SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION BRAND AWARENESS, IMAGE, AND ATTITUDE

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Abstract: This empirical study seeks to elucidate the impact of social media marketing (SMM) on forming brand awareness, brand image, and brand attitude within the educational institution context. In pursuit of these objectives, data were collected through a survey involving 149 respondents comprising current university students and graduates in North Sulawesi. The analysis was conducted utilizing Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with SmartPLS. The study's results disclose significant and positive relationships between SMM and brand attitude, brand awareness, and brand image. Furthermore, it was found that brand image significantly influences brand attitude, while brand awareness plays a pivotal role in shaping the brand image. However, it was observed that brand awareness did not exhibit a significant positive effect on brand attitude. These findings offer valuable insights for educational administrators, underscoring the central role of social media in fortifying institutional branding. By comprehending the intricate interplay of these variables, institutions can strategically harness social media platforms to augment brand awareness, cultivate a positive brand image, and ultimately foster a favorable brand attitude. This understanding is critical for their marketing and branding efforts within an increasingly digital and globalized educational landscape.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Education Institution Brand Awareness, Brand Image, Brand Attitude

INTRODUCTION

Alongside the world's population expansion, there has been a rapid advancement in technology. Introducing computers and other electronic media, such as smartphones and internet networks, is one example of this innovation. Over time, this transformative wave of technological advancement has catalyzed significant shifts in human behavior, encompassing modes of interaction and communication to the dynamics of interpersonal relationships (Hwang et al., 2021). The ubiquitous presence of social media platforms has redefined the landscape of human connectivity, providing a channel through which individuals can communicate, interact, and establish relationships with others (Mandagi & Aseng, 2021).

In its contemporary form, social media has emerged as the preeminent online platform, facilitating seamless interaction, communication, and information exchange (Poluan et al., 2022). It encompasses diverse elements, including blogs, social networks, wikis, forums, and virtual worlds, offering users the means to actively participate, share content, and create digital narratives (Kim & Ko, 2012). In the modern milieu, social media has transcended being merely a trend; it has become a fundamental aspect of human life, influencing and shaping individual mindsets globally (Sijabat et al., 2022). The utilization of social media offers many advantages, foremost among them being its potential as a medium for marketing communication due to its ubiquitous accessibility. Additionally, data derived from social media can serve as a valuable resource for enhancing the innovation, execution, and evaluation of marketing strategies, offering cost-saving benefits compared to traditional marketing approaches.

The evolution of marketing practices in the educational sector mirrors the broader trends driven by globalization and the innovative marketing strategies employed by enterprises via social media (Kainde & Mandagi, 2023). In this era of globalization, quality is paramount, prompting individuals to scrutinize and demand high-quality educational institutions for their children. Consequently, educational institutions offering services must adapt and implement strategic marketing approaches to attract and retain their user base, ensuring the sustainability of their educational services. The educational landscape has undergone significant changes in recent years, with institutions increasingly incorporating digital platforms and social media marketing (SMM) as tools to engage with their target audience (Kainde & Mandagi, 2023). Understanding the implications of these shifts is vital to adapt to the evolving educational landscape effectively. Moreover, educational institutions, like businesses, possess brand identities that are pivotal in attracting students, faculty, and support from the community (Walean et al., 2023). SMM serves as a potent medium that can either enhance

or diminish an institution's brand image, making it essential to determine the precise impact of SMM on brand perception and reputation (Sijabat et al., 2022; Mandagi & Sondakh, 2022).

The present study sets the context of exploration in educational institutions, especially private universities. As educational institutions play a crucial role in society, ensuring long-term sustainability is paramount. SMM can be part of a comprehensive branding and marketing strategy that supports an institution's sustainability (Wulus et al., 2022). Furthermore, SMM plays a vital role in enhancing the brand of private educational institutions by expanding their reach, building brand awareness, fostering engagement, showcasing excellence, influencing decision-making, targeting specific demographics, nurturing alumni relations, enabling real-time feedback and improvement, facilitating crisis management, and providing a competitive edge in the educational landscape. SMM is a dynamic and essential tool for institutions to connect with their audience, shape their image, and remain competitive and influential in the educational sector (Waworuntu et al., 2022).

Despite existing research on social media marketing, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the role of social media in enhancing the brand image of educational institutions. Consequently, this study aims to elucidate the impact of social media as a marketing tool in shaping the brand identity of higher education institutions. Specifically, the research objectives are to investigate the influence of social media marketing on educational institutions' brand awareness, brand image, and brand attitude. Additionally, the study seeks to explore the relationships between brand awareness and brand image, as well as brand awareness and brand attitude in the context of educational institutions. Through a comprehensive examination of these objectives, the research intends to contribute valuable insights to understanding how social media can be strategically employed to positively impact educational institutions' branding and marketing efforts in an increasingly digital and globalized landscape.

In the contemporary era, marked by the pivotal role of data-driven decision-making in ensuring organizational success, research at the confluence of Social Media Marketing (SMM) and educational institution branding stands as highly pertinent. This research is recognized as a linchpin for educational institutions, empowering them to adopt evidence-based strategies that steer their marketing endeavors. Such an approach enables institutions to harmonize their marketing strategies with their branding objectives, equipping them with the precision and relevance needed to navigate the fiercely competitive and rapidly evolving educational landscape. Importantly, this research accrues benefits not only to the institutions themselves but also extends its reach to students, faculty, and the broader community they serve.

A well-established theory in brand management posits that a strategic SMM presence can sculpt an institution's narrative, influence its perceived qualities, and convey its values and strengths (Mandagi & Aseng, 2021; Waworuntu et al., 2022; Warbung et al., 2023; Wulus et al., 2022; Poluan et al., 2022). This theory underscores the pivotal role of a robust and positive brand image in attracting and retaining students and stakeholders. Empirical studies within branding and marketing consistently corroborate this hypothesis, revealing that institutions with engaging and active social media profiles tend to elicit more favorable brand image perceptions among their audiences.

Furthermore, this research aligns with attitude formation theory, which posits that social media content can influence the attitudes and sentiments of the audience. It suggests that a well-managed social media presence, consistently delivering positive messages and engaging the audience, can foster more favorable brand attitudes (Sijabat et al., 2022; Kainde & Mandagi, 2023). Empirical studies within social media marketing and branding consistently reinforce this hypothesis, demonstrating that positive interactions and content on social media platforms are associated with more positive brand attitudes among the audience. Based on this robust foundation, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1a: SMM positively and significantly affects the brand awareness of educational institutions.

H1b: SMM positively and significantly affects the brand image of educational institutions.

H1c: SMM positively and significantly affects the brand attitude of educational institutions.

Brand awareness refers to the extent to which a target audience recognizes and recalls a brand. In educational institutions, brand image encompasses the perceptions and associations stakeholders hold about the institution. According to brand equity theory, brand awareness is a key component of brand equity, which includes brand image. This theory posits that the more aware people are of a brand, the more likely they are to have a positive image of it. Cognitive psychology also plays a role, suggesting that repeated exposure to a brand (i.e., high brand awareness) can lead to positive associations and perceptions. This psychological phenomenon, the mere exposure effect, can positively influence the brand image (Abin et al., 2022).

Brand awareness constitutes a fundamental pillar within the marketing strategy of educational institutions, playing a pivotal role in configuring the institution's overarching brand image (Chen, 2019). In the contemporary landscape of competitive academia, establishing a robust brand presence is paramount for attracting and retaining students, faculty members, and benefactors. Brand awareness, at its essence, embodies the extent to which a designated audience acknowledges and recollects an institution's name, logo, or other distinctive elements intrinsically tied to it (Abin et al.,

2022). When vigilantly nurtured and managed, brand awareness can profoundly influence an educational institution's reputation, credibility, and enduring prosperity (Kainde & Mandagi, 2022).

Various studies have explored the relationship between brand awareness and brand image in different contexts, including educational institutions. For instance, research conducted by Febriyantoro (2020) has shown that higher brand awareness is linked to a more favorable brand image. In the context of education, a study by Kainde and Mandagi (2022) found that universities with higher brand awareness tended to be perceived more positively by prospective students. Building upon this premise, we formulated the following hypothesis:

H2a: Brand awareness positively and significantly affects the brand image of educational institutions.

Brand attitude refers to the overall evaluation and sentiment that individuals have toward a brand, and it is influenced by various factors, with brand awareness being a significant one (Foroudi et al., 2021). Repeated exposure to a brand through high brand awareness can lead to affective conditioning, where positive emotions associated with the brand lead to more positive attitudes (Hwang et al., 2021). This conditioning occurs as individuals associate the brand with the positive experiences or emotions they've encountered in connection with the brand. Research in marketing and consumer behavior has demonstrated the impact of brand awareness on brand attitude. For example, a study by Foroudi (2019) found that brand awareness positively influenced brand attitude. In education, empirical studies have shown that institutions with higher brand awareness tend to have more favorable brand attitudes among students and alumni (Kainde & Mandagi, 2022). These theoretical frameworks and empirical findings collectively substantiate the following hypothesis:

H2b: Brand awareness positively and significantly affects the brand attitude of educational institutions.

The brand image of educational institutions holds immense significance in shaping the perceptions and attitudes of students, parents, alumni, faculty, and the broader community (Shehzadi et al., 2021). A strong and positive brand image sets institutions apart in an increasingly competitive educational landscape and influences the overall brand attitude that stakeholders hold. This relationship between brand image and brand attitude is a pivotal aspect of institutional marketing and strategic positioning, as it can profoundly impact an institution's ability to attract and retain students, secure funding, and foster a sense of loyalty and pride among alumni (Kainde & Mandagi, 2022).

Attribution theory suggests that individuals make inferences about the causes of events, including the reputation of educational institutions (Graham, 2020). This is particularly applicable in

the context of educational institutions. A strong and positive brand image is often attributed to the institution's qualities, such as academic excellence, faculty expertise, and a supportive learning environment (Shehzadi et al., 2021). These attributions can foster a positive brand attitude. Consequently, we formulated the following hypothesis:

H3: Brand image positively and significantly affects the brand attitude of educational institutions.

The connection between the variables under investigation and the research hypotheses is succinctly encapsulated in the diagram presented in Figure 1 below. This graphical representation is an essential visual aid to elucidate the study's conceptual framework, illustrating the interdependence between the research variables and the formulated research hypotheses. This figure serves as a pivotal reference point for the ensuing discussion and highlights the systematic and methodical approach employed in the research, underscoring its scientific rigor and academic merit.
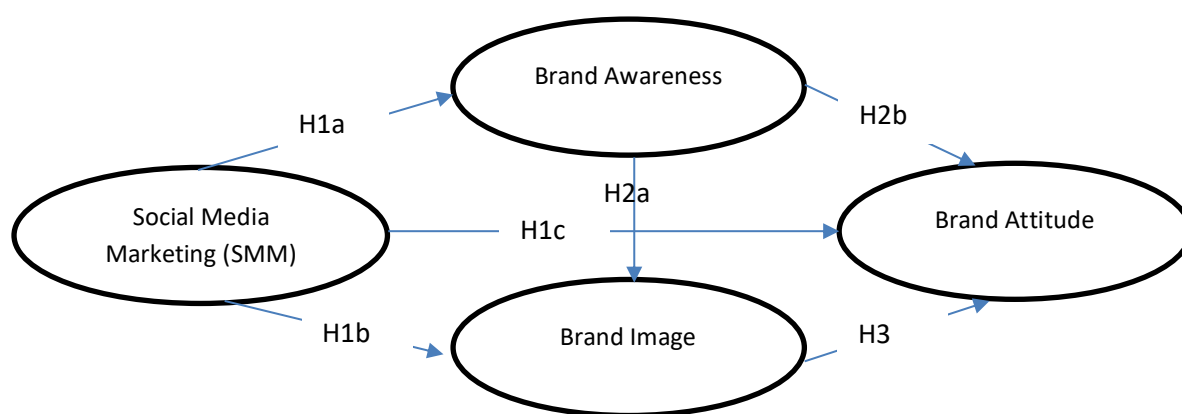

Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework

METHODS

Aligned with the research objectives, the chosen research design for this study is causal. The population in focus consists of individuals currently enrolled in various universities in North Sulawesi, Indonesia. The primary data collection method utilized in this study was an online survey administered through Google Forms, with 149 respondents participating. All variables were evaluated using multi-item scales primarily derived from existing research, with minor adjustments to suit the study's context. Social Media Marketing (SMM) was assessed using seven items from prior studies (Kim & Ko, 2012; Seo & Park, 2018). Brand awareness was gauged through five questions from Foroudi et al.'s research (2021). The measurement of brand image involved five statements adapted from the studies of Song et al. (2019) and McKercher et al. (2006). Similarly, the brand attitude was evaluated through five questions from Foroudi et al. (2021) and Hwang et al. (2021).

Data collection began with compiled and tabulated questionnaires meeting guidelines. Processed in spreadsheet software, data was exported for analysis in SPSS and SmartPLS 3.9. Initial scrutiny of demographic data used SPSS descriptive statistics. The central analysis involved SmartPLS structural equation modeling, starting with a measurement model assessment ensuring validity and reliability. A discriminant validity test followed, checking variable distinctness and addressing multicollinearity concerns. The final step assessed the inner model, examining the significance of path coefficients to reveal relationships between variables in line with research hypotheses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 briefly presents the demographic composition of the participants involved in this study, encompassing 149 respondents. The dataset predominantly featured female respondents, comprising 70.5% of the total, while male respondents accounted for 29.5%. This gender distribution offers valuable insights into the research sample. The age group of 15-20 constituted 24.2% of the total sample, making it the largest segment among the respondents. Following closely, the 20-25 age group represented a substantial 75.8% of the entire respondent pool. Furthermore, it is worth noting that 70.5% of these individuals identified as female, highlighting the prevalence of women who actively engage with social media platforms in this demographic group.

Table 1. Demographic Data of Respondents

Variable	Level	n	%
Gender	Male	44	30
	Female	105	70
Age group	15-20	36	24
	20-25	113	76

Measurement Model

The objective of measurement model analysis is to assess the validity and reliability of each variable under investigation in this study, including social media marketing, brand awareness, brand image, and brand attitude. The outcomes of the measurement model assessment were obtained through the application of the Partial Least Square (PLS) method, facilitated by using SmartPLS 3.2 statistical software, as depicted in Figure 2.
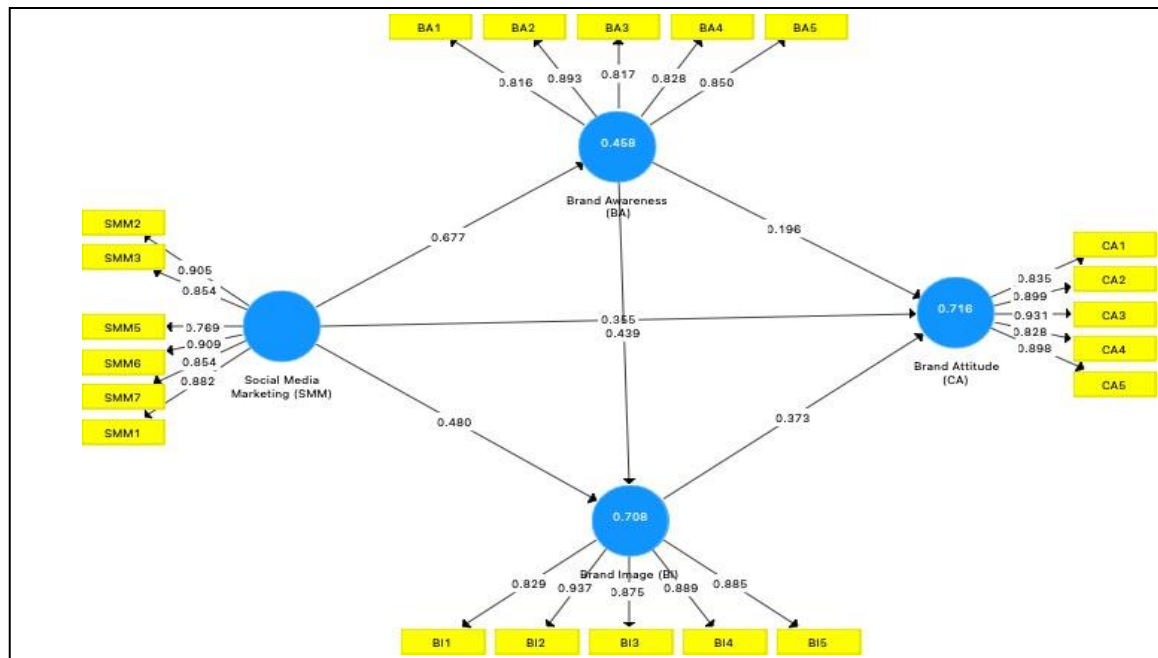
Figure 2. Measurement Model Testing Results (Outer Model)

Table 2. Factor Measurement Model

Variable	Indicator	Factor Loading
Social Media Marketing	SM1	0.88
	SM2	0.91
	SM3	0.85
	SM5	0.77
	SM6	0.91
	SM7	0.85
Brand Awareness	BAw1	0.82
	BAw2	0.89
	BAw3	0.82
	BAw4	0.83
	BAw5	0.85
Brand Image	BIm1	0.83
	BIm2	0.94
	BIm3	0.88
	BIm4	0.89
	BIm5	0.89
Brand Attitude	BAt1	0.84
	BAt2	0.90
	BAt3	0.93
	BAt4	0.83
	BAt5	0.90

Furthermore, discriminant validity testing is an essential analytical procedure in this study. This testing evaluates the Fornell-Larcker Criterion and cross-loading to ensure the distinctiveness of the constructs under examination. The first facet of the discriminant validity test, the Fornell-Larcker Criterion, involves a comparison of the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct with the correlations between variables within the model. Discriminant validity is affirmed when the square root of the AVE for each construct surpasses the correlations between different constructs in the research model. This indicates that a given construct shares a greater proportion of variance with its associated indicators than with indicators from other constructs. The results of the validity test are presented in Table 3.

Table3. Fornell-Larcker Criterion Validity Test Results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Brand attitude (1)	**0.88**			
Brand Awareness (2)	0.72	**0.84**		
Brand Image (3)	0.80	0.76	**0.88**	
Social Media Marketing (4)	0.78	0.68	0.78	**0.86**

In assessing the reliability of variables in this study, a thorough examination was conducted, including the analysis of Cronbach's alpha (CA), composite reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values. As depicted in Table 4, all variables demonstrated robust reliability, with CA, rho_A, and CR values surpassing 0.70 and AVE values exceeding 0.50, signifying a satisfactory level of reliability.

Table 4. Result of the Reliability Test

	CA	rho_A	CR	AVE
Brand Attitude	0.926	0.927	0.944	0.773
Brand Awareness	0.897	0.902	0.924	0.708
Brand Image	0.930	0.933	0.947	0.781
Social Media Marketing	0.931	0.937	0.946	0.746

Structural Model

To address the research questions and test the hypotheses, the structural model was evaluated using the bootstrapping feature in SmartPLS. The findings of the structural model analysis are presented in Figure 3 and Table 5.
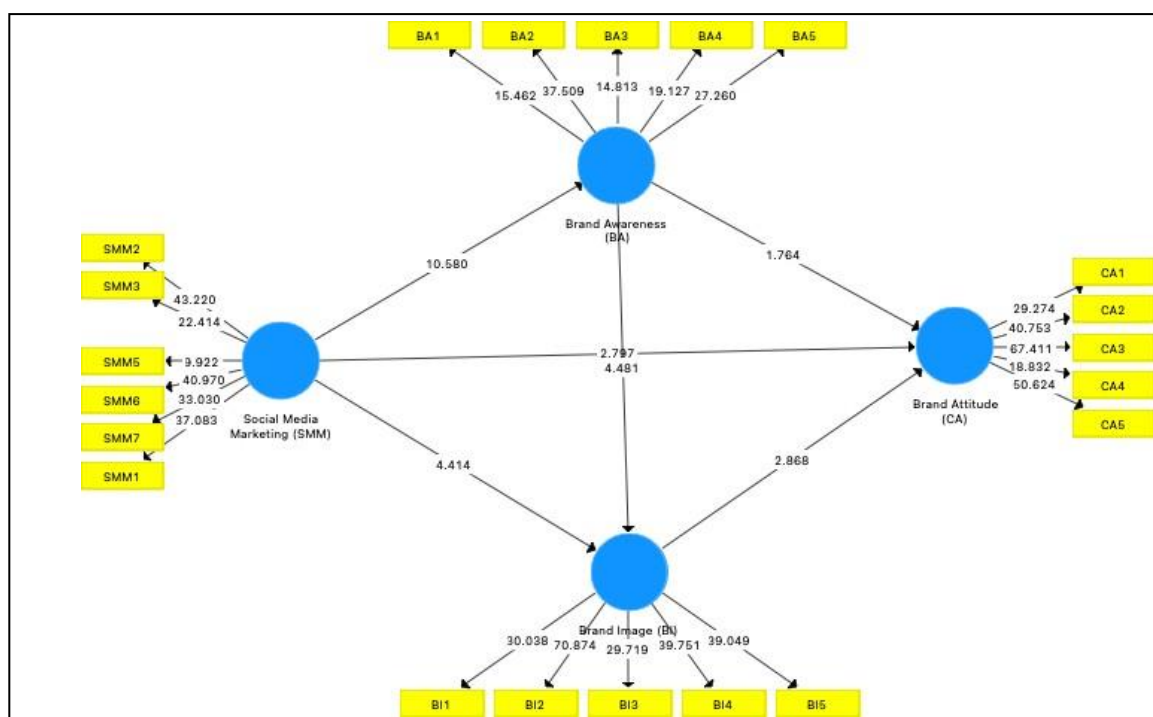
Figure 3. Structural Model

Table 5. Results of the Hypothesis Testing

Path Relation	Estimate	STDEV	P Values	Significant?
Brand Awareness -> Brand Attitude	1.76	0.111	**0.078**	No
Brand Awareness -> Brand Image	4.48	0.098	**0.000**	Yes
Brand Image -> Brand Attitude	2.87	0.130	**0.004**	Yes
SMM -> Brand Attitude	2.80	0.127	**0.005**	Yes
SMM -> Brand Awareness	10.58	0.064	**0.000**	Yes
SMM -> Brand Image	4.41	0.109	**0.000**	Yes

The findings from the structural model testing provide support for the hypotheses H1a-H1c, demonstrating the significant influence of social media marketing on brand attitude ($\beta = 2.80$, p-value < 0.05), brand awareness ($\beta = 10.58$, p-value < 0.01), and brand image ($\beta = 4.41$, p-value < 0.01). Concerning the second hypothesis, the analysis results offer corroborative evidence for H2b, indicating that brand awareness positively impacts the brand image ($\beta = 4.48$, p-value < 0.05). However, concerning H2a, the analysis reveals that the effect of brand awareness on brand attitude is not statistically significant. Moreover, a notable and favorable effect is observed in the relationship between brand image and brand attitude ($\beta = 2.87$, p-value < 0.05), thus confirming H3.

Subsequently, the Goodness of Fit model test is conducted to assess the accuracy of the data distribution from the sample, assumed to be the true statistical value. The assessment criteria for each indicator include SRMR value < 0.08, d_ULS > 2.00, d_G > 0.90, Chi-square < 5, and NFI value < 0.9. These criteria must be met to validate the appropriateness and fit of the model employed with the data in this study. The results of the Goodness of Fit model test are detailed in Table 6.

Table 6. *Goodness of Fit Model*

	Saturated Model	*Estimated Model*
SRMR	0.07	0.07
d_ULS	1.13	1.13
0 d_G	0.79	0.79
Chi-square	616.003	616.003
NFI	0.070	0.070

The analysis of goodness-of-fit indicators, as presented in Table 6, reveals that a majority of these metrics within the study, namely, SRMR = 0.070, d_ULS = 1.1, d_G = 0.78, and NFI = 0.07, collectively suggest that the structural model maintains a satisfactory level of unity with the dataset incorporated within the research sample.

Discussions

The findings from the structural model testing offer support for five out of six hypotheses in this study. Firstly, the results provide evidence of the influence of Social Media Marketing (SMM) on brand awareness. In the contemporary era, marked by the pivotal role of data-driven decision-making in ensuring organizational success, the significance of SMM in shaping educational institution branding is highly pertinent (Kainde & Mandagi, 2023; Mandagi & Aseng, 2021). Empirical studies in branding and marketing consistently corroborate this finding, indicating that institutions with engaging and active social media profiles tend to elicit more favorable brand awareness (Mandagi & Aseng, 2021; Waworuntu et al., 2022; Warbung et al., 2023; Wulus et al., 2022; Poluan et al., 2022). Furthermore, this result aligns with attitude formation theory, suggesting that social media content can influence audience attitudes and sentiments. It implies that a well-managed social media presence, consistently delivering positive messages and engaging the audience, can foster more favorable brand attitudes (Sijabat et al., 2022; Kainde & Mandagi, 2023).

Secondly, the analysis results offer corroborative evidence for the link between SMM and brand attitude. Brand attitude refers to the overall evaluation and sentiment that individuals have toward a brand, influenced by various factors, with brand awareness being significant (Foroudi et al., 2021). Repeated exposure to a brand through social media can lead to affective conditioning, where positive

emotions associated with the brand lead to more positive attitudes (Hwang et al., 2021). This conditioning occurs as individuals associate the brand with the positive experiences or emotions they've encountered in connection with the brand. Empirical studies in social media marketing and branding consistently reinforce this hypothesis, demonstrating that positive interactions and content on social media platforms are associated with more positive brand attitudes among the audience (Arghashi et al., 2021; Chu & Chen, 2019; Wang et al., 2019; Pace et al., 2017).

Thirdly, the results also document evidence of SMM's significant and positive effect on brand image. Social media marketing in educational institutions is vital in providing opportunities for institutions to establish and enhance their brand image. A consistent and engaging social media presence aids in shaping their reputation and conveying their unique value propositions to a broad audience (Constantinides & Zinck, 2011). This is critical for attracting students, faculty, and donors while differentiating institutions from their competitors. In educational institutions, brand image encompasses the perceptions and associations stakeholders hold about the institution. According to brand equity theory, brand awareness is a key component of brand equity, which includes brand image. This theory posits that the more aware people are of a brand, the more likely they are to have a positive image of it. Cognitive psychology also plays a role, suggesting that repeated exposure to a brand (i.e., high brand awareness) can lead to positive associations and perceptions. This psychological phenomenon, the mere exposure effect, can positively influence the brand image (Abin et al., 2022).

Fourthly, significant and positive influences were documented in the relationship between brand awareness and brand image. Brand awareness constitutes a fundamental pillar within the marketing strategy of educational institutions, playing a pivotal role in configuring the institution's overarching brand image (Chen, 2019). In the contemporary landscape of competitive academia, establishing a robust brand presence is paramount for attracting and retaining students, faculty members, and benefactors. Brand awareness, at its essence, embodies the extent to which a designated audience acknowledges and recollects an institution's name, logo, or other distinctive elements intrinsically tied to it (Abin et al., 2022). When vigilantly nurtured and managed, brand awareness can profoundly influence an educational institution's reputation, credibility, and enduring prosperity (Kainde & Mandagi, 2022). Various studies have explored the relationship between brand awareness and brand image in different contexts, including educational institutions. For instance, research conducted by Febriyantoro (2020) has shown that higher brand awareness is linked to a more favorable brand image. In the context of education, a study by Kainde and Mandagi (2022) found that universities with higher brand awareness tended to be perceived more positively by prospective students.

Finally, brand image was a significant predictor of brand attitude. This finding aligns with attribution theory, which suggests that individuals make inferences about the causes of events, including the reputation of educational institutions (Graham, 2020). This is particularly applicable in the context of educational institutions. A strong and positive brand image is often attributed to the institution's qualities, such as academic excellence, faculty expertise, and a supportive learning environment (Shehzadi et al., 2021). These attributions can foster a positive brand attitude.

CONCLUSION

The study aims to explain the effectiveness of social media platforms for marketing within educational institutions by analyzing the impact of four key variables: Social Media Marketing (SMM), brand awareness, brand image, and brand attitude. The results of the data analysis have revealed several noteworthy findings. Firstly, it is evident that SMM positively and significantly influences all three critical brand variables: brand awareness, brand image, and brand attitude. Additionally, the findings indicate that while brand awareness does not directly and statistically significantly influence brand attitude, it significantly impacts the brand image.

In addition to its substantive contributions, this study has certain limitations that should be considered for future research endeavors. Subsequent investigations should encompass a wider range of social media platforms and involve a larger and more diverse cohort of respondents. Furthermore, future studies may benefit from incorporating additional theoretical frameworks that offer diverse perspectives on the subject matter, as well as integrating a variety of variables that may exert influence in the context of educational marketing. This multifaceted approach will enhance the comprehensiveness and depth of scholarship.

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