

How Social Media Marketing and Brand Image Shape College Decision-Making Through Perceived Value

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ABSTRACT

The growing influence of digital platforms has transformed marketing practices in higher education, with social media emerging as a key channel in shaping students' enrollment decisions. This study aims to examine the effect of social media marketing and brand image on college decision-making, with perceived value serving as a mediating variable. A quantitative approach using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was applied to analyze data from 461 respondents. The results reveal that social media marketing significantly influences college decision both directly ($\beta = 0.668$, $p < 0.001$) and indirectly through perceived value ($\beta = 0.059$, $p = 0.013$). Brand image also impacts college decision directly ($\beta = 0.105$, $p = 0.031$) and indirectly via perceived value ($\beta = 0.032$, $p = 0.039$). The model explains 69.1% of the variance in college decision ($R^2 = 0.691$). These findings highlight the importance of digital branding in enhancing students' perceived value and influencing enrollment behavior. The study contributes to the literature on student decision-making and offers strategic insights for universities to optimize their digital engagement and institutional image.

Keywords: Brand Image; College Decision; Higher Education; Perceived Value; PLS-SEM; Social Media Marketing; Student Behavior

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of digital technology has profoundly influenced communication strategies across sectors, including higher education. In response to intensifying global competition, universities are required to enhance their visibility and engagement through more effective digital platforms. The increasing reliance of Generation Z digital natives who are highly responsive to online stimuli on social media platforms has prompted higher education institutions to adopt social media marketing as a strategic tool for recruitment, image-building, and decision influence (Pietrzak et al., 2025).

In the Indonesian context, the issue of declining new student enrollment, particularly in private universities, has become a pressing concern. Consequently, higher education institutions must explore innovative approaches to attract prospective students. The "Digital 2024" report by Kemp (2024) indicates that over 88% of Indonesians aged 16–24 actively engage with social media, making platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube critical for reaching this demographic segment.

Globally, social media marketing is not only implemented to enhance institutional visibility but also to build a consistent and emotionally resonant brand image (Nair et al., 2022; Sumarlinah et al., 2022). Empirical evidence from several countries illustrates the effectiveness of this approach. For example, gamification strategies in Spanish universities (Alonso-Sánchez et al., 2025) and personalized influencer campaigns in Vietnam (Quan et al., 2025) have been shown to influence students' engagement and enrollment intentions. These strategies signal a shift from traditional transactional marketing toward experiential and interactive branding that aligns with students' digital behavior.

From a theoretical perspective, the application of service dominant logic within higher education redefines students not merely as recipients but as co-creators of educational value. In this framework, social media serves as a service interface that fosters dialogic communication, value co-creation, and continuous relationship development (Ng & Forbes, 2009). Thus, social media marketing enables institutions to project not only functional excellence but also emotional appeal and social relevance.

An essential construct that bridges institutional communication and student behavior is perceived value. Zeithaml (1988) and Ganatra et al. (2021) define perceived value as a consumer's overall assessment of the benefit received relative to the cost incurred. In higher education, perceived value comprises various dimensions: functional (academic quality), emotional (pride, motivation), and social (peer perception and prestige) (Alves, 2011). Research suggests that well-designed social media marketing campaigns can influence these perceptions, thereby increasing the likelihood of prospective students making positive enrollment decisions (Dewi et al., 2022).

Despite the growing recognition of these variables, empirical investigations that explore the interrelationship between social media marketing, brand image, perceived value, and student decision-making remain limited, particularly within the Indonesian private university context. Previous studies have predominantly focused on consumer product contexts or examined these constructs in isolation. Hence, this study aims to address the gap by examining the direct and indirect effects of social media marketing and brand image on college decision-making, with perceived value serving as a mediating variable. This study is expected to advance theoretical understanding of how social media marketing and brand image affect student decision-making through perceived value. Practically, the results may assist higher education institutions in designing more

effective, student-centered digital marketing strategies to address enrollment challenges in a competitive environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Marketing

In the evolving landscape of higher education marketing, social media has become an indispensable tool for institutions to communicate, compete, and connect with prospective students. As digital natives increasingly rely on social platforms for information gathering and decision making, universities are challenged to establish not only a presence but also meaningful engagement. [Capriotti et al. \(2024\)](#) argue that universities with an active and strategic presence on social media project stronger institutional identities and foster better student awareness.

Recent research also demonstrates that social media engagement contributes significantly to trust building and perceived relational value. [Potelwa et al. \(2025\)](#) highlight that content formats that are interactive, emotional, and community-oriented can influence prospective students' attitudes and behavioral intentions, including word of mouth referrals and brand preference.

[Iskandar et al. \(2024\)](#) emphasize that emotional resonance and authenticity in social media messaging are central to students' perceptions of institutional value. Rather than passively consuming information, students actively engage with content that reflects their identity, aspirations, and expectations, making social media not just a dissemination tool but a relational interface.

Moreover, [Alonso-Sánchez et al. \(2025\)](#) provide evidence that gamified and immersive content experiences improve digital engagement outcomes among prospective students. Their findings reinforce the notion that social media marketing, when personalized and value-driven, has a direct and measurable impact on students' evaluation of institutional relevance and attractiveness.

Brand Image

Brand image plays a pivotal role in shaping prospective students' perceptions of higher education institutions. In a competitive educational landscape, universities are increasingly required to build and maintain a strong digital brand to attract and retain students. According to [Potelwa et al. \(2025\)](#), social media marketing activities significantly influence students' brand preference and word of mouth intentions toward universities, indicating that digital branding serves both promotional and relational purposes.

[Song et al. \(2023\)](#) argue that engagement on social media contributes directly to relationship quality and institutional brand performance. Their findings highlight that frequent and meaningful digital interactions, such as live sessions, personalized content, and responsive messaging, enhance emotional ties and strengthen institutional credibility in the eyes of prospective students.

[Capriotti et al. \(2024\)](#) further emphasize that universities with active and strategic social media presence tend to project more coherent institutional identities, which in turn increase student trust and brand loyalty. As higher education becomes more market-driven, brand image has evolved beyond static visual identity to encompass perceived authenticity, social responsiveness, and digital storytelling.

Recent studies reinforce this shift by highlighting the growing role of digital narratives in shaping emotional brand connections. Digital storytelling, when designed authentically, can enhance student engagement, foster a sense of belonging, and position universities as relatable and student-centered institutions (Ramalia, 2023; Tian & Suki 2023). Visual narratives, testimonials, and day-in-the-life content contribute not only to visibility but also to perceived warmth and identity alignment.

Thus, brand image in the context of higher education is no longer built solely through academic reputation but also through dynamic and value-driven digital engagement. These elements, when effectively communicated via social media, can significantly enhance students' willingness to apply, recommend, or affiliate themselves with a particular institution.

Perceived Value

Perceived value has emerged as a critical mediating variable in understanding how marketing stimuli influence behavioral intentions in higher education. Unlike traditional marketing approaches that emphasize features and benefits, recent research suggests that students evaluate universities holistically based on emotional, social, and functional dimensions of value (Iskandar et al., 2024).

Their study confirms that fairness in communication, perceived institutional support, and alignment with student expectations significantly shape the overall value students perceive in a university offering. When prospective students perceive high value both academically and experientially, they are more likely to develop trust, satisfaction, and intention to enroll.

The authenticity and credibility of social media communication further enhance this dynamic by transforming viewer impressions into meaningful perceptions and eventual enrollment behavior. As shown by recent research, social media ads that are perceived as authentic and trustworthy significantly influence perceived value, which in turn mediates decision-making behavior (Kothari et al., 2025)

Moreover, social media marketing plays an instrumental role in shaping this perceived value. Potelwa et al. (2025) reveal that students often derive emotional and symbolic meaning from digital content, which contributes to value perception even before formal interactions with the institution occur. This indicates that perceived value is not merely transactional, but deeply relational and shaped by digital impressions.

Therefore, universities aiming to influence prospective students' decision-making must focus not only on communicating academic strengths but also on cultivating perceived value through personalized, interactive, and authentic content strategies across digital platforms.

Hypotheses Development

Social Media Marketing Toward College Decision

Social media marketing plays a crucial role in shaping prospective students' perceptions and behaviors. Social media marketing encompasses dimensions such as entertainment, interaction, trendiness, and customization (Asikin et al., 2024). In the context of higher education, social media acts not only as an information source but also as an interactive space that influences students' feelings, trust, and perceived relevance of a university. Moreover, customized content delivery increases the perceived responsiveness and student orientation of the institution, thereby positively affecting their college decision.

- H1: Social media marketing significantly affects the college decision of Telkom University Purwokerto students.
- H2: Social media marketing significantly affects the perceived value of Telkom University Purwokerto students.
- H6: Social media marketing significantly affects college decisions through the perceived value of Telkom University Purwokerto students.

Brand Image Toward College Decision

Brand image refers to how an institution is perceived by its target market in terms of credibility, academic reputation, and quality (Rani & Madiawati, 2022). For universities, a positive brand image conveys trust, stability, and prestige, which are important psychological drivers for students in selecting their place of study. A strong image builds expectations regarding academic excellence, career prospects, and overall student experience. When students perceive that the institution aligns with their personal values and goals, the perceived value increases, which ultimately supports their decision-making process (Ramadhan, 2024). A well-managed brand image can therefore directly and indirectly influence student enrollment.

- H3: Brand image has a significant effect on the college decision of Telkom University Purwokerto students.
- H4: Brand image has a significant effect on the perceived value of Telkom University Purwokerto students.
- H7: Brand image significantly affects college decisions through the perceived value of Telkom University Purwokerto students.

Perceived Value Toward College Decision

Perceived value, defined as the subjective evaluation of benefits relative to costs, acts as a mediating variable that links institutional messaging to student behavior. Hair et al. (2022) define it as a latent construct that cannot be directly observed but is derived through indicators such as satisfaction, utility, and relevance.

In the higher education context, perceived value includes academic quality, support services, career prospects, and emotional experience. Putri et al. (2024), in their study on live video commerce, found that perceived social presence significantly enhanced perceived value, which subsequently influenced purchase intention. Translating this to the university setting, institutions that present clear value propositions through digital platforms are more likely to positively influence students' enrollment decisions.

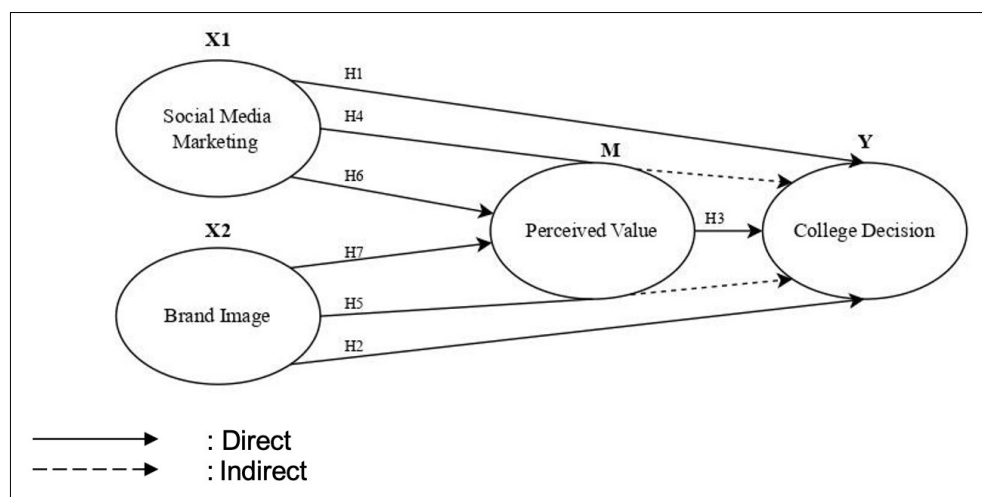
When students perceive that a university offers a combination of quality education, good facilities, industry exposure, and personal development opportunities, they are more likely to make a favorable college decision. Research also supports the role of perceived value as a mediating variable between external factors (such as social media marketing and brand image) and actual decision outcomes (Putri et al., 2024).

- H5: Perceived value has a significant effect on the college decisions of Telkom University Purwokerto students.

Conceptual Framework

The study framework model is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Research Framework



RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quantitative research approach using survey data collected from students of Telkom University Purwokerto. The target population consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in the 2024/2025 academic year. These students were selected as they represent active users of social media who are exposed to institutional marketing content and are capable of evaluating brand image and perceived value in relation to college decision-making. The unit of analysis in this research was the individual student, and the research context focused on private higher education marketing in Indonesia.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select respondents who met the criteria of being active social media users and having engaged with institutional content related to Telkom University Purwokerto. A total of 461 valid responses were collected and analyzed. The demographic profile of respondents indicated a balanced distribution across study programs and academic levels, with the majority aged between 17 and 22 years old. The gender distribution was relatively equal, and most respondents reported using social media platforms daily for educational and informational purposes.

Data collection was conducted using an online questionnaire distributed through digital channels, including WhatsApp and Instagram, to ensure accessibility and reach. The questionnaire consisted of multiple sections measuring each research variable using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) for "strongly disagree" to (5) for "strongly agree". Prior to distribution, the questionnaire was pre-tested to ensure the clarity, reliability, and validity of the items.

This is consistent with [Rubiyanti et al. \(2022\)](#), who used SEM-PLS to assess decision-related constructs in the context of halal product purchasing behavior. The measurement model included four latent constructs: social media marketing, brand image, perceived value, and college decision. Each construct was operationalized based on indicators adapted from validated instruments used in previous studies. Brand image was assessed based on perceptions of institutional credibility, quality, and reputation, drawing from [Rani and Madiawati \(2022\)](#). Perceived value was measured in terms of academic benefit, personal development, and overall experience, aligned with indicators used by [Putri et al. \(2024\)](#). College decision was operationalized as the intention to choose and enroll in Telkom University Purwokerto. All measurement items were tested for reliability and validity using the PLS-SEM technique, ensuring the robustness of the model and its constructs.

RESULTS

The research instrument was a questionnaire structured on a five-point Likert scale. Data analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling based on the SEM-PLS method, implemented through SmartPLS software. SEM-PLS was selected due to its ability to model complex relationships, including mediating effects, and its robustness in handling non-normal data with relatively small to medium sample sizes. Data were collected from 461 undergraduate students of Telkom University Purwokerto through a structured questionnaire distributed via digital platforms, including WhatsApp and Instagram.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics Based on Gender

Gender	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Male	256	57.7
Female	195	42.3
Total	461	100

Table 1 illustrates the gender distribution of the respondents. A total of 461 students participated in the study, consisting of 256 male respondents (57.7%) and 195 female respondents (42.3%). This composition shows a relatively balanced gender proportion, although male students slightly outnumber female students. The results suggest that while both genders are well represented in the sample, there is a modest male dominance, which is consistent with the demographic structure of science and technology-oriented academic programs. Overall, the gender profile confirms the diversity of participants and strengthens the relevance of the findings for a broad student population.

Table 2. Respondent Characteristics Based on Academic Program Format

Academic Program	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Bachelor of Telecommunication Engineering	32	6.9%
Bachelor of Electrical Engineering	21	4.6%
Bachelor of Biomedical Engineering	25	5.4%
Bachelor of Food Technology	26	5.6%
Bachelor of Industrial Engineering	31	6.7%
Bachelor of Information Systems	51	11.1%
Bachelor of Logistics Engineering	24	5.2%
Bachelor of Informatics Engineering	63	13.7%
Bachelor of Software Engineering	25	5.4%
Bachelor of Data Science	48	10.4%
Bachelor of Digital Business	38	8.2%
Bachelor of Visual Communication Design	59	12.8%
Bachelor of Product Design	14	3%
Associate Degree in Telecommunication	32	6.9%
Total	461	100%

Table 2 presents the distribution of respondents based on their academic programs. The sample consisted of students from 14 different programs at Telkom University Purwokerto. The highest proportion of respondents came from the Informatics Engineering program, accounting for 13.7% of the total sample. This was followed by Visual Communication Design (12.8%), Information Systems (11.1%), and Data Science (10.4%). Other programs with notable representation included Digital Business (8.2%), Industrial Engineering (6.7%), and Telecommunication Engineering (6.9%) for both Bachelor's and Associate's levels. Meanwhile, programs such as Biomedical Engineering, Software Engineering, Logistics Engineering, and Food Technology

contributed between 5% and 6% each. The lowest representation came from Product Design at 3.0%. This diverse academic composition indicates that the study successfully captured insights from a wide range of disciplines, particularly from STEM and creative-based programs, ensuring the generalizability and multidimensional relevance of the research findings.

Statistical Results

Convergent Validity (N = 461)

Convergent validity was assessed by examining the outer loading values of each indicator and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct. As recommended by Hair et al. (2022), an indicator is considered valid if it has an outer loading above 0.70 and an AVE value exceeding 0.50.

Stage I – Outer Loadings

Table 3. Outer Loading (Stage I)

	Outer Loadings	Conclusion
BI1 <- Reputation	0.798	Valid
BI2 <- Reputation	0.840	Valid
BI3 <- Brand Consistency	0.789	Valid
BI4 <- Brand Consistency	0.781	Valid
BI5 <- Visual Impression	0.776	Valid
BI6 <- Visual Impression	0.763	Valid
CD1 <- Recognition of Needs	1.000	Valid
CD2 <- Information Search	1.000	Valid
CD3 <- Alternative Evaluation	1.000	Valid
CD4 <- College Decision	1.000	Valid
CD5 <- Post Decision Behavior	1.000	Valid
PV1 <- Functional Value	0.827	Valid
PV2 <- Functional Value	0.830	Valid
PV3 <- Functional Value	0.804	Valid
PV4 <- Functional Value	0.767	Valid
PV5 <- Functional Value	0.768	Valid
PV6 <- Functional Value	0.788	Valid
SMM1 <- Entertainment	0.840	Valid
SMM2 <- Entertainment	0.781	Valid
SMM3 <- Interaction	0.905	Valid
SMM4 <- Interaction	0.671	Valid
SMM5 <- Trendiness	0.760	Valid
SMM6 <- Trendiness	0.752	Valid
SMM7 <- Customization	0.745	Valid
SMM8 <- Customization	0.829	Valid

In the initial stage in Table 3, all outer loading values were above 0.70, indicating that each indicator was strongly correlated with its respective latent construct. Indicators measuring brand image, college decision, perceived value, and social media marketing yielded outer loadings ranging from 0.671 to 1.000. Although one item (SMM4 = 0.671) was slightly below 0.70, it was retained for theoretical consistency and still considered acceptable for exploratory research. All other indicators exceeded the threshold and were thus declared valid.

Stage II – Outer Loadings for Second-Order Constructs

Table 4. Outer Loading (Stage II)

	Outer Loadings	Conclusion
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Alternative Evaluation <- CD	0.916	Valid
College Decision <- CD	0.463	Valid
Customization <- SMM	0.764	Valid
Entertainment <- SMM	0.802	Valid
Information Search <- CD	0.883	Valid
Interaction <- SMM	0.866	Valid
Visual Impression <- BI	0.726	Valid
Brand Consistency <- BI	0.824	Valid
Emotional Value <- PV	0.855	Valid
Functional Value <- PV	0.781	Valid
Social Value <- PV	0.811	Valid
Post Decision Behavior <- CD	0.908	Valid
Recognition of Needs <- CD	0.911	Valid
Reputation <- BI	0.763	Valid
Trendiness <- SMM	0.712	Valid

Note: CD (College Decision), SMM (Social Media Marketing), BI (Brand Image), PV (Perceived Value)

At the second stage of analysis in Table 4, reflective dimensions within second-order constructs were examined. All outer loading values remained above the minimum threshold, ranging from 0.712 (Trendiness ← SMM) to 0.916 (Alternative Evaluation ← CD). These results confirm that the higher-order constructs were also well specified and that the dimensions were representative of their respective latent variables.

Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

Table 5. AVE

	AVE	Conclusion
BI	0.593	Valid
CD	0.699	Valid
PV	0.664	Valid
SMM	0.618	Valid

Note: CD (College Decision), SMM (Social Media Marketing), BI (Brand Image), PV (Perceived Value)

The AVE values for all constructs in Table 5 were also above the 0.50 threshold: Brand Image (0.593), College Decision (0.699), Perceived Value (0.664), and Social Media Marketing (0.618). These values indicate that more than 50% of the variance in the observed indicators was explained by the latent construct, confirming satisfactory convergent validity across all constructs.

Discriminant Validity

Cross Loading

Table 6. Discriminant Validity – Cross-Loading

	BI	CD	PV	SMM
Brand Consistency	0.824	0.506	0.487	0.559
Reputation	0.763	0.520	0.483	0.535
Visual Impression	0.726	0.452	0.505	0.502
Alternative Evaluation	0.587	0.916	0.621	0.758
Recognition of Needs	0.589	0.911	0.571	0.730
Post Decision Behavior	0.551	0.908	0.554	0.773
Information Search	0.504	0.883	0.569	0.697
College Decision	0.431	0.463	0.402	0.400
Emotional Value	0.578	0.561	0.855	0.608

Functional Value	0.451	0.508	0.781	0.564
Social Value	0.525	0.535	0.811	0.566
Interaction	0.628	0.789	0.612	0.866
Entertainment	0.463	0.697	0.544	0.802
Customization	0.578	0.559	0.583	0.764
Trendiness	0.504	0.506	0.496	0.712

Note: CD (College Decision), SMM (Social Media Marketing), BI (Brand Image), PV (Perceived Value)

Discriminant validity was tested to determine whether each construct in the model is truly distinct from the others. This was assessed using the cross-loading method, where an indicator should have a higher loading on its associated construct compared to other constructs. As shown in Table 6, all indicators exhibit the highest loading on their respective latent constructs, thus confirming satisfactory discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2022).

Construct Reliability

To ensure that each construct is measured consistently, the study assessed internal consistency reliability using two key indicators: Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (ρ_c). According to Hair et al. (2022), a construct is considered reliable if it meets the minimum threshold of 0.60 for Cronbach's Alpha and 0.70 for Composite Reliability.

Table 7. Discriminant Validity – Construct Reliability

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (ρ_c)	Conclusion
BI	0.659	0.815	Valid
CD	0.878	0.917	Valid
PV	0.749	0.857	Valid
SMM	0.796	0.867	Valid

Note: CD (College Decision), SMM (Social Media Marketing), BI (Brand Image), PV (Perceived Value)

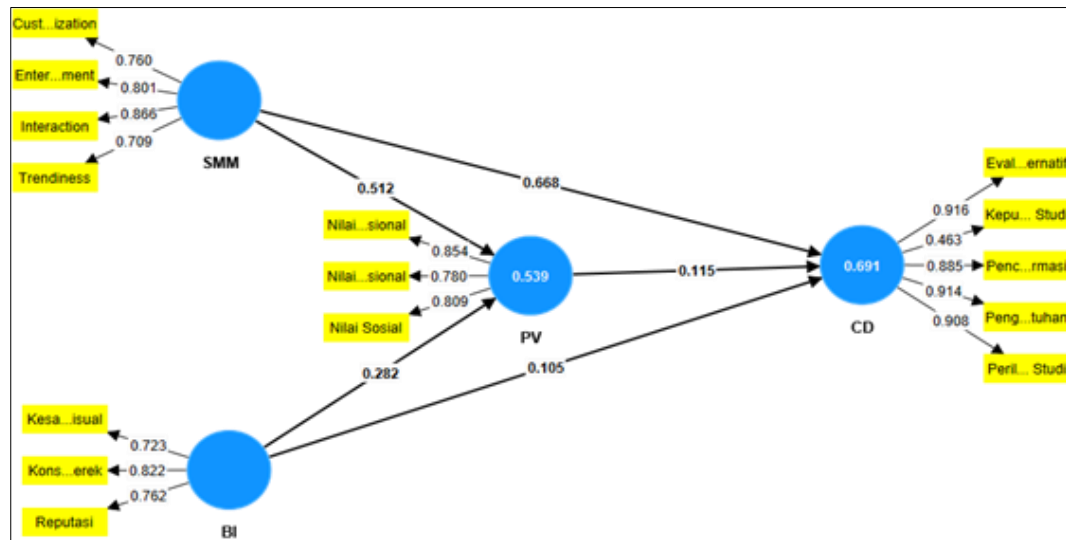
The results presented in Table 7 show that all constructs in this study, Brand Image (BI), College Decision (CD), Perceived Value (PV), and Social Media Marketing (SMM), meet both criteria. The Cronbach's Alpha values range from 0.659 to 0.878, while the Composite Reliability values range from 0.815 to 0.917. This indicates a high degree of internal consistency.

Structural Model (Inner Model)

Coefficients Determinant (R^2)

The evaluation of the structural model in this study was carried out to assess the strength of the causal relationships among latent constructs and to determine the extent to which the independent variables explain the variance in the dependent variables. One of the primary indicators in evaluating the inner model is the R-squared (R^2) value, also referred to as the coefficient of determination. This statistic represents the proportion of variance in the dependent variable that is explained by one or more independent variables within the proposed model framework (Hair et al., 2022).

Figure 2. Inner Model



As shown in Figure 2, the structural model illustrates the direct and indirect relationships among the constructs: Social Media Marketing (SMM), Brand Image (BI), Perceived Value (PV), and College Decision (CD). The R² value for College Decision is 0.691, which indicates that 69.1% of the variance in students' decision-making is explained by the combined influence of Social Media Marketing, Brand Image, and Perceived Value. Similarly, the R² value for Perceived Value is 0.546, suggesting that 54.6% of the variance in perceived value.

These results indicate a strong explanatory power of the structural model, particularly in the context of higher education decision-making influenced by digital marketing and institutional perception.

Table 8. Coefficients of Determination (R²)

	R-Square	R-Square Adjusted
CD	0.691	0.689
PV	0.546	0.544

Note: CD (College Decision), SMM (Social Media Marketing), BI (Brand Image), PV (Perceived Value)

The high R² values in Table 8 support the predictive relevance of the model and justify the inclusion of perceived value as a mediating variable. The results also reinforce the importance of social media marketing and brand image as strategic tools in influencing students' academic decision-making processes.

Hypothesis Testing

Table 9. Hypothesis Testing

	Path Coefficients	T statistics	P values	Conclusion
BI -> CD	0.105	2.156	0.031	Accepted
BI -> PV	0.282	5.696	0.000	Accepted
PV -> CD	0.115	2.483	0.013	Accepted
SMM -> CD	0.668	15.433	0.000	Accepted
SMM -> PV	0.512	10.672	0.000	Accepted
BI -> PV -> CD	0.032	2.066	0.039	Accepted
SMM -> PV -> CD	0.059	2.483	0.013	Accepted

Note: CD (College Decision), SMM (Social Media Marketing), BI (Brand Image), PV (Perceived Value)

Hypothesis testing in this study was conducted using the bootstrapping procedure available in SmartPLS software to assess the significance of both direct and indirect relationships among the variables. A hypothesis is considered supported if the T-statistic is greater than or equal to 1.96 and the P-value is less than 0.05, indicating a statistically significant relationship at the 95% confidence level (Hair et al., 2022). The results, as shown in Table 9 and Figure 2, present the path coefficients, T-statistics, and P-values for each hypothesized relationship in this study.

The first hypothesis (H1) reveals that Brand Image has a positive and significant effect on College Decision, with a path coefficient of 0.105, a T-statistic of 2.156, and a P-value of 0.031. The second hypothesis (H2) is also supported, where Brand Image significantly influences Perceived Value with a coefficient of 0.282 and a highly significant T-statistic of 5.696 and P-value of 0.000. The third hypothesis (H3) shows that Perceived Value positively affects College Decision, supported by a coefficient of 0.115, a T-statistic of 2.483, and a P-value of 0.013. The fourth hypothesis (H4) demonstrates that Social Media Marketing exerts the strongest direct influence on College Decision, with a path coefficient of 0.668, T-statistic of 15.433, and P-value of 0.000. Furthermore, the fifth hypothesis (H5) indicates that social media marketing significantly impacts Perceived Value with a coefficient of 0.512, T-statistic of 10.672, and P-value of 0.000, emphasizing its crucial role in shaping students' perceptions.

In terms of mediation, the sixth hypothesis (H6) confirms that brand image indirectly influences college decision through perceived value, with an indirect effect coefficient of 0.032, T-statistic of 2.066, and P-value of 0.039. Similarly, the seventh hypothesis (H7) establishes that Social Media Marketing also indirectly affects College Decision via Perceived Value, with an indirect coefficient of 0.059, T-statistic of 2.483, and P-value of 0.013. These results collectively validate all proposed hypotheses, highlighting the significant direct and indirect roles of brand image, social media marketing, and perceived value in shaping prospective students' decisions when choosing a college.

The results of this hypothesis testing provide empirical evidence for the theoretical framework proposed in the study. They confirm the mediating role of Perceived Value in the relationships between brand image, social media marketing, and college decision.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the influence of social media marketing and brand image on college decisions, with perceived value acting as a mediating variable among undergraduate students at Telkom University Purwokerto. The findings provide empirical support for the proposed research framework and contribute to a better understanding of how digital marketing strategies and institutional perceptions shape student decision-making in the context of higher education.

The analysis confirmed that all proposed hypotheses were supported. Social media marketing emerged as the most dominant factor, having both a direct and indirect influence on college decisions through perceived values. The total effect of social media marketing on college decision is $\beta = 0.668$, $T = 15.433$, $p < 0.001$, highlighting the strategic importance of digital engagement and interaction, particularly on platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp, where prospective students seek authentic and relevant content.

Brand image, although exhibiting a lower direct effect on college decision ($\beta = 0.105$, $T = 2.156$, $p = 0.031$), showed a significant influence on perceived value ($\beta = 0.282$, $T =$

5.696, $p < 0.001$), which in turn mediated its effect on college decision (indirect $\beta = 0.032$, $p = 0.039$). These findings are consistent with Rani and Madiawati (2022), who demonstrated that brand associations such as academic reputation and visual consistency indirectly affect students' enrollment choices via perceived benefits and trust.

Although brand image was found to be statistically significant, its influence was comparatively weaker than social media marketing. This could indicate a shift in how digitally native students interpret institutional quality. Rather than relying solely on institutional identity elements, such as logos, reputation, or accolades, today's students appear to be more influenced by consistent, authentic, and dynamic content interactions (Dennis et al., 2016; Ng & Forbes, 2009). This insight challenges earlier studies that placed greater weight on brand credibility and suggests that in digital environments, brand value must be actively co-created through ongoing engagement.

The mediating role of perceived value was also substantiated in the relationship between social media marketing and college decision (indirect $\beta = 0.059$, $p = 0.013$). This aligns with the study by Putri et al. (2024), who found that value perception in digital platforms enhances behavioral intentions in decision contexts like product purchases and can be extended to higher education decisions.

From a managerial standpoint, the findings suggest that universities should prioritize interactive and value-rich digital communication strategies. Investing in responsive social media content that reflects institutional quality, student experience, and graduate outcomes can significantly enhance perceived value and ultimately influence college selection. Moreover, brand identity elements, such as logo consistency, message tone, and academic achievements, should be integrated across digital touchpoints to strengthen the institutional image. International comparisons also reveal that universities in digitally advanced countries are leveraging data analytics and AI-based personalization in their social media marketing campaigns to enhance student engagement. For instance, institutions in South Korea and Singapore have implemented social listening tools to identify student needs and respond proactively through targeted content strategies. These practices not only enhance perceived institutional relevance but also foster emotional connections that influence decision-making. Indonesian universities can adopt similar strategies to remain competitive in the regional education market.

One limitation of this study is its focus on a single institution, which may limit the generalizability of findings. Future research could expand the model to include other intervening variables, such as trust or student satisfaction, and apply the framework to different educational contexts, including public universities or international campuses. A longitudinal approach is also recommended to assess changes in perception and decision behavior across academic periods. From a policy perspective, the Ministry of Education and Culture in Indonesia has introduced digital transformation guidelines that emphasize the integration of technology in marketing and recruitment. This includes leveraging big data to understand prospective student behavior, customizing communication based on demographic segmentation, and building institutional narratives around employability and innovation. Embedding these policy directions into social media strategies can strengthen brand positioning and improve college decision outcomes.

In conclusion, the study confirms that social media marketing, brand image, and perceived value are essential determinants in students' decision-making when choosing a higher education institution. These insights offer valuable contributions both to

marketing theory in educational contexts and to practical strategies aimed at increasing institutional competitiveness in a digitally driven landscape.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the influence of Social Media Marketing and Brand Image on College Decision, with Perceived Value as a mediating variable, using data from students of Telkom University Purwokerto. The findings indicate that both Social Media Marketing and Brand Image significantly affect students' decisions to choose a university, either directly or through the mediating role of Perceived Value. These results demonstrate that prospective students are not only influenced by the institution's academic offerings but also by how it communicates and positions itself through digital platforms.

The research highlights the strategic importance of managing social media engagement and cultivating a positive institutional image to increase perceived value among target audiences. From a practical perspective, institutions should focus on producing content that is engaging, informative, and aligned with student expectations. Furthermore, efforts to strengthen brand credibility, academic reputation, and the overall student experience can meaningfully impact enrollment decisions.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on higher education marketing and student behavior by integrating four constructs into a unified decision-making model. Future researchers are encouraged to test this model across different institutional types and geographical contexts to enhance generalizability and explore additional mediating or moderating variables that may further explain student decision-making dynamics.

LIMITATION

This study is limited by its focus on a single institution, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader higher education contexts. The use of purposive sampling may also introduce selection bias, as participants were chosen based on specific criteria. Furthermore, the data relied on self-reported responses, which may be subject to perception bias or social desirability bias. Future studies could employ longitudinal designs or comparative samples from multiple universities to strengthen external validity and explore causal relationships more deeply.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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