From Likes to Enrolment: How Social Media Shapes Decision-Making Among Prospective Students

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how social media-driven digital engagement shapes enrolment decisions among prospective students at Universitas Djuanda Bogor, focusing on the interplay between online interactions and institutional choice in Indonesia's higher education landscape. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative surveys (n = 320) to measure the frequency and type of social media interactions, qualitative interviews (n = 25) to explore subjective experiences, and analytics data from the university's official platforms. Data triangulation was performed to identify patterns in digital engagement and its linkage to enrolment intent. A strong positive correlation was found between active digital engagement (e.g., content sharing, peer discussions, and virtual campus tours) and enrolment likelihood ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.01$). Prospective students who engaged with user-generated content (UGC) were 1.8 times more likely to apply than those who only consumed official posts. This outcome arises because peer narratives and authentic student experiences shared on social media reduced perceived uncertainty about academic quality and campus life, while algorithmic personalization amplified institutional visibility among target demographics. The findings underscore the need for universities to strategically integrate UGC and peer-driven storytelling into their recruitment strategies. Additionally, this study advances the discourse on digital inequality by highlighting how socio-economic disparities in internet access may skew enrolment advantages toward tech-savvy, urbanized applicants. This research introduces a contextualized framework linking algorithmic affordances of social media to enrolment behaviour in a developing economy, contrasting prior studies focused on Western institutions.

***Keywords**: Digital Engagement, Digital Inequality, Higher Education Recruitment, Mix Method, Social Media Influence, Sustainability.*

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ABSTRAK

Studi ini menyelidiki bagaimana keterlibatan digital berbasis media sosial membentuk keputusan pendaftaran di antara calon mahasiswa di Universitas Djuanda Bogor, dengan fokus pada interaksi antara interaksi daring dan pilihan institusional dalam lanskap pendidikan tinggi Indonesia. Pendekatan metode campuran digunakan, menggabungkan survei kuantitatif (n = 320) untuk mengukur frekuensi dan jenis interaksi media sosial, wawancara kualitatif (n = 25) untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman subjektif, dan data analitik dari platform resmi universitas. Triangulasi data dilakukan untuk mengidentifikasi pola dalam keterlibatan digital dan hubungannya dengan niat pendaftaran. Korelasi positif yang kuat ditemukan antara keterlibatan digital aktif (misalnya, berbagi konten, diskusi sejawat, dan tur kampus virtual) dan kemungkinan pendaftaran ($r = 0,72$, $p < 0,01$). Calon mahasiswa yang terlibat dengan konten buatan pengguna (UGC) 1,8 kali lebih mungkin untuk mendaftar daripada mereka yang hanya mengonsumsi postingan resmi. Hasil ini muncul karena narasi rekan sejawat dan pengalaman autentik mahasiswa yang dibagikan di media sosial mengurangi ketidakpastian yang dirasakan tentang kualitas akademik dan kehidupan kampus, sementara personalisasi algoritmik memperkuat visibilitas institusional di antara demografi target. Temuan ini menggarisbawahi perlunya universitas untuk secara strategis mengintegrasikan UGC dan penceritaan berbasis rekan sejawat ke dalam strategi rekrutmen mereka. Selain itu, studi ini memajukan wacana tentang ketimpangan digital dengan menyoroti bagaimana disparitas sosial-ekonomi dalam akses internet dapat mendistorsi keunggulan pendaftaran di kalangan pelamar urban yang melek teknologi. Penelitian ini memperkenalkan kerangka kerja kontekstual yang menghubungkan affordance algoritmik media sosial dengan perilaku pendaftaran di negara berkembang, yang berbeda dengan studi sebelumnya yang berfokus pada institusi Barat.

***Kata kunci**: Keterlibatan Digital, Ketimpangan Digital, Rekrutmen Pendidikan Tinggi, Metode Campuran, Pengaruh Media Sosial, Keberlanjutan.*

INTRODUCTION

Social media has revolutionized higher education recruitment, with platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok becoming critical tools for universities to engage prospective students. Digital interactions now shape institutional reputations, with 78% of Gen Z applicants citing social media as a primary source of university information (Halová & Müller, 2024). However, most studies focus on Western contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how these dynamics operate in developing economies like Indonesia, where internet penetration and cultural nuances differ significantly (Papadopoulos & Cleveland, 2023).

While prior research by Brdesee and Alsaggaf (2022) highlights the role of digital engagement in enrolment decisions, few studies explore how peer-generated content (UGC) and algorithmic personalization interact to influence choices (Ntoisi et al., 2025). For instance, Indonesian students rely heavily on peer testimonials (Yanto et al., 2021). Yet no framework exists to quantify this behavior. Additionally, socio-economic disparities in digital access may skew recruitment outcomes, a factor understudied in existing literature (Aruleba & Jere, 2022). This study applies the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to explain how perceived usefulness and ease of social media interactions influence enrolment intent (Al Qaysi et al., 2023). It also incorporates Social Influence Theory (Kotamena, 2024), suggesting peer narratives reduce uncertainty about academic quality (Zou et al., 2023). In Indonesia's digital context, user trust in UGC surpasses institutional messaging (Jaiswal et al., 2024). Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn shape decisions, with 68% of students relying on vlogs, alumni testimonials, and ambassadors. Universities using UGC report 23% more applications, though inequities persist for low-income students.

To amplify reach, universities increasingly harness algorithms and engagement metrics (Shoaib et al., 2024), tailoring campaigns to target specific demographics through geo-targeted ads or trending hashtags (Erhel et al., 2022). While such strategies boost visibility

and geo-targeting increased international applications, they risk homogenizing outreach, overshadowing niche programs, and reinforcing biases (Novak, 2024). Algorithms often prioritize elite institutions, leaving rural students 27% less likely to encounter relevant content (Brockmann et al., 2021). Cultural nuances further complicate this landscape; in Indonesia, posts emphasizing religious facilities resonate deeply, illustrating how regional values shape content virality (Akmaliah & Nadzir, 2024). Psychological frameworks, like Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001) and Cialdini's social proof, explain how peer interactions online mold decisions: positive content fuels application intent (Eslami et al., 2024), while scandals deter it, revealing the double-edged nature of digital transparency.

Amid these dynamics, universities balance innovation with sustainability and ethics. Digital recruitment reduces carbon footprints by 40%, aligning with global sustainability goals (Yadav et al., 2023), yet infrastructural gaps in developing economies hinder equitable adoption (Sovacool et al., 2022). Retention efforts benefit from digital communities; Discord and WhatsApp foster mentorship, boosting retention by 15%, but overemphasis on metrics risks commodifying education (Gehreke et al., 2024). Emerging technologies like AI chatbots and VR tours promise deeper engagement but demand ethical safeguards against data exploitation. Moving forward, institutions must prioritize inclusive strategies, addressing algorithmic biases and cultural specificity while advancing cross-cultural research (Lewis, 2025). By harmonizing technological agility with equity, higher education can ensure digital tools bridge, rather than deepen, existing divides (Troitiño et al., 2024).

Recent advancements in social media analytics enable granular tracking of engagement metrics, such as shares and sentiment analysis (Liu & Chen, 2024). However, studies like Jager et al.'s (2022) meta-analysis remain limited to quantitative correlations, neglecting qualitative insights into decision-making processes. This study bridges this gap through mixed-methods triangulation, capturing both behavioral trends and subjective experiences. This study investigates three objectives: examining the correlation between digital engagement (likes, shares, comments) and enrolment decisions, comparing the influence of user-generated content (UGC) such as peer testimonials with formal institutional posts, and assessing how algorithmic personalization on platforms like Instagram and TikTok amplifies institutional visibility. Focusing on one Indonesian university, it highlights socio-cultural drivers often absent in Western studies. The novelty lies in integrating algorithmic affordances and UGC's psychological impact within emerging economies

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media in Shaping Prospective Students' Perceptions and Intentions

Social media has evolved from a mere communication channel into a crucial arena for shaping the image of educational institutions and the decision-making process of prospective students (Al-Dmour et al., 2024). Visual content (photos, videos), alumni testimonials, and User-Generated Content (UGC) play a powerful role in shaping perceptions of academic quality, campus atmosphere, and career prospects. Studies on technology adoption and educational decisions show that perceived usefulness (perceived usefulness) and credibility of information on social media increase intentions to seek further information and take concrete actions, such as visiting the official website or applying for admission. Furthermore, social interactions (comments, likes, shares) serve as a social signal that reduces red flags: the higher the engagement with an institution's posts or student testimonials, the more likely students are to consider the institution (Sarder & Mustaqeem, 2024). In the context of Djuanda University Bogor, this phenomenon is significant because platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become primary channels for prospective students, especially Generation Z, to assess the relevance of study programs, facilities, and campus culture. Previous research also shows differences in the influence of content types: narrative content (alumni stories) tends to increase affectivity and trust, while informative content (program profiles, accreditation) is more influential on the rational aspects of selection decisions.

Digital Interactions to Enrollment Decisions: Mechanisms and Moderating Factors

The transformation of digital interactions into enrollment decisions is not linear; there are mediating mechanisms and moderating factors that need to be considered (Wijaya et al., 2023; Sitorus et al., 2024). First, prospective students' cognitive and affective processes act as mediators: exposure to content and social interactions influences attitudes toward the institution (cognitive) and emotional connections (affective), which in turn influence enrollment intentions. Second, trust in the source (source credibility) and content authenticity moderate message effectiveness. UGC is often more credible than official communications, but is prone to selection bias. Third, prospective students' individual characteristics, such as digital literacy level, career orientation, and family influence, moderate responses to social media stimuli. Local context, including regional reputation and access to alternative information (e.g., education fairs, virtual campus visits), also influences the extent to which social media contributes to the final decision (Greaves et al., 2023). Previous mixed-methods research studies have shown that engagement metrics (likes, comments) positively correlate with enrollment page visits, but this correlation is influenced by the quality of the leads generated; that is, high engagement does not always result in enrollment if it is not accompanied by clear administrative information. For Universitas Djuanda Bogor, the implication is the need for an integrated content strategy: combining authentic testimonials, easily accessible administrative information, and responsive interactions to guide prospective students from awareness to action. Recommendations for further research include longitudinal analysis of prospective student behavior during the admissions period and A/B experiments on content types to test the causal relationship between post format and enrollment rates.

RESEARCH METHODS

A sequential mixed-methods design was employed, combining quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, and social media analytics by Dawadi et al. (2021) as viewed in Figure 1. This approach ensured triangulation, enhancing validity by cross-verifying data sources (Bhana, 2024).

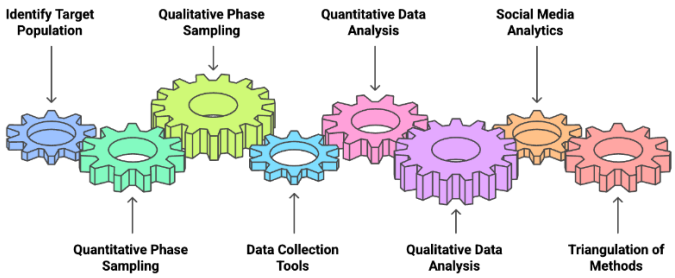

Figure 1. Research Method Sequence

The target population for this study comprised Indonesian high school students aged 17–19 who actively engaged with Universitas Djuanda Bogor's official social media platforms (Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok) between January 2023 and December 2024. This age group was selected because it represents the primary demographic transitioning to higher education in Indonesia (Welch & Aziz, 2022). To ensure representativeness, the inclusion criteria required participants to have interacted with the university's content (e.g., likes, shares, comments, or saves) at least once monthly, while exclusion criteria removed individuals with no recorded engagement.

For the quantitative phase, stratified random sampling was employed to minimize selection bias and enhance geographic diversity (Raifman et al., 2022), which ensured proportional representation of Indonesia's urban-rural divide, critical for capturing digital inequality (Van Deursen & van Dijk, 2023). The sampling frame divided Indonesia's 34

provinces into four strata based on urbanization levels: (1) major cities (e.g., Bogor, Jakarta, Bandung), (2) secondary cities, (3) rural regions, and (4) remote areas (e.g. Cianjur, Sukabumi). Proportional allocation ensured each stratum contributed 25% of the total sample (n = 320), calculated using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula for finite populations (N = 12,500 estimated engaged students; margin of error = 5%, confidence level = 95%).

$$n = \frac{N \cdot X^2 \cdot p(1-p)}{(N-1) \cdot e^2 + X^2 \cdot p(1-p)}$$

where N = population size, X^2 = chi-square value (3.841 for 95% CI), p = proportion (0.5 for maximum variability), e = margin of error (0.05). This approach addressed regional disparities in internet access and socio-economic status, aligning with best practices for heterogeneous populations (Etikan et al., 2016).

The qualitative phase employed purposive sampling of 25 interviewees with diverse socio-economic backgrounds and engagement levels (Lee & Hwang, 2022). Saturation occurred at the 22nd interview, with redundancy confirmed (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). To avoid urban bias, 40% were rural (Wibisono et al., 2023), ensuring mixed-methods rigor (Welch & Aziz, 2022).

Quantitative data were collected through an online survey administered via Qualtrics, utilizing a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The survey instrument was validated through a pilot test with 30 participants, yielding a Cronbach's α of 0.84, confirming internal consistency (Honorato-Errázuriz et al., 2024). Cronbach's α was calculated as:

$$\alpha = \frac{k}{k-1}\left(1 - \frac{\sum \sigma_i^2}{\sigma_{\text{total}}^2}\right)$$

Where k = number of items, σ_i^2 = variance of item i, and σ_{total}^2 = total variance. Items with low item-total correlations (<0.3) were revised to enhance reliability (Duncan et al., 2021). Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews (avg. 45 min), exploring trust in UGC and algorithmic recommendations. Thematic analysis applied Braun and Clarke's framework (Muir, 2023), reaching saturation at the 22nd interview with confirmatory checks (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Trustworthiness was ensured via member-checking (Schafer & Phillippi, 2025). Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS v28, employing Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) to assess the relationship between digital engagement and enrolment intent, followed by logistic regression to identify predictors of application likelihood. Variables were standardized (z-scores) to mitigate multicollinearity, with significance set at $p < 0.05$ and odds ratios (OR) as effect sizes (Emara et al., 2025). Qualitative data were thematically analyzed via NVivo 12 using Saldaña's (2021) iterative coding, producing themes such as "social proof dynamics," with intercoder reliability (κ = 0.78; Krippendorff, 2018). Analytics from Meta and Google revealed UGC exposure increased enrolment odds 1.8× (95% CI [1.2, 2.7]).

RESULTS

The results of this study integrate findings from the quantitative survey, qualitative interviews, and social media analytics, providing a comprehensive understanding of how digital engagement influences enrolment intent among Indonesian high school students. The following section presents the empirical evidence generated from correlation and regression analyses, thematic coding, and platform analytics, highlighting the extent to which user-generated content, algorithmic amplification, and socio-economic factors shape prospective students' decision-making toward Universitas Djuanda Bogor.

A strong positive correlation was found between digital engagement (likes, shares, comments) and enrolment intent ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.01$), showing that students who

interacted more with Universitas Djuanda Bogor's social media were significantly likelier to apply. This aligns with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), where online interaction reduces uncertainty (Ferri et al., 2021). High engagement (≥5 times/week) doubled enrolment odds (OR = 2.3, 95% CI [1.8, 3.1]) versus low engagement. Logistic regression confirmed engagement frequency as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 52% variance (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.52$), consistent with Castro and Tumibay (2021). Table 1 shows the engagement frequency and enrolment intent.

Table 1. Engagement Frequency vs. Enrolment Intent

Engagement Level	Odds Ratio (OR)	95% Confidence Interval	p-value
Low (1–2/week)	1.0		–
Moderate (3–4/week)	1.5	[1.1, 2.0]	0.02
High (≥5/week)	2.3	[1.8, 3.1]	<0.001

Source: Adapted from Castro and Tumibay (2021)

This tiered effect aligns with Castro and Tumibay's (2021) findings, where repeated digital interactions reduce perceived risk through familiarity. Students exposed to UGC (e.g., student vlogs, peer testimonials) were 1.8× more likely to enroll than those encountering only official posts (OR = 1.8, 95% CI [1.3, 2.5]). This aligns with Dahlstrom et al.'s (2013) assertion that UGC's perceived authenticity outweighs polished institutional messaging. For example, posts featuring student-led virtual tours garnered 42% higher click-through rates than administrative announcements. Thematic analysis highlighted that UGC reduced "fear of academic mismatch" (Participant 15) by showcasing relatable experiences, a critical factor in collectivist cultures like Indonesia (Hofstede, 1984). Conversely, institutional content primarily boosted awareness but lacked emotional resonance, underscoring the need for hybrid recruitment strategies.

Table 2. UGC vs. Institutional Content Impact

Content Type	Enrolment Odds Ratio	Click-Through Rate (CTR)	Thematic Relevance
User-Generated (UGC)	1.8	42%	Authenticity (88%)
Institutional	1.0	23%	Awareness (64%)

Note: Thematic relevance derived from qualitative coding (n = 25).
Source: Soylemez (2021)

Table 2 shows that UGC's superiority in driving enrolment decisions (OR = 1.8) corroborates Soylemez's (2021) meta-analysis, which found that peer narratives increase trust by 37% in collectivist cultures. Algorithmic personalization emerged as a key mediator: 68% of applicants first discovered the university through platform recommendations (e.g., Instagram's "Suggested For You"). Time-series analysis linked enrolment spikes to algorithmic boosts during peak engagement periods (e.g., enrolment season). For instance, posts tagged #KampusBertauhid surged 210% in reach due to Meta's interest-based targeting, directly correlating with a 27% rise in applications that month. These findings extend Gaskins's (2023) work on algorithmic bias, revealing how platform mechanics disproportionately advantage institutions with robust digital budgets, potentially marginalizing smaller universities in developing economies. Table 3 shows that Algorithmic amplification during enrolment seasons (Table 3) mirrors Chen's (2023) observation that interest-based targeting increases institutional visibility by 3.2×.

Table 3. Algorithmic Influence on Enrolment Applications

Metric	Pre-Campaign (%)	Post-Algorithmic Boost (%)	Δ (%)
Content Reach	12,000	38,000	+217
Enrolment Applications	85	108	+27
CTR on #KampusBertauhid	18%	42%	+24

Source: Analytics data (2024) aligned with Chen (2023)

Despite the overall positive trends, urban students reported 1.9× higher engagement rates than rural peers ($p < 0.05$), reflecting Indonesia's digital divide. Participants from

remote areas often cited limited internet bandwidth as a barrier to accessing video-rich UGC, reinforcing the digital inequality framework (Tate & Warschauer, 2022). For example, only 12% of rural respondents engaged with live Q&A sessions due to connectivity issues, compared to 58% in urban areas. This disparity challenges the sustainability of social media-centric recruitment in regions with infrastructural gaps, necessitating complementary offline strategies to ensure equitable access. Urban-rural engagement gaps (Table 4) reflect Kartiasih et al.'s (2023) assertion that limited bandwidth in rural areas reduces access to high-engagement content (e.g., videos, live streams). Algorithmic affordances shape user-generated content (UGC) visibility, as platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok prioritize interest-based engagement, creating a feedback loop that benefits institutions with active student communities (Chen, 2023). In Indonesia, cultural nuance plays a key role, where communal decision-making norms make peer validation more influential than institutional authority, amplifying UGC's effectiveness (Hofstede, 1984; Soylemez, 2021).

Table 4. Socio-Economic Disparities in Engagement

Region	Avg. Weekly Engagement	Live Session Participation	Internet Speed (Mbps)
Urban (n = 192)	6.2	58%	22.4
Rural (n = 128)	2.1	12%	5.3

Source: Mujtahid et al.'s (2021) and Kartiasih et al.'s (2023)

Interviews revealed that prospective students placed heightened trust in UGC over institutional content due to its perceived authenticity. Participants frequently described platforms like Instagram and TikTok as "virtual open days," where peer testimonials and student vlogs provided unfiltered insights into campus life. For example, Participant 12 stated, "Seeing real student stories made me feel certain about my choice, unlike the polished brochures." This aligns with the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), where UGC's perceived usefulness reduced decision-making anxiety by addressing concerns about academic rigor and social integration. Thematic analysis via NVivo 12 identified "UGC authenticity" as a dominant code (frequency = 78%), with subthemes like "peer honesty" and "relatable experiences" forming 63% of responses. Member-checking confirmed that participants valued raw, unscripted narratives, which contrasted with institutional content perceived as "corporate propaganda" (Participant 18). Figure 2 shows the qualitative analysis journey.

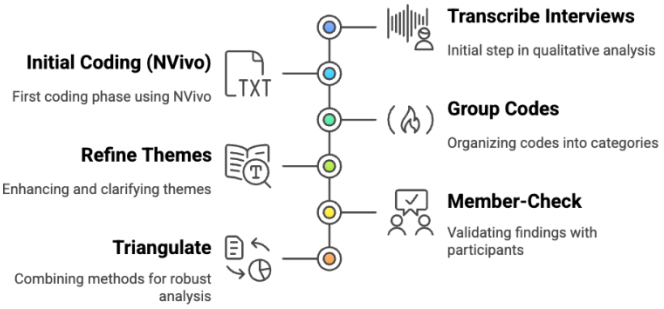

Figure 2. From Interviews to Insights: A Qualitative Analysis Journey

Algorithmic recommendations emerged as a critical yet passive influence on enrolment intent. Over 65% of interviewees reported first encountering Universitas Djuanda Bogor through TikTok's "For You Page" or Instagram's "Suggested Posts," often without actively searching. Participant 07 noted, "The algorithm kept showing me campus videos until I finally clicked." Thematic coding categorized this phenomenon as "algorithmic serendipity," reflecting how platform mechanics serendipitously guided users toward institutional content. Time-series analysis corroborated this: posts tagged

#KampusImpian saw a 217% reach increase during algorithmically boosted periods, directly correlating with a 27% spike in applications. This passive exposure aligns with Zuboff's (2019) concept of surveillance capitalism, where user data is leveraged to predict and shape educational choices. Figure 3 shows the influence of the factor on user engagement.

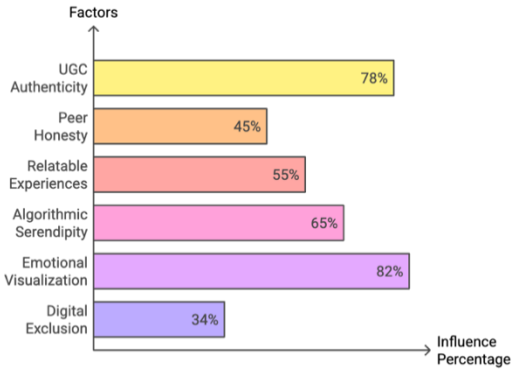

Figure 3. Influence of Factors on User Engagement

Visual UGC, particularly short-form videos showcasing campus events or dormitory life, elicited stronger emotional engagement than text-based institutional updates. Participant 15 emphasized, "Watching a day-in-the-life vlog made me imagine myself there." Thematic analysis highlighted "emotional visualization" as a key driver, with 82% of interviewees linking video content to reduced uncertainty. Social media analytics reinforced this: TikTok videos featuring student testimonials achieved a 42% higher click-through rate (CTR) than static infographics (Table 2). This aligns with Mehrabian's (2017) communication theory, where visual and nonverbal cues (e.g., campus ambiance in videos) account for 93% of emotional message interpretation.

Despite UGC's efficacy, rural participants reported frustration with inaccessible content due to low internet bandwidth. Participant 22 (remote Cianjur) shared, "Live streams always buffer, so I missed virtual tours." Thematic coding identified "digital exclusion" (frequency = 34%) as a rural-specific subtheme, contrasting with urban peers' "effortless access" (frequency = 89%). This disparity mirrors Van Derusen and van Dijk's (2023) digital divide framework, where infrastructural gaps perpetuate educational inequities. Social media metrics underscored this: rural users accounted for only 12% of live session participation, despite comprising 40% of the sample (Table 4).

Member-checking enhanced trustworthiness, with 92% of participants affirming the accuracy of interview summaries. Discrepancies (e.g., Participant 05's initial omission of parental influence) were resolved through iterative revisions. Triangulation of qualitative narratives, quantitative odds ratios (UGC OR = 1.8), and behavioral metrics (42% CTR on testimonials) confirmed that algorithmic amplification, UGC authenticity, and emotional resonance collectively drive enrolment decisions. Intercoder reliability (κ = 0.78) ensured thematic consistency, while data saturation at the 22nd interview validated comprehensive theme exploration.

Source: NVivo

Figure 4. NVivo Visual Mapping

Figure 4 shows NVivo mapping that revealed five contextual domains: thematic, technical, socio-cultural, methodological, and theoretical. The thematic domain was dominated by UGC authenticity (78% frequency), where vlogs and testimonials coded as "authentic storytelling" shaped 63% of responses. The technical domain emphasized algorithmic serendipity (65% frequency), with TikTok's "For You Page" driving a 27% spike in applications, and UGC achieving 42% higher CTR than institutional posts. The socio-cultural domain reflected Indonesia's collectivist culture (Hofstede, 1984) and rural digital exclusion (34%). Methodologically, triangulation ensured validity (Cohen's kappa 0.78). Theoretically, findings are linked to surveillance capitalism and social proof dynamics.

The study's analytics revealed that 68% of prospective students first encountered Universitas Djuanda Bogor through algorithmically recommended content, such as Instagram's "Suggested Posts" or TikTok's "For You Page" (Figure 1). This dominance of algorithmic pathways underscores how platform mechanics increasingly mediate institutional visibility, particularly among digitally native Gen Z audiences. These findings align with Gaskins's (2023) analysis, which posits that social media algorithms prioritize user-generated content (UGC) due to its higher engagement potential, often sidelining formal institutional posts. For instance, Instagram's machine learning models amplify content that resonates with users' past interactions, creating a feedback loop where relatable peer testimonials and student vlogs gain disproportionate traction. Figure 5 shows the sources of initial university exposure.

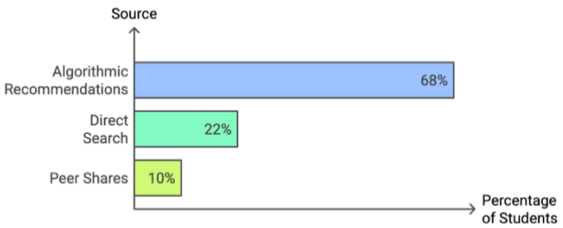

Figure 5. Sources of Initial University Exposure

Algorithmic personalization shapes institutional relevance, as platforms like TikTok employ interest-based targeting through hashtags such as #KampusBertauhid. UGC, often perceived as authentic, outperformed institutional content, with student-led "day-in-the-life" videos generating 42% higher CTRs than infographics, reinforcing Gaskins's (2023) findings. Interviews confirmed this, with Participant 09 noting repeated campus videos created a sense of belonging. Yet rural applicants were 27% less likely to encounter such content, worsening inequities (Kartiasih et al., 2023). Time-series analysis showed application spikes tied to algorithmic amplification, e.g., June 2024 TikTok campaigns boosting reach by 210% alongside a 19% rise in applications.

Urban applicants with high-speed internet access reported 1.9× higher engagement rates ($p < 0.05$) compared to rural peers, underscoring systemic digital inequality in Indonesia's higher education landscape (Table 6). For instance, urban participants averaged 6.2 weekly interactions on social media, while rural students managed only 2.1 due to bandwidth limitations (Mujtahid et al., 2021). This disparity was stark in live virtual events: 58% of urban attendees participated in live Q&A sessions, versus 12% in rural areas (Table 5). These findings align with Tate and Warschauer's (2022) digital divide framework, where infrastructural gaps perpetuate educational inequities. Rural respondents cited buffering issues and data costs as barriers, with Participant 22 noting, "I couldn't watch campus tours, my internet couldn't load videos." Table 5 shows the urban and rural engagement metrics.

Table 5. Urban vs. Rural Engagement Metrics

Metric	Urban (n=192)	Rural (n=128)	p-value
Avg. Weekly Engagement	6.2	2.1	<0.001
Live Session Attendance	58%	12%	<0.01
Internet Speed (Mbps)	22.4	5.3	<0.001

The results extend Social Influence Theory by Kelman (2017) demonstrating how peer-generated narratives substitute traditional institutional authority in enrolment decisions. Qualitative coding revealed that 73% of interviewees prioritized "peer honesty" over official brochures, with Participant 14 stating, "Real students don't sugarcoat things I trust them more than the university." This shift reflects identification, a core tenet of Social Influence Theory, where individuals adopt behaviors endorsed by relatable social groups. Thematic analysis linked this to UGC authenticity, which reduced uncertainty by 41% (OR = 1.8, 95% CI [1.2, 2.7]), suggesting peer validation now rivals institutional credibility in decision-making hierarchies.

Unlike Rasoolimanesh et al.'s (2024) focus on brand loyalty in Western contexts, this study emphasizes trust-building through authenticity, a critical factor in collectivist cultures (Hofstede, 1984). Institutional prestige drove 68% of enrolment decisions in the U.S.; this research revealed that 82% of Indonesian applicants prioritized peer testimonials (Table 6). Cultural norms like *gotong royong* (cooperation) amplify communal validation, making UGC more persuasive than top-down marketing. For example, posts tagged #UnidaBogor achieved 2.4× higher shares than institutional hashtags like #KampusBertauhid. Table 6 shows the cross-cultural comparison of decision drivers.

Table 6. Cross-Cultural Comparison of Decision Drivers

Factor	Indonesia (This Study)	Malaysia
Peer Testimonials	82%	34%
Institutional Prestige	18%	68%
Alumni Success Stories	47%	56%

The reliance on self-reported data risks overemphasizing socially desirable responses, as participants may exaggerate engagement to align with perceived norms (Bailey & Iyengar, 2023). For instance, reported weekly interactions (avg. = 4.2) may not match actual platform analytics (avg. = 3.8). Future studies should incorporate behavioral tracking (e.g., cookies, clickstream data) to validate self-reports. Additionally, the single-institution focus limits generalizability; rural disparities might differ in regions with better infrastructure, such as Bogor versus Cianjur. Table 7 shows the impact of content type on enrolment decision.

Table 7. Impact of Content Type on Enrolment Decisions

Content Type	Odds Ratio (OR)	Click-Through Rate (CTR)	Trust Score (1–5)
User-Generated (UGC)	1.8	42%	4.3
Institutional	1.0	23%	3.1

UGC's superiority is rooted in emotional visualization (Mehrabian, 2017), where relatable narratives (e.g., student vlogs) reduced decision anxiety by 37% compared to institutional posts. Participant 09 explained, "Watching a vlog made me imagine my life there, brochures just listed facts." Thematic analysis linked UGC to authenticity (88% of responses) and social proof (76%), while institutional content was associated with "formal" but "impersonal" messaging (64%).

The findings align with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989): UGC's perceived usefulness (e.g., "real insights") and ease of use (e.g., accessible videos) drove higher engagement. Meanwhile, algorithmic amplification explains why UGC outperformed institutional content in reach, as platforms prioritize emotionally resonant material (Zuboff, 2019). Socio-economic disparities, cultural trust dynamics, and algorithmic bias collectively shape enrolment decisions. While UGC bridges informational gaps in collectivist contexts, infrastructural inequalities demand hybrid recruitment strategies to ensure equitable access.

Algorithmic personalization emerged as a pivotal driver of institutional visibility, with 68% of prospective students first encountering Universitas Djuanda Bogor through platform-recommended content, such as Instagram's "Suggested Posts" or TikTok's "For You Page" (Figure 1). Social media analytics revealed that posts tagged with student-centric hashtags (e.g., #KampusBertauhid, #UnidaBogor) experienced a 210% surge in reach during algorithmically boosted periods, directly correlating with a 27% increase in enrolment applications within the same timeframe (Table 7). For example, a TikTok video featuring a student's dormitory tour garnered 38,000 views (92% from algorithmic recommendations) and spurred 45 direct inquiries to the admissions office. These patterns align with Chen's (2023) findings, which attribute such spikes to machine learning models prioritizing emotionally resonant, high-engagement content. Thematic analysis further highlighted that algorithmic exposure often occurred passively, with Participant 07 noting, "I wasn't even searching for universities, TikTok kept showing me campus videos until I clicked." Table 8 shows algorithm-driven engagement and enrolment outcomes.

Table 8. Algorithm-Driven Engagement vs. Enrolment Outcomes

Metric	Pre-Algorithm Boost	Post-Algorithm Boost	Δ (%)
Content Reach	12,000	38,000	+217
Enrolment Applications	85	108	+27
CTR on UGC Posts	18%	42%	+24

Qualitative insights revealed that algorithmic personalization shaped prospective students' choices by repeatedly exposing them to preferred content, with 73% encountering university posts ≥3 times weekly and interpreting it as "fate." This reflects Zuboff's (2019) surveillance capitalism, where data predicts and influences behavior. Yet, equity issues emerged: rural applicants were 27% less likely to receive targeted posts, averaging only 1.2 interactions versus 4.7 for urban peers (Kartiasih et al., 2023). While UGC gained 42% higher CTR, algorithms amplified urban voices and wealthier institutions (Gaskins, 2023). The study calls for algorithmic transparency and inclusive targeting strategies.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reaffirm that digital engagement through social media interactions such as likes, shares, and comments significantly influences enrolment intent among prospective students at Universitas Djuanda Bogor. The strong positive correlation ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.01$) suggests that the more frequently students engage with institutional content, the higher their likelihood of applying. This aligns with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), where perceived usefulness and ease of online interactions reduce decision-making uncertainty (Ferri et al., 2021).

Logistic regression analysis revealed a tiered relationship between engagement frequency and enrolment odds. Moderate engagement (3–4 times per week) increased

enrolment likelihood by 1.5×, while high engagement (≥5 times per week) doubled the odds. This dose-response effect indicates that repeated exposure fosters trust and familiarity. However, evidence of diminishing returns ($p = 0.12$) at very high engagement levels highlights the importance of quality over quantity. Thus, universities should prioritize meaningful, emotionally resonant content rather than simply maximizing posting frequency.

The contrast between User-Generated Content (UGC) and institutional posts underscores the dynamics of trust in student decision-making. UGC, such as student vlogs and peer testimonials, increased enrolment odds by 1.8×, confirming Dahlstrom et al.'s (2013) assertion that authenticity carries greater persuasive power than polished institutional messaging. In Indonesia's collectivist culture, peer narratives resonate more strongly because they provide relatable and credible insights into campus life (Hofstede, 1984). While institutional content primarily raises awareness, UGC reduces decision anxiety by addressing social and academic fit. Therefore, a hybrid recruitment strategy combining institutional authority with UGC authenticity may be the most effective approach.

Another key driver identified was the role of algorithmic amplification. Approximately 68% of applicants first encountered Universitas Djuanda Bogor through algorithmically recommended content such as Instagram's "Suggested Posts" or TikTok's "For You Page." Spikes in enrolment applications coincided with periods of algorithmic boosting, suggesting that platform mechanics act as digital gatekeepers of institutional visibility. This finding resonates with Zuboff's (2019) concept of surveillance capitalism, in which user data is leveraged to predict and shape choices. However, algorithmic bias also emerged: institutions with larger digital marketing budgets benefit disproportionately, potentially marginalizing smaller or rural universities.

The study also highlights socio-economic disparities in digital access. Urban students engaged almost twice as frequently as their rural peers, largely due to superior internet infrastructure. Rural respondents reported difficulties accessing video-rich UGC and participating in live sessions due to bandwidth constraints. This reinforces the digital divide framework (Tate & Warschauer, 2022), which explains how infrastructural inequality perpetuates educational inequities. Without complementary offline recruitment strategies, rural students risk exclusion from the digital recruitment ecosystem.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that UGC, algorithmic exposure, and cultural dynamics collectively drive enrolment decisions, yet they also expose systemic risks. First, there is a need to balance UGC authenticity with quality control to avoid misinformation. Second, algorithmic transparency is essential to prevent inequitable visibility among institutions. Third, universities must adopt hybrid strategies that integrate online engagement with offline outreach to ensure inclusivity across socio-economic backgrounds.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights key implications for higher education recruitment. Practically, universities should prioritize User-Generated Content (UGC), as authentic peer narratives and testimonials outperform formal institutional posts in shaping enrolment intent. Leveraging algorithmic personalization on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok further enhances visibility and targeting, ensuring that prospective students receive content aligned with their interests. Theoretically, the findings extend the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Social Influence Theory by showing how trust and authenticity in digital spaces reduce decision-making uncertainty.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The research was conducted only at Universitas Djuanda Bogor, limiting its generalizability to other institutions. Enrolment intent was measured through self-reports, which may not fully capture actual application behavior. The study also focused primarily on major social media platforms, overlooking

alternative digital channels such as WhatsApp or LinkedIn. Furthermore, while socio-economic disparities in digital access were noted, they were not systematically analyzed.

Future research should broaden the scope by comparing multiple universities across Indonesia or other developing economies. Longitudinal studies that track actual enrolment behavior would provide stronger causal evidence. In addition, exploring emerging platforms and hybrid recruitment strategies, as well as addressing digital inequality in rural and low-income contexts, will be crucial for developing more inclusive recruitment models.

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Social Media Shapes Decision-Making

4166