

The Impact of Social Media Marketing on College Selection Mediated By Brand Image: Case Study on @officialunila Instagram Account

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ABSTRACT

Increasing competition among universities has prompted Lampung University to optimize its digital marketing strategies through social media, yet the @officialunila Instagram account faces challenges in effectively attracting prospective students despite significant engagement growth. This study examines the relationship between social media marketing and students' college selection decisions, with brand image serving as a mediating variable, using Structural Equation Modeling with Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) to analyze data from 390 Lampung University students from the class of 2024. The findings reveal that social media marketing has a strong positive correlation with brand image (path coefficient = 0.708; p-value = 0.000) and college selection decisions (path coefficient = 0.167; p-value = 0.000), while brand image significantly influences selection decisions (path coefficient = 0.752; p-value = 0.000) and effectively mediates the relationship between social media marketing and selection decisions through complementary mediation (path coefficient = 0.532; p-value = 0.000). The results demonstrate that social media marketing significantly impacts prospective students' decision-making processes both directly and indirectly through brand image enhancement, suggesting that Lampung University should continue managing the @officialunila Instagram account professionally by creating informative and engaging content tailored to digital generation preferences to strengthen brand image and attract prospective students.

INTRODUCTION

University is one of the primary option for secondary education graduates who want to continue their studies to a higher level. Based on Law No. 12/2012 on Higher Education, university is explained as a level of education that includes diploma, bachelor's, master's, doctoral, and professional and specialist programs. According to Databoks, there will be at least 3,107 universities in Indonesia by 2022, which makes the competition between universities to attract new students even tougher.

More specifically, Lampung Province has 61 universities, with 3 of them being state universities, including Lampung University, Lampung State Polytechnic, and Sumatra Institute of Technology. This high number of institutions illustrates the intense competition in attracting prospective students, especially in the midst of the increasing Gross Participation Rate (APK) of Indonesian Higher Education, which reached 31.45% in 2023, according to Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS). Prospective students are faced with a complex range of choices, with decisions often based on career prospects, as Peto & Gedert (2015) point out, where 80% of students choose college for job preparation. In addition to career motivation, other factors

such as promotion through social media also influence prospective students' decisions (Kango et al., 2021).

The internet's digitalization has transformed social media into a revolutionary tool that organizations across various fields utilize to promote their products and services. According to Kominfo data from 2024, Indonesia ranks as the 6th largest internet user globally, with 78.19% of the total population having internet access. Furthermore, Instagram ranked second as the most popular social media platform in Indonesia in early 2024, with 85.3% of users aged 16 to 64 years according to Databoks in 2024. This widespread popularity makes Instagram a strategic platform for university marketing campaigns, particularly through visual content and direct interaction that can effectively build brand image and influence prospective students' college selection decisions.

According to Karamang (2023), Social media is a big part of getting new prospective students, so social media optimization is key in strengthening the attractiveness of educational institutions. However, not all universities are able to utilize social media optimally. Some universities still face challenges in implementing marketing strategies through social media optimally, including Lampung University. This is exemplified by the 2025 rankings of Indonesia's leading universities, as follows.

Table 1. Webometric Ranking of Indonesia's Leading Universities in 2025

National Rank	Name of University
1	Universitas Indonesia
2	Universitas Gadjah Mada
3	Institut Teknologi Bandung
4	Universitas Diponegoro
5	Institut Pertanian Bogor
6	Universitas Sebelas Maret
7	Institut Teknologi Sepuluh Nopember
8	Universitas Telkom
9	Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia
10	Universitas Negeri Malang

Source: Webometrics.info (2025)

Table 1 above presents the 2025 rankings of Indonesia's leading universities according to the January 2025 edition of Webometrics. The table clearly shows that Universitas Indonesia holds the top position among Indonesian universities, followed by several other universities and institutes. This ranking reveals a significant gap compared to Lampung University, which ranks 15th nationally. This disparity indicates that Lampung University has not effectively utilized social media platforms as a promotional strategy to attract prospective students. According to Constantinides (2014), social media serves as a strategic tool to increase brand awareness, enhance engagement, and create a positive institutional image, which can subsequently influence students' university selection decisions.

Responding to competitive competition among universities, the utilization of social media as a strategic instrument for marketing purposes has become an unavoidable strategy for various institutions, including universities in today's digital era. In line with Constantinides' research (2014), Social Media Marketing offers significant potential for institutions in building brand awareness, increasing stakeholder engagement, and shaping a positive institutional image. One such institution is Lampung University (UNILA), which actively implements social media marketing strategy to increase interest of prospective students and new students significantly from year to year, as the next figure shows:

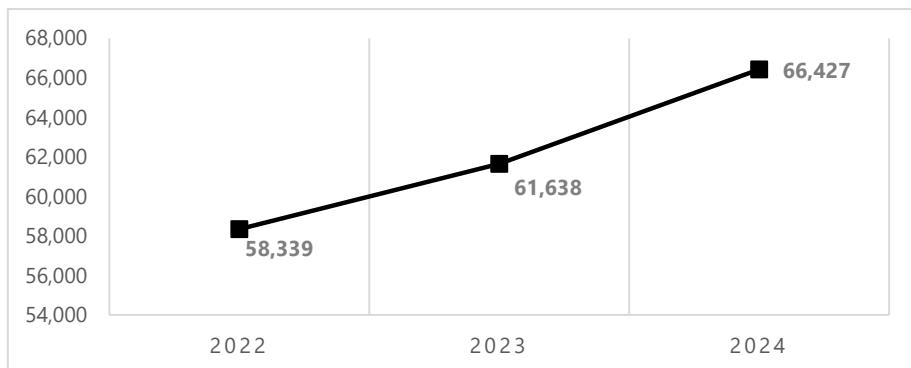


Figure 1. The Number of Applicants to Lampung University in 2022-2024

Source: BAK Unila (2024)

Figure 1 shows the positive trend in the number of applicants for Lampung University during 2022-2024 from the accumulation of SNBP, SNBT, SIMANILA, postgraduate, and S3 pathways. This increase proves that the attractiveness of Lampung University is getting stronger, in accordance with the positive trend in the number of enthusiasts in Figure 1. This increase was driven by a Social Media Marketing strategy that successfully reached a wider audience and creatively displayed campus excellence, reflecting the success of Lampung University in attracting the digital generation. Lampung University actively utilizes Instagram @officialunila as part of its social media marketing strategy. With 159 thousand followers and 2,890 posts promoting various aspects of the campus, the account managed by UNILA Public Relations seeks to increase engagement and attract prospective students. The success of Lampung University's comprehensive approach in building brand image and increasing engagement with its target audience through the Instagram demonstrated by the information in the table below:

Table 2. Growth of Engagement Rate on University of Lampung Instagram Account (2023-2024)

Name	2023	2024	Growth
Followers	125.246	151.658	21%
Number of Posts	2.036	2.591	27%
Accounts reached	254.336	648.562	155%
Impressions	4.109.366	6.521.197	59%
Profile Activity	70.778	149.378	111%
#universitaslampung	153.430	176.000	15%
#akucintaunila	-	60.200	-
#unila	333.365	357.000	7%

Source: BPHM Unila (2024)

From Table 2 above, it shown that Lampung University's social media program showed significant success throughout 2023-2024. This data reflects UNILA's success in building engagement with their audience. However, the efficacy of social media in improving brand image and the decision to choose UNILA still requires further research, especially in the midst of increasingly aggressive promotional competition between universities, as stated by Riswanto (2020).

Therefore, by looking at the importance of social media platforms to enhance brand image for universities, also the profound correlation of social media marketing on prospective students' interest, this article critically analyzes the effect of interventions designed to fill existing knowledge gaps by exploring the correlation of social media marketing on decision on @officialunila instagram account with brand image act as role of mediating variable.

METHODOLOGY

This research utilizing a quantitative descriptive methodology, a survey technique to analyze the collected data. The research population consists of all University of Lampung students in the class of 2024, totaling 15,745 students, who have known or followed the @officialunila Instagram account. The sample determination used the Slovin formula with a threshold of significance of 5%, the minimum sample size of 390 respondents was determined. Non-probability sampling was utilized as a sampling technique, employing a purposive sampling strategy grounded in predefined criteria, namely being an active student of Lampung University class of 2024, actively using Instagram social media, and already knowing or following the @officialunila Instagram account.

Data were obtained using an organized questionnaire with a Likert scale. The method of Partial Least Squares (PLS) was utilized to evaluate the data, facilitated by SmartPLS 3.0 software. The analysis process is carried out through two interrelated testing stages, specifically evaluating the measurement outer model and testing the structural inner model.

The framework that describes the correlation between each variable in this research can be described as follows:

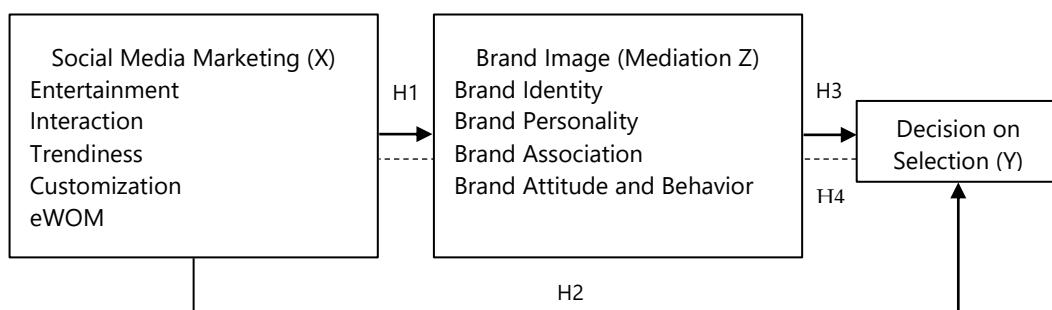


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Referring to Figure 1 that presented above, can be formulated several hypotheses below:

- H1. Social Media Marketing (X) has a positive correlation on Brand Image (Z) of Lampung University.
- H2. Social Media Marketing (X) has a positive correlation on prospective students' decisions (Y) in choosing Lampung University.
- H3. Brand Image (Z) has a positive correlation on prospective students' decisions (Y) in choosing Lampung University.
- H4. Social Media Marketing (X) has a positive correlation on prospective students' decisions (Y) in choosing Lampung University mediated by Brand Image (Z).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Respondent Characteristics

This study categorizes respondents into several characteristics, include age, gender, study program, knowledge of the @officialunila Instagram account, and the type of content of interest. The characteristics of the respondents of the 2024 class of Lampung University students served in table 1.

According to Table 1, shows that the characteristics of respondents divided by their age are in the range of 17 to 21 years. The age of respondents who have filled out the questionnaire is dominated by 19 years, with 210 respondents, or 53.8% of the total data, followed by 18 years, with 141 respondents, or 36.2% of the total data. It can be inferred that most of the respondents are 19 years of age, which is the right age as a first-year student in college in general. The traits of respondents according to their gender are female with 284 respondents, or 72.8% of the total data, and male with 106 respondents, or 27.2% of

the total data. The result is that the respondents in this research were leading by women. The majority of respondents came from the S1 Economics and Development Studies study program, with 92 people, or 23.6%, followed by S1 Accounting, with as many as 46 people, or 11.8%, and S1 Management, with as many as 46 people, or 11.8%. In conclusion, the distribution of respondents based on their study program is dominated by S1 Economics and Development Studies.

Table 1. The Respondents Characteristics

Particular	Quantity	Percentage (%)
Age		
17	0	0,0
18	141	36,2
19	210	53,8
20	33	8,5
21	6	1,5
Gender		
Female	284	72,8
Male	106	27,2
Study Program		
Ekonomi Pembangunan	92	23,6
Akuntansi	46	11,8
Manajemen	46	11,8
Bimbingan dan Konseling	28	7,2
Bisnis Digital	21	5,4
Etc.	157	40,3
Knowledge of @officialunila Instagram Account		
Yes	390	100,0
No.	0	0,0
Preferred Content Types		
<i>Unila dalam Sepekan</i>	115	29,5
<i>Prestasi Sобу</i>	55	14,1
<i>Sharing with Sобу</i>	19	4,9
<i>Kenal Prodi</i>	67	17,2
<i>Kata Sобу</i>	43	11,0
<i>Info Unila</i>	71	18,2
<i>Tau Gak Sih?</i>	11	2,8
Etc.	9	2,3

Source: Analyzed data in 2025

Furthermore, all respondents have known or followed the @officialunila Instagram account, according to the sample criteria in this research. Content type that respondents are most interested in is "*Unila dalam Sepekan*" with a total of 115 people, or 29.5%, followed by "*Sharing with Sобу*," with as many as 71 people, or 18.2%, and "*Prestasi Sобу*" with as many as 67 people, or 17.2%. In conclusion, informative content such as *Unila dalam Sepekan* and *Sharing with Sобу* shows the tendency of students to look for useful information and updates on campus life, especially at Lampung University.

Therefore, according to the traits of the people who took part in this study, most of them are 19-year-old female students who come from the S1 Economics and Development Studies study program, reflecting the ideal first-year student profile. All respondents are familiar with the @officialunila Instagram account, with content preferences dominated by "*Unila dalam Sepekan*" and "*Sharing with Sобу*," indicating a tendency for students to access informative content that provides updates and useful information related to campus life at Lampung University.

2. Outer Model Test

The method of Partial Least Square (PLS) was utilized in this article, run by using SmartPLS 3.0 software. It is known that the number of respondents is 390 as the sample size in this research. The evaluation procedure in the Partial Least Square method is the measurement outer model and the structural inner model.

The outer loading value is utilized in the outer model test. Referring to Hair et al. et al. (2022), the allowable outer loading magnitude is > 0.7 . Indicators with outer loading magnitudes between 0.4 and 0.7 can be kept if removing them doesn't cause composite reliability and average variance extracted (AVE) to increase above acceptable limits. Conversely, if the magnitude of Outer Loading less than 0.4 in a certain indicator should be left out of the model. The subsequent figure presents a visual overview of the outer model:

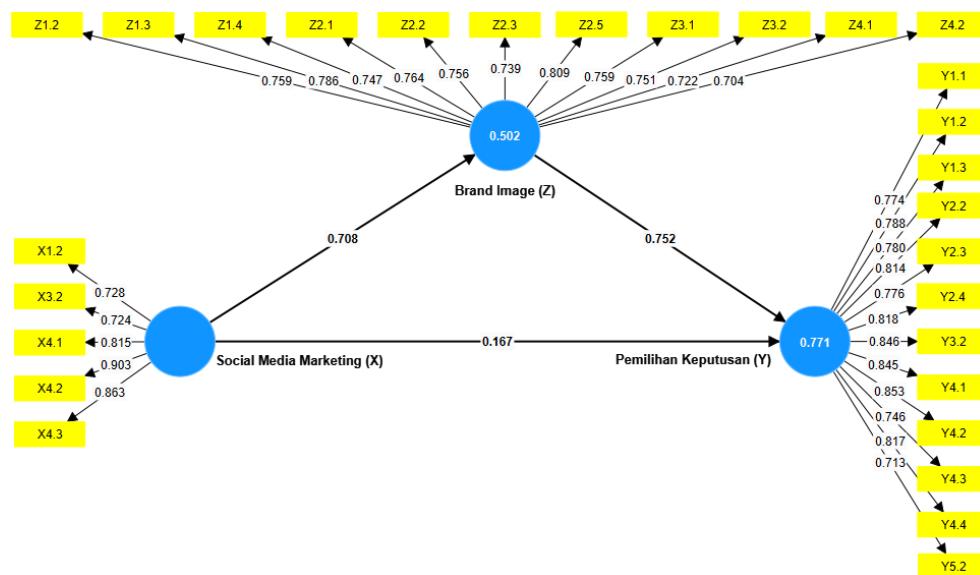


Figure 1. Outer Model Visualization

Figure 1 above is a visualization of the outer model evaluation utilizing SEM-PLS algorithm in Smart PLS 3.0 software. This visualization is the result of visualizing the outer model after removing indicators that have a magnitude of <0.70 , which refers to Hair et al. (2022). In summary, the test results can be presented as table 2 below:

Table 2. Outer Loading Value

Variable	Indicator	Outer Loading	Description
Social Media Marketing (X)	X1.2	0,728	Valid
	X3.2	0,724	Valid
	X4.1	0,815	Valid
	X4.2	0,903	Valid
	X4.3	0,863	Valid
Decision on Selection (Y)	Y1.1	0,774	Valid
	Y1.2	0,788	Valid
	Y1.3	0,780	Valid
	Y2.2	0,814	Valid
	Y2.3	0,776	Valid
	Y2.4	0,818	Valid
	Y3.2	0,846	Valid
	Y4.1	0,845	Valid

Variable	Indicator	Outer Loading	Description
Brand Image (Z)	Y4.2	0,853	Valid
	Y4.3	0,746	Valid
	Y4.4	0,817	Valid
	Y5.2	0,713	Valid
Brand Image (Z)	Z1.2	0,759	Valid
	Z1.3	0,786	Valid
	Z1.4	0,747	Valid
	Z2.1	0,764	Valid
	Z2.2	0,756	Valid
	Z2.3	0,739	Valid
	Z2.5	0,809	Valid
	Z3.1	0,759	Valid
	Z3.2	0,751	Valid
	Z4.1	0,722	Valid
	Z4.2	0,704	Valid

Source: Analyzed data in 2025

According to Table above, it can be concluded that all indicators other than those that have been eliminated and recalculated have been declared valid and acceptable. In this case, it can be interpreted that the indicators in table 2 above can be explained and absorbed by their latent variables.

3. Convergent Validity Test

Convergent validity as a form of assessment that evaluates the degree to explains how a theoretical construct explains the variation seen in its related indicators. Average variance extracted (AVE) is the most widely employed method for assessing convergent validity involves examining the correlations among indicators intended to calculate the same construct, according to Hair et al. (2022), with the following results:

Table 3. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) Value

Variable	AVE	Description
Social Media Marketing (X)	0,570	Valid
Brand Image (Z)	0,638	Valid
Decision on Selection (Y)	0,656	Valid

The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) magnitude for every item is shown in Table 3 above. Social Media Marketing has a value of 0.570, followed by Brand Image at 0.638 and Decision Selection at 0.656. Referring to the opinion of Hair et al. (2022) that the AVE value in convergent validity testing that can be said to be valid is > 0.5 , indicates that a construct's variance may be explained by 50% of its indicators. As a result, it is determined that every construct or variable in this study has good validity.

4. Discriminant Validity Test

The subsequent phase is the discriminant validity assessment, it assesses how much a construct actually differs from other constructs. In this case, using the cross-loading value, which can be explained as follows:

Table 4. Cross Loading Value

Indicator	Brand Image (Z)	Decision on Selection (Y)	Social Media Marketing (X)
X1.2	0,568	0,532	0,728
X3.2	0,527	0,508	0,724
X4.1	0,567	0,569	0,815

Indicator	Brand Image (Z)	Decision on Selection (Y)	Social Media Marketing (X)
X4.2	0,620	0,624	0,903
X4.3	0,579	0,592	0,863
Y1.1	0,701	0,774	0,628
Y1.2	0,671	0,788	0,464
Y1.3	0,626	0,780	0,538
Y2.2	0,685	0,814	0,524
Y2.3	0,717	0,776	0,555
Y2.4	0,742	0,818	0,521
Y3.2	0,697	0,846	0,595
Y4.1	0,684	0,845	0,560
Y4.2	0,747	0,853	0,561
Y4.3	0,620	0,746	0,513
Y4.4	0,729	0,817	0,569
Y5.2	0,692	0,713	0,660
Z1.2	0,759	0,580	0,548
Z1.3	0,786	0,635	0,536
Z1.4	0,747	0,611	0,448
Z2.1	0,764	0,678	0,543
Z2.2	0,756	0,657	0,669
Z2.3	0,739	0,582	0,534
Z2.5	0,809	0,735	0,581
Z3.1	0,759	0,720	0,467
Z3.2	0,751	0,664	0,460
Z4.1	0,722	0,657	0,558
Z4.2	0,704	0,683	0,507

Table 4 above indicates that the magnitude of cross-loading for every item on its respective latent construct exceeds the cross-loading magnitude of the item on alternative constructs (Ridwan & Ali, 2024). It is anticipated that the latent construct on its own indicator will have a higher cross-loading value than the latent construct on other indicators. Thus, it can be said that this study's variables all have strong discriminant validity.

5. Reliability Test

Reliability test refers to Sugiyono (2016), which is a testing step to measure data consistency so that the same results are obtained even though it is used in different samples or times. In this case, utilizing the Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability magnitude, as follows:

Table 5. Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability Value

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Keterangan
Social Media Marketing (X)	0,866	0,904	Reliable
Brand Image (Z)	0,924	0,936	Reliable
Decision on Selection (Y)	0,948	0,955	Reliable

Source: Analyzed data in 2025

According to Table 5, the Social Media Marketing (X) variable has a Cronbach's Alpha magnitude of 0.866 and a Composite Reliability of 0.904. The decision selection variable (Y) exhibits a Cronbach's alpha of 0.948 and a composite reliability of 0.955. Simultaneously, the brand image variable (Z) has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.924 and a composite reliability of 0.936. Referring to Hair et al. (2022), the research instrument is deemed dependable if the Cronbach's alpha exceeds 0.7 and the composite reliability

surpasses 0.6. Consequently, it can be inferred that all constructs exhibit strong reliability, signifying that the instruments utilised in this study possess high consistency and can be depended upon to assess research variables.

6. Hypothesis Test

In hypothesis testing, it will be determined whether the hypothesis in this study will be accepted (significant) or denied. Hypothesis Testing utilizes the p-value obtained using the bootstrapping tools in Smart PLS 4 software, as follows:

Table 6. Hypothesis Test Results

Hypothesis	Correlation	Finding	Description
H1	Social Media Marketing (X) -> Brand Image (Z)	Path coefficient = 0,708 T-Statistik = 22,849 P-value =0,000	Accepted
H2	Social Media Marketing (X) -> Decision on Selection (Y)	Path coefficient = 0,167 T-Statistik = 4,125 P-value =0,000	Accepted
H3	Brand Image (Z) -> Decision on Selection (Y)	Path coefficient = 0,752 T-Statistik = 23,006 P-value =0,000	Accepted

According to the recapitulation of the hypothesis test results in table 6, several findings can be presented as follows:

H1: Social Media Marketing (X) has a positive correlation on Brand Image (Z) at Lampung University.

According to hypothesis test, the path coefficient relating to correlation between social media marketing's on brand image is 0.708, signifying a positive impact of social media marketing through brand image. With a p-value of 0.000(<0.05), it is evident that social media marketing shows a significant correlation on brand image. The findings demonstrate that social media marketing notably enhances the brand image of Lampung University (H1 is accepted).

H2: Social Media Marketing (X) has a positive correlation on prospective students' decisions (Y) in choosing Lampung University.

According to hypothesis test, the path coefficient magnitude reflecting the correlation between social media marketing on decision selection is 0.167, signifying a positive correlation of social media marketing on decision selection. Furthermore, the p-value of 0.000(<0.05), demonstrates that social media marketing has a significant impact on decision selection. The result implies that social media marketing act as a positive and significant in the decision selection processes of prospective students (H2 accepted).

H3: Brand image (Z) has a positive correlation on prospective students' decisions (Y) in choosing Lampung University.

According to hypothesis test, the path coefficient magnitude the correlation between brand image on decision selection is 0.752, indicating a positive correlation and suggesting that social media marketing has a favorable impact on brand image. Furthermore, the p-value of 0.000(<0.05), demonstrates that brand image significantly affects decision selection. The findings suggest that brand image has a significant correlation on the decision selections made by prospective students in positive direction. (H3 accepted).

7. Inner Model Test

The inner model test assesses the link among endogenous latent variables affected by other variables. The structural model assessment employs the r-squared (R^2) statistic, as presented in table 7 below:

Table 7. R-Square Value

Variable	R-square	R-square adjusted
Brand Image (Z)	0,502	0,500
Decision on Selection (Y)	0,771	0,770

As shown in table 7, the R-square of the brand image (Z) is 0.502 (adjusted R-square is 0.500), and the R-square of the decision selection (Y) is 0.771 (adjusted R-square is 0.770). Referring to Chin (1998), the R-square is divided into three levels: 0.67 (strong impact), 0.33 (moderate/medium impact) and 0.19 (weak impact). The R-square of the brand image (Z) is 0.502, indicating that social media marketing has a moderate correlation on brand image. In contrast, the R-squared value of the decision selection (Y) is 0.771. This indicates that social media marketing through brand image has a significant (strong) impact on decision selection together. This indicates that the inner model of this study has a high capacity for prediction. The social media marketing variable can explain 50.2% of the variation of the brand image variable, while social media marketing and brand image together can explain 77.1% of the variation of the decision choice variable.

8. Mediation Test

The mediation test is the last test step, as according to Hair et al. (2022), the impact of the mediating variable on the correlation on exogenous variables through endogenous variables is assessed using this test. To evaluate the mediate impact can be using the specific indirect effect value from bootstrapping, as shown in table 8:

Table 8. Spesific Indirect Effect Value

Variable	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics	P values
Social Media Marketing (X) -> Brand Image (Z) -> Decision on Selection (Y)	0,532	0,534	0,030	17,678	0,000

Based on Table 8 above, the following conclusions are obtained:

H4: Social Media Marketing (X) has a positive correlation on prospective students' decisions (Y) in choosing Lampung University mediated by Brand Image (Z).

The mediation test in Table 8 shows that the path coefficient is 0.532 and the p-value is 0.000(<0.05), which indicates that social media marketing has a significant indirect correlation on decision selection through brand image in positive direction (H4 accepted).

In addition, the direct effect analysis described in Table 6 proves the path coefficient of social media marketing (X) on decision selection (Y) is 0.708, and the p-value is 0.000<0.05, confirming the significance of the direct effect. Referring to the study of Hair et al. (2022), this findings referred to as complementary mediation effect (partial mediation effect), are similarly significant and have a positive direction on direct and indirect effects. Therefore, the findings prove that brand image act as a partial mediating act in the impact on social media marketing to decision selection, and social media marketing can directly or indirectly influence decision selection through brand image.

Discussion

1. The Correlation of Social Media Marketing on Brand Image

The empirical findings reveal a substantial positive correlation between social media marketing and brand image (path coefficient = 0.708; p-value = 0.000), confirming hypothesis 1. This correlation coefficient notably exceeds Salhab et al. (2023) finding where social media marketing explained only 45% of brand image variance, while the current study demonstrates approximately 50% variance explanation. The strength of this relationship also surpasses Ali and Naushad (2023) results and aligns more closely with Tauran et al. (2022) findings, though the current coefficient remains higher. However, these findings contrast with Depari and Jocelyn (2024) research, which found that social media marketing influenced brand image but failed to demonstrate effective mediation effects.

The exceptionally strong correlation supports the Consumer-Based Brand Equity theory, where brand image serves as a critical component of brand equity formation. Nevertheless, this robust relationship raises concerns about potential over-reliance on social media marketing, echoing Liu (2024) emphasis on the need for consistent brand building approaches. For Lampung University, these results suggest that while Instagram marketing (@officialunila) represents a strategic priority, diversification of brand-building strategies remains essential to mitigate platform-dependent vulnerabilities and ensure sustainable competitive positioning in Indonesia's higher education landscape.

2. The Correlation of Social Media Marketing on Decision Selection

The empirical findings reveal a moderate positive correlation between social media marketing and decision selection (path coefficient = 0.167; p-value = 0.000), confirming hypothesis 2. However, this correlation coefficient is considerably weaker than the brand image relationship, indicating that social media marketing's direct influence on university selection decisions is limited. This finding aligns with Adam and Gunarto (2021) research, yet contradicts several previous studies where social media marketing showed stronger direct effects. Notably, the current results mirror Ali and Naushad (2023) findings, which demonstrated that social media marketing lacks significant direct impact on decision-making processes, suggesting that indirect pathways through mediating variables may be more influential.

The relatively modest direct correlation raises important theoretical and practical considerations. From a theoretical perspective, this supports the elaboration likelihood model, where high-involvement decisions like university selection require more substantial cognitive processing than can be achieved through social media exposure alone. The weak direct effect suggests that prospective students may be influenced by social media marketing but require additional factors, such as enhanced brand image to translate this influence into actual enrollment decisions. For Lampung University, these findings indicate that while maintaining professional Instagram management (@officialunila) remains important, the institution should not expect social media marketing alone to drive enrollment decisions and must focus on building comprehensive brand equity that mediates these relationships effectively.

3. The Correlation of Brand Image on Decision Selection

The empirical findings reveal a strong positive correlation between brand image and decision selection (path coefficient = 0.752; p-value = 0.000), confirming hypothesis 3 and representing the strongest relationship among all tested variables. This substantial correlation coefficient indicates that brand image explains approximately 57% of the variance in university selection decisions, significantly exceeding the direct effect of social media marketing (0.167). These results strongly support Rihayana et al. (2022) and Rosanti et al. (2021) findings, while demonstrating an even stronger relationship magnitude. However, the exceptionally high correlation raises questions about potential common method bias or the

possibility that brand image and decision selection may share overlapping conceptual domains in respondents' minds.

The dominance of brand image as a predictor suggests that prospective students' university selection decisions are fundamentally driven by institutional reputation and perceived quality rather than marketing exposure alone. This finding aligns with signaling theory, where brand image serves as a quality signal that reduces information asymmetry in high-stakes educational decisions. Nevertheless, the extremely strong correlation warrants cautious interpretation, as it may indicate that brand image has become so central to university selection that other important factors, such as academic programs, facilities, or costs are being overshadowed. For Lampung University, these results emphasize that while social media marketing through @officialunila is important for brand building, the institution must focus on substantive brand equity development through academic excellence, student outcomes, and authentic reputation management rather than relying solely on promotional activities.

4. The Correlation of Social Media Marketing on Decision Selection Mediated by Brand Image

The mediation analysis reveals a substantial indirect effect of social media marketing on decision selection through brand image (path coefficient = 0.532; p-value = 0.000), confirming hypothesis 4 and establishing complementary partial mediation. This indirect pathway (0.532) demonstrates considerably stronger influence than the direct relationship between social media marketing and decision selection (0.167), indicating that brand image amplifies social media marketing effectiveness by over 300%. These findings align with Sumarga et al. (2024) research, though the current study shows stronger mediation effects. The mediation coefficient also surpasses several previous studies, including Tauran et al. (2022) findings where brand image provided complete mediation, suggesting that partial mediation may be more realistic in educational contexts where multiple decision factors remain relevant.

The dominance of the indirect pathway supports the two-step flow theory of communication, where social media marketing first influences brand perceptions before affecting behavioral intentions. However, the strength of this mediation effect raises important strategic considerations. While the results validate the importance of brand image as a mediator, the substantial difference between direct (0.167) and indirect (0.532) effects suggests that social media marketing may be ineffective without simultaneous brand image enhancement. For Lampung University, these findings indicate that @officialunila Instagram management should prioritize brand-building content over direct promotional messages, focusing on reputation enhancement, academic achievement showcases, and authentic student experiences that strengthen institutional image rather than merely increasing engagement metrics.

CONCLUSION

This article aims to evaluate the correlation on social media marketing through the Instagram account @officialunila and potential students' decision making, mediated by brand image. Utilizing partial least squares (PLS) as the analytical method, the findings implies that social media marketing through the Instagram account @officialunila has a significant correlation on the brand image of Lampung University. Social media marketing through the Instagram account @officialunila has a significant impact on prospective students' decision selection. The brand image conveyed by the Instagram account @officialunila has a significant impact on prospective students' decision selection. Social media marketing through the Instagram account @officialunila significant impact on prospective students' decision selection mediated by brand image. All hypotheses have a correlation with a positive direction. Act of Social media marketing on decision selection, which mediated by brand image is under the condition of complementary mediation (partial mediation), indicating the correlation of social media marketing on decision making is not only direct but also indirect through the brand image.

According to the findings and conclusions that have been presented, there are several suggestions that can be given, namely, for Lampung University, it is recommended to continue to develop social media content that is informative, interesting, and in accordance with the characteristics of the digital generation and manage the @officialunila Instagram account more professionally in order to strengthen brand image and increase The interest of prospective students in selecting Lampung University. While for further research suggested that different variables be used that can provide a developing perspective in this article because this article is only limited to social media marketing, brand image, and decision selection, subsequent research may develop alternative models, methodologies, or case studies to enhance understanding of social media marketing's influence on decision selection, as mediated by brand image.

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