

## Influence of Social Media Marketing on the Brand Image of Higher Education Institutions: A Student Perspective

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### Abstract

The move to social media integration into educational marketing has fundamentally changed the way that higher education institutions (HEIs) work to build their brand image and market themselves to prospective students. This research on the effects of social media marketing (SMM) on the brand image of HEIs has been carried out from the perspective of Indian students. Employing a mixed-method approach using quantitative survey results alongside qualitative information, the data of 300 respondents were analyzed using factor analysis method, t-tests, and ANOVA. The results of this chapter suggest that social media factors such as digital outreach, brand gratification, impact of SMS and Blogging, and institutional reliability have huge impact on the perceptions of brand image. Demographic variables such as gender, age and education level were found to have a moderating effect. Specifically, female students showed themselves to be more sensitive to brand than males concerning social media engagement, while older and better educated respondents showed differentiated responses to institutional credibility and outreach. The study, therefore, emphasizes growing need for HEIs to pursue integrated digital branding approaches for continuity of engagement as well as institutional reputation.

**Keywords** - Social Media Marketing; Higher Education Institutions; Brand Image; Student's Perception; Digital Outreach; brand gratification

### 1. Introduction

In the modern age of digital transformation, social media marketing (SMM) has become a strategic tool for higher education institutions (HEIs) to supplement their visibility, reach relevant stakeholders and strengthen their brand image. The increasing use of social networking sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube, has transformed the idea of the communication dynamics between academic institutions and prospective student cohorts, allowing for more direct, authentic and interactive relational dynamics (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Within today's hyper-competitive educational environment a strong brand image occurs as not only a marker of institutional credibility but also a key determinant of student choice, loyalty and engagement (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993).

The role of branding in higher education has changed significantly in the last two decades. Traditionally, branding has been limited mainly to institutional reputation, pedagogical excellence and faculty credentials. The advent of digital media, however, has changed the concept of branding to an on-going dialogue as opposed to a one-way dissemination of information. Social media facilitates HEIs to publish their values, achievements and real-time student experiences in a way that promotes a sentiment of belonging and openness (Smith & Zook, 2011). Consequently, the institutions which strategically incorporate SMM into their communication framework appear to obtain better affective relationships with students, which ultimately reflect on their brand image and standing in the market (Hamann et al., 2007).

The educational arena of India can provide a particularly telling context to investigate this phenomenon in. With the increasingly ever-growing number of universities and colleges participating in competition for enrolment of students, effective digital branding has emerged as an all-important differentiator. Within India, the use of social media has become an integral part of the everyday routine of Indian students - it not only influences social interaction but also decision-making processes regarding educational choices (Sharma, 2021). As students become more and more dependent on online platforms to access information, evaluate peer reviews, and enjoy virtual campus tours, an institutional digital identity has a significant impact on the perceptions of trustworthiness, quality and prestige (Majhi, 2020).

Moreover, student centred branding highlights the coherence between the values of an institution and their aspirations and real life experiences. This paradigm shift is one of a wider understanding in educational marketing of students as co-creators of brand meaning (Vrontis & Papasolomou, 2007). Through the help of participatory engagement, social media helps students become advocates of their institutions, spreading out testimonials, achievements and stories of campus life, adding up their institutional identity. The interactive nature of social media therefore turns students from the passive recipients of information to active contributors to the building of brands (Rios & Riquelme, 2008).

Previous studies have found that some of the determinants to effective SMM in education are digital outreach, content relevance, interactivity, and responsiveness (Bruno & Dabrowski, 2015; Dutta & Sarma, 2021). However, empirical research, which relates specifically to the Indian higher education sector from student perspective, is limited. Investigating the moderating effect of demographic variables on how students perceive social media branding could provide helpful insights for targeting communication strategies to different audiences (e.g., by gender, age, educational, etc.) (Gnuszowski & Schoefer, 2022).

Against this backdrop the present study attempts to analyze the impact of the social media marketing on the brand image of HEIs from the perspective of students. It examines the influence of different digital factors such as digital outreach, brand gratification, SMS and blogging impact and institutional reliability on the brand image perception. Furthermore, it considers the role that sociodemographic factors play in these relationships. The findings will expectedly contribute to the already accumulated knowledge about educational marketing by providing practical suggestions to educational institutions looking to improve their digital branding's endeavors.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Overview**

The explosive growth of digital communication platforms has changed fundamentally the way in which brands, including higher education institutions (HEIs), communicate with their audience. Social media marketing (SMM) has become a dominant approach to influence perception of brand, improve engagement and institutional loyalty in students (Smith & Zook, 2011). Within the educational context, social media serves as a venue where students-to-be make impressions about quality, culture, and credibility of institutions and hence make enrollment decisions (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Majhi, 2020).

### **2.2 How Social Media and Branding have Evolved**

Since the beginning of the 2000s, social media has reshaped the way marketing communication is conducted with participatory and user-driven communication (Boyd, 2007). Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube enable interactive interactions whereby the brand meanings are co-created by institutions and their audiences (Ozuem, 2017). Barwise and Meehan (2010) suggest the three qualities that are essential to effective digital branding are consistency, trust building and innovation; all of which are important qualities for institutions competing in an increasingly digital academic environment.

In the educational sector, branding was about, in the past, reputation and academic performance. Recent studies, however, highlight a paradigm shift in the development of experiential and emotional branding which is driven by social media (Newman et al., 2004; Braude, 2009). Students now not only judge institutions based on academic merit, they also re-evaluate them based on their ability to communicate effectively on values and student experiences online (Lipka, 2009).

### **2.3 The Importance of Social Media in Branding Education**

Numerous studies support that SMM has a great impact on institutional image and student engagement. Bruno and Dabrowski (2015) report that the social media communication through the platforms such as Facebook has a positive impact on brand equity with the increase of awareness and the emotional resonance. Similarly, Fauser (2011) has concluded that online engagement fosters trust, interaction and long term loyalty to institutional brands.

Hamann et al. (2007) assert that branding is an ultimate form of marketing strategy when a well-designed approach is employed, which can also include consistent social media messaging to improve the perceived value of educational

institutions. Furthermore, Sharma (2021) argues that the online marketing divisions responsible for maintaining a robust digital presence attract more prospective students with the sense of authenticity and responsiveness.

Aldahdouh, Nokelainen, and Korhonen (2020) illustrates that individual innovativeness and technology adoption have positive effects on students engagement with institutional social media content, which supports the ideas of technological affinity that promotes digital brand perception. Likewise, Dutta and Sarma (2021) emphasize and emphasize the direct correlation of behavioral intention to adopt new digital platforms as individuals trust and are satisfied as students.

## **2.4 Influencing Factors of Brand Image via SMM**

Research has consistently found digital outreach, brand gratification, content interactivity, and responsiveness to be the main factors that lead to effective branding (Vrontis & Papasolomou, 2007, Rios & Riquelme, 2008). For example, Akrimi and Khemakhem (2012) showed positive online word-of-mouth enhances credibility and affects enrollment intentions. Tong and Hawley 2009 find that online engagement builds brand equity by raising awareness and emotional attachment.

Palmatier et al. (2007) consider brand loyalty in relation to relationship driven contexts, and highlight that "consistent communication fosters long term affiliation". Yacout and Elsahn (2011) support this by showing that trust and credibility, built up through digital communication, are very important for maintaining institutional reputation.

Recent empirical studies provide additional evidence for the role of moderating influence of demographics. Gender and age have a big role to play in the way the students see digital branding content. Gnusowski and Schoefer (2022) note that student-to-student online interaction has a strong influence on satisfaction and loyalty. Majhi (2020) notes that while younger students are more responsive to visual social media marketing, older (mature) learners are more interested in institutional credibility and information depth.

## **2.5 Gaps in Existing Literature**

Although there has been previous research on the increased significance of social media within educational marketing, much of the research has been conducted in Western countries. There is still a limited body of empirical work that explores the Indian higher education landscape from a student's point of view. Additionally, not many research works at once analyze demographic moderators - gender, age, qualification - in analyzing the influence of SMM on institutional branding. This research is a response to these gaps in literature as it will provide an integrated, evidence-based understanding of the influence of the social media marketing in shaping brand image of higher education institutions in India.

## **2.6 Literature Summary Table**

Table-1: Summary of Literature

<b>No.</b>	<b>Author(s) &amp; Year</b>	<b>Title / Source</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>	<b>Relevance to Current Study</b>
<b>1</b>	Kaplan & Haenlein (2010)	Users of the world, unite!	Social media fosters interactive engagement and brand community.	Establishes theoretical foundation for SMM in HEIs.
<b>2</b>	Smith & Zook (2011)	Marketing communications: Integrating offline and online media	Highlights how social media integrates brand experience.	Provides framework for institutional online branding.
<b>3</b>	Barwise & Meehan (2010)	The one thing you must get right about your brand	Consistency and authenticity drive digital trust.	Relates to brand gratification and trust.
<b>4</b>	Vrontis & Papasolomou (2007)	Brand and product building	Emphasizes brand consistency and consumer awareness.	Supports HEI brand equity measurement.

5	Bruno & Dabrowski (2015)	The impact of Facebook communication on brand equity	Found social media improves awareness and loyalty.	Empirical basis for SMM effects.
6	Aldahdouh et al. (2020)	Technology and social media usage in higher education	Innovativeness predicts adoption of digital branding.	Links tech behavior with SMM perception.
7	Sharma (2021)	Effectiveness of online marketing tools	Online divisions enhance institutional web presence.	Relates to operational digital outreach.
8	Dutta & Sarma (2021)	Adoption of digital innovations	Behavioral intention mediates social media adoption.	Supports student behavior modeling.
9	Gnusowski & Schoefer (2022)	Student-to-student interactions	Peer engagement impacts satisfaction and trust.	Highlights role of online community.
10	Majhi (2020)	Impact of SMM on brand awareness	Visual and interactive content enhances brand image.	Central reference for Indian HEI context.

The reviewed literature as whole, shows that social media marketing has changed the branding strategies in the higher education institutions. These platforms not only act as marketing tools, but are complex ecosystems of interaction, trust building and co-creation. Institutional social media pages, student engagement with them improves perception of institutional credibility as well as contributes to an emotional commitment to the institution (Bruno & Dabrowski, 2015; Aaker, 1996). However, the effects of these digital affordances differ according to demographic and behavioural variables, as described by Sharma (2021) and Gnusowski and Schoefer (2022).

While international scholarship provides basic understanding, Indian higher education institutions face unique challenges entailing the idea of cultural heterogeneity, technological accessibility, and digital literacy. Consequently, the present study is a contribution for empirically examining the extent of influence of digital outreach, brand gratification, SMS and blogging impacts, and institutional reliance for brand image within the context of Indian higher education.

### 3. Research Objectives

The major objective of the current study is to explore the role of social media marketing (SMM) on brand image of higher education institutions (HEIs), from the perspective of the students of India. Specifically, this research aims to: introduce the key factors of SMM, which influence the students to perceive HEI branding; analyze the effect of socio-demographic variables (gender, age, and educational qualification) on the perception of HEI branding; assess the inter-relationships between digital outreach, brand gratification, SMS and blogging impact, and institutional reliance on HEI brand image; determine the existence of the perceptual differences among the various student demographics in respect to SMM components; and provide strategic insights for HEI administrators in reinforcing institutional branding by focused social media practices.

### 4. Research Hypotheses

Based on the reviewed literature, and using the following theoretical framework, the following hypotheses were formulated:

#### 4.1 Gender-Based Hypotheses

H01: Male and female students will have no significant difference on the effect of digital outreach on branded higher education institution selection.

H02: There is no significant difference between male and female students in terms of influence of brand gratification to brand selection of higher education institutions.

H03: There is no significant difference between male and female students on the effect of SMS and blogging in Perception of Branding.

H04: There is no significant difference in the student choice in dependability of institutions when seeking branded higher education institutions among the male and female students.

#### **4.2 Age-Based Hypotheses**

H05: There is no significant difference between different age groups in the response to digital outreach.

H06: No significant difference exists between different age groups in the effect of brand gratification;

H07: There is no significant difference between different age groups regarding communication idea of SMS and blogging to the different branding perception

H08: No significant difference is observed on distinct age groups about the reliance on institutions for choosing branded higher education institutions.

#### **4.3 Education-Based Hypotheses**

H09: There is no significant difference between different educational qualification groups in the perception of digital outreach.

H10: There is no significant difference in the group of different educational qualification with respect to brand gratification.

H11: There is no significant difference found among various educational qualification groups in terms of impact of SMS and blogging.

H12: There is no significant difference between the different groups of educational qualification in the number of dependency on institutions when choosing branded higher education institutions.

### **5. Research Methodology**

#### **5.1 Research Design**

This investigation adopted a quantitative research design; with the application of descriptive and inferential analysis strategies to measure the influence of SMM on HEIs brand image. Data Collection was done through a survey conducted among student respondents in India. The study adopted a cross-section form learning what is perceived in a defined period of time (March to June 2023). Both exploratory techniques and confirmatory statistical methods were employed for inter-variable relationships validity including factor analysis, t-tests, and ano-vars.

#### **5.2 Sampling Design**

A non probabilities sampling approach that combines convenience and referral sampling was used. The research sample included a total of 300 respondents that were undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral students from various higher education institutions in Madhya Pradesh, India. Among the sample, there were 175 women and 125 men. The diversity and representativeness in terms of student backgrounds and ages was ensured by the inclusion of students from varied educational backgrounds.

#### **5.3 Instrumentation**

Data were collected based on a structured questionnaire with 42 statements (strongly disagree to strongly agree, 5 scale Likert). The present instrument has been created based on designs of previously validated constructs and adapted to the HEI context. Four main constructs were measured: Digital Outreach (institutional use of videos, captions, and communication with communities in social platform), Brand Gratification (responsiveness, frequency of updates and positive interaction in institutional social media pages), SMS and Blogging Impact (communication through newsletters, SMS alerts, and blogs), and Reliance on Institution (perception of responsiveness and trust in institutional page on social

media). A pilot study with 58 experts (30 senior academicians and 28 digital marketing professionals) was conducted to improve the clarity and the reliability of questionnaire.

#### **5.4 Reliability and Validity**

Reliability as measured by Cronbach's alpha was collected with the alpha value of 0.756 and this value represents acceptable internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978). Construct validity was supported by Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity indicated by  $KMO = 0.816$  and  $p < .001$  indicating adequacy for sampling. Convergent validity of the items was supported by factor loading counts that were above the threshold of 0.5.

#### **5.5 Data Analysis**

The statistical data was analysed with the help of SPSS 20.0. The techniques that were used included Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to extract underlying factors that influence SMM's effects on HEI branding, Independent Sample t to conduct gender based perceptual differences, One-way ANOVA to conduct differences across the age and educational qualifications group, and Descriptive Statistics to summarize the demographic characteristics and mean responses. Graphical representations: (bar charts, factor loading representations and visualization of results of statistical analysis such as ANOVA) were used for improving interpretability.

#### **5.6 Ethical Considerations**

Participation was voluntary, and the confidentiality of respondents was ensured during the study. Ethical approval was taken from Institutional Review Board of Shri Vaishnav Vidyapeeth Vishwavidyalaya, Indore.

### **6. Result Analysis and Discussion**

#### **6.1 Overview**

This section presents the results of the statistical analyses used to examine the influence of social media marketing (SMM) on the brand image of higher education institutions (HEIs) from a student perspective. The analysis includes gender-, age-, and education-based comparisons through *t-tests* and *ANOVA*, along with reliability, validity, and factor analysis results. The visual data and tables provide a clearer understanding of patterns across the different demographic groups.

#### **6.2 Reliability and Validity Results**

The internal consistency of the 42-item questionnaire was verified using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a value of 0.756, which indicates acceptable reliability (Nunnally, 1978). Construct validity was tested through the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The KMO value of 0.816 ( $p < .001$ ) confirmed sampling adequacy, while Bartlett's test indicated that the variables were significantly correlated and suitable for factor analysis.

Subsequent Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) revealed four dominant factors contributing to the perception of HEI branding through social media marketing:

1. Digital Outreach,
2. Brand Gratification,
3. SMS and Blogging Impact, and
4. Reliance on Institution.

These components align with prior studies emphasizing digital visibility, interactivity, responsiveness, and trust as critical elements in educational branding (Bruno & Dabrowski, 2015; Sharma, 2021).

#### **6.3 Gender-Based Comparison**

An independent samples *t-test* was conducted to examine gender differences in perceptions across the four constructs (see Figure 1 and Table-2 "Gender-wise Perception Data").

Table -2 Gender-wise Perception Data

Variables	Female	Male
Digital Outreach	34.1	32.22
Brand Gratification	52.37	51.93
SMS & Blogging Impact	35.6	33.84
Reliance on Institution	11.49	13.69

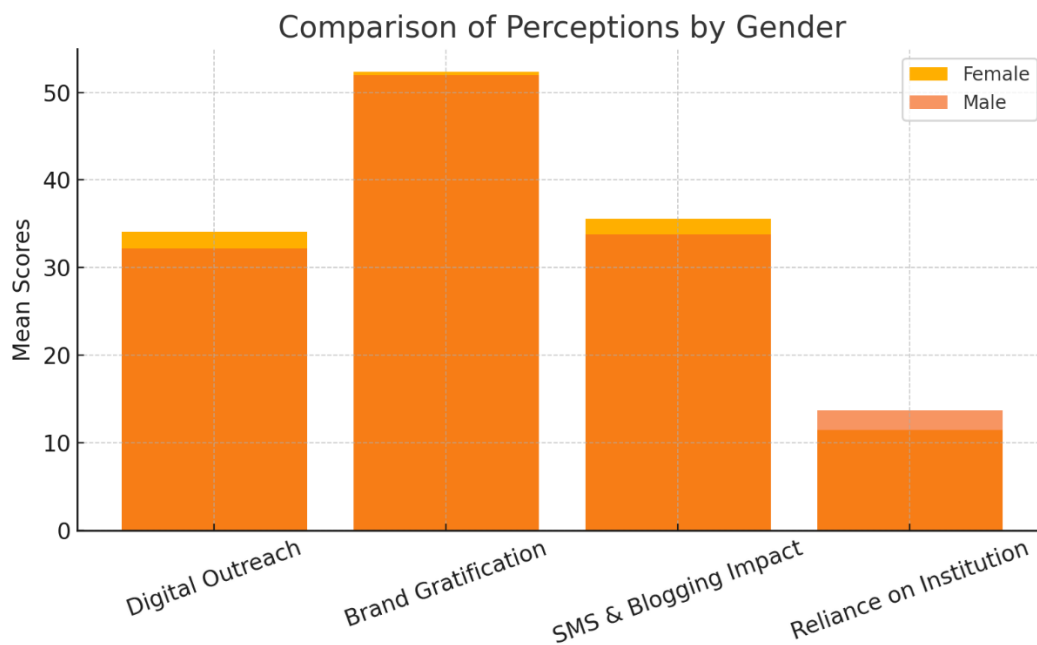


Figure 1: Comparison of Perceptions by Gender

Results indicate that female respondents scored higher on *Digital Outreach* ( $M = 34.10$ ) and *Brand Gratification* ( $M = 52.37$ ) compared to males ( $M = 32.22$  and  $M = 51.93$ , respectively). This suggests that female students tend to engage more actively with institutional social media content and are more likely to perceive it as an influential branding factor. Conversely, males demonstrated slightly higher mean values in *SMS and Blogging Impact* and *Reliance on Institution*, implying that they may place greater emphasis on institutional credibility and structured communication mechanisms.

The *t-test* results revealed a significant difference in **Digital Outreach** ( $p = .001 < .05$ ), leading to the rejection of **H01**, while no significant gender differences were found in *Brand Gratification*, *SMS & Blogging Impact*, or *Reliance on Institution* (all  $p > .05$ ).

These findings align with **Majhi (2020)**, who observed that female students display more social engagement and aesthetic responsiveness to online institutional branding.

#### 6.4 Age-Based Comparison

A one-way *ANOVA* was applied to test differences among four age groups (18–20, 21–23, 24–26, and 27 and above).

Table-3 Age-wise Perception Data

Age Group	Digital Outreach	Brand Gratification	SMS & Blogging Impact	Reliance on Institution
18-20	27.85	48.48	26.85	19.96

21-23	30.97	52.21	31.78	18.89
24-26	33.13	57.59	34.54	21.38
27 and above	34.1	52.65	35.98	19.91

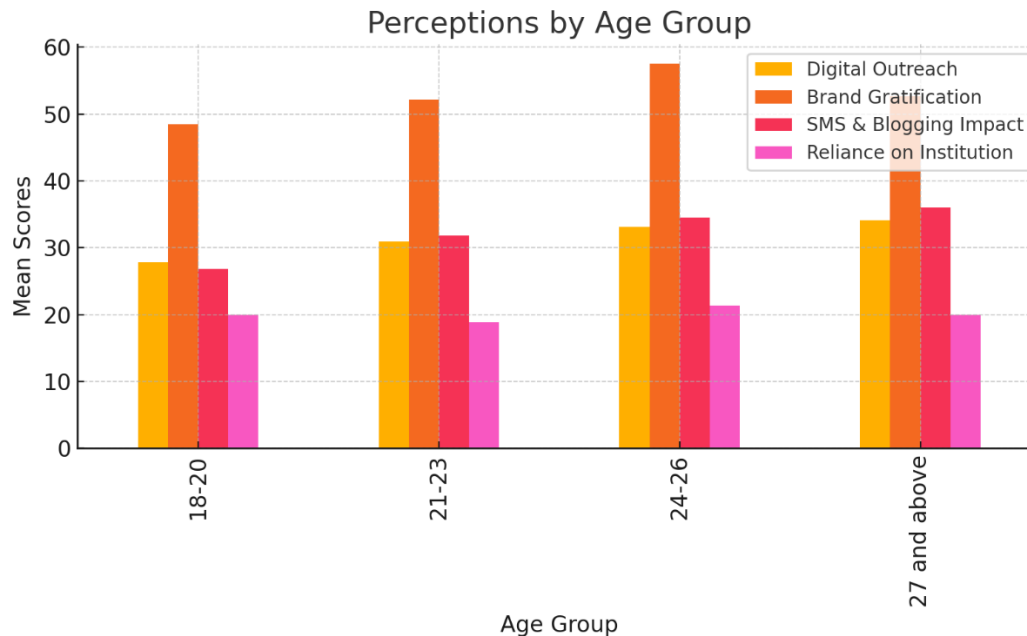


Figure 2: Perceptions by Age Group

Younger respondents (18–20 years) reported lower mean values for *Digital Outreach* ( $M = 27.85$ ) and *Brand Gratification* ( $M = 48.48$ ) compared to older students (27+ years;  $M = 34.10$  and  $M = 52.65$ , respectively). This suggests that older students perceive institutional online efforts as more credible and informative, possibly due to greater educational experience and exposure to digital systems.

The ANOVA results were significant across all four constructs:

- **Digital Outreach:**  $F = 9.99, p < .001$
- **Brand Gratification:**  $F = 9.31, p < .001$
- **SMS & Blogging Impact:**  $F = 9.92, p < .002$
- **Reliance on Institution:**  $F = 4.20, p < .001$

All null hypotheses (**H05–H08**) were therefore rejected, indicating that age significantly moderates how students perceive SMM and institutional branding.

These outcomes align with findings by **Aldahdouh et al. (2020)**, who noted that digital innovativeness and technological adaptability vary by age, influencing perceptions of online institutional credibility.

### 6.5 Education-Based Comparison

Differences among respondents based on educational qualifications (graduate, postgraduate, doctorate) were examined through *ANOVA* (see Figure 3 and Table-4 “Education-wise Perception Data”).



Table-4 Education-wise Perception Data

Education	Digital Outreach	Brand Gratification	SMS & Blogging Impact	Reliance on Institution
Graduate	36.49	66.35	26.08	9.98
Postgraduate	37.18	60.95	32.7	13.37
Doctorate	31.15	52.6	31.56	22.7

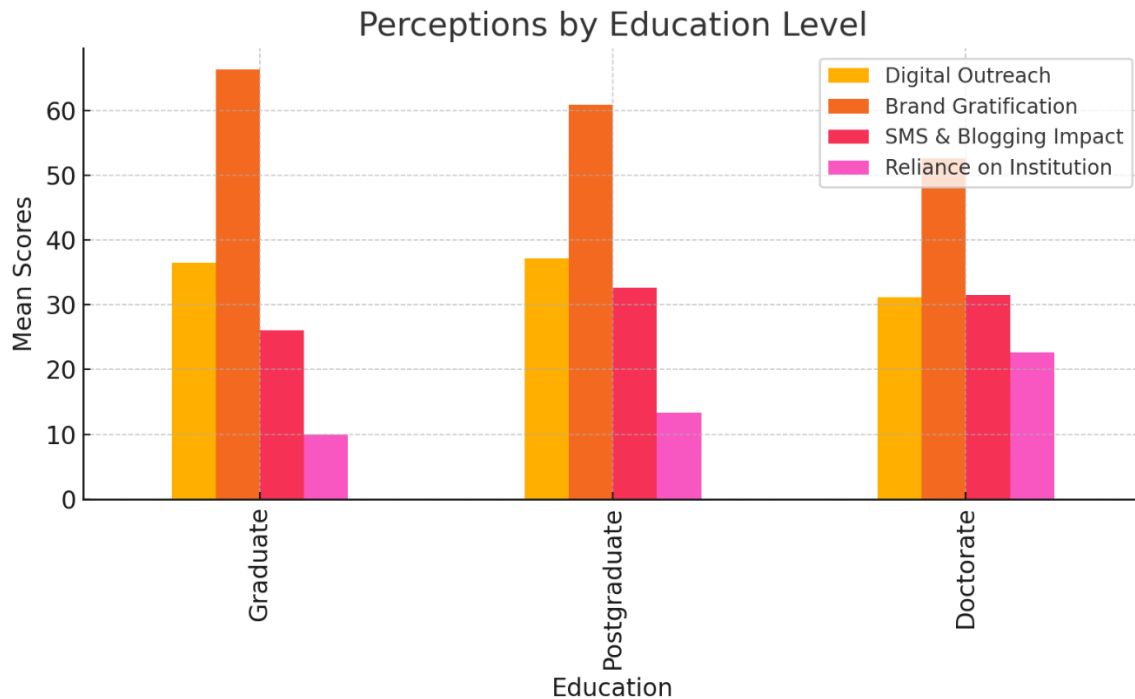


Figure 3: Perceptions by Education Level

Graduates and postgraduates reported higher scores in *Digital Outreach* ( $M = 36.49$  and  $M = 37.18$ , respectively) and *Brand Gratification* ( $M = 66.35$  and  $M = 60.95$ ) compared to doctoral students ( $M = 31.15$  and  $M = 52.60$ ). Interestingly, *Reliance on Institution* was highest among doctoral respondents ( $M = 22.70$ ), indicating that more academically advanced individuals tend to place greater emphasis on institutional reliability and information accuracy rather than promotional content.

The  $p$ -values for all four constructs were below .05, confirming statistically significant differences across education levels. Hence, hypotheses H09–H12 were rejected. These findings echo Vrontis and Papasolomou (2007), who suggested that academic maturity influences expectations from institutional communication strategies.

## 6.6 Discussion of Key Findings

Overall, the results demonstrate that social media marketing has a significant and multifaceted influence on the brand image of HEIs. The four identified factors — *Digital Outreach*, *Brand Gratification*, *SMS & Blogging Impact*, and *Reliance on Institution* — collectively explain how students perceive institutional branding efforts online.

- **Digital Outreach** emerged as the strongest determinant of brand perception, confirming that active social media presence directly contributes to positive institutional visibility.

- **Brand Gratification** and **SMS & Blogging Impact** represent relational dimensions that reinforce trust, satisfaction, and responsiveness between institutions and students.
- **Reliance on Institution** was more pronounced among older and doctoral respondents, indicating that trust-based communication and information transparency are essential for sustaining credibility.

These findings align with Bruno and Dabrowski (2015) and Rios and Riquelme (2008), who emphasized that interactive communication enhances consumer-based brand equity. Moreover, gender and age differences observed in this study support the theoretical assumption that digital engagement behaviors are shaped by socio-demographic variables (Hamann et al., 2007; Sharma, 2021).

### 6.7 Summary of Hypothesis Testing

**Table-5 Summary of Hypothesis Testing**

Factor	Gender	Age	Education	Result
Digital Outreach	Rejected ( $p < .05$ )	Rejected	Rejected	Significant
Brand Gratification	Accepted	Rejected	Rejected	Partially significant
SMS & Blogging Impact	Accepted	Rejected	Rejected	Significant
Reliance on Institution	Accepted	Rejected	Rejected	Significant

### 6.8 Interpretive Insight

The analysis underscores that HEIs must adopt differentiated social media strategies tailored to diverse student demographics. Younger students respond positively to visual storytelling and peer-driven engagement, while older and postgraduate students value credibility, consistency, and institutional responsiveness. Gender-sensitive approaches can further enhance engagement — such as using emotional narratives and authenticity-focused campaigns to appeal to female audiences.

The integration of these findings with prior literature suggests that HEIs' social media marketing should balance informational content (e.g., program details, achievements) with emotional engagement (e.g., success stories, interactive events). By doing so, institutions can cultivate stronger and more sustainable brand relationships with students.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 7.1 Conclusion

This study investigated the role of social media marketing (SMM) on brand image of HEIs with reference to students that was studied in the Indian scenario. Using both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses, including factor analysis, t-tests, and analysis of variance (ANOVA), the research was able to explain four major determinants in the perception of students, namely: Digital Outreach, Brand Gratification, SMS & Blogging Impact and Reliance on Institution. The results reveal that social media is a key part of the ways by which HEI branding is perceived by students. Of all factors considered, Digital Outreach proved most influential that highlights the importance that institutional visibility acquired through consistent and interactive social media engagement significantly builds upon the institutional recognition and credibility. Moreover, demographic variables including gender, age, and educational qualification were found to moderate the influence of SMM giving validity to the existence of differences in the perceptions of the students in terms of their social and academic.

Female students were more engaged with social media content and they were more responsive in emotional and interactive brand. On the other hand, older and more highly educated respondents focused on institutional reliability and information accuracy. These results are consistent with the results of previous studies by Bruno and Dabrowski (2015) and Vrontis and

Papasolomou (2007), who found that online brand communication builds trust, brand awareness and brand loyalty. The study has thus concluded that social media is not just a channel of promotion, but a strategic tool that is important to HEIs that wish to build and protect their brand image. Effective SMM increases the trust between student and institution, boosts engagement and creates a long-term sense of community among students and institutions.

## 7.2 Managerial and Strategic Implications

The study has a number of implications for HEI administrators and marketing professionals:

- **Strategic Digital Presence:** Use multiple social platforms where institutions should have a constant and active presence with a focus on visual storytelling, testimonials, and open communication.
- **Audience Segmentation:** Social media strategies need to be tailored to fit demographic differences - youth oriented, emotionally oriented strategies for undergraduates and information-oriented, credibility-oriented for postgraduates and doctoral students.
- **Interactive Engagement:** Facilitating two way communication (i.e., live questions and answers, student takeovers, discussion threads, etc.) can elevate institutional authenticity, as well as approachability.
- **Integration of Blogging and SMS Marketing:** Regular updates via SMS, blogs, and newsletters can help to build trust among the institution and to keep students updated about the academic and other extracurricular activities.
- **Performance Monitoring:** flouid.com and Google Forms Surveys-tracking engagement metrics continuously, and adjust strategies and tailor content based on results, to maximise engagement and manifestation of brand effectiveness.

These insights support the move towards data driven student centred digital branding models that can support an increase in enrollment and institutional reputation.

## 7.3 Theoretical Contributions

This study chronicles to the literature on educational marketing and brand management through the empirical validity of the influence of social media on the institutional brand image in the developing country context. It extends brand equity theory (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993) by bringing social media variables such as digital outreach and online gratification into the mix, and thereby bridges a conceptual gap between traditional and digital brand management frameworks in the field of education.

## 7.4 Limitations and Future Research

Although this study is a contribution, it has limited limitations:

**Sample Scope:** The sample was limited to higher education institutions in the state of Madhya Pradesh in India. Future research might expand the geographical scope or do cross-country comparisons in order to improve generalisability.

**Cross - sectional Design:** The study gets perceptions at one point in time. Longitudinal research may be able to better explain how the engagement in social media changes over time.

**Platform-Specific Analysis:** This is research that assumes a homogenous construct of social media. Future studies might be able to distinguish between various platforms (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube) to identify platform-specific influences.

**qualitative insights:** Bringing interviews or focus groups might deliver richer insights to emotional and cognitive response to institutional branding.

Future research activities could even test integration of the analysis capabilities of AI and sentiment analysis to assess impact of student engagement in real-time to enable institutions to better optimise their marketing investments.

## 7.5 Closing Remark

In conclusion, this research highlights the importance of social media marketing in institutional branding in the higher education domain. It changes the traditional branding model into a dynamic ecosystem of interaction, trust and co-creation between students and institution. By using social media strategically, HEIs can build their reputation and boost their student relationships while enjoying sustainable competitive advantage in the new digital education landscape.

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