



The Impact of Social Media Marketing on Enrolment Decision for Bachelor's Degree Programmes in Nepalese Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has transformed student recruitment practices in higher education. Social media platforms have become important channels through which prospective students obtain information, interact with institutions, and develop perceptions about educational opportunities. Despite the growing use of social media marketing by higher education institutions, there is limited evidence on how different dimensions of social media marketing influence students' enrolment decisions in developing countries such as Nepal.

Guided by the Theory of Planned Behaviour, this study examines the influence of social media accessibility, content quality, engagement, brand awareness, and paid advertising on students' enrolment decisions in Nepalese Higher Management Educational Institutions.

This research used a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, with quantitative data collected from a survey of two hundred and thirty-nine (N=239) bachelor-level management students and qualitative data from interviews with nine participants. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, principal component analysis, independent-samples t-tests, and binary logistic regression. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis.

The results show that parental social media activity, engagement in digital communities for prospective students, and clarity of social media content are the main factors affecting enrolment decisions. Conversely, peer influence, information accessibility, and paid advertisements had a small direct effect on enrolment outcomes. The study contributes to the Theory of Planned Behaviour by integrating cultural and family influences in a developing country context and emphasising the importance of family involvement and credible digital communication in higher education marketing, which have practical implications for educational institutions seeking to improve recruitment success through targeted, culturally appropriate social media approaches.

Keywords: digital marketing, enrolment decision, higher education, mixed methods, Nepal, social media marketing, theory of planned behaviour

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Introduction

The digitalisation of society has had a significant impact on organisational communication, stakeholder engagement, and service marketing. In the higher education context, social media has emerged as an important marketing and communication tool through which institutions can engage potential students, enhance institutional reputation, and facilitate student recruitment (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Rutter, Roper, & Lettice, 2016). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, and TikTok have become part of prospective students' information behaviour influencing how they search for information, compare institutions, and make educational choices (Peruta & Shields, 2017; Shah et al., 2024).

The adoption of social media marketing by higher education institutions reflects the broader shift in consumer behaviour and communication channels. Today's students, especially those from Generation Z, are digital natives who use social media to research, seek advice from peers, and evaluate products and services before making any decision (Mogaji, 2025). Consequently, higher education institutions are increasingly embracing social media marketing strategies to enhance their visibility, attract potential students, and build their institutional brands (Brech et al., 2017). Research has empirically demonstrated that social media plays a role in different stages of the student decision-making process, namely awareness, interest, consideration, and the final decision to enrol (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Garza et al., 2024).

Furthermore, social media marketing presents many advantages for educational institutions. It is a low-cost communication tool; it offers real-time interaction, supports user-generated content, and fosters online communities so that prospective students can interact with current students, alumni, faculty, and institutional representatives (Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015; Rutter et al., 2016). Social media platforms also allow institutions to promote institutional culture, academic quality, campus experiences, scholarship

opportunities, and career prospects in a more interactive and accessible way than traditional marketing channels (Peruta & Shields, 2017).

However, the effectiveness of social media marketing in influencing students' decisions to enrol remains a question despite the above mentioned opportunities. Existing studies provide mixed results regarding the influence of social media engagement, content quality, peer influence, and digital advertising on selecting educational institutions (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022; Krezel & Krezel, 2017). The results have found that social media has a positive impact on students' perceptions and intentions to enrol (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Consequently the next result suggests that social media serves more as an information source than as a direct driver of enrolment behaviour (Garza et al., 2024), which suggest that the effect of social media may vary across institutional, cultural, and geographic contexts.

It is sought to study the above mentioned relationships in the context of Nepalese higher education. In the last decade, there has been an exponential increase in internet access and social media use in Nepal, leading educational institutions to invest more in digital marketing strategies. Universities and colleges are actively using social media platforms to promote their academic programs, engage with prospective students, and build their institutional image. However, little empirical evidence exists on the effectiveness of those efforts. Most studies on social media marketing in higher education are conducted in Western countries, limiting the generalisability of findings to developing countries with vastly different cultures, social norms, and economic contexts (Mogaji, 2025).

Furthermore, educational decision-making in Nepal is situated within a collectivist cultural context, where family influence, parental expectations, and community norms often play a significant role in students' choices of educational institutions (Hofstede, 2001). While social media marketing research often emphasises peer influence and individual attitudes, little attention has been given to how parental engagement in digital environments affects on students enrolment

decisions. Therefore, there is limited understanding of the mechanisms through which social media marketing influences student recruitment in Nepalese higher education institutions.

This gap is addressed in this study through the theoretical framework of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). The TPB, which was developed by Ajzen (1991), states that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control determine behavioural intentions. The theory has been widely used to understand behavioural intentions in education, technology adoption, marketing, and consumer decision-making contexts (Armitage et al., 2004; Conner & Sparks, 2005). In social media marketing, content quality and institutional communication can affect attitudes; parental and peer influences can serve as subjective norms; and information accessibility can affect perceived behavioural control. Applying TPB provides a useful framework for understanding how social media marketing influences students' enrolment decisions within a culturally distinct higher education environment.

Statement of the Problem

The increasing adoption of social media marketing by higher education institutions has created new opportunities for student recruitment; however, there is insufficient empirical evidence regarding which dimensions of social media marketing most effectively influence students' enrolment decisions in Nepal. Existing research largely originates in developed countries and focuses on general social media usage rather than on specific social media marketing dimensions, such as content quality, accessibility, engagement, awareness, and paid advertising. Moreover, although family plays a significant role in educational decision-making in collectivist societies, parental digital engagement has received little attention, leaving a gap in evidence-based guidance for higher education institutions in Nepal on the design and implementation of effective social media marketing strategies. This study aims to address this knowledge gap by investigating how key dimensions of social media marketing influence students' enrolment decisions in bachelor-level management education.

Research Objectives

General Objective

- To examine the impact of social media marketing on students' enrolment decisions in bachelor-level management education institutions in Nepal.

Specific Objectives

- To assess the influence of social media accessibility on students' enrolment decisions.
- To examine the effect of social media content quality and clarity on enrolment decisions.
- To investigate the influence of social media engagement and digital community participation on enrolment decisions.
- To determine the role of social media awareness-building activities in students' enrolment decisions.
- To evaluate the influence of paid social media advertising on enrolment decisions.
- To examine the influence of parental and peer social media engagement on students' enrolment decisions.
- To interpret the findings through the lens of the TPB.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide the study:

How does social media accessibility influence students' enrolment decisions in higher education institutions?

What is the relationship between social media content quality and students' enrolment decisions?

To what extent does engagement in digital communities influence enrolment decisions?

How do social media awareness-building activities affect students' enrolment decisions?

What role does paid social media advertising play in influencing enrolment decisions?

How do parental and peer influences affect students' enrolment decisions in a social media environment?

How can the Theory of Planned Behaviour explain the relationship between social media marketing and enrolment decisions?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to theory, practice, and policy contexts. Theoretically, it broadens the scope of the TPB to encompass social media marketing and university recruitment in developing countries, which contributes to the adaptation of behavioural theories in collectivist cultures by considering parental social media engagement alongside the traditional TPB constructs.

The study has practical implications for higher education institutions aiming to enhance their student recruitment strategies with evidence-based insights, which identifies social media marketing dimensions that have the greatest influence on enrolment decisions, and guides content creation, digital community engagement, and family-focused communication strategies. The above mentioned insights could help universities and colleges allocate their marketing resources more effectively and achieve better recruitment results.

The findings also can help educational planners, university administrators, and policymakers to understand the role of digital communication in expanding access to higher education from a policy perspective. As Nepal continues to advance its digital transformation initiatives, examining the role of social media in educational decision-making is essential to inform the development of more effective communication strategies and enhance student engagement in higher education.

Conceptual Framework

To explain the influence of social media on students' enrolment decisions in Nepalese management educational institutions, this study develops a conceptual framework that integrates social media marketing dimensions with the TPB. The three cognitive mediators in this model, attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control, are primarily shaped by the independent variables (Social media marketing factors).

First, content quality and clarity directly impact attitude. When students view social media posts as clear, professional, and easy to understand, they form a positive psychological impression of higher-level educational institutions, thereby increasing their intention to enrol. Second, peer

and parental influences shape subjective norms by reflecting the social support and perceived pressure students experience within their immediate online and offline networks. In this context, parental engagement with social media is a significant normative factor that reinforces its influence on students' enrolment decisions.

Lastly, information accessibility and interaction are connected to perceived behavioural control. According to this relationship, students feel more capable and in charge of the impact of social media on their enrolment process when they can easily obtain information and receive responsive engagement from the higher-level institution, which helps to bridge the gap between initial interest and final behavioural commitment.

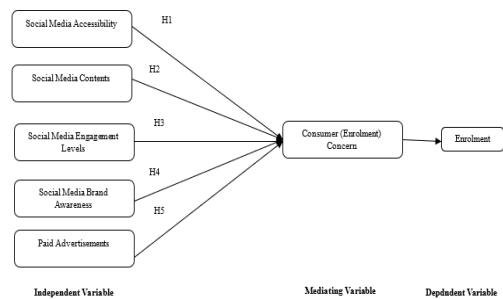


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework: Impact of Social Media Marketing on Enrolment Decisions

Hypothesis

Direct Relationships (Independent Variables → Dependent Variable)

H1: Peer and parental influences, as components of subjective norms, have a significant positive effect on students' enrolment decisions in Nepalese management educational institutions.

H2: The integration of educational, entertaining, and emotionally engaging content on social media is expected to increase user engagement and enhance brand recall, thereby influencing students' enrolment decisions.

H3: Interactive and personalised social media content that aligns with individual user preferences is positively associated with higher user engagement.

H4: *Consistent, frequent brand activity on social media significantly increases brand visibility and builds brand awareness among target audiences.*

H5: *Paid social media advertisements that are targeted using users' behavioural data generate higher marketing returns than non-targeted advertisements.*

This study is an applied empirical investigation that uses established theories and methods to address practical marketing challenges in Nepal's higher education sector. Rather than focusing solely on theoretical constructs, this study employs systematic observation and primary data collection to validate the relationship between digital marketing efforts and student behaviour. By grounding the analysis in established communication and consumer behaviour theories, the study ensures that the findings are not merely subjective but are derived from rigorous, replicable scientific methods that are consistent with contemporary academic standards.

Theoretical Foundation

This study is an applied empirical investigation that uses established theories and methods to address practical marketing challenges in Nepal's higher education institutions. Rather than focusing solely on theoretical constructs, this study applied systematic observation and primary data collection to validate or refute the relationship between digital marketing efforts and student behaviour. By grounding the analysis in established communication and consumer behaviour theories, the study ensures that the findings are not merely subjective but are derived from rigorous, replicable scientific methods consistent with contemporary academic standards.

This study examined the factors shaping students' perceptions and assessments of a brand following their engagement with Social Media Brand Communities (SMBBCs), a process crucial to developing brand loyalty.

Novel Application of the TPB

In this study, the TPB serves as the theoretical foundation for understanding the influence of social media on students' enrolment decisions in Management Educational Institutions in Nepal.

The TPB suggests that behavioural intentions are shaped by three components: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Gatfield & Chen, 2006; Krezel & Krezel, 2017). This study operationalised earlier-mentioned constructs by examining how content quality and clarity on social media affect students' attitudes, how parental and peer influences serve as subjective norms, and how accessibility and interaction with information on social media affect students' perceived behavioural control. This innovative application of TPB, which has primarily been used in consumer behaviour, provides a robust analysis of social media's role in educational decision-making in a developing context, such as Nepal.

By connecting social media content characteristics to TPB constructs, this research highlights the cognitive and social processes involved in enrolment decisions, thereby expanding the theoretical framework and suggesting that TPB can be modified to enhance its explanatory power in new contexts. The methodology established in this research not only assesses information dissemination but also examines social persuasion and empowerment, offering a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of student enrolment decision by social media marketing (Ong et al., 2023; Rehman et al., 2023). This approach enhances the rigour and generalisability of the findings, moving beyond simple descriptive analysis to provide deeper insights into student behaviour (Mogaji, 2025).

Literature Review

Social Media Marketing in Higher Education:

The fast growth of social media has changed marketing communication in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Social media platforms offer HEIs cost-effective ways to communicate institutional values, promote academic programs, and build relationships with prospective students (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Rutter et al., 2016). Unlike traditional advertising, social media enables two-way communication and helps students interact with educational institutions and obtain authentic information from peers, alumni, and current students (Peruta & Shields, 2017).

Research suggests that prospective students are increasingly relying on social media for information search and institutional evaluation (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). Digital platforms affect awareness, consideration, and final decision-making processes by increasing institutional visibility and facilitating electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Social media also influences brand development by allowing engagement and emotional connection between students and institutions (Brech et al., 2017).

Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have emerged as effective channels for relationship promoting and student recruitment in higher education. Facebook remains relevant for institutional communication and parental engagement, whereas Instagram and TikTok are visual and experiential content that appeals to Generation Z students. YouTube serves as a source of detailed information, including Alumni testimonials, virtual campus tours, and faculty presentations, to help students evaluate educational quality (Brech et al., 2017).

Social Media Brand Communities and Student Recruitment

Social Media Brand Communities (SMBBCs) have become relevant in digital marketing strategies in higher education. SMBBCs provide opportunities for prospective students to connect with university stakeholders and to experience university culture, academic programs, and career prospects (Laroche, Habibi & Richard, 2012; Dessart et al., 2015).

Research highlights that membership in online brand communities increases trust, involvement, and brand perceptions, resulting in higher behavioural intentions (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Cingillioglu, Gal & Prokhorov, 2024). Within an educational context, such communities facilitate information exchange and social learning, helping students reduce uncertainty about higher-education decisions (Rutter et al., 2016).

This study is consistent with prior research indicating that active involvement in prospective students' digital communities positively influences

the decision to enrol. The results show that the digital community engagement increased the probability of enrolment by 46.2% and suggest that online communities act as important social validation mechanisms in the educational decision-making process.

Theory of Planned Behaviour

TPB, developed by Ajzen (1991), is one of the most widely used frameworks to explain behavioural intentions and decision-making processes. TPB highlights that behavioural intentions are determined by three main constructs: attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control.

Attitude is a positive or negative evaluation of a behaviour held by a person. The quality, credibility, and clarity of information communicated through social media may affect attitudes toward educational marketing (Ajzen, 1991; Krezel & Krezel, 2017). Subjective norms are perceived social pressure from important reference groups such as parents, peers, and community members. Perceived behavioural control refers to an individual's confidence in performing a behaviour and is influenced by access to information, resources, and opportunities (Ajzen, 1991).

TPB has been used to explain consumer behaviour, technology adoption, management-related decisions, and educational choices (Armitage et al., 2004; Conner & Sparks, 2005). Recent studies have employed the TPB within the context of digital marketing, emphasising that social media content, online communities, and digital engagement influence attitudes, norms, and perceived control, which in turn shape behavioural intentions (Ong et al., 2023; Rehman et al., 2023). In this study, the determinants of attitude formation include content quality and clarity; social media engagement by parents and peers is a determinant of subjective norms; and information accessibility and digital interaction are determinants of perceived behavioural control. The use of TPB broadens the theory's application to social media marketing and student recruitment in Nepal. Social and cultural influences on enrolment decisions besides institutional characteristics, social and cultural

factors also shape student enrolment decisions. Prior research has identified parents, peers, teachers, and community members as significant reference groups influencing educational aspirations and the selection of higher-level educational institutions (Areces et al., 2016; Goodrich, Swani & Munch, 2020). Nepal is a collectivist society, and family can have more influence than friends on education decisions. Family members are actively involved in assessing educational choices, financial obligations, and career possibilities (Hofstede, 2001). Accordingly, the normative influence of parental attitudes and digital engagement can be greater than peer influences. The findings of this research lend support to this argument. Parental social media activity was the strongest predictor of enrolment decisions, with the odds of enrolment 49.2% higher, which challenges the common Western assumption that peer influence is the most important factor in educational decisions.

Research Gap

There remains a lack of research into social media marketing in higher education, with three key gaps still to be filled. Most of the research has been conducted in developed countries, so there is little insight into developing and collectivist contexts such as Nepal. Most existing research has focused on the individual impact of digital marketing variables, often overlooking behavioural theories such as the TPB. The role of parental digital engagement remains poorly understood, despite its importance in educational decision-making. This study seeks to address earlier mentioned gaps by incorporating social media marketing variables into the TPB model and examining their effects on enrolment decisions at management education institutions in Nepal.

Methodology

Research Philosophy and Design

The research philosophy adopted was pragmatism, which enables this study to integrate quantitative and qualitative approaches to address complex research problems (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Pragmatism is concerned with the practical application of research problems and acknowledges that both

objective and subjective realities exist in the creation of knowledge. The convergent parallel mixed-methods design was selected because it enables the simultaneous collection of quantitative and qualitative data, the separate analysis of each, and the integration of both at the interpretation stage (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This design allows triangulation and enhances the validity and richness of the research findings.

Quantitative Strand

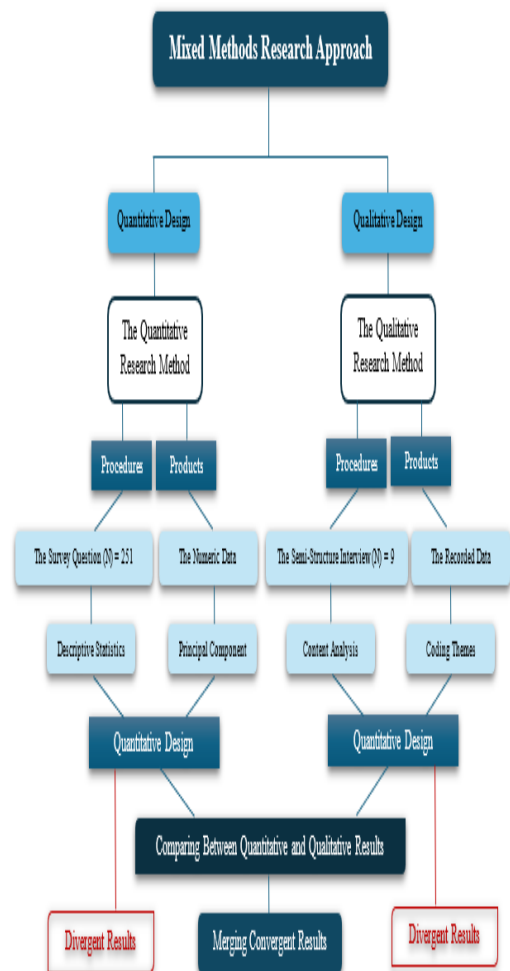


Figure 2. Mixed Methods Design

The quantitative component of the study applied a cross-sectional survey design to explore the

relationships between social media marketing variables and students' decisions to enrol. Cross-sectional surveys are widely used in educational and behavioural research because they permit the collection of large amounts of data within a relatively short period (Bryman, 2016; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011).

The survey was conducted with 239 bachelor-level management students from different higher education institutions in Gandaki and Bagmati Province, Nepal. The sample size was adequate for multivariate statistical analyses such as principal component analysis (PCA), independent sample t-test, and binary logistic regression. The questionnaire items were developed based on previous studies and the constructs of the Theory of Planned behaviour, which measured social media content quality, information accessibility, parental influence, peer influence, digital community participation, and enrolment decisions.

Qualitative Strand

The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews with nine participants. Semi-structured interviews provide flexibility in this study while maintaining consistency across participants and are particularly useful for exploring perceptions, opinions, and meanings (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interviews focused on students' experiences with social media marketing, perceptions of institutional credibility, information quality, parental involvement, and enrolment decision processes. Interview data were analysed using inductive content analysis following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Reliability and Validity

To ensure measurement reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for all constructs. Reliability assessment followed the recommendations of Hair et al. (2019), in which values above 0.70 are considered acceptable for internal consistency. Construct validity and underlying factor structures were assessed using PCA. In the qualitative part, trustworthiness was established by credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability procedures

suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Member checking, rich contextual descriptions, and methodological transparency were used to enhance qualitative rigour.

Data Analysis and Integration

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, independent sample t-tests, principal component analysis, and binary logistic regression. Logistic regression was selected because the dependent variable represented a dichotomous enrolment outcome and allowed estimation of odds ratios for significant predictors (Field, 2018; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). The qualitative data were analysed separately using content analysis. Following independent analyses, quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated using a convergent parallel process to identify areas of convergence, complementarity, and divergence. The integration enhanced the study's interpretive strength and explanatory quality.

Results, Discussion, and Conclusion

Results

This study investigated the influence of social media marketing on students' enrolment decisions for bachelor-level management education in Nepal, using the TPB framework. The findings reveal that parental social media activity, engagement in prospective student digital communities, and content clarity have a significant impact on enrolment decisions. In contrast, peer influence, information accessibility, and paid social media advertising did not exhibit statistically significant effects, contributing to the growing body of literature on digital marketing in higher education and highlighting the significance of contextual and cultural factors in shaping student decision-making.

Table 1. Binary Logistic Regression Model to Predict Social Media Impact on Enrolment Decision in Higher Education

Variables of the equation	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sin	Exp (B)	Exp (B)	
							Lower	Upper
Social media information utility	-.59	.183	.105	1	.746	.942	.658	1.35
Social media information access	.080	.163	.242	1	.623	1.084	.787	1.492
Social media enrolment information	.152	.164	.866	1	.352	1.165	.845	1.605
Social media content clarity	.325	.168	3.744	1	.049	1.383	.996	1.922
Constant	-1.133	.522	4.713	1	.030	.322		

At the 5% level, the only statistically significant predictor is the clarity of social media content clarity ($B = 0.325$, $SE = 0.168$, $Wald = 3.744$, $p = 0.049$). The odds ratio [$Exp(B) = 1.383$] indicates that if people think social media content is clearer, the likelihood of signing up increases by about 38.3%, holding other factors constant. The lower bound of the 95% confidence interval ($0.996 - 1.922$) is very close to 1, but the result is still somewhat significant. This suggests that clearer content has a big impact on students' decisions.

On the other hand, social media information utility ($B = -0.059$, $p = 0.746$), social media information access ($B = 0.080$, $p = 0.623$), and social media enrolment information ($B = 0.152$, $p = 0.352$) were not statistically significant predictors of enrolment decisions. Their confidence intervals include 1, indicating that these factors do not significantly affect the likelihood of enrolling in this study (see Table 1).

The constant term was statistically significant ($B = -1.133$, $p = 0.030$), indicating the baseline log-odds of enrolment when all predictor variables are held constant. In general, the results show that the clarity of social media content is the most important factor affecting students' decisions to enrol. In contrast, other informational aspects of social media have little effect on this model (see Table 1).

Although content-related variables provide some additional insights, the model continues to exhibit low explanatory power. This can be attributed to the overlapping nature of content constructs and their limited ability to capture user interaction. Therefore, the next section extends the analysis by incorporating engagement-related variables.

Table 2. Binary Model to Predict Social Media Impact on Enrolment Decision in Higher Education ($N = 239$)

Variables of the equation	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sin	Exp (B)	Exp (B)	
							Lower	Upper
Student social media engagement	.301	.182	2.733	1	.098	1.352	.946	1.93
Prospective student digital community	.380	.171	4.95	1	.026	1.462	1.047	2.042
Constant	-1.343	.166	65.55	1	<.001	.261		

The results demonstrate that the prospective student digital community is a statistically significant predictor of enrolment decisions ($B = 0.380$, $SE = 0.171$, $Wald = 4.95$, $p = 0.026$). The odds ratio [$Exp(B) = 1.462$] indicates that for each one-unit rise in engagement with digital communities, the probability of enrolment escalates by roughly 46.2%, assuming other variables remain unchanged. The 95% confidence interval ($1.047 - 2.042$) does not encompass 1, thereby reinforcing the significance of this variable (see Table 2).

On the other hand, student social media engagement was not a statistically significant predictor at the 5% level ($B = 0.301$, $SE = 0.182$, $Wald = 2.733$, $p = 0.098$). The odds ratio ($Exp(B) = 1.352$) shows a positive relationship, but the p-value is greater than 0.05, and the confidence interval ($0.946 - 1.93$) includes 1. This means that this effect is not statistically reliable for predicting enrolment decisions. This

can reflect contextual factors specific to Nepal.”

The constant term was statistically significant ($B = -1.343$, $p < 0.001$), showing that the baseline log-odds of enrolment are when all predictor variables are set to zero. Overall, the results show that being part of digital communities has a greater impact on students’ enrolment decisions in Nepal than simply using social media (see Table 2).

While the initial model provides a baseline understanding of the relationship between the independent variables and students’ enrolment decisions, the relatively low explanatory power suggests that additional factors may be influencing the outcome. To enhance the model, the next section incorporates content-related variables, which are expected to better capture the informational influence of social media.

Summary of significant predictors

Table 3. Strong Predictors of the Impact of Social Media Marketing on Students’ Enrolment

Independent variables (predictors)	Unstandardised Coefficient (B)	Odds ratios	P values
Parental social media activity	.402	1.492	.019
Social media content clarity	.325	1.383	.049
Prospective student digital community	.380	1.462	.026

The study finds that parental social media activity is a stronger predictor than other variables, exerting a moderate effect on students’ enrolment decisions ($B = 0.402$, $p = 0.019$), with an odds ratio of 1.492, indicating a 49.2% increase in the probability of enrolment. Additionally, clarity of social media content positively affects students’ enrolment decisions ($B = 0.325$, $p = 0.049$), increasing the likelihood of influence by 38.3% (odds ratio = 1.383). Active participation in online student groups also plays a crucial role ($B = 0.380$, $p = 0.026$), increasing the influence on students’ enrolment decisions by 46.2% (odds ratio = 1.462). The findings emphasise the need for higher education institutions to enhance direct digital engagement and involve parents to improve recruitment strategies (see Table 3).

Discussion

Parental Social Media Activity and Subjective Norms

The key finding of this study is that parental social media activity influences enrolment decisions. This finding supports Ajzen’s (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour and specifically the concept of subjective norms, which states that the expectations and perceptions of significant others influence behavioural intentions. The finding suggests that students whose parents are actively engaged with educational information on social media are significantly more likely to enrol at a specific institution.

This finding is in line with the previous studies that consider parents as the key stakeholders in the educational decision-making process (Areces et al., 2016; Goodrich et al., 2020). Nonetheless, this study contributes to the literature by showing that parents’ role in the decision-making process is gradually shifting toward the digital sphere rather than face-to-face interaction. Although previous TPB-based studies often underscore peer influence as the primary subjective norm affecting young adults (Armitage et al., 2004; Krezel & Krezel, 2017), the current study suggests that parental influence remains more pervasive than peer influence in Nepal’s collectivist cultural context.

The results also corroborate Hofstede’s (2001) theory of cultural dimensions, which holds that collectivist societies place greater importance on family approval and group expectations when making major life decisions. In contrast to studies in Western countries, where individual preferences often influence university choice (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015), this study shows that family involvement continues to play a role in educational choices in Nepal. Thus, the study challenges the generalisability of Western-centric student choice models and emphasises the need for culturally contextualised approaches to marketing higher education. Digital communities and social validation

Another important predictor of enrolment decisions was participation in prospective student digital communities. This finding is

consistent with research on Social Media Brand Communities (SMBBCs), which highlights that online communities foster trust, engagement, and behavioural intention through common experiences and peer-to-peer interactions (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Laroche et al., 2012; Dessart et al., 2015). The result of this study is consistent with Rutter et al. (2016), who found that social media interactions positively impacted perceptions of higher level educational institutions brands and recruitment outcomes. Similarly, Cingillioglu et al. (2023) found that community participation was associated with higher levels of trust and commitment to institutions. The qualitative results of this study further indicate that prospective students value interactions with current students and alums, as these interactions provide authentic information about institutional culture, academic quality, and career opportunities.

However, the present findings also suggest that digital community's function differently from traditional promotional channels. Rather than directly persuading students, earlier mentioned communities reduce uncertainty and facilitate social validation. This finding supports the literature on consumer decision-making, which indicates that information generated by peers is perceived as more credible than organisational communication (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Therefore, higher-level educational institutions can be better served in their recruitment by building interactive online communities rather than focusing only on one-way promotional messaging.

Clarity of Content, Trust, and Formation of Attitude

Content clarity strongly influences the attitudinal component of TPB. As Ajzen (1991) states, positive attitudes increase the likelihood of behavioural intention and the ensuing action. The results indicate that students are more likely to enrol if institutions provide clear, transparent, and relevant information via social media platforms, which finding is consistent with research by Peruta and Shields (2017), Shah et al. (2024), and Garza et al. (2024), who found that high-quality content enhances institutional credibility and positively impacts prospective students'

perceptions. Moreover, Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2011) argue that the content of social media is a major source of information in the higher-level educational institutions selection process, thus making clarity and transparency key factors in the building of the institutional image. However, the qualitative results indicate that clarity alone is insufficient. Students referred to authenticity, alum experience, scholarship opportunities, and signs of educational quality as factors in assessing institutions, which finding is consistent with recent literature indicating that Generation Z consumers are becoming more skeptical of polished promotional material and prefer authentic, experience-based communication (Mogaji, 2025). Therefore, the content's success appears to depend not only on clarity but also on perceived authenticity and trustworthiness.

Insignificant Role of Peer Influence

One of the surprising results is the insignificant role of peer influence on enrolment decisions. This result contradicts several studies that claim that peers have a strong influence on educational and consumer decisions (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022; Krezel, & Krezel, 2017). TPB states that several reference groups, including friends and classmates, usually influence subjective norms. However, the present study shows a small role of peer influence in the Nepalese context. This gap can be explained in several ways.

To begin with, students can place greater importance on their parents' advice than on their peers', because decisions about higher education carry major financial and career consequences. Second, cultural norms in Nepal encourage family involvement in educational planning, thereby reducing the relative importance of peer opinions. Third, students can seek peer information only for confirmation and not as the basis for final decisions, which adds to the ongoing discussion about the relative impact of different normative groups within TPB, indicating that subjective norms should not be treated as a monolithic construct but rather as a culturally dependent phenomenon in which some reference groups have greater influence than others.

Limited Role of Information Accessibility

Information accessibility did not emerge as a significant predictor of enrolment decisions, which was unexpected. This finding is contrary to previous studies, which highlight the availability of information as a major factor in shaping educational choice (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Shah et al., 2024). Under TPB, information accessibility is often associated with perceived behavioural control because access to information enhances individuals' confidence in decision-making. One possible explanation is that information accessibility has become a baseline expectation rather than a differentiating factor.

Most higher education institutions today have websites and social media accounts, and information is available across institutions. Therefore, accessibility alone can no longer influence students' choices, as it no longer provides a competitive advantage, which consistent with recent literature on digital marketing, which suggests that the abundance of information may reduce the strategic value of mere availability and increase the importance of content quality, credibility, and engagement (Mogaji, 2025). However, it is not enough to disseminate information; it is also necessary to ensure that the information is meaningful, credible, and relevant to prospective students.

Limited Impact of Paid Advertising

Another interesting finding is that there is no significant relationship between paid social media advertising and the decision to enrol, which challenges the traditional marketing assumption that paid promotion directly influences consumer conversion rates (Kotler, Keller & Chernev, 2022). However, it is consistent with a growing body of higher education marketing literature that shows students are increasingly resistant to overt advertising and more trusting of organic content and peer recommendations (Peruta & Shields, 2017; Mogaji, 2025). The qualitative findings of the present study suggest that students are more likely to perceive paid advertising as marketing rather than education. Most participants reported that when investigating institutions, they trusted reviews, testimonials, and chats with current

students more than sponsored content, which is consistent with the concept of advertising skepticism, proposed by Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998), which holds that consumers are becoming increasingly skeptical of commercial messages. Consequently, educational institutions may be more effective at building relationships and leveraging user-generated content than at spending too many resources on paid advertising campaigns.

Theoretical Contributions of this Study

The results contribute to the TPB in three main ways. First, they suggest that TPB remains a valid framework for explaining educational decision-making in digital environments. Second, they suggest that social media marketing variables can be meaningfully mapped onto TPB constructs, with content clarity affecting attitudes, parental influence serving as a proxy for subjective norms, and information accessibility influencing perceived behavioural control. The third, and most importantly, this study highlights the contextual nature of TPB. The strong influence of parental social media activity and the weak influence of peers suggest that subjective norms vary significantly across cultural settings, which supports calls by Conner and Sparks (2005) and Sniehotta, Priesseu and Araújo-Soares (2014) for a better contextualisation of the TPB when applied in non-Western societies. Thus, the study recommends that future applications of TPB in higher education recruitment explicitly consider family-centered digital engagement as a distinct aspect of subjective norms, particularly in collectivist cultures. Such an extension would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how social media influences educational decision-making in developing countries.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of social media marketing on students' enrolment decisions at bachelor-level management education institutions in Nepal, using the TPB as the guiding theoretical framework. The study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach, collecting quantitative data from 239 students and qualitative data from nine interviews to build a comprehensive picture

of the role of social media in educational decision-making. This study examines the significant yet inconsistent impact of social media on higher education enrolment decisions, highlighting the importance of parental engagement, participation in digital communities, and content clarity.

It questions the efficacy of paid advertising and peer pressure in the traditional sense, demonstrating that Nepalese families place a higher premium on trust and authentic information over marketing messages. This study employs the TPB in social media recruitment and highlights the importance of subjective norms and cultural context in decision-making. The practical implications include the need for educational institutions to develop clear, informative content and involve parents and communities in recruitment campaigns. The policy implications relate to ethical digital communication. The study has limitations regarding bachelor's-level programs and calls for further research across multiple contexts and disciplinary lenses, which concludes by advocating a culturally responsive approach to social media marketing in higher education and emphasising the importance of trust and family engagement in the enrolment process.

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