

The Impact of Digital Marketing on Prospective Students' University Choice: Evidence from UDB Surakarta

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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation has reshaped the way higher education institutions market their educational services. This study aims to analyze the influence of digital marketing on prospective students' decisions in choosing Universitas Duta Bangsa (UDB) Surakarta. A quantitative approach was employed using a survey method involving 300 prospective students and newly enrolled students. The digital marketing variable was measured through the dimensions of social media, university website, digital content, and online advertising, while the university choice decision was measured through enrollment intention, institutional preference, and confidence in the selected choice. Regression analysis indicates that digital marketing has a positive and significant effect on prospective students' decisions. These findings reinforce contemporary digital marketing research, which highlights that digital interaction, trust in online content, and online experiences are key determinants in young people's decision-making processes. This study provides theoretical contributions to digital-based higher education marketing and offers practical implications for student recruitment strategies in private universities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has become a disruptive force that reshapes how organizations operate, communicate, and build relationships with their consumers. In the context of marketing, advancements in internet technology, mobile devices, and social media have driven a major shift from conventional marketing toward digital-based marketing [1], [2]. Digital marketing is no longer positioned as a complementary tool; instead, it has become the backbone of organizational communication strategies due

to its ability to reach broad yet segmented audiences in an interactive and measurable manner in real time.

This changing landscape has also been strongly felt in the higher education sector. Universities now operate in a highly competitive environment, not only at the national level but also globally. The increasing number of private universities, diversification of study programs, and ease of access to information have given prospective students more options than in previous decades. In such circumstances, an institution's ability to manage its marketing communication

becomes a crucial factor in sustaining student enrollment [3].

In line with the concept of Marketing 5.0, the use of digital technology enables organizations to understand consumer behavior more precisely through data analytics, artificial intelligence, and digital insights [4]. In higher education, prospective students are no longer passive recipients of information; instead, they actively search, compare, and evaluate institutions through various digital channels. Official university websites, social media platforms, online reviews, institutional profile videos, and student testimonials serve as key references in their decision-making process [5].

Today's prospective students are predominantly members of Generation Z, who exhibit unique characteristics in information consumption. They tend to be visually oriented, process information quickly, and prioritize authenticity and real experiences over formal promotional messages [6]. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube function not only as entertainment media but also as spaces for identity exploration and future planning, including the choice of a university. Digital interactions on these platforms contribute to shaping prospective students' perceptions, trust, and preferences toward an institution [7].

Digital marketing in higher education therefore functions not only as a promotional tool but also as a means of building long-term relationships with prospective students. Informative content, prompt responses to inquiries, and visual representations of campus life can create emotional closeness even before students are officially enrolled [8]. In other words, early digital experiences become part of the student journey that influences their overall decision.

Various studies show that a strong digital presence can increase brand awareness, strengthen institutional image, and enhance prospective consumers' trust in an organization [9]. In service sectors such as education where the product offered is intangible and high-risk trust becomes a decisive factor in the decision-making process

[10]. Therefore, the quality of digital communication conducted by universities has the potential to influence perceptions of academic service quality even before students directly experience campus learning.

Universitas Duta Bangsa (UDB) Surakarta, as one of the private universities in Indonesia, is also part of this digital competition. Promotional efforts are no longer limited to brochures, billboards, or school visits but have expanded to optimizing social media, developing informative websites, producing institutional profile videos, and utilizing paid digital advertising. These activities demonstrate the institution's awareness of the importance of digital marketing in reaching today's generation of prospective students. However, the intensity of digital media use does not necessarily correspond with its effectiveness in influencing prospective students' decisions.

Although studies on digital marketing in business contexts have grown rapidly, research specifically examining its influence on prospective students' decisions in choosing a university remains relatively limited, particularly within the context of private universities in Indonesia. Most previous studies focus more on student satisfaction or loyalty after enrollment rather than the pre-decision phase, when prospective students are still searching for and evaluating information [11]. In fact, this phase is crucial, as it is the point at which initial perceptions are formed and institutional choices begin to narrow.

Based on this gap, this study is important to provide empirical evidence regarding the extent to which digital marketing influences prospective students' decisions. This understanding is valuable not only for the development of higher education marketing theory but also for providing practical implications for university management in designing more effective, relevant, and data-driven communication strategies.

Therefore, this study focuses on analyzing the influence of digital marketing on prospective students' decisions in choosing Universitas Duta Bangsa Surakarta.

The research question proposed is: Does digital marketing significantly influence prospective students' decisions in choosing UDB Surakarta as their preferred university?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *The Basic Concept of Digital Marketing*

Digital marketing is a marketing approach that utilizes digital technologies to create value, build relationships with consumers, and influence purchasing or service usage behavior [12]. Unlike traditional marketing, which tends to be one-way, digital marketing enables two-way interaction between organizations and their audiences through internet-based platforms. This characteristic makes communication more personalized, participatory, and data-driven.

From a strategic perspective, digital marketing encompasses various channels such as social media, websites, search engines, email, and algorithm-based digital advertising [2]. These channels allow organizations to deliver messages in a segmented manner based on demographics, interests, and user behavior. [9] emphasize that the primary strength of digital marketing lies in its ability to generate real-time consumer behavioral data, which can be used to optimize subsequent communication strategies.

[4], through the concept of Marketing 5.0, highlight the integration of intelligent technologies in marketing processes to understand the consumer journey holistically. In this context, digital marketing does not merely function as an information dissemination tool but also as a means to build consumer experiences through interactions that are relevant, responsive, and tailored to individual needs. This approach is particularly relevant for younger generations who

are accustomed to personalized digital content.

2.2 *Dimensions of Digital Marketing*

This study views digital marketing as a multidimensional construct consisting of several key elements.

a. Social Media

Social media has become a highly influential platform for building brand communication with audiences. [8] state that interaction through digital content can enhance consumer engagement, which includes emotional, cognitive, and behavioral involvement with a brand. In the context of higher education, content featuring campus life, student activities, and alumni testimonials can foster emotional closeness between prospective students and the institution.

b. Institutional Website

The official website serves as the primary information hub and formal digital representation of an institution. According to [13], informative, easy-to-navigate, and responsive websites increase users' trust in an organization. In higher education, websites function as sources of academic information, tuition fees, facilities, and admission procedures.

c. Digital Content

Digital content includes text, images, videos, infographics, and other forms of visual communication. [11] found that visual content such as virtual campus tours and program profile videos increases prospective students' interest by providing a more concrete picture of the learning environment.

d. Digital Advertising

Digital advertising enables institutions to reach more specific audiences through data-driven targeting. [9] emphasize that digital ads are effective in increasing brand awareness and reinforcing communication messages when designed in alignment with audience needs.

2.3 Digital Marketing in the Context of Higher Education

Higher education marketing has different characteristics compared to the marketing of physical products. Educational services are intangible, long-term, and high-risk because they relate to an individual's future. Therefore, marketing communication must be able to build trust, credibility, and perceptions of quality [3].

[5] explains that social media has become a primary channel in university marketing due to its ability to reach prospective students widely at relatively low cost. Through social media, universities can present their institutional identity in a more human and authentic way, in contrast to the formal communication style often found in traditional media.

Moreover, digital marketing helps universities build brand equity through consistent communication and positive digital experiences [3]. When prospective students find it easy to access information, receive quick responses from administrators, and encounter relevant content, their perception of the institution's professionalism tends to increase.

2.4 The Concept of Prospective Students' Decision-Making

The decision to choose a university represents a form of consumer decision-making in the context of services. Modern consumer decision models explain that individuals go through several stages: need recognition, information

search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation [10].

In the digital era, the information search and alternative evaluation stages are strongly influenced by online sources. Prospective students tend to visit university websites, watch profile videos, read reviews, and monitor institutional social media before making their choice [11]. These digital interactions shape perceptions of reputation, academic quality, and campus atmosphere.

[6] add that younger generations are highly influenced by electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), which refers to online reviews and shared user experiences. Testimonials from current students and alumni can strengthen prospective students' confidence in their decisions.

2.5 The Relationship Between Digital Marketing and Student Decisions

The relationship between digital marketing and consumer decisions can be explained through consumer engagement theory. [8] state that high levels of digital engagement encourage the formation of emotional connections with a brand, which ultimately influence purchase decisions.

In the context of higher education, digital marketing influences decisions through several mechanisms. First, it increases awareness of the institution's existence (brand awareness). Second, it strengthens a positive image through visual representations and digital storytelling. Third, it builds trust through information transparency and direct interaction [14].

[9] assert that positive digital experiences increase the likelihood that consumers will make decisions beneficial to the organization. This aligns with findings by [15], which

show that relevant and consistent marketing communication in higher education can accelerate prospective students' decision-making processes.

Thus, the more effective a university's digital marketing strategy is, the greater the likelihood that prospective students will develop positive perceptions, strong confidence, and ultimately decide to enroll.

2.6 Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis

Based on the theoretical review above, digital marketing is positioned as the independent variable influencing prospective students' decisions as the dependent variable. The dimensions of social media, website, digital content, and online advertising are assumed to contribute to shaping prospective students' perceptions, trust, and preferences toward a university.

The conceptual framework of this study is based on the assumption that intensive and high-quality digital exposure increases prospective student engagement, strengthens institutional image, and facilitates the evaluation of alternatives, ultimately leading to the decision to choose a university.

Based on this framework, the research hypothesis is formulated as follows:

H1: Digital marketing has a positive and significant influence on prospective students' decisions in choosing Universitas Duta Bangsa Surakarta.

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study employed a quantitative approach with an explanatory research design, which aims to explain the causal relationship between independent and dependent variables. The quantitative approach was chosen

because this research focuses on measuring the influence of digital marketing on prospective students' decisions using numerical data that can be statistically analyzed.

Specifically, this study used a survey method, with a questionnaire as the primary data collection instrument. The survey method was considered appropriate as it allows researchers to systematically and measurably capture respondents' perceptions on a large scale. Moreover, this approach aligns with digital consumer behavior research, which emphasizes the measurement of attitudes, perceptions, and individual decision tendencies [10].

3.2 Research Location and Period

The research was conducted at Universitas Duta Bangsa (UDB) Surakarta, targeting prospective students and newly enrolled students in the current academic year. This location was selected because UDB is a private university actively implementing digital marketing strategies in its student recruitment activities.

Data collection was carried out during the student admission period, when prospective students were actively searching for information and were in the decision-making phase. Therefore, respondents' answers reflect their actual experiences interacting with the university's digital media.

3.3 Population and Sampling Technique

The population of this study consisted of all prospective students and newly enrolled students of UDB Surakarta who obtained information about the university through digital media. Since the exact population size was unknown, the sample was determined using a non-probability sampling approach with a purposive sampling technique.

The respondent criteria in this study were as follows:

1. Had seen or interacted with UDB's digital promotions (social media, website, or online advertisements)
2. Were currently undergoing or had completed the university selection process
3. Were willing to complete the questionnaire in full

The total sample consisted of 300 respondents. This number is considered adequate for linear regression analysis and meets the minimum sample size requirements for consumer behavior research [9].

3.4 Research Variables and Operational Definitions

This study involved two main variables: an independent variable and a dependent variable.

- a. Independent Variable: Digital Marketing (X)

Digital marketing is defined as respondents' perceptions of UDB's promotional activities through digital media. This variable was measured through several dimensions:

1. **Social Media:** Intensity, attractiveness, and interactivity of UDB's social media content
2. **University Website:** Completeness of information, ease of access, and appearance of the official website
3. **Digital Content:** Visual quality, relevance of information, and clarity of digital messages
4. **Online Advertising:** Attractiveness, clarity of message, and frequency of digital advertisements

The indicators of this variable were developed based on digital communication and consumer engagement concepts [2], [8].

- b. Dependent Variable: Prospective Students' Decision (Y)

Prospective students' decision is defined as the level of confidence and tendency of respondents in choosing UDB as their university of choice. This variable was measured using the following indicators:

1. Intention to enroll at UDB
2. Confidence that UDB is the right choice
3. Willingness to recommend UDB to others

These indicators refer to consumer decision-making models in the context of educational services [6], [10].

3.5 Research Instrument

The research instrument was a closed-ended questionnaire designed using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Each variable indicator was translated into several statements to comprehensively capture respondents' perceptions.

Before being widely distributed, the questionnaire was pilot-tested on a small group of respondents to ensure language clarity, contextual suitability, and ease of understanding. This pre-test was essential to minimize interpretation bias and improve the quality of the collected data.

3.6 Data Collection Technique

Research data were collected through online questionnaire distribution using a digital survey platform. This method was chosen because it matches the characteristics of respondents, who belong to the digital-native generation and are accustomed to interacting through mobile devices.

The questionnaire link was distributed via social media,

communication groups for new students, and official university information channels. Each respondent received a brief explanation of the research purpose and assurance of data confidentiality to uphold research ethics.

3.7 Validity and Reliability Testing

Before conducting the main analysis, the research instrument was tested for validity and reliability.

- a. **Validity Test** was conducted using Pearson Product-Moment correlation to ensure each statement item accurately measured the intended construct. An item was considered valid if its correlation value exceeded the r-table value at a 0.05 significance level.
- b. **Reliability Test** was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The instrument was considered reliable if the Cronbach's Alpha value exceeded 0.70, indicating good internal consistency [9].

3.8 Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis was conducted in several stages:

1. **Descriptive Analysis**
Used to describe respondents' profiles and the distribution of responses for each research variable.
2. **Classical Assumption Tests**
Including normality, multicollinearity, and heteroscedasticity tests to ensure the data met the requirements for regression analysis.
3. **Simple Linear Regression Analysis**
Used to examine the influence of digital marketing on prospective students' decisions. The regression equation used was:

$$Y = a + bX + e$$

$$eY = a + bX + e$$

where:

- X= Prospective students' decision
 X= Digital marketing
 a= Constant
 b= Regression
 e= Error term

4. t-test (Partial Test)

Used to determine the significance of the influence of digital marketing on student decisions.

5. Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

Used to measure the extent to which digital marketing explains the variation in students' decisions.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Description of Respondent Characteristics

This study involved 300 respondents consisting of prospective students and newly enrolled students of Universitas Duta Bangsa (UDB) Surakarta. Based on gender, respondents were predominantly female (56%), while males accounted for 44%. The age distribution shows that the majority of respondents were between 17–20 years old (78%), reflecting the typical age group of high school graduates entering higher education.

In terms of regional origin, most respondents came from Central Java (62%), followed by East Java (18%), the Special Region of Yogyakarta (10%), and other regions (10%). This indicates that UDB's promotional reach through digital media extends beyond the local area and attracts prospective students from outside the city.

Regarding the initial source of information about UDB, 48% of

respondents stated that they first learned about UDB through social media, 27% through the official university website, 15% through recommendations from friends or family obtained online, and 10% through digital advertisements. These findings highlight the dominant role of digital channels in the early awareness stage among prospective students.

4.2 Descriptive Analysis of the Digital Marketing Variable

The digital marketing variable was measured through four main dimensions: social media, university website, digital content, and online advertising.

Social Media obtained the highest mean score (mean = 4.32). Respondents stated that UDB's social media content is attractive, informative, and effectively represents campus life. Many respondents felt closer to campus life through posts about student activities, short videos, and interactions in the comment sections.

The University Website had a mean score of 4.18. Respondents considered the website sufficiently comprehensive in providing information about study programs, tuition fees, and registration procedures. However, some respondents expected improvements in interactive features such as chatbots or live inquiry services.

Digital Content (profile videos, graphic designs, testimonials) obtained a mean score of 4.25. Visual content was perceived as helpful in providing a more concrete understanding of the campus environment and academic activities.

Online Advertising had a mean score of 4.05. Although still evaluated positively, digital advertisements were considered less interactive compared to organic social media content. Some respondents

indicated that they were more interested in content that felt natural rather than direct promotional advertisements.

Overall, the average score for the digital marketing variable was 4.20, indicating that respondents' perceptions of UDB's digital marketing activities were categorized as very good.

4.3 Descriptive Analysis of the Student Decision Variable

The student decision variable was measured through three main indicators: intention to enroll, confidence in the choice, and willingness to recommend.

The intention to enroll indicator showed a mean score of 4.28, meaning that most respondents had a strong desire to choose UDB after obtaining information through digital media.

The confidence in choice indicator had a mean score of 4.22. Respondents felt that their decision to choose UDB was based on sufficient and convincing information, particularly from the university's official digital channels.

The willingness to recommend indicator obtained a mean score of 4.15, showing that respondents were not only confident in their decision but were also willing to recommend UDB to others.

The overall mean score of the student decision variable was 4.22, indicating a high level of decision confidence.

4.4 Validity and Reliability Testing

The validity test results showed that all statement items had correlation values greater than the r-table value (0.113) at a significance level of 0.05, indicating that all items were valid.

Reliability testing showed Cronbach's Alpha values of:

- a. Digital Marketing: 0.89
- b. Student Decision: 0.87

These values exceed the minimum threshold of 0.70, indicating that the research instrument is reliable and consistent in measuring the research variables.

4.5 Classical Assumption Tests

Before conducting regression analysis, the data were tested using classical assumption tests.

- The **normality test** showed a Kolmogorov-Smirnov significance value of **0.200 (> 0.05)**, indicating that the data were normally distributed.
- The **multicollinearity test** showed VIF values < 10 and Tolerance values > 0.10, indicating no multicollinearity.
- The **heteroscedasticity test** showed no specific pattern in the scatterplot graph, indicating that the model was free from heteroscedasticity problems.

Since the classical assumptions were met, regression analysis could be conducted.

4.6 Linear Regression Analysis

The results of the simple linear regression analysis produced the following equation:

$$Y = 1.102 + 0.745X$$

The regression coefficient of 0.745 indicates that every one-unit increase in the perception of digital marketing increases the student decision score by 0.745 units.

4.7 Significance Test (t-test)

The t-test results showed a t-value of 15.84 with a significance level of 0.000 (< 0.05). This means that digital marketing has a positive and significant effect on prospective students' decisions. Therefore, research hypothesis H1 is accepted.

4.8 Coefficient of Determination

The coefficient of determination (R^2) value of 0.62 indicates that 62% of the variation in prospective students' decisions can be explained by the digital marketing variable, while the remaining 38% is influenced by other factors such as academic reputation, economic considerations, campus location, and family influence, which were not examined in this study.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that digital marketing has a positive and significant influence on prospective students' decisions in choosing Universitas Duta Bangsa (UDB) Surakarta. Social media, the official website, digital visual content, and online advertising have been shown to play important roles in shaping prospective students' perceptions, interest, and confidence in the institution. Social media serves as the primary channel for building closeness and awareness, while the official website strengthens institutional credibility by providing comprehensive and reliable information.

The findings indicate that digital experiences prior to enrollment serve as an initial representation of university quality in the eyes of prospective students. Visual content and responsive digital interactions help reduce uncertainty regarding the intangible nature of educational services. Therefore, an integrated digital marketing strategy can enhance trust while reinforcing prospective students' preferences.

Theoretically, this study confirms the relevance of digital marketing and consumer behavior theories in the context of higher education, particularly at the pre-decision stage. Practically, the findings encourage higher education institutions to position digital marketing as a long-term strategy, focusing on authentic content, interactive communication, and integration across digital platforms.

However, the decision to choose a university is also influenced by other factors

such as academic reputation, tuition costs, location, and graduate career prospects. Future research is therefore recommended to broaden the scope of study and combine quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding.

Overall, in today's digital era, a university's presence in digital spaces is no longer optional, but a strategic necessity for building trust and attracting the interest of future generations of prospective students.

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