



STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FACEBOOK MARKETING IN HIGHER EDUCATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF JAFFNA, SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Facebook marketing shapes student perceptions of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), focusing on the state-owned University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. While Facebook is a common global marketing tool for HEIs, its specific effectiveness and reception in state universities within developing nations remain underexplored. This research addresses that gap. A thematic analysis of interviews with 26 MBA students revealed six key themes. Findings highlight Facebook's advantages: it is cost-effective, offers broad youth reach and fosters interactive communities among prospective students, current students and alumni. This access to peer insights and visual content directly influences application decisions. However, significant challenges were also identified, including content over-saturation, perceived credibility issues compared to official websites, algorithmic constraints on organic reach and risks from unmanaged negative feedback. While Facebook drives stronger general engagement than visually-focused platforms like Instagram or professionally-oriented networks like LinkedIn, it is less effective at reaching niche audiences such as international students. The study concludes that for state-owned HEIs in contexts like Sri Lanka, Facebook is a valuable yet limited tool. To maximize its potential, it must be integrated into a broader multi-platform strategy. Practical recommendations include creating engaging, credible content; using targeted ads to supplement organic reach; and proactively managing online reputation. This research offers original insights and actionable guidance for universities in developing nations to refine their social media marketing for improved student recruitment and engagement.

Keywords: Facebook Marketing, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Student Perceptions, Social Media Engagement, Sri Lanka, University Branding



1. INTRODUCTION

The university sector remains deeply rooted in campus-based education, with brand awareness playing a critical role in attracting talented candidates. In their effort to reach broader audiences, universities have evolved their marketing strategies. A key innovation has been the adoption of social media platforms, particularly Facebook. With its ability to connect institutions with a tech-savvy, global audience, Facebook has become a powerful tool for higher education marketing. Social media platforms, especially Facebook, enable real-time, direct interaction between universities and prospective students, fostering engagement and communication (Rahman, Kim, Noh, & Lee, 2021). This shift aligns with the growing reliance on digital platforms for education and communication, making social media a key touchpoint for student engagement (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

In the realm of higher education marketing, Facebook stands out as a vital platform for institutions to promote their campuses, programs, and achievements. With billions of active users worldwide, Facebook offers unparalleled reach, allowing universities to target specific demographics, geographic locations, and academic interests (Adetayo, Adeleke, Adekunmisi, & Alawiye, 2023). This capability enables institutions to craft tailored marketing strategies that resonate with potential students. Research highlights that engaging content, such as posts related to athletics, university news, and admissions, significantly influences prospective students' decisions (del Rocío Bonilla, Perea, del Olmo, & Corrons, 2020). Such content not only captures attention but also shapes students' perceptions and choices regarding university applications (Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015). Despite its widespread use, there is limited understanding of how prospective students interpret and respond to Facebook marketing campaigns in higher education.

While universities recognize the importance of social media for increasing awareness, little is known about how students perceive these messages and whether these perceptions influence their decision-making (Alalwan, Rana, Dwivedi, & Algharabat, 2017). This study seeks to address this gap by examining the impact of Facebook marketing on students' perceptions of university programs, campus activities, and brand image. By exploring these dynamics, the research aims to provide insights into how universities can leverage Facebook to create effective marketing strategies that align with student expectations (Zaveri & Wilk, 2024).

Although previous studies have explored social media marketing in higher education, most have focused on content strategies that attract student attention (del Rocío Bonilla et al., 2020). Few studies have investigated students' perceptions of Facebook as a marketing tool, particularly in developing countries like Sri Lanka. The University of Jaffna, for instance, lacks comprehensive research on how students perceive Facebook marketing. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the effectiveness of Facebook marketing strategies at the University of Jaffna, providing valuable insights for improving university marketing campaigns (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

This study addresses the relevance and effectiveness of Facebook as a marketing medium for higher education institutions, with a focus on the University of Jaffna. The



research problem centers on understanding how students perceive promotional content on the university's Facebook page and how this content shapes their opinions about the institution. Despite Facebook's growing role in higher education marketing, limited research has explored its impact on students, the primary target audience (Alalwan et al., 2017). By addressing this gap, the study aims to enhance the understanding of Facebook marketing effectiveness and contribute to the development of more holistic digital marketing strategies for higher education (Dwivedi, 2024).

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of Facebook promotional content on students' perceptions of higher education marketing practices at the University of Jaffna. Specifically, it investigates how Facebook marketing influences students' opinions about university programs, campus activities, and brand image (Ngai et al., 2015). The study also explores whether Facebook enhances or hinders effective communication between the university and its students. By focusing on student preferences and perceptions, this research aims to help universities refine their social media marketing strategies, improve engagement, and boost recruitment efforts (Peruta & Shields, 2018). Additionally, the study contributes to the existing literature on social media usage in higher education marketing in Sri Lanka, offering insights for future research and practice in the field (Dwivedi, 2024). Thus, research questions are;

- 1) *How does Facebook marketing influence students' perceptions of university programs, campus activities, and brand image at the University of Jaffna and what types of content are most effective in shaping these perceptions?*
- 2) *What are the key challenges and opportunities of using Facebook as a marketing tool for higher education institutions in a developing country like Sri Lanka, and how does it impact communication between the university and prospective students?*

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The rise of social media, particularly Facebook, has revolutionized how higher education institutions connect with students. With worldwide users of Facebook (Adetayo et al., 2023), Facebook has become a powerful tool for universities to engage prospective students, promote programs, and influence decision-making. Universities use Facebook not only to market courses and events but also to build their brand identity and foster a sense of community (Wong, Tan, Hew, Ooi, & Leong, 2022). This shift in marketing communication allows students to interact with university content in a more informal and personal way, strengthening their connection to the institution (del Rocío Bonilla et al., 2020). By leveraging Facebook, universities can effectively communicate their ethos and values, enhance their marketing efforts and build stronger relationships with students (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). However, the extent to which this global model of community-building and identity communication translates effectively to state universities in Sri Lanka, which often operate with constrained budgets and within a different socio-cultural framework, remains a key question for this study.



Student engagement on Facebook, measured through likes, comments, and shares, reflects their level of interest and connection with university content. Research shows that engaging, informative, and visually appealing content such as success stories, campus events, and academic achievements captures student attention more effectively than other types of posts (Perera, Nayak, & Nguyen, 2023). Authentic and relatable content resonates more with students than overly formal or promotional material, fostering higher engagement levels (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). This engagement not only enhances students' perceptions of the university but also increases their likelihood of applying (Song, Lee, Liew, & Subramaniam, 2023). Within the Sri Lankan context, and specifically for the University of Jaffna, the definition of "authentic" content may differ. Content highlighting local graduate success, community impact, or resilience in the post-war context of the Northern Province may resonate more powerfully than generic campus aesthetics, suggesting a need for culturally nuanced content strategies.

Social media platforms, especially Facebook, play a critical role in students' university selection process (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). By providing information on course offerings, student testimonials, and campus life, Facebook helps students identify institutions that align with their needs and preferences. According to Peruta & Shields (2018), students rely more on social media than traditional marketing materials like brochures, as Facebook significantly shapes their opinions about universities. However, Wong et al. (2022) caution that Facebook is just one of many factors students consider, alongside university rankings, official websites, and peer advice. This may be particularly true in Sri Lanka's state university system, where centralized placement schemes for undergraduate study can limit the primary decision-making role of social media. For postgraduate and self-financing programs like the MBA, however, Facebook's role in providing detailed, peer-sourced information may become comparatively more critical, representing a key distinction from the global undergraduate recruitment model. To stand out, universities must create diverse and value-driven Facebook content that complements their broader marketing efforts (Al-Debei, Al-Lozi, & Papazafeiropoulou, 2013).

The success of Facebook marketing depends on how well the content resonates with students and its overall reach. Students prefer content that is both relevant and entertaining, such as testimonial videos, virtual campus tours, interactive polls, and question and answer (Q&A) sessions (Song et al., 2023). Conversely, overly commercialized or generic content often fails to engage students (Friesen & Lowe, 2012). Timing also plays a crucial role, as posts published during high-activity periods, such as exam weeks, are more likely to be seen and interacted with (Peruta & Shields, 2018). These findings underscore the importance of strategic content selection and timing for maximizing the impact of Facebook marketing campaigns (Ngai et al., 2015). Applying these principles locally requires understanding the specific online habits and academic calendars of Sri Lankan students. Furthermore, logistical and resource constraints at the University of Jaffna may affect the ability to produce high-quality virtual tours or real-time Q&A sessions, potentially altering the ideal content mix suggested by global research.

Despite its potential, Facebook marketing presents several challenges for universities.



The sheer volume of content on the platform can overwhelm students, making it difficult for universities to differentiate their messages (Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010). Additionally, students are often skeptical of overly polished or promotional content, preferring authentic portrayals of campus life (Wong et al., 2022). This requires universities to strike a balance between promotional messaging and genuine representation. Furthermore, Facebook's constantly evolving algorithms can affect the visibility and effectiveness of marketing campaigns, necessitating ongoing adjustments to strategies (Chang, Hsu, Hsu, & Chen, 2019). For the University of Jaffna, these universal challenges are compounded by local factors. These include potentially limited digital marketing expertise, the need to communicate effectively in multiple languages (Tamil, Sinhala, English), and the task of building a brand that appeals to both local students and the diaspora community a unique challenge not commonly addressed in broader literature.

Despite these challenges, Facebook remains a vital tool for higher education marketing, offering opportunities for targeted advertising and deep student engagement (Dwivedi, 2024). By addressing these challenges and leveraging Facebook's strengths, universities can create more effective marketing strategies that resonate with students and enhance their recruitment efforts. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on social media marketing in higher education, offering practical insights for institutions aiming to optimize their Facebook presence. Specifically, it investigates these global dynamics within the under-researched context of a state university in Northern Sri Lanka, seeking to determine which best practices are universally applicable and which require significant adaptation to local institutional, cultural, and resource-based realities.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative methodology to explore the influence of Facebook on students' perceptions of higher education marketing and branding at the University of Jaffna. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with Master of Business Administration (MBA) students from the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce (First Year, Second Semester, MBA Batch - VII) at the University of Jaffna. The study adopts an interpretivist research philosophy, which emphasizes understanding multiple subjective viewpoints through qualitative data (Darke, Shanks, & Broadbent, 1998). Interpretivism allows for the exploration of participants' perspectives, which are captured through interviews and reported as part of the findings.

An inductive research approach is employed, as the study does not begin with a predefined theory or hypothesis. Instead, it seeks to identify emerging patterns and themes from the data (Stephens, Dunn, Hayes, & Kalish, 2020). This approach aligns with the study's goal of exploring students' lived experiences and perceptions of Facebook marketing in higher education. This study uses a strategy focused on understanding how students interpret and make sense of the University of Jaffna's content on Facebook. It adopts a cross-sectional approach, capturing students' perceptions at one point in time to allow for a focused analysis



of how Facebook marketing currently shapes their views. This approach was chosen because it is a practical and effective way to understand the current overall effect of the university’s Facebook strategy at this moment, instead of studying how opinions change over a long period.

The study population consists of MBA students from the University of Jaffna’s Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce. Given the limited literature on Facebook as a marketing tool in this context, the study aims to fill this gap. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 26 MBA students from existing MBA batch for data collection. The sample was chosen to ensure diversity in age, gender, and experience, as shown in Table 1: demographics of MBA student respondents. Data was collected through in-depth interviews using a structured question guide. While the guide ensured coverage of key topics, the researchers remained flexible to ask follow-up questions based on participants’ responses. Example interview questions included: “What role does Facebook play in your academic life?”, “What are the pros and cons of using Facebook to market higher education institutions like the University of Jaffna?”, “Has Facebook influenced your decision to apply to or continue studying at the University of Jaffna?”, “Do you think Facebook is an effective platform for attracting potential students? Why or why not?”, “What challenges do you see in using Facebook for higher education marketing, and what improvements would you suggest?” The interviews explored students’ experiences with Facebook, their perceptions of its effectiveness as a marketing tool, and its impact on the university’s reputation.

Thematic analysis was used in this study to explore the interview data, identifying common patterns and key themes across the student responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data collection continued until no new themes emerged, ensuring a thorough investigation. To organize the findings, similar ideas were grouped into categories. This process helped summarize the main results clearly and avoid repetition. In this study, several established techniques, such as having participants review the findings, discussing the data with other researchers and providing detailed explanations of the process were employed to ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the conclusions (Morse, 2015).

Table 1: Demographics of MBA Student Respondents

Code	Gender	Age Range	Interview Duration
MBA01	Male	36 - 55 years	35 minutes
MBA02	Male	26 - 35 years	35 minutes
MBA03	Male	26 - 35 years	25 minutes
MBA04	Female	26 - 35 years	26 minutes
MBA05	Female	26 - 35 years	34 minutes



MBA06	Female	26 - 35 years	35 minutes
MBA07	Female	26 - 35 years	35 minutes
MBA08	Male	36 - 55 years	26 minutes
MBA09	Male	26 - 35 years	28 minutes
MBA10	Female	26 - 35 years	33 minutes
MBA11	Male	36 - 55 years	32 minutes
MBA12	Female	26 - 35 years	25 minutes
MBA13	Male	26 - 35 years	27 minutes
MBA14	Female	26 - 35 years	25 minutes
MBA15	Female	26 - 35 years	34 minutes
MBA16	Male	26 - 35 years	35 minutes
MBA17	Female	26 - 35 years	35 minutes
MBA18	Male	26 - 35 years	26 minutes
MBA19	Female	26 - 35 years	28 minutes
MBA20	Male	26 - 35 years	34 minutes
MBA21	Male	36 - 55 years	35 minutes
MBA22	Male	36 - 55 years	31 minutes
MBA23	Male	36 - 55 years	30 minutes
MBA24	Male	26 - 35 years	29 minutes
MBA25	Male	26 - 35 years	25 minutes
MBA26	Male	36 - 55 years	25 minutes

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The data analysis revealed six key themes that highlight the advantages, disadvantages, and overall impact of Facebook marketing on students' perceptions of HEIs,



particularly at the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. These themes emerged from in-depth interviews with MBA students and were analyzed using thematic analysis. Below is a detailed discussion of each theme.

Theme 1: Advantages of using Facebook for higher education marketing

Facebook emerged as a powerful and cost-effective marketing tool for HEIs, offering several advantages. Respondents highlighted the platform's ability to disseminate engaging and visually appealing content, such as digital posters, which effectively promote university programs. One respondent noted;

"The poster is colorful and published on Facebook, so university can reach more students who are interested in MBA program." - MBA01

This underscores Facebook's role in capturing attention and facilitating information sharing. The platform's affordability was another significant advantage, especially for institutions with limited marketing budgets. Compared to traditional media like TV, radio, or print, Facebook allows universities to reach a broad audience at a fraction of the cost. A respondent stated,

"Facebook is much cheaper than traditional ads, and university can reach a lot of people for low cost." - MBA03

Additionally, Facebook's large youth user base aligns well with the target demographic of HEIs, making it an ideal platform for engagement. As one participant remarked,

"Most young people in Sri Lanka are on Facebook, so that's an ideal platform for connecting and sharing updates." - MBA04

Facebook also fosters interactive communication between prospective students, current students, and alumni, creating a supportive community. Respondents valued the platform's ability to connect them with individuals who have firsthand experience of university life. One participant shared,

"Students use Facebook as a forum to share their experiences and answer questions prospective students have about life on campus." - MBA23

This interactivity not only builds trust but also enhances the university's reputation and exposure.

Theme 2: Disadvantages of using Facebook for higher education marketing

Despite its advantages, Facebook presents several challenges as a marketing tool for HEIs. One major issue is the over-saturation of content, which can lead to user disengagement. A respondent explained,

"Students like me get tired of too many posts or ads, and may stop looking at Facebook page." - MBA02

It's emphasizing the need for a balanced posting strategy. Credibility concerns also arise, as Facebook content is often perceived as less formal compared to official university websites. Poorly managed content can negatively impact the institution's image. One participant noted,

"Facebook content can sometimes present a lower level of credibility than that of official websites if not well managed." - MBA07

Additionally, Facebook's ever-changing algorithm poses challenges for organic reach, often requiring paid promotions to maintain visibility. A respondent stated,

"According to my knowledge, there are many changes in the algorithm, so it's hard to keep my views consistent unless university pay for an ad." - MBA10

Managing negative feedback is another significant challenge. Unaddressed negative comments can deter prospective students and harm the university's reputation. One



participant shared,

“Having to deal with negative feedback on university’s posts is hard, specifically if the comments are visible to the public.” – MBA12

Furthermore, Facebook’s targeting limitations make it difficult to reach niche audiences, such as international students. A respondent observed,

“I think, it is difficult to target specific groups (such as international students) with just Facebook.” – MBA22

Theme 3: Influence of Facebook on application/study decisions

Facebook plays a pivotal role in shaping students’ decisions to apply to or study at a university. The platform provides easy access to information about programs, campus events, and student life, enabling prospective students to make informed decisions. One respondent explained,

“I could easily find information about the programs and events on Facebook and got to know the university more.” – MBA20

Multimedia content, such as images and videos, enhances the platform’s appeal by helping students visualize their potential experiences. A participant shared,

“For me, seeing beautiful campus images and student activities helped me visualize what my experience could be like.” – MBA21

Additionally, Facebook’s real-time communication features allow prospective students to ask questions and receive instant responses, boosting their confidence in their application decisions. One respondent noted,

“I was able to ask questions directly on Facebook and expect an instant response, so it all made me feel certain about my decision.” – MBA26

Theme 4: Effectiveness of Facebook for attracting prospective students

Facebook’s effectiveness as a marketing platform is largely attributed to its popularity among youth and its cost-effective advertising options. One respondent stated,

“Facebook is mostly used by youth everywhere, so it makes sense to do marketing on students through Facebook.” – MBA04

The platform’s affordability allows universities to run ads without significant financial strain. A participant remarked,

“Always, Facebook has cheap and effective ads where university can reach more people without breaking the profit point of income generated course like MBA.” - MBA05

However, the platform’s reliance on paid promotions for visibility limits the reach of organic content. A respondent noted,

“My point is unless universities pay for promotions, posts don’t reach very many people.” – MBA11

Additionally, unaddressed negative comments can harm the institution’s online image. One participant shared,

“Sometimes if a student has a negative comment about a lecturer, it goes unanswered, and the other students would see it not a good look.” – MBA22

Theme 5: Reach of Facebook marketing to relevant student groups

Facebook’s reach is constrained when targeting specific student groups, particularly those who are less active on the platform. Some respondents noted that students may prefer other platforms like Instagram or TikTok, leading to missed updates. One participant explained,



“Some students are just using different mediums like Instagram or TikTok, so they are not seeing important updates posted on Facebook.” – MBA14

Additionally, connecting with international students through Facebook can be challenging. A respondent stated,

“Facebook doesn’t seem to reach nationals from some countries very well.” – MBA21

To address these limitations, respondents suggested using paid ads to target specific demographics and encouraging existing students to share posts within their networks. One participant noted,

“Encouraging students to share posts to their networks can aid in increasing impressions with prospective students.” – MBA25

Theme 6: Impact of Facebook on university reputation

Facebook can significantly enhance a university’s reputation by showcasing student achievements and fostering open communication. One respondent shared,

“By sharing student achievements and events, the university builds a strong, positive image.” – MBA24

However, failure to manage negative feedback and privacy concerns can damage the institution’s reputation. A participant noted,

“Sometimes unresolved negative feedback can affect how others view the university.” – MBA26

The thematic analysis revealed that Facebook offers significant advantages, such as cost-effectiveness, broad reach, and interactive communication, making it a valuable tool for HEI marketing. However, challenges like content over-saturation, credibility issues, and algorithmic constraints highlight the need for strategic management. The platform’s influence on students’ application decisions and its ability to attract prospective students underscore its importance in higher education marketing. Nonetheless, its limitations in reaching niche audiences and managing reputation emphasize the need for a diversified social media strategy.

The findings suggest that while Facebook excels in reach and community engagement, it must be integrated into a broader marketing ecosystem to address its limitations. Platforms like Instagram and LinkedIn offer complementary strengths, particularly for niche audiences and professional networking. To maximize Facebook’s potential, HEIs should focus on creating engaging content, leveraging targeted ads, and proactively managing feedback. These insights provide valuable guidance for universities aiming to enhance student engagement and recruitment through effective social media strategies.

Table 2: Summary of thematic analysis of the study from coding to defining themes

Initial codes (first-order concepts)	Sub themes (second-order concepts)	Main themes
1) The poster is colorful and published on Facebook	1) Cost-effective marketing	1) Advantages of using Facebook for higher education marketing 2) Disadvantages of using Facebook for higher education marketing 3) Influence of Facebook on application/study decisions 4) Effectiveness of
2) University can reach more students	2) Targeting the youth demographic	
3) Who are interested in our program	3) Interactivity, communication between current and prospective students	
4) Facebook is much cheaper	4) Over-saturation of content, user disengagement	
5) Can reach a lot of people for low cost	5) Credibility issues, comparison with official university channels	
6) Most young people are on Facebook	6) Issues with Facebook’s algorithm affecting content reach	
7) Ideal platform for connecting and sharing updates	7) Negative feedback and reputation management challenges	



<p>8) Facebook as a forum 9) Share their experiences 10) Students get tired of too many posts or ads. 11) May stop looking at our page 12) Facebook content can sometimes present a lower level of credibility 13) If not well managed 14) There are many changes 15) Hard to keep my views 16) Deal with negative feedback 17) If the comments are visible to the public in general 18) I could easily find information about the programs and events on Facebook 19) Got to know the university more 20) Seeing beautiful campus images and student activities 21) Visualize what my experience could be like 22) Able to ask questions directly on Facebook 23) Expect an instant response 24) Made me feel certain about my decision 25) Facebook is mostly used by youth 26) It makes sense to do marketing on students through Facebook 27) Facebook has cheap and effective ads 28) You can reach more people 29) Unless universities pay for promotions, posts don't reach very many people 30) Sometimes if a student has a negative comment 31) It goes unanswered, and the other students would see 32) Some students are just using different mediums like Instagram or TikTok 33) They are not seeing important updates posted on Facebook 34) Paid ads would help to better reach 35) Encouraging students to share posts to their networks 36) Increasing impressions with prospective students 37) By sharing student achievements and events 38) University builds a strong,</p>	<p>8) Access to information, ease of decision-making 9) Visual appeal, multimedia content influencing decision-making 10) Real-time communication 11) Popularity among youth, targeted marketing 12) Cost-effective advertising for institutions 13) Importance of addressing negative comments 14) Platform preference and its impact on reach 15) Use of paid ads to target specific student groups 16) User-generated content, peer recommendations 17) Building a positive reputation through success stories and events 18) Negative feedback management and its effect on reputation</p>	<p>Facebook for attracting prospective students 5) Reach of Facebook marketing to relevant student groups 6) Impact of Facebook on university reputation</p>
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positive image		
39) Sometimes unresolved negative feedback can affect		
40) How others view the university		

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight Facebook’s significant role in higher education marketing at the University of Jaffna, particularly in shaping students’ perceptions of university programs, campus activities, and brand image. Participants emphasized Facebook’s cost-effectiveness and ability to disseminate engaging content, such as digital posters and multimedia materials, which align with the platform’s global reach and interactive capabilities. For instance, one participant noted that Facebook is fantastic for getting in front of students for the least amount of money and greatest exposure, especially with digital posters and visual stuff. This reflects the platform’s ability to capture attention and facilitate information sharing, as highlighted in prior research (del Rocío Bonilla et al., 2020). The real-time interaction features of Facebook were also praised for fostering direct communication between prospective students, current students, and alumni. This aligns with the growing reliance on digital platforms for education and communication, as noted by Kaplan & Haenlein (2010). A participant stated that the real-time interaction on Facebook makes me feel the university is more approachable and responsive. This interactivity not only builds trust but also enhances the university’s reputation and exposure, reinforcing the importance of engagement in higher education marketing (Rahman et al., 2021).

However, challenges such as credibility concerns and algorithmic limitations were noted. Some participants felt that informal posts could detract from the university’s professional image, echoing findings by Wong et al. (2022), who caution that overly promotional or generic content often fails to engage students. Additionally, Facebook’s algorithm-driven visibility and the risk of negative comments affecting reliability highlight the need for strategic content management. Regarding communication effectiveness, while Facebook excels in real-time interaction, it may fall short in meeting the diverse needs of international students. This aligns with the findings of Zaveri & Wilk (2024), who emphasize the importance of tailored marketing strategies that resonate with specific demographics. As one participant noted that university can get instant responses on Facebook, but not always sufficient ones especially for international students who may not see everything. This suggests the need for a multichannel approach to complement Facebook’s reach and effectiveness, as proposed by Dwivedi (2024).

The study contributes to the understanding of Facebook’s role in higher education marketing by emphasizing the need for universities to adopt diversified strategies beyond a single platform. It reaffirms the importance of engaging, authentic content that resonates with students, as highlighted by del Rocío Bonilla et al. (2020). However, it also underscores the limitations of Facebook, particularly in terms of content credibility and its suitability for diverse student populations. These findings suggest that universities should integrate multiple communication channels to effectively reach and engage students, aligning with the broader literature on social media marketing in higher education (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).



Practically, the University of Jaffna and similar institutions should integrate Facebook with other platforms like Instagram and LinkedIn to target diverse audiences. Paid ads, live streams, and interactive content such as polls can enhance engagement and mitigate the limitations of organic reach. A strategic content management plan is essential to maintain credibility and professionalism, ensuring timely responses to algorithm changes and moderation of negative comments. This approach aligns with the findings of (Ngai et al., 2015), who emphasize the importance of strategic content selection and timing for maximizing the impact of Facebook marketing campaigns.

While this study provides valuable insights, it has limitations that offer avenues for future research. The qualitative approach, though insightful, may miss nuanced interactions with Facebook marketing. Future studies could employ mixed methods, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews, to explore psychological and emotional dynamics in student engagement. The study's focus on a single institution limits generalizability. Future research could expand to multiple universities and regions to explore how cultural and institutional contexts influence students' perceptions of Facebook marketing. Longitudinal studies could track the evolution of student engagement from prospective students to alumni, providing a deeper understanding of Facebook's role in higher education marketing. Additionally, ethical considerations surrounding privacy and data collection in hyper-targeted marketing strategies warrant further exploration. Future research should investigate how universities can balance personalized marketing with ethical practices to maintain trust with their audience.

Despite its challenges, Facebook remains a vital component of the University of Jaffna's marketing strategy, offering an affordable and interactive platform to showcase university life and programs. However, its limitations, such as algorithmic constraints and difficulties in reaching niche audiences, underscore the need for a diversified social media strategy. By integrating Facebook with other platforms, leveraging paid promotions, and maintaining credible content, universities can optimize their marketing efforts and enhance student engagement and recruitment.

6. CONCLUSION

This study employs a qualitative approach using thematic analysis, which focuses on detailed, individual accounts of participants' experiences rather than aiming for broad generalization. While this idiographic approach is well-suited for exploring lived experiences and provides rich, in-depth insights, it inherently limits the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the study is based on 26 MBA students from the University of Jaffna, which restricts the breadth of the data. The research also focuses solely on Facebook, limiting comparisons with other social media platforms such as Instagram or LinkedIn. Nonetheless, despite these limitations, the study contributes valuable theoretical and practical insights into Facebook marketing for HEIs and provides a strong foundation for future multi-case studies.

In conclusion, this study underscores the significant role of Facebook as a cost-



effective and interactive platform for higher education marketing, particularly at the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. The findings reveal that Facebook's ability to disseminate engaging content, foster real-time communication, and reach a broad audience makes it a valuable tool for shaping students' perceptions of university programs, campus activities, and institutional brand image. However, challenges such as content over-saturation, credibility concerns, algorithmic limitations, and difficulties in targeting niche audiences highlight the need for strategic content management and a diversified social media approach. To maximize Facebook's potential, universities should integrate it with other platforms, leverage targeted ads, and prioritize authentic, engaging content while addressing negative feedback and privacy concerns. This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on social media marketing in higher education, offering practical recommendations for institutions aiming to enhance student engagement and recruitment. Future studies should explore cross-institutional perspectives, longitudinal impacts, and ethical considerations to further refine social media strategies in the evolving digital landscape.

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