

The Role of High-Quality Online Content in Enhancing Lead Generation for Educational Institutions: A Conceptual Review

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Abstract

The paper examines how educational institutions can strengthen student lead generation using high-quality content strategy and educational marketing practices informed by behavioural theories such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), the AIDA model, and the Marketing Funnel. In an age of growing competition and digital disruption within the education sector, education institutions must adopt innovative strategies that combine targeted outreach, storytelling, and personalisation. It integrates theoretical constructs such as TPB, AIDA, the marketing funnel, content marketing, digital channels, and consumer persona development with empirical studies on content and consumer engagement. This study proposes a conceptual framework to facilitate educational marketers in designing digital campaigns that are psychologically informed, strategically structured, and performance oriented.

Keywords: Lead Generation, Educational Marketing, Content Strategy, AIDA, TPB, Consumer Persona, Marketing Funnel

Introduction

In today's increasingly digital and competitive higher education environment, student recruitment has evolved from traditional outreach to highly data-driven and content-based marketing strategies. Educational institutions face mounting pressure to differentiate themselves and sustain enrolment amid declining demographics, rising costs, and intensified global competition (Altbach & de Wit, 2018; ICEF Monitor, 2022). These challenges have heightened the need for effective digital engagement strategies that not only increase awareness but also influence prospective students' decision-making processes (Dewi, 2021; Zizka, 2020). Within this context, lead generation—the process of attracting and converting potential students into applicants—has become critical to institutional sustainability. However, despite broad adoption of digital marketing, many institutions still employ fragmented or reactive approaches that overlook behavioural insights and structured communication frameworks (Czernek-Marszałek, 2020; Nguyen, Yu, Melewar, & Chen, 2016). This gap underscores the

importance of understanding how high-quality online content can systematically shape behavioural intentions and conversion outcomes.

This study situates the research within the intersection of behavioural science and marketing communication, employing the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991), AIDA model (Kotler et al., 2015), and Marketing Funnel (Kotler & Fox, 1995) to explain how attitudes, social norms, and perceived control influence digital engagement. Integrating these frameworks offers a holistic understanding of how psychological drivers translate into measurable actions, such as application and enrolment decisions.

The rationale for this research stems from the growing call for evidence-based, theory-informed strategies in education marketing (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009; Pulizzi, 2014). Although institutions invest heavily in digital presence, many fail to convert visibility into engagement and enrolment (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016; Liu & Morgan, 2016). This review bridges that gap by proposing an integrative conceptual framework that connects behavioural theory with applied marketing practice.

The significance of this paper extends beyond marketing efficiency. It contributes to broader social science debates on how digital communication shapes choice, trust, and identity in education. By synthesising behavioural and marketing theories, this study advances both scholarly understanding and institutional practice in designing high-quality online content that meaningfully influences student behaviour.

Literature Review

Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) offers a robust psychological framework for understanding individual decision-making processes. It posits that behavioural intention the most immediate predictor of behaviour is influenced by three interrelated components: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. In the context of higher education, these constructs explain how prospective students evaluate institutions, respond to social influences, and assess their capacity to successfully complete the application process.

Attitude reflects a student's overall evaluation of studying at a particular institution, shaped by perceptions of academic reputation, programme quality, and future employability prospects (Dennis et al., 2016). Subjective norms capture the social expectations and pressures exerted by parents, peers, and educators that influence choice-making (Shah & Richardson, 2016). Perceived behavioural control denotes students' confidence in their ability to take action enhanced by intuitive online systems, transparent financial information, and effective digital communication (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011).

In digital marketing, TPB underscores that persuasive content must go beyond awareness-building to actively address emotional and cognitive barriers. Institutions should design content that reduces uncertainty, reinforces trust, and empowers prospective students through accessible and transparent information. Within educational marketing, this means that content should not merely broadcast information but meaningfully engage with student and parental concerns through credible, culturally sensitive, and contextually relevant

communication. Simplified admission procedures, responsive online support, and user-friendly platforms can further reduce perceived obstacles, thereby enhancing students' confidence in their ability to complete the application journey. TPB, therefore, functions not only as an explanatory theory but also as a strategic guide for designing psychologically informed marketing interventions that strengthen student recruitment outcomes.

AIDA Model

The AIDA model (Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action) offers a structured communication pathway that guides prospective students from initial awareness to final enrolment (Kotler et al., 2015). During the attention stage, institutions attract audience awareness through search engine-optimised content, informative blog articles, and engaging social media campaigns that highlight institutional strengths and unique offerings (Armstrong & Kotler, 2020). The interest stage focuses on sustaining curiosity and engagement through webinars, digital brochures, and programme insights that provide academic clarity and personal relevance. In the desire stage, emotional connection becomes central—alumni success stories, authentic student testimonials, and experiential videos help foster aspiration and identification with the institution (Daymon & Mehus, 2019). Finally, the action stage is realised through intuitive application platforms, responsive live chat systems, and structured follow-up communication that seamlessly convert interest into commitment (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016).

The AIDA model operationalises the psychological constructs of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) particularly attitudes and social norms by translating them into a persuasive, sequential process that moves students from awareness to behavioural action. For educational institutions, AIDA serves as a practical framework ensuring that marketing communication aligns with the natural progression of student decision-making. However, many institutions invest disproportionately in generating awareness while underemphasising the nurturing of interest and desire, leading to disengagement before application. To counter this, embedding authentic narratives and sustained storytelling—especially through alumni and current student voices—can enhance emotional resonance and maintain momentum throughout the recruitment cycle. Thus, AIDA functions not merely as a communication model but as a strategic reminder that educational marketing must be holistic, relational, and consistently reinforced across all stages of engagement.

Marketing Funnel

The Marketing Funnel complements the AIDA model by structuring the student recruitment process into three progressive stages awareness, consideration, and decision (Kotler & Fox, 1995). Each stage represents a distinct phase in the prospective student's journey, requiring targeted communication and tailored content to sustain engagement. The funnel ensures coherence by aligning marketing efforts with the student's readiness to act, thereby preventing premature calls-to-action that can lead to confusion or disengagement. It transforms fragmented outreach activities into a systematic, evidence-based progression that nurtures prospects from initial curiosity to final enrolment (Wilkins & Juusola, 2018; Liu & Morgan, 2016).

From an educational marketing perspective, the funnel offers institutions a clear roadmap for understanding how prospective students move from awareness to enrolment. It guides

marketers to design content that matches the student's stage of intent building awareness through broad storytelling and visibility, addressing consideration through comparative information and testimonials, and driving decision through clear, supportive application guidance. However, many institutions fail to maintain this alignment, often overemphasising application forms, scholarship promotions, or call-to-apply messages before adequately addressing mid-funnel concerns such as affordability, programme relevance, or institutional credibility. Such premature messaging can discourage rather than convert potential applicants. A well-calibrated marketing funnel ensures that prospective students receive the right information at the right time, fostering confidence, trust, and emotional connection throughout the decision-making process. When properly executed, it becomes more than a structural model—it evolves into a strategic tool for creating consistent, student-centred experiences that enhance both engagement and enrolment outcomes (Liu & Morgan, 2016).

Content Marketing and Digital Channels

Content Marketing is a strategic approach focused on creating, curating, and disseminating valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience (Pulizzi, 2014). Within the context of higher education, this involves producing materials such as blogs, infographics, videos, and personalised email campaigns that inform, inspire, and engage prospective students throughout their decision-making journey (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009; Zizka, 2020; Dewi, 2021). The use of digital channels including search engines, social media platforms, and instant messaging applications amplifies this strategy by extending institutional reach to global audiences (Czernek-Marszałek, 2020; Narang & Frank, 2020). Collectively, these tools represent the operational foundation of modern recruitment funnels. Consistency and cultural sensitivity are essential for content effectiveness. Overdependence on a single communication channel or neglect of post-enrolment engagement can weaken conversion rates and diminish long-term student loyalty. Adopting a multi-channel, persona-driven, and data-informed strategy enables institutions to deliver cohesive messaging tailored to diverse audiences while maintaining authenticity and trust. For educational institutions, content marketing is not a supplementary activity but a central pillar of competitive differentiation. Institutions that fail to invest in high-quality, consistent, and emotionally resonant content risk being overshadowed by competitors offering richer and more personalised digital experiences. Conversely, those that strategically integrate content across multiple channels can position themselves as credible and empathetic advisors—guiding students and families through one of life's most significant decisions. Ultimately, strategic content marketing enhances brand visibility, strengthens institutional credibility, and cultivates enduring relationships built on trust and engagement.

Consumer Persona Development

Consumer Persona Development involves transforming audience insights into semi-fictional yet evidence-based representations of distinct student segments (Kotler et al., 2015). Each persona integrates demographic, psychographic, and behavioural characteristics to guide the creation of targeted, relevant communication. For instance, an international applicant persona may prioritise visa assistance, global recognition, and employability prospects, whereas a parent persona may emphasise affordability, safety, and institutional reputation (Nguyen et al., 2016; Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019).

Persona-driven strategies operationalise the social and control dimensions of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and enhance alignment with the AIDA model and the Marketing Funnel by ensuring that each message resonates with the audience's expectations, motivations, and perceived barriers. This approach humanises institutional communication, transforming generic marketing into empathetic, trust-oriented engagement.

In educational marketing, persona development holds particular significance because student recruitment decisions often involve multiple stakeholders. A single decision-making unit may combine parental priorities for affordability and security with a student's aspirations for employability, campus experience, and personal growth. Therefore, content strategies must reflect this complexity, addressing both rational and emotional drivers simultaneously. Adopting a one-size-fits-all approach risks diluting message effectiveness and misaligning with real concerns. Conversely, developing rich, data-informed personas enables institutions to communicate more persuasively, customise value propositions, and strengthen institutional stakeholder relationships ultimately improving lead generation and conversion outcomes.

Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework integrates TPB, AIDA, and the Marketing Funnel, supported by Content Marketing and Consumer Persona Development. TPB represents the psychological core, explaining intention formation. AIDA structures the communication process, showing how awareness evolves into action. The Marketing Funnel provides the strategic architecture, mapping content to each stage of the decision journey. Content Marketing and Persona Development act as operational enablers, translating theory into targeted practice. Together, these models create a cohesive structure that transforms visibility into meaningful engagement, guiding educational institutions toward measurable, sustainable enrolment outcomes.

At the centre of the framework is the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which explains behavioural intention as a function of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of higher education, student and parental attitudes are influenced by perceptions of institutional credibility, academic reputation, and the likelihood of successful career outcomes (Dennis, Papagiannidis, Alamanos, & Bourlakis, 2016). Subjective norms reflect the influence of social networks and family decision-making, often reinforced by testimonials, alumni endorsements, and peer recommendations (Shah & Richardson, 2016). Perceived behavioural control is linked to the ease with which prospective students can navigate admission procedures, including online support services, financial transparency, and user-friendly application systems (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011). By situating TPB at the psychological core of the framework, the model recognises that content must address these cognitive and social factors to effectively influence student decisions.

Surrounding this psychological core is the AIDA model, which operationalises the process of communication and persuasion (Kotler, Burton, Deans, Brown, & Armstrong, 2015). At the attention stage, prospective students encounter institutional messages through blogs, SEO-enhanced websites, and targeted social media content (Armstrong & Kotler, 2020). Interest is generated through interactive formats such as webinars, digital brochures, and personalised email campaigns, which provide depth and detail about academic programmes.

Desire is cultivated through emotionally resonant content such as alumni success stories and video testimonials, which highlight both academic quality and future career potential (Daymon & Mehus, 2019). Finally, the action stage is achieved through direct calls-to-action, live chat support, and automated application follow-ups that reduce inertia and encourage enrolment (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). In this way, AIDA complements TPB by illustrating how psychological drivers translate into measurable behavioural outcomes through communication. The Marketing Funnel provides a broader structuring of the student journey, categorising engagement into awareness, consideration, and decision stages (Kotler & Fox, 1995). During the awareness stage, institutions use informational content such as “Top programmes to study” or thought leadership articles to build brand recognition (Daymon & Mehus, 2019). At the consideration stage, prospective students evaluate different options through comparison tools, interactive FAQs, and virtual open days (Wilkins & Juusola, 2018). At the decision stage, content such as scholarship calculators, application portals, and one-on-one consultations support final enrolment (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). The funnel enhances the framework by ensuring that content is deployed sequentially, preventing mismatches such as promoting applications before students have fully considered financial or academic suitability (Liu & Morgan, 2016).

Complementing these theoretical layers are Content Marketing Strategies, which act as the practical delivery mechanisms. Content marketing is a long-term approach that builds trust and relationships by consistently providing valuable and relevant content (Pulizzi, 2014). In the education sector, this includes academic blogs, explainer videos, infographics, nurturing email sequences, and personalised landing pages (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009; Zizka, 2020; Dewi, 2021). These strategies enable institutions to move from transactional communication to sustained engagement, positioning themselves as trusted advisors in students’ educational journeys.

The final supporting construct is Consumer Persona Development, which ensures that content strategies are tailored to specific audience segments. Personas incorporate demographic details, aspirations, pain points, and preferred communication channels. For instance, an international applicant persona might prioritise visa guidance and financial aid information, while parents may emphasise affordability and institutional reputation (Nguyen, Yu, Melewar, & Chen, 2016; Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019). Persona-driven approaches increase cultural sensitivity, enhance relevance, and strengthen the resonance of digital campaigns.

The integration of TPB, AIDA, and the Marketing Funnel, supported by Content Marketing and Consumer Persona Development, provides a holistic framework that bridges theory and practice. As illustrated in Figure 1, TPB highlights the psychological underpinnings of intention formation, AIDA structures the communication process, and the Marketing Funnel organises the student journey. These theoretical layers are operationalised through content marketing and persona-based segmentation, ensuring that campaigns are evidence-based, culturally responsive, and strategically aligned. For educational institutions, this framework demonstrates how visibility can be transformed into measurable engagement and ultimately into successful enrolment outcomes.

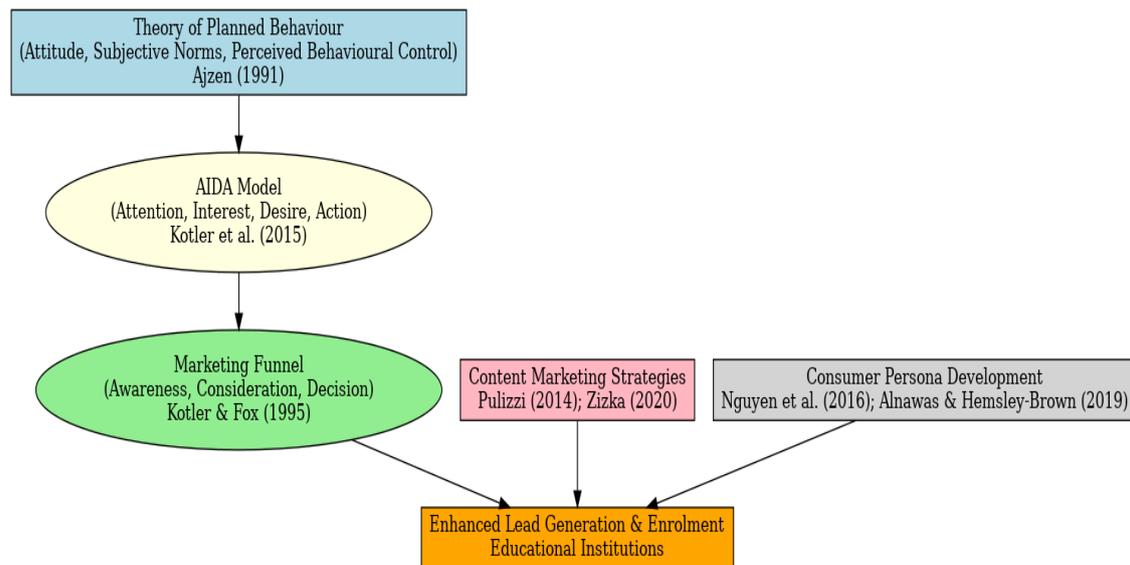


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework for Lead Generation in Educational Institutions through Online Content, integrating TPB (Ajzen, 1991), AIDA (Kotler et al., 2015), and the Marketing Funnel (Kotler & Fox, 1995), supported by content marketing strategies (Pulizzi, 2014; Zizka, 2020) and consumer persona development (Nguyen et al., 2016; Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019).

The structure is crafted to emphasize alignment between psychology and practice to allow for schools to bridge between parental concerns, dreams of the students, and cultural sensitivity through systemic and measurable digital marketing campaigns.

Discussion

Key Gaps in Existing Strategies

Despite the growing use of digital platforms, many educational institutions continue to employ fragmented and reactive marketing strategies. Research suggests that international schools often fail to maintain consistent content calendars, leading to irregular communication and missed engagement opportunities (Czernek-Marszałek, 2020; Zizka, 2020). In addition, multi-channel distribution remains underutilised, with schools relying heavily on single platforms such as Facebook while neglecting other high-impact channels like WhatsApp, TikTok, or YouTube (Dewi, 2021; Narang & Frank, 2020). Weak segmentation is another common shortcoming, where generic content is pushed to all audiences without recognising the differing needs of international students, local applicants, or parents (Nguyen, Yu, Melewar, & Chen, 2016). Finally, limited use of retargeting strategies and marketing automation results in one-off campaigns rather than sustained engagement journeys (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). These gaps demonstrate that while institutions may generate awareness, they often fail to nurture interest and convert leads into enrolments.

Application for Educational Institutions

To address these gaps, educational institutions must embed persona-driven content segmentation, automation tools, and narrative-driven campaigns within their recruitment strategies. For example, international students may be engaged through visa guidance content and peer-led social media discussions, while parents may require transparent tuition

calculators and testimonials from satisfied families (Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019; Daymon & Mehus, 2019). Automation systems, such as CRM-driven nurturing workflows, can maintain communication across multiple time zones, ensuring that institutions remain present in the decision-making process of global applicants (Liu & Morgan, 2016). Furthermore, story-driven media such as alumni success videos and authentic student blogs can enhance emotional resonance and reinforce institutional credibility (Dennis, Papagiannidis, Alamanos, & Bourlakis, 2016). By aligning content with funnel stages and persona needs, schools can transform digital campaigns from awareness-centric to conversion-oriented.

Implications for International Schools

The conceptual framework also highlights implications for institutions of different scales and contexts. Large international school networks can leverage advanced CRM systems and AI-driven personalisation to deliver sophisticated campaigns that address diverse cultural expectations (ICEF Monitor, 2022). In contrast, smaller schools may lack these resources but can still achieve impact by focusing on consistent content calendars, authentic storytelling, and localised strategies that resonate with their immediate communities (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009). For region-specific markets, strategies must be adapted to reflect local cultural values, such as an emphasis on return on investment in South Asia or prestige and reputation in East Asia (Altbach & de Wit, 2018; Wilkins & Juusola, 2018). In higher education, where competition is even more intense, these implications highlight the necessity of balancing institutional branding with student-centric content delivery.

Theory–Practice Integration

A key contribution of the proposed framework is its ability to bridge theoretical models with practical strategies. For instance, an online open day can simultaneously attract attention (AIDA), provide information that supports perceived behavioural control (TPB), and build consideration within the marketing funnel. Similarly, student success videos not only generate desire (AIDA) but also serve as social proof that strengthens subjective norms (TPB). This integration demonstrates how seemingly abstract models can be operationalised into tangible digital campaigns. By aligning theoretical constructs with practical marketing tools, institutions are better positioned to create campaigns that are both evidence-based and impactful.

Taken together, these discussions highlight that the majority of institutions remain reactive in their marketing efforts, focusing on generating attention without fully leveraging the potential of digital strategies to nurture and convert leads. The framework proposed in this study offers a way forward by combining psychological theory, communication models, and strategic tools into a single, coherent roadmap. It provides actionable guidance for institutions of varying scales, allowing them to design campaigns that are systematic, culturally sensitive, and performance oriented. Ultimately, the integration of TPB, AIDA, and the marketing funnel, supported by content marketing and persona development, ensures that digital visibility is translated into sustained engagement and long-term enrolment success.

Conclusion and Future Studies

This conceptual review has examined how digital strategies, guided by theoretical and practical frameworks, can strengthen student recruitment in educational institutions. By integrating the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), the AIDA model, and the Marketing Funnel, the study highlights how psychological, communicative, and structural factors jointly influence student decision-making. These theoretical insights are further operationalised through content marketing strategies and consumer persona development, providing institutions with a comprehensive roadmap for enhancing lead generation and enrolment.

The review demonstrates that while many schools and universities have begun adopting digital marketing, their approaches remain fragmented, reactive, and often misaligned with the decision-making journeys of students and parents. A consistent pattern in the literature is the over-reliance on single channels, insufficient segmentation, and limited use of automation and retargeting tools (Zizka, 2020; Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). The proposed framework addresses these shortcomings by showing how institutions can design campaigns that are systematic, evidence-based, and performance-driven. Importantly, the framework emphasises the need for cultural sensitivity and stakeholder inclusivity, particularly in contexts where parents, sponsors, and students play overlapping roles in educational choices (Nguyen, Yu, Melewar, & Chen, 2016; Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019).

For practice, the framework offers institutions of varying scales ranging from global networks of international schools to small community-based providers actionable strategies that can be implemented with their respective resources. Larger institutions may leverage advanced CRM systems and AI-driven personalisation, while smaller institutions can focus on consistency, authenticity, and localised engagement (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009; Wilkins & Juusola, 2018). In all cases, the integration of TPB, AIDA, and the Funnel ensures that campaigns are not only designed to attract attention but also structured to nurture interest, build desire, and convert leads into enrolments.

Future research should empirically test the effectiveness of this conceptual framework in real-world institutional settings. Quantitative studies could evaluate how TPB constructs predict enrolment behaviours when mediated by digital content strategies. Experimental designs could assess which types of content such as alumni success stories, interactive webinars, or automated chat support—are most effective at different funnel stages. Furthermore, comparative studies across cultural contexts would provide insights into how persona-driven campaigns should be adapted for diverse markets, particularly between Western and Asian educational landscapes (Altbach & de Wit, 2018). Longitudinal studies could also explore how sustained content strategies influence not only enrolment but also retention and alumni engagement, offering a fuller understanding of the long-term value of digital marketing in education.

In conclusion, this review contributes to both theory and practice by providing a structured and integrated conceptual framework for digital marketing in education. By aligning psychological insights, communication models, and strategic tools, it offers a way for institutions to transform

online visibility into meaningful and sustained enrolment outcomes. At the same time, it opens new avenues for research that can further refine and validate the role of digital marketing in shaping the future of educational recruitment.

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