

An Investigation of the Impact of Social Media Brand Identity on Student Enrolment Intention in Selected Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

With the rise of Web 2.0 and the proliferation of social media platforms, communication has evolved into a more interactive and collaborative experience, transforming these platforms into key tools for marketing. This study examines the impact of digital institutional brand presence across social media platforms to enhance brand loyalty and foster student enrolment intention in higher learning institutions. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study utilized interviews for qualitative insights and surveyed 315 students for quantitative analysis. Data were analyzed using SPSS and MAXQDA, with regression analysis applied to test the relationship between brand loyalty and enrolment intention for the quantitative component of the research. Findings indicate a significant positive impact of social media-driven brand loyalty on students' intention to enrol, highlighting the strategic role of social media marketing in higher education.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Higher Education Institutions, Brand Loyalty, Customer Relationship Management, Enrollment Intention

Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed remarkable technological advancements, of which the most notable in the realm of communication and among the most transformative innovations is social media, a product of the Web 2.0 revolution, which shifted the internet from a static information platform to a dynamic, user-driven space. Social media has become a dominant communication tool not only in the business world but also increasingly within the world of Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs), where its use has expanded steadily since the early 2000s. Today, many organizations within and outside the academia world rely on these platforms to engage with their audiences, enhance customer service, and execute targeted marketing strategies more efficiently than traditional methods.

Recognized for fostering interaction, real-time feedback, and participatory culture (Boyd, 2015) social media has evolved into a powerful marketing instrument, allowing institutions to strengthen brand identity, cement their digital footprint, monitor marketing performance, and respond to client concerns virtually and instantly (Veríssimo & Menezes, 2015). In the higher education sector, where competition for student enrolment has intensified overtime in Zambia especially following policy reforms and the challenges of

the COVID-19 pandemic the strategic use of social media could be a critical factor in attracting and retaining students (Rutter et al., 2016; Muyunda, 2021).

Despite the growing presence of HLIs on social media platforms and its evident utilization in customer engagement, there has been limited empirical research to investigate the influence of institutional brand visibility and presence across social media platforms on student enrolment decisions. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by exploring the impact of social media brand identity on student enrolment intentions in higher education. By doing so, it aims to offer insights for education marketers, administrators, and policymakers on leveraging digital platforms for competitive advantage in a post-pandemic landscape.

1. Thematic or Conceptual Framework (if applicable)

This study draws on the following key theories to explain the research phenomenon and support the synthesis of literature.

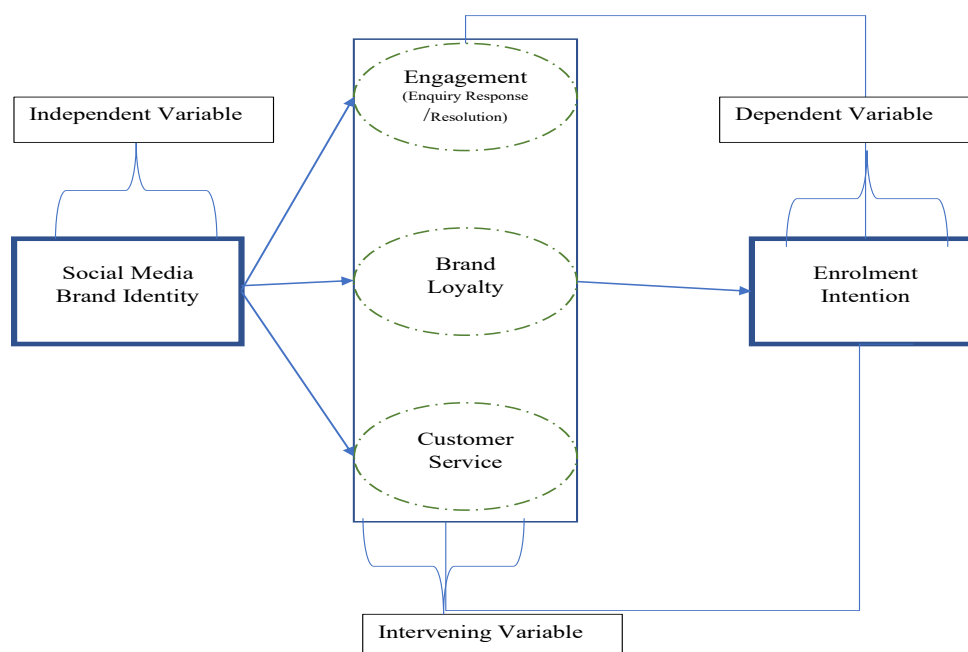
Uses and Gratification Theory (Katz & Blumler, 1974) explains consumer motivation to engage with media, such as following brand pages on social media to satisfy informational needs. **Technological Determinism** (Veblen; Hauer, 2017) asserts that technology drives societal change, illustrating how the shift to digital platforms transformed marketing and customer engagement.

Disconfirmation/Expectancy Theory (Mill, 2002; Xu et al., 2017) highlights how consumers assess new service experiences against their expectations, influencing the adoption of faster, more efficient social media-based customer service.

Service Quality Theory (Parasuraman et al., 1985) identifies five dimensions—reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles—used by consumers to evaluate service, including on social media.

Lastly, **Social Information Processing Theory** (Harrigan et al., 2020) explains how consumers form impressions and relationships with brands through online interactions, impacting brand perception. Together, these theories provide a robust foundation for understanding consumer behavior in digital customer engagement.

Conceptual Framework



2. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach grounded in the pragmatism philosophy, allowing for the integration of both qualitative and quantitative data to comprehensively address the research objectives. Following Saunders et al.'s (2016) research onion model, the study utilized both deductive and inductive research approaches, enabling hypothesis testing alongside theory development.

A convergent parallel design was adopted, where quantitative data were collected via self-administered questionnaires from a sample of 315 students across three purposively selected higher learning institutions in Lusaka (ZCAS University, Evelyn Hone College, and NIPA), using simple random sampling.

Representative Sample:

$$n = \frac{N}{(1 + Ne^2)} = \frac{13350}{(1 + 13350 \times 0.05^2)} = 388$$

Where: N= Population

n = Sample Size

e^2 = Margin of Error

Adopted from Krejcie and Morgan (1970)

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with selected participants using purposive sampling to explore deeper insights.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and regression analysis, while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis. Validity and reliability were ensured through pre-testing, triangulation, and consistency checks. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and institutional clearance were observed throughout the research process.

3. Literature Review and Synthesis

Social media has emerged as a transformative force in modern marketing, redefining how organizations engage with their audiences. Initially developed under the Web 2.0 paradigm, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have enabled real-time, interactive communication, influencing consumer behavior and organizational marketing strategies (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Greenwood et al., 2016). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the reliance on digital platforms intensified across sectors, including higher education, as institutions sought alternative means to maintain engagement and service delivery (Nyangau & Bado, 2012; Rutter et al., 2016).

A central component of social media's marketing utility lies in **brand identity**—the distinctive elements that shape consumer perception and loyalty. Studies indicate that social media enhances brand visibility, trust, and loyalty through customized messaging and user interaction (Bilgin, 2018; Ebrahim, 2020). Effective **customer service** via social media, including timely responses and complaint resolution, is positively linked to customer satisfaction and corporate reputation (Juanamasta et al., 2019; Guo et al., 2020).

Moreover, social media significantly influences **purchase intention**. Trust, perceived usefulness, and credibility of online platforms are key determinants in shaping consumers' decisions (Hajli, 2014; Yogesh & Yesha, 2014). These insights extend to the higher education sector, where institutions are increasingly using social media for branding, recruitment, and student engagement (Mukosa, 2022a).

Internationally, social media marketing has been widely studied in both developed and developing contexts. In Europe, it has proven effective in sectors like tourism (Uşaklı et al., 2017), while in Africa, the growing online presence of youth has made platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp essential

marketing tools (Duffett & Wakeham, 2016; Alalwan et al., 2017). In Zambia, the government’s policy shift toward digital public service delivery further emphasizes the relevance of social media in institutional communication (MNDP, 2017).

In sum, existing literature supports the notion that social media is not only a tool for digital interaction but a strategic asset in building brand identity, enhancing customer service, and influencing consumer decisions—including student enrolment in higher education institutions. However, empirical studies on its specific impact in this sector, particularly in Zambia, remain limited underscoring the need for further research.

4. Discussion

The study revealed that 100% of respondents confirmed being active on at least one social media platform, affirming the widespread presence of students in digital spaces. Among the platforms identified, Facebook emerged as the most commonly used by students surveyed, underscoring its relevance as a key channel for customer service engagement in the higher education sector.

This finding aligns with previous research. For instance, Knight-McCord et al. (2016) reported that Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook are among the most popular platforms in the United States. However, regional variations exist Wiid et al. (2014) found Facebook to be the most dominant platform in South Africa, a result that mirrors the current study’s observations in Zambia.

Summary and Implications: The universal student presence on social media, particularly Facebook, confirms the platform’s strategic value for higher learning institutions aiming to provide timely and accessible customer service. Given its high usage rate, Facebook offers a direct and familiar communication channel for addressing student inquiries, resolving complaints, and disseminating institutional information. This reinforces the platform’s potential as an effective tool for improving student engagement and satisfaction through digital customer service.

Table 4.4 Social Media sites

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Facebook	314	69.2	99.7	99.7
	Instagram	1	.2	.3	100.0
	Total	315	69.4	100.0	
Missing	System	139	30.6		
Total		454	100.0		

Correlation Analysis.

To assess the relationship between key study variables, a correlation analysis was conducted. This statistical technique evaluates the strength and direction of association between two or more variables, offering insights into how variations in one variable correspond to changes in another. While correlation identifies relationships, it does not imply causation.

The analysis focused on two variables: student engagement—linked to social media usage—and enrolment intention—reflecting social media's effectiveness as a marketing tool for higher learning institutions. The relationship between these variables was measured using Pearson’s correlation

coefficient (r), which ranges from -1 to +1. A value of +1 indicates a perfect positive linear relationship, -1 indicates a perfect negative linear relationship, and 0 denotes no linear correlation.

To perform the analysis, Likert scale responses related to each variable were aggregated into total composite scores using SPSS. This approach simplifies complex response data, allowing for clearer statistical interpretation. The results of the correlation analysis are presented in Table 4.4 below.

Table 4.4 – Correlation Matrix Engagement & Student Enrolment

Correlations			
		TotalE	TotalEI
Total Score Engagemt	Pearson Correlation	1	.429**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.008
	N	315	315
Total Score Enrollemet Intention	Pearson Correlation	.429**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.008	
	N	315	315

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Results from the table exhibit the correlation coefficient as 0.429 for total score engagement and total scores for enrollment intention this figure indicates that there is a positive relationship between the two variables which is relatively strong. Below the pearson correlation is the significance level which is 0.008 and according to Pallant (2020) results below 0.05 or if the P value is P>0.05 the results are statistically significant the asterisks next to the pearson r are an insignia that the results are significant. The N below the significance level is the sample size which is 315 in a nut shell this is an indicator that social media is an effective customer service tool.

Bivariate Regression Analysis: Social Media Brand Loyalty and Enrolment Intention

This study employed a bivariate regression analysis to examine the relationship between **social media brand loyalty (BL)** and **student enrolment intention (EI)**. The regression model used was:

$$EI = \beta_0 + \beta_1 BL + \mu_1$$

Where:

- EI = Enrolment Intention (dependent variable)
- BL = Brand Loyalty (independent variable)
- β_0 = Constant
- β_1 = Regression coefficient
- μ = Error term

Model Results:

R = 0.517 indicates a moderate positive correlation between brand loyalty and enrolment intention. **R² = 0.268**, showing that 26.8% of the variance in enrolment intention is explained by brand loyalty. **Standard Error = 1.40**, suggesting a reasonable level of prediction accuracy.

ANOVA Results:

The model was statistically significant ($F = 114.42$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that brand loyalty significantly predicts enrolment intention.

Regression Coefficients:

The unstandardized coefficient for brand loyalty was $B = 0.506$ ($p < 0.001$), meaning that for every unit increase in brand loyalty, enrolment intention increases by 0.506 units on average.

Hypothesis Testing:

- H_0 : Social media brand loyalty has no significant impact on student enrolment intention.
- H_1 : Social media brand loyalty has a significant impact on student enrolment intention.

The results support H_1 , as $p < 0.05$ and the regression coefficient is statistically significant.

The findings confirm a **significant positive effect** of social media brand loyalty on student enrolment

5. Research Gaps and Future Directions

Numerous studies conducted both in Zambia and internationally have consistently highlighted the widespread use of social media platforms among students, as well as a strong social media presence by Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) (Akakandelwa & Walubita, 2018; Ann Voss & Kumar, 2013; Chewe et al., 2020; Wahila et al., 2018). Despite this high level of presence, there remains a notable gap in meaningful engagement between institutions and their target audiences. This suggests that while HLIs have adopted social media, they are yet to fully leverage its interactive capabilities to build relationships and foster student engagement.

Rutter et al. (2016) further emphasize that the benefits of social media presence are not without challenges. One key concern is the lack of clear, institutionalized policies governing communication between prospective students and admissions officers. This absence of guidelines can result in miscommunication, reputational risks, and legal ambiguities. With the enactment of the **Cyber Security and Cyber Crimes Act of 2025 in Zambia**, it is imperative for HLIs to align their social media policies with the new legal framework to ensure compliance and protect both institutional and student interests.

In addition, existing literature has increasingly focused on the relationship between social media and brand reputation, particularly in light of the evolving dynamics of consumer engagement (Barnes et al., 2008; Dolan et al., 2016). However, there is limited empirical evidence specifically addressing how social media impacts **customer service and satisfaction within the education sector**. This gap underscores the need for further research, which this study aims to address.

Furthermore, emerging trends such as the influence of social media content on audience engagement, and the growing role of influencer marketing, remain underexplored in academic discourse—especially within the context of higher education. Understanding the factors that influence platform selection among users, content preferences, and modes of interaction can provide critical insights for educational institutions seeking to optimize their social media strategies.

In light of these developments, there is a pressing need for more comprehensive studies that investigate not just the presence of HLIs on social media, but the **quality of engagement, policy alignment, and strategic content use**, to enhance student recruitment, satisfaction, and institutional visibility in the digital era.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated a significant relationship between social media brand loyalty and student

enrolment intention among university students. Statistical analysis using regression methods confirmed that brand loyalty fostered through social media marketing plays a pivotal role in influencing students' decisions to enroll. These findings align with earlier studies, such as that of Hossain and Sakib (2016), which also affirmed the strong impact of social media on students' brand perceptions and loyalty.

The contribution of this research to marketing performance is notable, particularly in highlighting the growing importance of social media as a strategic marketing tool. For universities targeting the younger, digitally native generation, social media offers a cost-effective and powerful platform to build brand loyalty, expand reach, and ultimately increase enrolment. Relevance and popularity of content were found to be the most influential aspects in building loyalty among students.

The implications are clear: institutions must prioritize social media as a core component of their marketing strategy. Social media not only enhances visibility through shares and reposts but also fosters relational engagement that translates into stronger brand affinity and increased student numbers.

To fully leverage the benefits of social media, universities are advised to develop comprehensive, audience-specific strategies, create engaging and relevant content, and foster interactive communication with students. Collaborating with student organizations further enhances authenticity and trust in the university brand.

Future research should expand by examining the influence of regulatory frameworks on social media effectiveness, comparing outcomes across different institutional and business contexts, and exploring the reasons behind unsuccessful social media efforts. Additionally, the emerging roles of virtual brand communities and positive word of mouth in shaping online engagement merit further empirical investigation. These insights will contribute to a deeper understanding of how social media can be optimized to support enrollment and broader marketing objectives in dynamic digital landscapes.

7. References

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