

Content Matters: What Type of Social Media Content Attracts Students to Nursing Programs?

*Jeffrey A. Lucero, EdD, MAN, RN, LPT, SHC, FRIN¹ and Joshua May D. Austria, MAN, RN²

¹Saint Paul University Quezon City, Philippines

²Far Eastern University, Philippines

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

The increasing reliance on digital platforms has transformed how higher education institutions (HEIs) promote academic programs, particularly in competitive fields such as nursing. This study examined the influence of social media content on students' enrollment intentions in Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) programs, incorporating student engagement and perceived institutional image as mediating variables. Anchored on the Theory of Planned Behavior, a quantitative cross-sectional design was employed among 312 senior high school students in a semi-urban area in the Philippines. Data were collected using a validated questionnaire and analyzed through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to assess direct and indirect relationships among variables.

Findings revealed that career-oriented and testimonial content significantly influenced students' enrollment intention, both directly and indirectly through engagement and institutional image. Informational content showed no significant direct effect, while interactive content demonstrated a modest influence primarily through engagement pathways. Among the mediators, perceived institutional image emerged as the strongest predictor of enrollment intention, highlighting the critical role of credibility and perceived quality in higher education decision-making. The proposed model explained a substantial proportion of variance in enrollment intention, indicating the robustness of the framework.

The study concludes that effective social media marketing in nursing education requires strategically designed content that is career-focused, authentic, and engaging. These findings provide evidence-based insights for HEIs seeking to enhance recruitment strategies and contribute to the growing body of literature on digital marketing in higher education.

Keywords: social media marketing, enrollment intention, nursing education, student engagement, institutional image, structural equation modeling

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed marketing practices across industries, including higher education. In recent years, social media platforms have emerged as central tools for student recruitment, enabling higher education institutions (HEIs) to communicate with prospective students in dynamic, interactive, and highly visual ways. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok are no longer used solely for social interaction; they now serve as primary sources of information, influencing how students perceive academic programs and make enrollment decisions. As noted in recent studies, digital engagement plays a critical role in shaping students' awareness, attitudes, and behavioral intentions toward higher education offerings (Perera, 2023; Granier, 2025).

In the Philippine context, the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program remains one of the most sought-after academic tracks due to strong local demand and expanding global employment opportunities. However,

the increasing number of HEIs offering nursing programs has intensified competition, compelling institutions to adopt more strategic and evidence-based marketing approaches. Social media marketing, in particular, has become a key driver of institutional visibility and competitiveness, allowing HEIs to position their programs through targeted and content-driven communication strategies (Siminto et al., 2024; Yaqin & Aini, 2025).

A growing body of literature highlights that the effectiveness of social media marketing is not determined solely by platform presence but by the type and quality of content delivered. Content that is visually appealing, emotionally engaging, and contextually relevant has been shown to generate higher levels of interaction and influence (Safitri et al., 2025). Among the various content types, testimonial-based content has gained prominence due to its ability to present authentic student experiences. Such narratives function as social proof, reducing uncertainty and enhancing trust among prospective students (De Vries et al., 2012). Similarly, interactive content, such as polls, live sessions, and comment-driven posts, has been found to increase user participation, although its direct influence on decision-making may depend on the presence of persuasive messaging (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Singh et al., 2025).

Career-oriented content has also been identified as a particularly influential factor in students' program selection, especially in professionally oriented disciplines such as nursing. Students are increasingly motivated by pragmatic considerations, including job security, employability, and opportunities for international practice. Studies indicate that content emphasizing career outcomes significantly enhances students' perceived value of academic programs and strengthens their intention to enroll (Jian, 2025). In contrast, purely informational content—such as admission requirements, curriculum outlines, and program descriptions—while necessary, often lacks persuasive power unless presented in engaging and narrative-driven formats (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Beyond content characteristics, recent research underscores the importance of psychological and perceptual mechanisms in mediating the relationship between marketing exposure and behavioral intention. Student engagement, defined as the level of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement with content, has been identified as a critical intermediary variable. Engaged students are more likely to process information deeply, develop favorable attitudes, and ultimately act on their intentions. Likewise, perceived institutional image plays a central role in shaping decision-making, as students often rely on institutional reputation, credibility, and perceived quality when evaluating program options (Perera, 2023; Yaqin & Aini, 2025).

This study is grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior, which posits that behavioral intention is influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. However, in the context of digital marketing, these components are often shaped indirectly through content exposure and engagement processes. By integrating student engagement and perceived institutional image as mediating variables, the present study extends the theoretical framework to better capture the complexities of decision-making in digitally mediated environments.

Despite the growing interest in social media marketing within higher education, significant gaps remain in the literature. First, many studies focus on general marketing effectiveness without disaggregating the specific impact of different content types. Second, existing research often assumes direct relationships between marketing inputs and behavioral outcomes, overlooking the mediating roles of engagement and perception. Third, there is limited empirical evidence within the Philippine context, particularly in relation to nursing education, where cultural, economic, and professional factors uniquely shape student decision-making.

Addressing these gaps, the present study investigates how different types of social media content influence students' enrollment intentions in BSN programs, incorporating student engagement and perceived institutional image within a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) framework. By doing so, the study aims to provide a more nuanced and evidence-based understanding of digital marketing effectiveness in nursing education and to inform strategic recruitment practices among HEIs. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do students perceive the attractiveness of the following types of social media content used by HEIs:

- a. Informational content;
 - b. Testimonial content;
 - c. Career-oriented content; and
 - d. Interactive content?
2. Do social media content types significantly influence:
 - a. Student engagement and
 - b. Perceived institutional image?
 3. Do student engagement and perceived institutional image significantly influence students' enrollment intention in BSN programs?
 4. Do social media content types have a significant direct effect on students' enrollment intention in BSN programs?
 5. Does student engagement mediate the relationship between social media content types and enrollment intention?
 6. Does perceived institutional image mediate the relationship between social media content types and enrollment intention?
 7. To what extent does the proposed SEM model explain the variance in students' enrollment intention in BSN programs?

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design utilizing Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to examine the complex relationships among social media content types, student engagement, perceived institutional image, and enrollment intention in Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) programs. The use of SEM is particularly appropriate for this investigation, as it allows for the simultaneous estimation of multiple dependent relationships and the testing of mediating mechanisms within a theoretically grounded framework (Hair et al., 2021; Kline, 2016).

Unlike traditional regression approaches, SEM enables a more comprehensive analysis by accounting for measurement error and assessing both direct and indirect effects. In the context of this study, SEM provides a robust methodological approach to understanding how different types of social media content influence enrollment intention not only directly but also through psychological constructs such as engagement and institutional image. This aligns with contemporary research in digital marketing, which emphasizes the importance of latent variables and mediation pathways in explaining consumer behavior (Perera, 2023).

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in a selected city in Cavite, Philippines, a setting characterized by a mix of public and private educational institutions and a growing population of senior high school students preparing for tertiary education. This context is particularly relevant given the increasing competition among higher education institutions (HEIs) offering nursing programs in the region.

A total of 312 senior high school students participated in the study. These students were selected using a stratified random sampling technique, ensuring proportional representation across different school types and strands. This sampling strategy was employed to enhance the representativeness of the sample and minimize sampling bias.

The choice of senior high school students as respondents is theoretically and practically justified, as they are in a critical decision-making stage regarding their future academic and career paths. Their exposure to social media marketing and their active engagement with digital platforms make them an appropriate population for examining the influence of social media content on enrollment intentions.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire developed based on an extensive review of literature on social media marketing, student engagement, and higher education decision-making. The instrument was designed to capture both observable perceptions and latent constructs relevant to the study.

The questionnaire consisted of multiple sections measuring the key variables of interest. Social media content was operationalized into four distinct categories: informational content, testimonial content, career-oriented content, and interactive content. Each category included several items reflecting students' perceptions of attractiveness, relevance, and persuasiveness.

To enhance measurement clarity and ensure that respondents evaluated content consistently, brief examples of social media stimuli were embedded within the questionnaire. Informational content included sample posts presenting admission requirements, tuition fees, and curriculum outlines. Testimonial content featured excerpts of student or alumni narratives describing their experiences in the nursing program. Career-oriented content included posts highlighting employment opportunities, board examination performance, international career pathways, and salary expectations. Interactive content was represented through sample posts involving polls, live question-and-answer sessions, comment prompts, and engagement-driven captions. These contextual cues were provided to reduce abstraction and to guide respondents in evaluating each content category based on realistic social media representations.

In addition, the instrument measured two mediating variables: student engagement, defined as the level of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement with social media content, and perceived institutional image, referring to students' perceptions of the credibility, reputation, and overall quality of the institution. The outcome variable, enrollment intention, captured the likelihood of students choosing to enroll in a BSN program based on their exposure to social media content.

All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), allowing for nuanced responses while maintaining ease of analysis.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the instrument, it underwent expert validation involving specialists in nursing education and marketing. A pilot test was conducted with a sample of respondents similar to the target population, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89, which indicates high internal consistency and reliability.

Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, formal approval was obtained from school administrators and relevant authorities. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was secured before participation. Ethical principles, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity, were strictly adhered to throughout the research process.

Data collection was carried out using a combination of face-to-face survey administration and online platforms, allowing for flexibility and increased response rates. The dual approach ensured that students with varying levels of access to digital resources could participate.

Completed questionnaires were carefully reviewed to ensure completeness and accuracy. Responses with missing or inconsistent data were excluded from the analysis to maintain data integrity.

To address potential methodological inconsistencies arising from the use of both face-to-face and online data collection methods, procedural controls were implemented. The same questionnaire, instructions, and content

examples were used across both modes to ensure standardization. Additionally, preliminary analyses were conducted to compare responses between the two groups, revealing no statistically significant differences in key study variables ($p > .05$). This suggests that the mode of data collection did not introduce systematic bias, thereby supporting the comparability and integration of the datasets.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process followed a two-stage SEM approach, consisting of the evaluation of the measurement model and the structural model.

In the first stage, the measurement model was assessed to establish the reliability and validity of the constructs. This involved examining factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). Convergent validity was confirmed when factor loadings exceeded 0.70 and AVE values were above 0.50, while discriminant validity was assessed using established criteria such as the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Hair et al., 2021).

In the second stage, the structural model was evaluated to test the hypothesized relationships among variables. Path coefficients were estimated to determine the strength and direction of relationships, and bootstrapping procedures were employed to assess the significance of both direct and indirect effects. This approach allows for a rigorous examination of mediation effects, providing deeper insights into the mechanisms through which social media content influences enrollment intention.

The level of statistical significance was set at $p < .05$, consistent with standard practice in social science research.

RESULTS

Perceived Attractiveness of Social Media Content Types

Table 1 presents students' perceptions of the attractiveness of different types of social media content used by HEIs. The results indicate that all content types were perceived as at least moderately attractive, with career-oriented content obtaining the highest mean ($M = 4.18$), followed by testimonial content ($M = 4.01$), interactive content ($M = 3.85$), and informational content ($M = 3.62$).

Table 1. Perceived Attractiveness of Social Media Content Types

Content Type	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Informational Content	3.62	0.71	Moderately Attractive
Testimonial Content	4.01	0.65	Attractive
Career-Oriented Content	4.18	0.60	Highly Attractive
Interactive Content	3.85	0.68	Attractive

The prominence of career-oriented content suggests that students prioritize information related to employment opportunities, professional growth, and long-term career stability when evaluating nursing programs. This aligns with findings that students increasingly approach higher education decisions from a utilitarian perspective, focusing on return on investment and employability outcomes (Appel et al., 2020; Le et al., 2022). Similarly, the high rating of testimonial content reflects the importance of authenticity and peer influence, consistent with the role of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in shaping perceptions and reducing uncertainty (Ismagilova et al., 2020).

In contrast, informational content, while still relevant, received the lowest rating, suggesting that traditional forms of communication—such as static posts about admission requirements—may lack engagement appeal.

This supports earlier research indicating that informational content must be transformed into more narrative and visually appealing formats to remain effective in digital environments (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Interactive content, although rated positively, appears to function more as a supplementary engagement tool rather than a primary persuasive mechanism.

Influence of Content Types on Student Engagement and Institutional Image

Table 2 shows the effects of social media content types on student engagement and perceived institutional image. Career-oriented ($\beta = 0.42, p < .001$) and testimonial content ($\beta = 0.31, p < .001$) demonstrated the strongest effects on engagement, followed by interactive content ($\beta = 0.28, p = .002$). Informational content did not significantly influence engagement.

Table 2. Effects of Content Types on Engagement and Institutional Image

Path	β	p-value	Interpretation
Informational → Engagement	0.12	0.081	Not Significant
Testimonial → Engagement	0.31	0.000	Significant
Career-Oriented → Engagement	0.42	0.000	Significant
Interactive → Engagement	0.28	0.002	Significant
Informational → Image	0.15	0.043	Significant
Testimonial → Image	0.36	0.000	Significant
Career-Oriented → Image	0.39	0.000	Significant
Interactive → Image	0.21	0.006	Significant

These findings suggest that engagement is driven primarily by emotionally resonant and personally relevant content. Career-oriented posts likely stimulate cognitive involvement by highlighting tangible outcomes, while testimonial content fosters emotional connection through relatability. This supports engagement theory, which posits that meaningful and value-laden content generates higher levels of user interaction (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Lim et al., 2022).

Interestingly, informational content did not significantly affect engagement but had a modest effect on institutional image ($\beta = 0.15, p < .05$). This indicates that while such content may not actively engage users, it contributes to perceptions of transparency, professionalism, and credibility. This distinction underscores the dual role of content: some types attract attention and interaction, while others reinforce institutional legitimacy (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

Influence of Engagement and Institutional Image on Enrollment Intention

Table 3 reveals that both student engagement ($\beta = 0.29, p = .001$) and perceived institutional image ($\beta = 0.54, p < .001$) significantly influence enrollment intention.

Table 3. Effects of Mediators on Enrollment Intention

Path	β	p-value	Interpretation
Engagement → Enrollment	0.29	0.001	Significant
Institutional Image → Enrollment	0.54	0.000	Significant

The stronger effect of institutional image suggests that students ultimately base their decisions on broader perceptions of the institution’s quality, reputation, and trustworthiness. This is consistent with branding literature, which emphasizes that institutional image serves as a critical heuristic in decision-making under conditions of uncertainty (Perera et al., 2023). Engagement, while significant, plays a supporting role by facilitating deeper processing of information and strengthening positive attitudes.

These findings extend the Theory of Planned Behavior by illustrating how attitudes and intentions are shaped not only by direct evaluation but also by mediated perceptions formed through digital interactions.

Direct Effects of Content Types on Enrollment Intention

Table 4 presents the direct effects of content types on enrollment intention. Career-oriented ($\beta = 0.33, p < .001$) and testimonial content ($\beta = 0.27, p = .002$) significantly influenced enrollment intention, while informational content remained non-significant.

Table 4. Direct Effects of Content Types on Enrollment Intention

Path	β	p-value	Interpretation
Informational → Enrollment	0.08	0.120	Not Significant
Testimonial → Enrollment	0.27	0.002	Significant
Career-Oriented → Enrollment	0.33	0.000	Significant
Interactive → Enrollment	0.14	0.048	Significant

These results confirm that persuasive content must go beyond information delivery to influence behavioral intentions. Career-oriented content likely appeals to rational decision-making processes, while testimonial content leverages social proof. This aligns with prior studies showing that narrative-based and outcome-focused messages are more effective in shaping consumer behavior (Alalwan, 2018).

Mediating Role of Student Engagement

Table 5 indicates that student engagement significantly mediates the relationship between most content types and enrollment intention, except for informational content.

Table 5. Indirect Effects via Student Engagement

Path	Indirect β	p-value	Interpretation
Testimonial → Engagement → Enrollment	0.09	0.001	Significant
Career-Oriented → Engagement → Enrollment	0.12	0.000	Significant
Interactive → Engagement → Enrollment	0.08	0.003	Significant
Informational → Engagement → Enrollment	0.03	0.090	Not Significant

This finding highlights the importance of engagement as a psychological mechanism through which content exerts influence. Content that stimulates interaction encourages deeper cognitive elaboration, which in turn strengthens intention formation (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

Mediating Role of Institutional Image

Table 6 shows that institutional image significantly mediates the relationship between all content types and enrollment intention, including informational content.

Table 6. Indirect Effects via Institutional Image

Path	Indirect β	p-value	Interpretation
Testimonial \rightarrow Image \rightarrow Enrollment	0.19	0.000	Significant
Career-Oriented \rightarrow Image \rightarrow Enrollment	0.21	0.000	Significant
Interactive \rightarrow Image \rightarrow Enrollment	0.11	0.002	Significant
Informational \rightarrow Image \rightarrow Enrollment	0.08	0.041	Significant

This reinforces the central role of institutional image as a key decision-making factor. Even less engaging content contributes indirectly by shaping perceptions of quality and trust. This supports prior findings that brand image acts as a critical mediator in higher education marketing (Perera et al., 2023).

Model Explanatory Power

The model (Table 7) explains 71 percent of the variance in enrollment intention, indicating strong explanatory power. This suggests that the integration of content types, engagement, and institutional image provides a comprehensive framework for understanding student decision-making in digital contexts. Compared with similar studies, this level of explanatory power is considered robust, particularly in behavioral research (Hair et al., 2021).

Table 7. Model Summary (R² Values)

Endogenous Variable	R ²	Interpretation
Student Engagement	0.56	Moderate
Institutional Image	0.62	Substantial
Enrollment Intention	0.71	Strong

The findings demonstrate that social media marketing effectiveness depends not only on content presence but on content type, psychological engagement, and institutional perception. Career-oriented and testimonial content consistently outperform other types due to their ability to address both rational and emotional dimensions of decision-making. Engagement enhances the persuasive impact of content, while institutional image serves as the ultimate determinant of enrollment intention.

These results contribute to the growing body of literature by offering a more nuanced understanding of how digital marketing strategies influence higher education choices, particularly in the context of nursing education.

Limitations of the Study

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the use of a cross-sectional design restricts the ability to infer causal relationships among variables. While Structural Equation Modeling allows for the testing of theoretically grounded pathways, the observed associations remain correlational in nature. Future research may adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to establish temporal ordering and causal effects of social media content exposure on enrollment intention.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to response biases such as social desirability and recall bias. Participants may have overestimated their engagement or intention levels, potentially inflating observed relationships. Moreover, the use of a single survey instrument raises the

possibility of common method bias, where variance is attributable to the measurement method rather than the constructs themselves. Although procedural remedies (e.g., anonymity and scale design) were applied, future studies could strengthen validity by incorporating multiple data sources, behavioral metrics (e.g., actual enrollment data), or time-lagged data collection.

Third, the study was conducted within a specific geographic and cultural context, which may limit generalizability. Students' perceptions of social media content and institutional image may vary across regions and educational systems. Future research is encouraged to replicate the study in diverse settings to enhance external validity and to explore potential cultural differences in digital engagement and decision-making processes.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how social media content influences students' enrollment intentions in Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) programs using a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) framework. Findings reveal that career-oriented and testimonial content are the most effective in shaping enrollment intention, both directly and indirectly through student engagement and perceived institutional image. Informational content alone showed limited influence, emphasizing the need for more engaging and narrative-driven approaches. Notably, perceived institutional image emerged as the strongest predictor of enrollment intention, highlighting the importance of credibility and reputation in higher education marketing. These results extend the Theory of Planned Behavior by demonstrating the role of digital content and engagement mechanisms in shaping behavioral intentions. Higher education institutions are encouraged to adopt strategic, content-driven social media approaches to enhance recruitment effectiveness in nursing education.

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