

The Effectiveness of Promotional Medium: A Study in Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah (UniSHAMS)

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Abstract

Promotion is the main strategy for almost all Higher Education Institute (HEIs), especially Private Higher Education Institutes (PHEIs), to raise the name of the HEI and attract students to apply for studies. According to the current uncertain situation, such as the spread of the Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020 and endemic conditions, an effective promotional medium is absolutely important. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to evaluate the efficiency of all promotional initiatives conducted by the Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah (UniSHAMS) Marketing, Industrial Network and Community Division (BPJIK) during the year before, during, and after Covid-19. This study used a quantitative methodology that involved a descriptive analysis of the BPJIK data. Additionally, this study identified issues and recommendations for improvement through an interview session with two respondents who represented BPJIK and Academic Management Center (PPA). The study's findings revealed a substantial gap between the quantity of applicants, the offer, and admission. The disparity can be attributed to the absence of well-defined guidelines within UniSHAMS pertaining to the allocation of responsibilities among its Kulliyyahs, Centres, and Divisions (KPB). It is recommended that UniSHAMS establish a well-defined and documented standard operating procedure (SOP) and reinstate the *Jawatankuasa Induk Promosi* as a platform for deliberating and coordinating promotional activities.

Keywords: Promotion, University, Marketing, Higher Education, Covid-19

Introduction

Promotion is a marketing medium that must be done continuously to introduce and strengthen the university's brand to the general public (Suanda et al., 2010). Various promotional methods are used by the University to attract SPM, STPM, STAM, Matriculation, Diploma and others to continue their studies at the Undergraduate level (Certificate, Diploma and Degree programs). The promotion is offered to students who have completed a Bachelor's degree and wish to pursue further education at the Postgraduate level, including Master's and Doctor of Philosophy programmes. The purpose of this study was to assess the efficacy of the promotional medium employed by the Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah (UniSHAMS) in its efforts to promote the Private Institute of Higher Learning (PHEIs) to local as well as global markets.

UniSHAMS formerly known as Institut Agama Islam Negeri Kedah Darul Aman (INSANIAH) was established on 2 January 1996. At that time, INSANIAH only offered twin Islamic Studies programmes with Al-Azhar University, Egypt in the fields of Usulluddin, Syariah and Arabic. In 2000, INSANIAH offered a Diploma in Management and Diploma in Accounting, followed by a Diploma in Information Technology in 2001. On 18 May 2006, INSANIAH was upgraded as Kolej Universiti Insaniah (KUIN). In the year 2009, KUIN provided a comprehensive range of 40 academic programmes spanning from foundational levels to the highest degree of Doctor of Philosophy. On the 8th of February, 2018, KUIN underwent a transformation and was officially recognised as a Full University, adopting the new name UniSHAMS. Currently, UniSHAMS is an PHEIs owned by the Kedah state government with 6 Kulliyah and 3 Study Centres that provide 42 programmes ranging from Foundation level to Doctor of Philosophy.

UniSHAMS possesses a highly active unit dedicated to organising promotional activities for its comprehensive range of 42 academic programmes. The Marketing, Industry Network and Community Division (BPJIK) is tasked with the implementation of widespread promotion for UniSHAMS products on a consistent basis. This is achieved by employing suitable channels and financial resources that have been approved by the Company's Board of Directors (LPS). The Academic Management Centre (PPA) is in charge of the filtering and offered process for undergraduate programmes, while the Postgraduate Management Centre (PPS) is responsible for postgraduate programmes. This study focuses only on promotion for undergraduate programmes, ranging from foundation programmes to Bachelor's degrees.

Problem Statement

BPJIK has committed a substantial portion of its budget on promotional endeavours; however, the rate of student admissions from the Foundation to Bachelor's Degree programmes at UniSHAMS is highly unfavourable. The records indicate that UniSHAMS has access to a large number of applications and offerings. However, the admission registration record for the entire programme for both local and international students remains low, with less than 30 percent of prospective students enrolling or joining UniSHAMS. The current situation has prompted inquiries over the extent of student admission issues and the efficacy of promotional efforts, as the LPS UniSHAMS has consistently granted a substantial budget for promotions annually.

The challenge of increasing the enrolment of both domestic and international students has encountered greater complexities due to the constraints imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, which have curtailed physical movement and necessitated operational adaptations. The shift

in work culture towards rotation and online formats has presented significant challenges in terms of adaptation across many divisions. The hindrance of various promotional initiatives has indirectly affected the efficiency of the offer process. The abrupt transition of these operations to an online format has resulted in unforeseen challenges (Abdul Razak et al., 2021).

Online changes in teaching and learning (PdP) techniques have also affected parents and students to adapt. Studies from Ngoc (2021) found that students began to lose motivation, lack of discipline and lack of interaction during this online PdP. Socioeconomic factors for income-affected parents also contribute to children's lack of readiness and incapacity to access online learning equipment (Jafar et al., 2020). The lack of motivation has resulted in students experiencing a decline in their sense of purpose, concentration, and enthusiasm towards pursuing their academic endeavours. Instead, they have grown more inclined towards engaging in activities such as utilising gig platforms, establishing themselves as social media influencers, participating in drop shipping, working as e-hailing drivers, and exploring other income-generating opportunities to support their families (Fadzill, 2022). A variety of changes in lifestyles has prompted the Department of Statistics to conduct a survey, revealing that 72.1% of Malaysian Certificate of Examination (SPM) graduates express a lack of desire to pursue further education (Musalib, 2022).

This study aims to examine the patterns pertaining to student applications, offered, and admissions to the under graduate programme at UniSHAMS. The analysis will cover the period from 2018 to 2022, encompassing the pre-pandemic phase of COVID-19, the period during the pandemic, and the post-pandemic phase. The primary objective is to identify any challenges that may have arisen during these periods and propose recommendations for enhancement.

Literature Review

Promotion serves as a means of communication aimed at marketing products, namely the programmes offered by a university. It is an obligatory practise for every educational institution to effectively introduce and enhance the university's brand to the broader public, with a particular focus on future students, parents of students, and the general public (Suanda et al., 2010). Marketing processes encompass a range of marketing actions and activities, which include the assessment of marketing opportunities, identification of target segments, formulation of promotional plans, and the integration of marketing efforts with their execution (Solcansky & Simberova, 2010). UniSHAMS also possesses specific marketing procedures and dedicated departments responsible for executing marketing initiatives.

Amini et al (2012) examine the effectiveness of marketing strategies represented by four marketing mixes, namely Channel, Price, Promotion and After Sales Services, and Corporate Image on Brand Equity. The results show that all elements including promotion are marketing strategies that have a positive impact on corporate image and brand equity. Risdiyanto & Kurniyati (2015) examines the relationship of seven marketing mixtures namely Product, Price, Location, Promotion, People, Physical and Process to Private Higher Education (PHEI) in Kabupaten Sleman Yogyakarta. The results showed that the seven independent variables had a significant influence on the selection of PHEI. Based on the findings, the beta coefficient indicates that the factors influencing the outcome are ranked in the following order: price, location, product, people, promotion, and physical facilities.

Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP) also conducted a study to identify the effectiveness of UniMAP's promotional activities and evaluate the current marketing strategies used to attract students to UniMAP for the 2008/2009 academic semester (Al Bakri Abdullah, Hussin, Suanda, Ghazali, & Mahmudin, 2007). The results showed that 36% of respondents knew UniMAP through the internet, 13.4% through exhibitions, talks (8.9%), special promotions (6.6%) and 8% of respondents did not know the existence of UniMAP at all. This shows that the respondent knows about UniMAP and chooses it when completing the UPU online form. This is consistent with the method of application for admission to Public Institutions of Higher Learning (IPTA) including UniMAP. However, UniMAP still thinks about the very important need to set up a proper and aggressive promotion strategy to ensure that the number of admissions to UniMAP will be better.

Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM) studies the effectiveness of public relations campaigns (PR) in promoting UTeM. The findings showed that external communities are still less vulnerable and less confident in choosing UTeM (Omar & Abdul Latif, 2011). PR is one of the promotional strategies to establish networking and good relations with the outside community through the dissemination of information. UniSHAMS also adopts a PR strategy to bridge relationships and disseminate information to corporate bodies, schools, individuals and communities. Based on the results conducted by UTeM, the most effective PR activity to give parents and prospective students a chance to get to know UTeM and introduce the courses available at UTeM is the promotion of "Jom Masuk Universiti" organized by the National Higher Education Carnival 2010 (Omar & Abdul Latif, 2011).

The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 has forced all HEIs to change the model of promotional activities (Abdul Razak et al., 2021). According to the findings of Abdul Razak et al (2021) derived from a study conducted at USIM, a significant majority of respondents (98.4%) agreed that social media serves as a platform for promoting academic programmes.

Nonetheless, 29 people (23.8%) said that the information on USIM's website is not visually appealing. This demonstrates every HEIs should make sure that the University's official website is kept current with all pertinent information. The official website of the HEIs serves as the primary platform for individuals, both domestic and international, to access comprehensive information pertaining to the programme and the University. The adoption of social media such as Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter, among others, can facilitate the dissemination of information to the public despite limited physical activity (Abu Bakar & Quah, 2018).

The purpose of this study was to examine the promotional mediums utilised and determine their effectiveness in raising awareness of UniSHAMS among prospective applicants. This investigation will additionally ascertain the issue of the gap and propose recommendations for enhancement.

Research Methodology

This study examined the promotional strategies employed by UniSHAMS to attract applicants, as well as the efficacy of each strategy in generating applications for foundation programmes up to the Bachelor's Degree. The analysis encompassed the periods before, during, and after the Covid-19 pandemic. The present study employs a quantitative approach, specifically utilising descriptive analytic techniques to examine data collected from the BPJIK database

spanning the years 2018 to 2022. Additionally, the study ascertained issues and recommendations for enhancement by through semi-structured interviews conducted with two participants who represented BPJIK and PPA.

Findings

Medium Analysis Recognised UniSHAMS

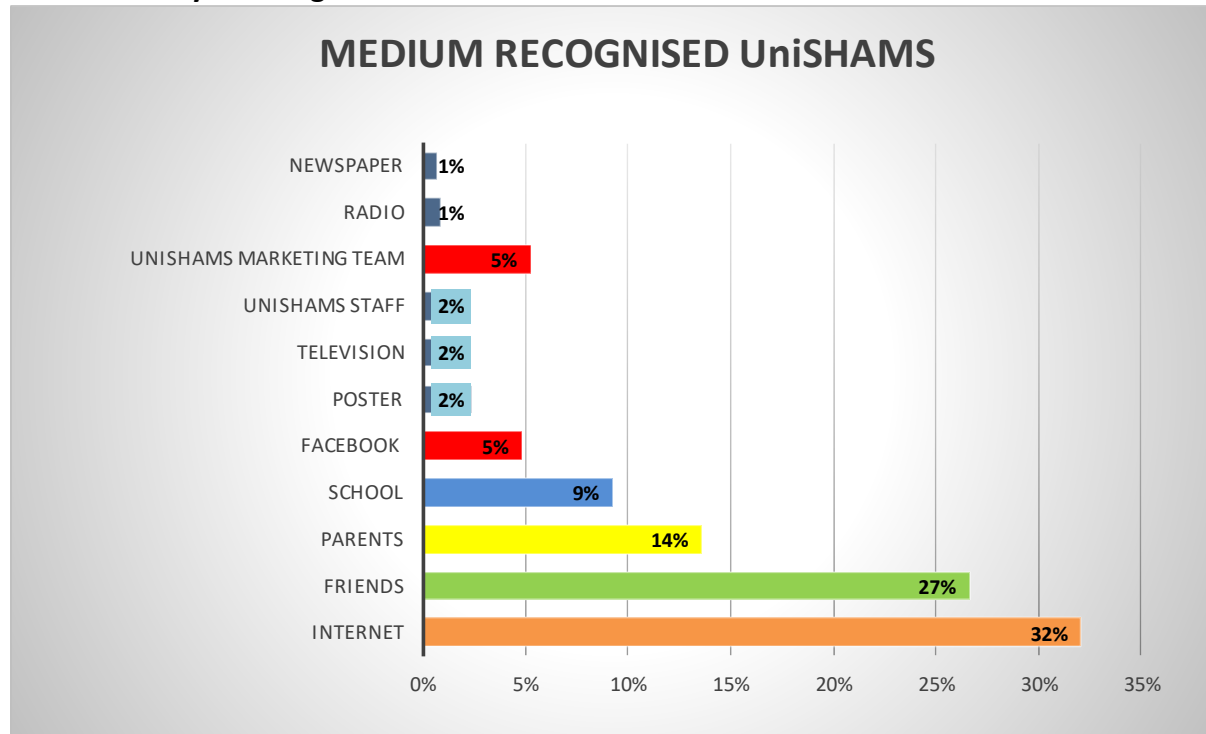


Figure 1: Medium Recognizes UniSHAMS

Figure 1 above shows the percentage of how students recognize UniSHAMS. The data collected from 2018 to 2022 indicates that a significant proportion of applicants, specifically 32%, were aware of UniSHAMS through online platforms. Additionally, the influence of friends had a substantial role in the decision-making process, resulting in 27% of applicants who chose UniSHAMS as their preferred institution. The results are consistent with the study conducted at Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP) by Suanda et al., (2010), which revealed that 55.1% of respondents were aware of UniMAP from internet and the second factor that contributed respondents to choose UniMAP was through friends at 43.8%. The influence of parents and schools also contributed to 14% and 9% of applicant's familiarity with UniSHAMS through this medium, respectively.

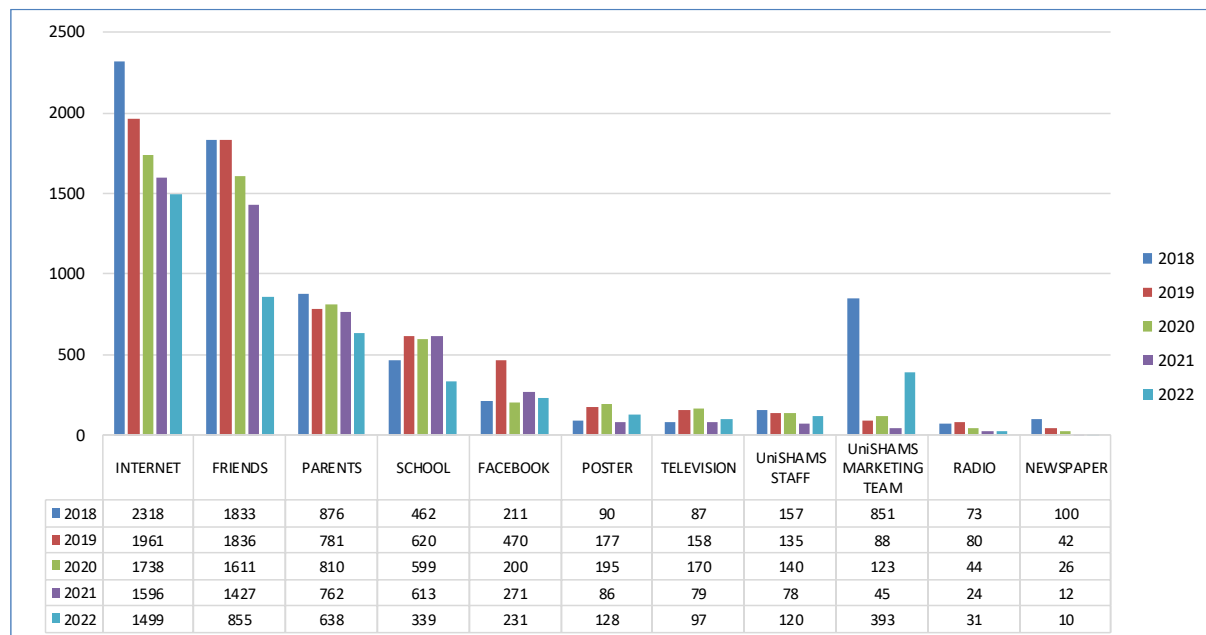


Figure 2: Student Admission Application Survey

According to the data presented in Figure 2, a significant proportion of students' admission application, ranging from the foundation level to the Bachelor's Degree, are mostly sourced from internet resources. The internet platform witnessed a peak in student admission applications in 2018, reaching a total of 2318. Subsequently, a decline in applications was observed in 2019, with a count of 1961 students. This downward trend continued in 2020, as the number of applications further decreased to 1738. In the subsequent years, the number of student admission applications continued to decline, with 1596 applications in 2021 and 1499 applications in 2022.

The admission applications of students can also be impacted by their friends. The findings indicated that the prevalence of admission applications facilitated by friends reached its peak in 2019, with a total of 1836 students. However, subsequent years witnessed a gradual decrease of approximately 12% in both 2020 and 2021. In the year 2022, there was a notable decline of 40%.

Furthermore, the sources with the lowest influence on student admission applications encompass various mediums such as posters, television advertisements, UniSHAMS employees and promotion teams, radio broadcasts, and newspapers. The number of applications for admission through the UniSHAMS promotion team in 2018 was significantly impacted, with a total of 851 applications received. However, there was a substantial decline of 90% observed in the subsequent year leading up to 2021. The inability of the UniSHAMS promotion team to engage in physical movement can be attributed to the widespread impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in the year 2022, the resurgence of post-COVID-19 conditions led to the revitalization of the promotion team, resulting in a significant 773% rise in the utilisation of the promotion team as a means to raise awareness and recognition of UniSHAMS.

Student Application, Offer and Admission Statistics

The results of this statistic show that the highest number of admission applications was in 2018, and the number of applications decreased by 10% to 13% continuously from 2019 to 2022.

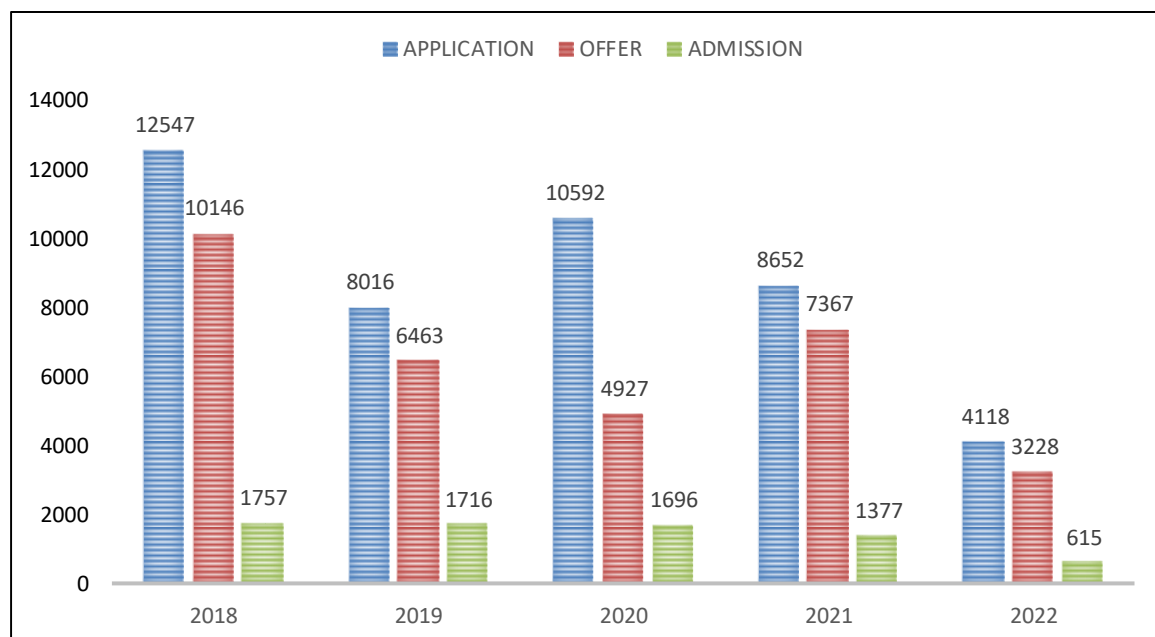


Figure 3: Application, Offer and Admission Statistics

Figure 3 above illustrates how the process of admission of local and international students to UniSHAMS for foundation programs up to Bachelor's Degree. BPJIK with the cooperation of many parties including Kulliyah and the Study Centre will be able to promote through various mediums. Once the application from the target student has been received, the PPA will proceed with the offering process based on the program application and the qualification of the student's examination results (SPM/STAM/Matrik/Certificate/Diploma).

Based on the data presented in Figure 3, it is evident that the year with the highest number of admission applications was 2018, followed by 2020, 2021, 2019, and 2022. The aforementioned statement serves as evidence of the diligent efforts undertaken by the BPJIK promotion team, in conjunction with the Kulliyah and the Study Centre, to ascertain UniSHAM and proceed with the completion of the application form.

The subsequent step involves offering of the programme to qualified candidates by the PPA. With reference to Figure 3, the proportion of offers made relative to the total number of applications for the years 2018, 2019, and 2021 falls within the range of 80% to 85%. According to statistical data for the year 2020, the number of offers made represents only 47% in relation to the second highest number of applications, which amounted to 10,592. This finding demonstrates a substantial disparity of 53% when comparing it to the other three years. The spread of COVID-19 and the enforcement of the Movement Control Order (MCO) have impeded the operational efficiency of all departments under UniSHAMS.. In 2022, there was a significant decline in the number of applications, which was notably negative in comparison to pre-pandemic and pandemic periods. The decline in desire towards pursuing higher education among SPM graduates is evident. The introduction of the Movement Control Order (MCO) and the adoption home-based teaching and learning (PdPR) approach, have

created avenues for young individuals to explore online entrepreneurship and engage in gig economy sectors, such as online food delivery.

The primary factor influencing the outcomes of BPJIK, Kulliyah, Study Centre, and PPA is the quantity of student admissions. Figure 3 illustrates the admissions data for the years 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022. The biggest number of admissions occurred in 2018, with a total of 1757 students. This was followed by 1716 students in 2019, 1696 students in 2020, 1377 students in 2021, and a low of 615 students in 2022. According to statistical data, there was a 2% decline in admissions between the years 2019 and 2020. In the year 2021, there was a reduction of 19%, but in the subsequent year of 2022, a significant decline of 55.34% was recorded.

The disparity between the number of offers every year and the admission gap exhibits significant variation. In the year 2018, a total of 10,146 offers were made, out of which only 1757 were accepted by students enrolled at UniSHAMS. There exists a substantial disparity between the quantity of offers made and the quantity of admissions accepted. With reference to Figure 3, the discovered percentage differences were 83% in 2018, 73% in 2019, 66% in 2020, 81% in 2021, and 80% in 2022. The study revealed no statistically significant disparities when comparing the pre-COVID-19, during-COVID-19, and post-COVID-19 periods.

Promotional Expenses

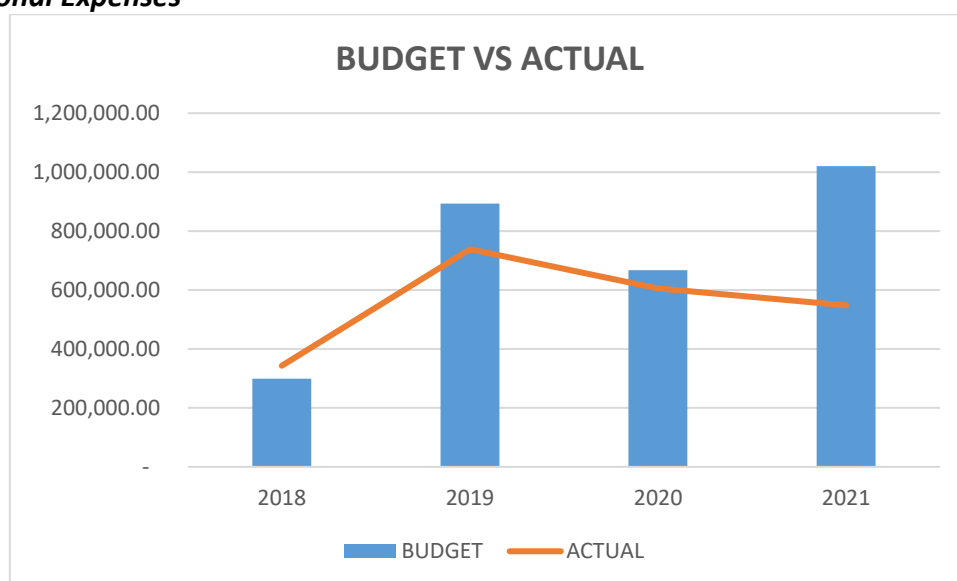


Figure 4: Budget and Actual Expenses

According to Figure 5, the promotional allocation for the year 2021 exhibits the largest value in comparison to previous years. But when compared to the actual spending only in 2018 exceeds the allowance granted. The main reason is due to the elevation of Kolej Universiti Insaniah (KUIN) to a full-fledged university, known as UniSHAMS, on 8th February 2018. The BPJIK actively participated in the educational funfair and exhibition. In the year 2018, there were also expenditures for the printing of brochures, banners, and souvenirs due to the name change of Kolej Universiti Insaniah (KUIN) to UniSHAMS. One of the contributing elements to excessive spending is the utilisation of promotional mediums such as newspapers and radio stations. However, the promotional allocation for the year 2018 exhibits the lowest value.

For 2019, there was a 200% increase in allocation. This is because, UniSHAMS has received approval to increase the number of billboard advertisements on the North South highway, Advertisements on TV and promotions over the radio. In 2020 the number of allocations was reduced due to the spread of COVID-19 and the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) has restricted face-to-face promotional activities. However, improvements have been made in the medium of marketing through television and radio. Compared to 2020, the allocation for 2021 increased by 60%, but actual expenses incurred represent only 46% of the total allocation. While still under MCO and work from home, 57% of the actual expenditure was utilised to increase the number of billboard advertisements. While television and radio advertising expenditure decreased in 2021.

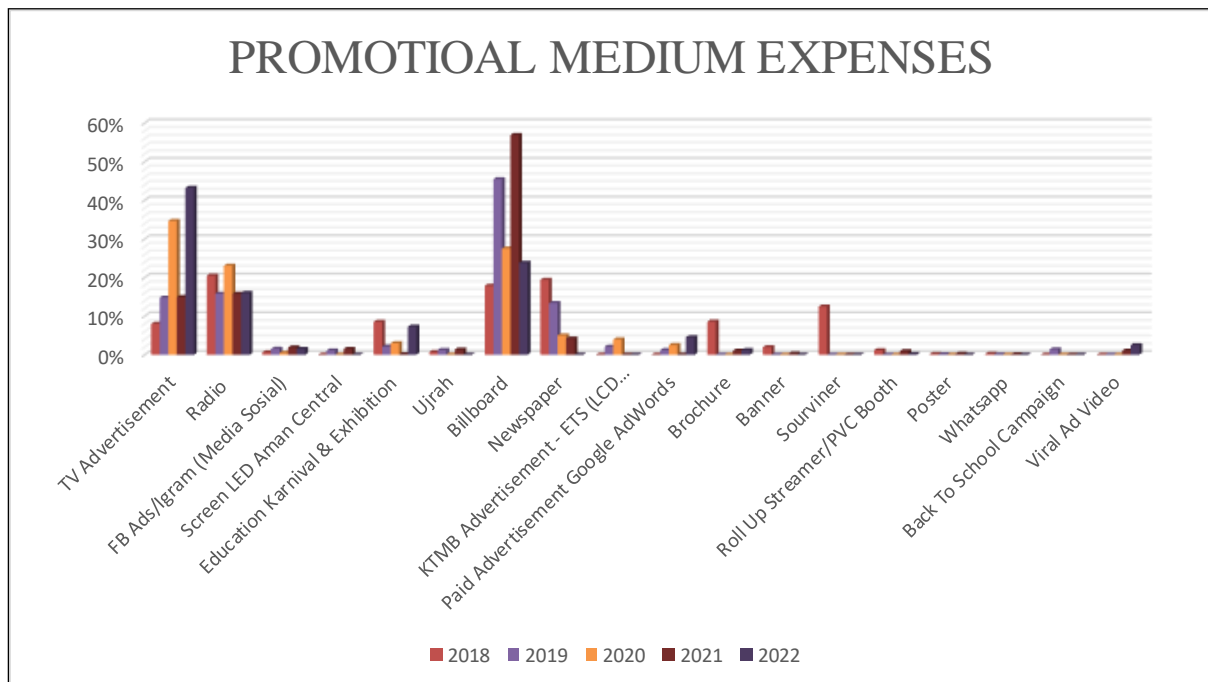


Figure 5 : Promotional Medium Expenses

The diagram presented in Figure 5 illustrates a comprehensive breakdown of the proportion of promotional medium expenditures for the years spanning from 2018 to 2022. Expenses for souvenirs only occur in 2018. Meanwhile, brochure and banner prints take place in 2018 and 2021. Every year, the costs associated with the promotional channels that are used include TV, radio, media social, education carnival & exhibition, billboards, and newspapers. Radio (20%) was the more costly in 2018, followed by billboards (45%) in 2019, TV advertisements (35%), and billboards (57%) in 2021. In the year 2022, BPJK placed significant emphasis on utilising the television medium as a means to reach out to parents, primarily through the programmes Malaysia Hari Ini (MHI) and TV Al-Hijrah.

Among the promotional expenses incurred from 2018 to 2022, the medium that accounted for the largest amount of expenditure was "Billboard," with a total of RM847,000, representing 37% of the whole promotional budget. This was followed by TV Advertisements, which amounted to RM524,000 (23%), radio expenses totalling RM400,000 (18%), and newspaper expenses reaching RM176,000 (8%). The allocation of funds for various promotional mediums, including the Education Carnival and Exhibition, Brochure, Souvenirs, KTM Advertising - ETS, FB/instag ADV, Screen LED Aman Central, Ujrah, and Google AdWords

paid ads, represents a percentage ranging from 1% to 4% of the overall promotional expenses. The promotional expenses incurred through the WhatsApp medium were the lowest. The University employs the utilisation of Billboard as a means to enhance its branding and cultivate a positive image. Evans, Molly, Eva, & Miles (2020) also discovered that Billboard advertising significantly contribute to the overall marketing effectiveness of a product or company.

Discussion and Conclusion

The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the culture of work, teaching and learning at the Higher Education Institute (HEI). The Movement Control Order (MCO) affects many work operations before the virtual adaptation can be fully implemented. The lack of preparedness exhibited by the management team with regards to essential facilities, including laptops, internet connection, system accessibility, document files, and other resources, has significantly impeded the efficiency and effectiveness of work operations. The lack of preparedness in managing children and families is also a contributing element to job inefficiency. In the year 2020, the transition to remote work, commonly referred to as the Work From Home (WFH) arrangement, was not inherently feasible for all tasks. According to the respondents from the PPA, it was reported that the work process was impeded during the MCO due to the inability to access the system remotely from home. This observation indicates that UniSHAMS lacks a formalised contingency plan to effectively manage emergency scenarios, such as the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. According to the study conducted by Diab-bahman & Al-enzi (2020), 60% of respondents indicated that the company lacks a standardised coordination plan or strategy. Consequently, it is recommended that a comprehensive plan be developed to address any potential emergencies that may arise in the future.

According to the response from the BPJIK, the primary responsibility of the promotion team is to proactively engage in the development of promotional initiatives and achieve a desired number of applications. The final task assigned to the PPA involves processing the application into the system and extending an offer. The PPA attempted to delegate the responsibilities to the Kulliyah, due to a lack of available manpower and other essential obligations, but was denied.

It can be inferred that the application and offered management at UniSHAMS is disorganised, lacking a well-defined standard operating procedure (SOP) for the officer responsible for handling new student applications, reviews, and offer. The respondents of the BPJIK also highlighted the issue of divided responsibility between two distinct departments, which resulted in a lack of coordination in their work efforts subsequent to promotion. Hence, it is recommended to centralise all the processes under one division or under the supervision of one leader. Additionally, it is recommended for UniSHAMS to provide comprehensive written guidelines that are thoroughly documented. The objective of this initiative is to mitigate instances of miscommunication and shortcomings by adhering to specified standards. The matter of manual application prompts the suggestion that the application procedure be conducted online as a means of mitigating the risk of application form abandonment. This align with the study undertaken by Abdul Razak et al (2021) which suggest that USIM should streamlining the application process in order to attract prospective students. Additionally, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the relevance of an online application procedure is highlighted

In 2022, the offer and admission procedures had a disruption caused by a system failure, which led to the malfunctioning of office telephones and rendered the system inaccessible. The aforementioned phenomenon has had a significant influence on the operations conducted at PPA. Therefore, it is of great importance to establish collaboration with the Division of Technology (BTM) to ensure the accessibility of the system at UniSHAMS, particularly during the peak season of admissions.

To enhance the enrollment of international students, it is recommended that BPJIK implement a range of methods and promotional channels to effectively attract prospective students from overseas to pursue their academic pursuits at UniSHAMS. One of the notable strengths of UniSHAMS is in its diverse faculty, comprising a significant number of international lecturers, particularly coming from the Middle East. This characteristic has the potential to attract students not only from Indonesia and Thailand, but also from other regions. There is a suggestion to reactivate the Jawatankuasa Induk Promosi as a means of facilitating discussions and coordinating promotional activities with the objective of increasing the enrollment of both local and international students at UniSHAMS.

Limitation of this study was its exclusive emphasis on cases at UniSHAMS. Additionally, the semi-structured interviews were confined to staff members within the PPA and the BPJIK only. In order to enhance the scope of research, it may be beneficial to engage students and the promotion coordinator from the Kulliyah to obtain more insights into promotion activities and procedures.

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