

Digital Marketing Effectiveness Shaping Enrollment Decisions in Islamic Higher Education: The Mediating Role of Student Interest

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Abstract:

The increasing reliance on digital platforms for educational information has made digital marketing an important factor influencing prospective students' enrollment decisions. This study aims to examine how digital marketing effectiveness shapes enrollment decisions in Islamic higher education through the mediating role of student interest. A qualitative case study was conducted involving 15 informants consisting of institutional administrators, marketing staff, prospective students, and parents. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis, and analyzed using data condensation, reduction, display, and verification techniques. The findings indicate that effective digital content characterized by visual appeal, information clarity, relevance, consistency, and interactivity increased audience engagement and stimulated student interest. Interest was found to function as a bridge between exposure to digital content and enrollment decisions. The novelty of this study lies in integrating digital content effectiveness, trust formation, student interest, and enrollment decisions within a single analytical framework. These findings suggest that institutions should prioritize authentic and interactive digital marketing strategies to strengthen student recruitment.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed communication and marketing practices across various sectors, including higher education. In contemporary society, prospective students increasingly rely on digital platforms to gather information before making educational decisions (Akil et al., 2024; Kanukova, 2024; Tishchenkova et al., 2021). Digital marketing enables universities to disseminate



information efficiently, build institutional reputation, and engage with potential applicants through interactive content. Effective digital marketing is therefore essential because it influences public perceptions and supports informed decision-making. Evidence from recent educational marketing trends indicates that institutions with strong digital visibility tend to attract greater public attention and higher enrollment rates (Flores et al., 2022; Muhtasim et al., 2022). Consequently, understanding the effectiveness of digital marketing has become an important societal issue, particularly for Islamic higher education institutions seeking to remain competitive and relevant in the digital era.

Despite the growing importance of digital marketing, many Islamic higher education institutions continue to face challenges in attracting prospective students through online platforms. In practice, promotional activities are often limited to the dissemination of institutional information without considering audience engagement, content personalization, or persuasive communication strategies (Maresh, 2021; Suyono et al., 2022). As a result, digital campaigns frequently fail to generate meaningful interactions and sustained interest among prospective students. The increasing competition among higher education institutions further intensifies this problem, as students are exposed to numerous educational alternatives through digital media (Maulana et al., 2025; Musvipwa et al., 2023). Field observations suggest that institutions with weak digital marketing strategies experience lower levels of student engagement and enrollment interest, indicating a significant gap between promotional efforts and actual enrollment outcomes.

Numerous scholars have investigated the relationship between digital marketing and consumer behavior. Kudry et al. (2023) and Kumar et al. (2021) emphasized that effective digital communication can influence consumer attitudes and purchasing decisions through value-based messaging. Li et al. (2024), Aanandha et al. (2023), and Despres et al. (2020) argued that digital marketing effectiveness depends on content relevance, consistency, and audience engagement. Almeida et al. (2024) and Tal et al. (2024) highlighted the role of social media interactions in strengthening consumer trust and loyalty, while Prado (2024) and Huhn et al. (2022) found that digital content quality significantly affects customer interest and decision-making processes. Although these studies provide valuable insights, most focus on commercial sectors or general educational contexts. Limited research specifically examines Islamic higher education institutions while simultaneously analyzing the interconnected relationship among digital marketing effectiveness, student interest, and enrollment decisions.

The novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive examination of digital marketing effectiveness within the context of Islamic higher education by positioning student interest as a mediating variable. Unlike previous studies that primarily investigate direct relationships between marketing activities and decision outcomes, this research explores both direct and indirect effects through a unified analytical framework (Lavoye et al., 2022; Popkin et al., 2022). Furthermore, the study incorporates dimensions that reflect the distinctive characteristics of Islamic higher education institutions, including credibility, religious values, trustworthiness, and institutional image. This contextual approach contributes to the advancement of

educational marketing literature by extending existing theoretical models beyond commercial settings. Therefore, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of how digital marketing mechanisms operate within faith-based educational environments.

Based on the identified gaps, several research problems emerge that require empirical investigation. First, it remains unclear to what extent digital marketing effectiveness influences prospective students' interest in enrolling in Islamic higher education institutions. Second, the direct impact of digital marketing effectiveness on enrollment decisions has not been sufficiently examined within this context. Third, the mediating role of student interest in connecting digital marketing effectiveness and enrollment decisions remains underexplored. These unresolved issues are particularly important because enrollment decisions are increasingly shaped by digital interactions and online information sources. Addressing these research problems is expected to provide evidence-based insights that can assist institutions in developing more effective digital marketing strategies to attract and retain prospective students.

This study argues that effective digital marketing positively influences enrollment decisions both directly and indirectly through student interest. High-quality digital content characterized by relevance, credibility, interactivity, and consistency is expected to create favorable perceptions, strengthen trust, and increase student engagement with institutional information. Increased engagement subsequently stimulates student interest, which serves as an important psychological mechanism influencing enrollment decisions. The originality of this research lies in integrating digital marketing effectiveness, student interest, and enrollment decisions within a single conceptual model tailored to Islamic higher education. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to educational marketing literature and practically to institutional policy development by providing strategic guidance for improving digital marketing effectiveness in attracting prospective students.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design (Kekeya, 2023). The case study design was selected because the research sought to gain an in-depth understanding of how digital marketing practices influence student interest and enrollment decisions within a specific institutional context. A qualitative approach enables researchers to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations regarding digital marketing activities conducted by Islamic higher education institutions. Through this design, the study examined the interaction between digital marketing effectiveness, student interest, and enrollment decisions as socially constructed phenomena that require contextual interpretation. The qualitative case study approach was considered appropriate because it facilitates a comprehensive understanding of real-life situations and allows researchers to investigate complex processes occurring within a particular educational setting.

The research was conducted at Kebun Sari Islamic Boarding School, located in Gung Kesan, Karang Penang, Sampang, Indonesia. This location was selected because the institution has actively utilized digital marketing platforms, including social media and online promotional content, to attract prospective students. The institution

represents an Islamic educational environment that is adapting to digital transformation while maintaining its religious identity. The study involved 15 informants selected through purposive sampling. The informants consisted of four institutional administrators responsible for strategic decision-making, three members of the marketing and social media team, five prospective students who had interacted with the institution's digital content before enrollment, and three parents involved in educational decision-making processes. These informants were chosen because they possessed direct knowledge and experience relevant to the research objectives.

Data were collected using multiple techniques to obtain comprehensive and credible information (Cole, 2024). First, document analysis was conducted to examine institutional reports, promotional materials, website content, and social media publications related to student recruitment activities. Second, non-participant observation was carried out to observe the characteristics of digital marketing content, including content themes, posting frequency, audience engagement, and communication strategies. Third, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with all informants using an interview guide developed based on the research objectives. The interviews explored participants' perceptions of digital marketing effectiveness, factors influencing student interest, and considerations underlying enrollment decisions. The combination of these techniques enabled the collection of rich and contextual data while facilitating triangulation across different sources of evidence.

Data analysis followed the interactive qualitative analysis model consisting of data condensation, data reduction, data display, and data verification (Lee et al., 2024). Data condensation was conducted by selecting, focusing, and organizing relevant information obtained from interviews, observations, and documents. Data reduction involved categorizing data into themes related to digital marketing effectiveness, student interest, and enrollment decisions. Subsequently, data display was performed through narrative descriptions, thematic matrices, and conceptual mapping to facilitate interpretation of patterns and relationships among categories. The final stage was data verification, which involved continuously reviewing findings, comparing evidence from different sources, and drawing conclusions based on recurring patterns. This analytical process enabled the development of a comprehensive understanding of the studied phenomenon.

To ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the findings, several validation strategies were employed (Fadli, 2021). Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from administrators, marketing staff, prospective students, parents, and institutional documents. Method triangulation was applied through the integration of interviews, observations, and document analysis. Member checking was also conducted by returning interview summaries and preliminary findings to selected informants for confirmation and clarification. In addition, peer debriefing was carried out through discussions with fellow researchers to evaluate the consistency and credibility of interpretations. These procedures were implemented to enhance the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the research findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The findings of this study reveal the interconnected relationship between digital content effectiveness, student interest, perceptions, trust, and enrollment decisions in Islamic educational institutions. The results demonstrate that digital marketing activities influence not only audience attention but also the psychological and behavioral processes that lead to institutional selection. These findings provide a comprehensive understanding of how digital communication strategies contribute to attracting prospective students and shaping educational decision-making processes.

The Influence of Interest on the Decision to Choose an Educational Institution

Interest in this study refers to the psychological tendency of prospective students and parents to seek further information, establish communication with the institution, and demonstrate a willingness to consider the institution before making an enrollment decision. In the field, interest was identified through participants' narratives regarding their initial attraction to the institution, subsequent information-seeking behavior, and the decision-making process that led to enrollment. Interest functioned as an intermediate stage between exposure to digital information and the final decision to choose the institution. Therefore, interest was operationally understood as a progressive process that develops from attention and curiosity into a stronger commitment to select the institution as a place of education.

The interview findings revealed that interest played an important role in encouraging enrollment decisions. One parent stated, "At first I only watched the activities posted on social media, but after searching for more information and visiting the boarding school, I became convinced to register my child." Another parent explained, "The content attracted my attention because it showed discipline, religious activities, and a positive learning environment. That made me interested in knowing more." These statements indicate that interest emerged gradually after repeated exposure to information. The researcher interpreted that initial attraction alone was insufficient to generate enrollment decisions. Instead, interest motivated participants to seek additional information and evaluate the institution more carefully before making a final choice.

A similar pattern was found among prospective students. One student explained, "I became interested after seeing videos of student activities because the environment looked active and supportive." Another student stated, "I followed the institution's social media account for several months before deciding that this was the place where I wanted to study." These findings suggest that interest developed through a process of continuous engagement with institutional information. The researcher interpreted that the decision to enroll was not a spontaneous action but rather the result of accumulated impressions and experiences obtained through ongoing exposure to information. Interest therefore functioned as a motivational factor that encouraged prospective students to move from curiosity toward actual enrollment decisions.

Field observations showed that prospective students with higher levels of interest displayed more active behaviors than those with lower levels of interest. Interested individuals frequently interacted with the institution’s social media accounts, requested additional information, communicated with administrators, and visited the boarding school directly. These actions reflected a transition from passive information consumption to active exploration. The researcher interpreted that increasing levels of interest were consistently accompanied by stronger behavioral engagement. Restating the findings, interest served as a bridge connecting information exposure and enrollment decisions. Individuals who demonstrated greater interest were more likely to undertake follow-up actions that eventually resulted in selecting the institution.

The data revealed a consistent pattern linking interest levels and enrollment decisions. Participants with low interest tended to limit their engagement to viewing content without taking further action. Moderate interest was characterized by information-seeking behavior but not necessarily by commitment. High interest was associated with direct communication and institutional visits, while very high interest frequently resulted in enrollment decisions. This pattern indicates that interest develops through several stages before influencing actual behavior. Furthermore, family involvement strengthened or weakened the progression of interest depending on the perceived suitability of the institution. Overall, the findings demonstrate that interest is a critical factor shaping enrollment decisions and functions as an important mechanism connecting information exposure with institutional choice.

The Effectiveness of Digital Content in Increasing the Interest of Prospective Students

Digital content effectiveness in this study refers to the ability of digital promotional materials to attract attention, communicate information clearly, maintain audience engagement, and stimulate interest among prospective students and parents. Operationally, effectiveness was assessed using indicators such as visual appeal, information clarity, message relevance, publication consistency, and audience engagement. The focus of observation was directed toward the institution’s social media activities, including content uploads, audience engagement patterns, and communication practices. Thus, digital content effectiveness was understood as the extent to which online promotional content succeeded in generating audience attention and encouraging further interest in the institution.

Table 1. Observation Results on Digital Content Effectiveness

Observation Findings		Indicator	Observation Findings
Student activity videos received higher audience engagement than text-based posts	higher	Visual Appeal	Student activity videos received higher audience engagement than text-based posts
Educational program information was delivered through concise and understandable captions	was and	Information Clarity	Educational program information was delivered through concise and understandable captions

Content frequently highlighted issues relevant to parents and prospective students	Message Relevance	Content frequently highlighted issues relevant to parents and prospective students
Posts were uploaded regularly throughout the observation period	Publication Consistency	Posts were uploaded regularly throughout the observation period
Administrators actively responded to comments and messages	Interactivity	Administrators actively responded to comments and messages

The observation data indicate that digital content effectiveness was strongly influenced by the combination of visual quality, information relevance, publication consistency, and audience interaction. Posts featuring authentic student activities generated higher engagement than purely informational content. Regular uploads helped maintain audience awareness, while active communication by administrators increased responsiveness and audience participation. The researcher interpreted that effective digital content was not determined by a single factor but by the integration of several complementary elements. Restating these findings, digital content became effective when it successfully attracted attention, sustained audience engagement, and encouraged prospective students and parents to explore the institution further through direct interaction and information seeking.

The observed data demonstrate a clear pattern between content quality and audience interest. Content with strong visual elements consistently generated higher engagement than content lacking visual appeal. Similarly, content aligned with audience needs attracted greater attention and interaction. Another recurring pattern involved the role of consistency, where regular publication maintained audience awareness over time. Interactivity also emerged as an important factor because responsive communication strengthened audience engagement and encouraged continued participation. These findings suggest that digital content effectiveness is multidimensional and results from the interaction of several supporting factors. Consequently, a structured and sustained digital marketing strategy appears essential for increasing prospective students' interest in the institution.

The Role of Digital Content in Shaping Perceptions and Trust

The role of digital content in shaping perceptions and trust refers to the capacity of institutional digital materials to influence how prospective students and parents evaluate the credibility, quality, and reliability of the institution. Operationally, perceptions were formed through exposure to information regarding educational programs, student activities, institutional values, and learning environments. Trust emerged when the information presented appeared authentic, consistent, transparent, and aligned with actual institutional conditions. In this study, digital content functioned not only as a communication medium but also as an instrument for establishing institutional image and credibility among audiences.

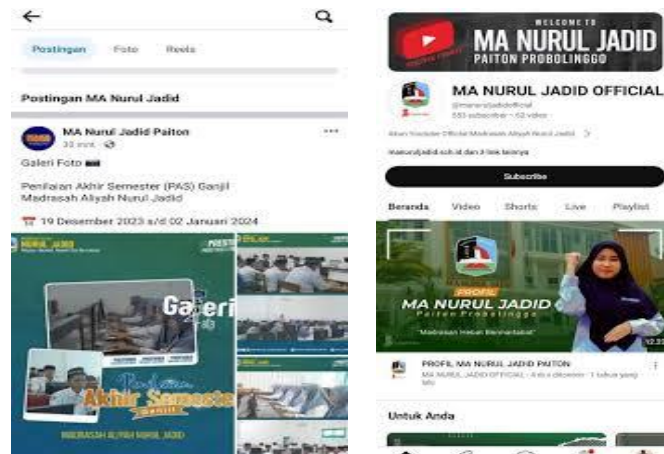


Figure 1. Student activity videos published on social media

Document analysis showed that the institution consistently published content portraying authentic student activities, educational programs, religious practices, and testimonials from parents. The reviewed documents demonstrated strong alignment between promotional messages and the institution's actual environment. Visual materials emphasized transparency by presenting real situations rather than highly edited promotional representations. The researcher interpreted that this authenticity contributed significantly to the development of positive perceptions among audiences. Furthermore, testimonials and recurring documentation of institutional activities provided additional evidence supporting the credibility of the information presented. As a result, digital content served as an important mechanism for strengthening public confidence in the institution.

The findings indicate that trust was primarily built through consistency, authenticity, and transparency in digital communication. Audiences developed positive perceptions when the information presented matched their expectations and appeared reliable. Restating the findings, digital content contributed to trust formation by reducing uncertainty and providing audiences with a realistic understanding of institutional life. The alignment between online representations and actual institutional conditions strengthened confidence among prospective students and parents. Therefore, digital content functioned not only as a promotional tool but also as a means of establishing long-term credibility and fostering positive institutional perceptions.

The data reveal a recurring pattern linking authenticity, consistency, and trust formation. Content documenting real educational activities generated stronger positive perceptions than purely promotional materials. Testimonials reinforced trust by providing social evidence from individuals with direct experience of the institution. Consistent publication of content strengthened audience familiarity and confidence over time. Another notable pattern was that trust developed gradually through repeated exposure to reliable information rather than through a single interaction. These findings suggest that perception and trust are cumulative outcomes resulting from continuous communication efforts. Consequently, transparent and reality-based digital content plays a crucial role in developing a positive institutional image and maintaining audience confidence.

Discussion

The findings indicate that student interest plays a crucial role in influencing enrollment decisions. The data show that interest develops gradually through exposure to institutional information, information-seeking behavior, direct interaction, and eventual commitment to enroll. This finding is consistent with consumer behavior theories that position interest as an intermediate stage between awareness and decision-making. Previous studies have argued that individuals rarely make important decisions immediately after receiving information; instead, they pass through stages of attention, interest, evaluation, and action (Almansour et al., 2023; Zgonnikov et al., 2022). The present study supports this perspective by demonstrating that prospective students and parents first develop curiosity before engaging in deeper exploration of the institution. However, unlike many studies that focus primarily on commercial consumer decisions, this research highlights the importance of educational values, religious environments, and parental involvement in strengthening or weakening student interest (Shorman et al., 2022; Mogaji et al., 2021). Theoretically, these findings reinforce the relevance of decision-making models in educational marketing contexts. Practically, they suggest that educational institutions should focus on maintaining prospective students' interest throughout the recruitment process rather than relying solely on initial promotional exposure.

The findings also reveal that the effectiveness of digital content significantly contributes to increasing prospective students' interest. Content characterized by visual attractiveness, clear information, message relevance, publication consistency, and active interaction generated stronger audience engagement (Almeida et al., 2024; Kurniawan et al., 2024). These findings align with previous research emphasizing that effective digital marketing depends on content quality and audience-centered communication. Studies in digital marketing have consistently demonstrated that visually appealing and informative content encourages greater engagement and positive audience responses (Hong et al., 2022; Salendra et al., 2024). The current findings support these conclusions while extending them into the context of Islamic educational institutions. The observed emphasis on authentic student activities and educational experiences suggests that audiences respond more positively to realistic representations than to purely promotional messages. Practically, educational institutions should prioritize content strategies that combine visual quality, informative messages, and consistent communication to sustain audience interest.

Another important finding concerns the role of digital content in shaping perceptions and trust. The study demonstrates that audiences develop trust when digital content appears authentic, transparent, and consistent with actual institutional conditions. This finding corresponds with previous literature suggesting that trust emerges when organizations provide reliable and credible information over time. Earlier studies have highlighted transparency and authenticity as essential elements in digital communication because audiences increasingly evaluate the credibility of online information before making decisions (Fornaia et al., 2022; Miao et al., 2024). The current research confirms these arguments by showing that documentation of real activities, testimonials, and institutional achievements contributes to positive perceptions and

stronger trust among prospective students and parents. At the theoretical level, these findings support trust formation theories that emphasize repeated exposure to credible information as a foundation for confidence development (Chaika, 2025; Jayalath et al., 2025).

The findings further suggest that digital content effectiveness, perception, trust, and interest operate as interconnected processes rather than isolated variables. Effective content attracts attention, which contributes to the formation of positive perceptions. Positive perceptions then foster trust, while trust strengthens interest and encourages enrollment decisions. This integrated process supports relationship marketing perspectives that emphasize long-term audience engagement rather than short-term promotional outcomes. Previous studies often examine these variables separately, focusing either on digital marketing effectiveness, consumer trust, or decision-making behavior. In contrast, the present findings demonstrate how these elements interact within a single educational marketing framework. Theoretically, this contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of educational marketing by illustrating the sequential relationship between communication effectiveness, psychological responses, and behavioral outcomes. Practically, institutions should develop holistic digital marketing strategies that address all stages of audience engagement, from awareness creation to trust building and decision support.

Overall, the findings indicate that successful digital marketing in Islamic educational institutions depends on the institution's ability to create meaningful, authentic, and consistent communication experiences. The results differ from some traditional promotional approaches that focus primarily on information dissemination because they highlight the importance of audience engagement, trust development, and emotional connection. The study contributes theoretically by extending educational marketing literature through the integration of digital content effectiveness, trust formation, student interest, and enrollment decisions within a unified framework. Furthermore, it contributes practical insights for educational managers, marketing teams, and policymakers seeking to improve student recruitment strategies. By focusing on authentic content, transparent communication, and sustained interaction, Islamic educational institutions can strengthen their competitive position and increase their ability to attract prospective students in an increasingly digitalized educational environment.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that digital marketing effectiveness plays an important role in shaping enrollment decisions in Islamic higher education through the mediating role of student interest. The findings reveal that effective digital content characterized by authenticity, clarity, consistency, relevance, and interactivity attracts attention, builds trust, increases student interest, and encourages enrollment decisions. The main lesson is that successful educational marketing requires not only information dissemination but also meaningful engagement with prospective students and parents. This study contributes to the educational marketing literature by presenting an integrated framework linking digital content effectiveness, trust, student interest, and

enrollment decisions within an Islamic educational context. However, the study is limited to a single institution and a small number of informants. Future research should involve broader settings, larger samples, and mixed-method approaches to enhance the generalizability and depth of findings.

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