

Pawar, Sanjay Krishnapratap

## Article

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# Social media in higher education marketing: a systematic literature review and research agenda

Sanjay Krishnapratap Pawar 

Symbiosis Institute of Management Studies, Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune, India

## ABSTRACT

The extensive use of social media in higher education marketing has attracted substantial research interest, which, however, appears fragmented to offer clear pathways. This research, therefore, aims to (1) systematically scrutinise and compile the empirical line of research on social media in higher education marketing and (2) outline a comprehensive and pertinent research agenda to advance this field. This study adopts the SPAR-4-SLR protocol and the TCCM (theories–contexts–characteristics–methods) framework to review 51 articles published in journals ranked B or above in the ABDC JQL. This literature review establishes the use of social media in five key areas of marketing for higher education, namely, student engagement, university branding, enrolment decision-making, relationship management and strategic marketing. The present study paints the most comprehensive picture of social media in higher education marketing by considering the theoretical underpinnings, research settings, variables of interest, and the research methods used in the reviewed literature. This study then develops a research agenda that suggests novel theoretical perspectives, contexts, associations and methodologies. Additionally, the practical and theoretical implications of this review are discussed.

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## SUBJECTS

Marketing; International Marketing; Internet/Digital Marketing/e-Marketing; Services Marketing

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background of this systematic literature review

The escalating competition to recruit and retain students makes it incumbent for universities to craft more effective marketing plans (Burton et al., 2021; MacEachern, 2018; Pawar, 2023). Concurrently, the rapid spread of social media has profoundly transformed the marketing scenario in many ways (Li et al., 2023; Minazzi, 2015; Pop et al., 2022). Social media offers higher education institutions (HEIs) a cost-effective medium to enhance awareness and build an image to help attract prospective university students (Bamberger et al., 2020; Galan et al., 2015). Social media marketing, defined as the ‘utilisation of social media technologies, channels, and software to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange offerings that have value for an organisation’s stakeholders’ (Tuten & Solomon, 2014, p. 21), is present in several forms. These forms include social networking sites, communities, and virtual worlds. Social media activities on these platforms are multifaceted; they encompass ‘entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation, and word of mouth’ (Kim & Ko, 2012, p. 1484), thus enabling exciting university-student exchange prospects. Furthermore, the social media database is a rich source of market intelligence for universities (Gai et al., 2016; Zhu, 2019). Scholars have produced a growing volume of empirical inquiry to improve our understanding of social media in higher education (HE) marketing. However, the present information on the topic appears highly fragmented and cannot yield clear insights and directions (Cingillioglu et al., 2023). Extant literature shows that social media in HE marketing impacts several university marketing objectives and meaningfully influences prospective, enrolled, and former students.

**CONTACT** Sanjay Krishnapratap Pawar  [sanjay.pawar@sims.edu](mailto:sanjay.pawar@sims.edu); [sanjaypawar0822@gmail.com](mailto:sanjaypawar0822@gmail.com)  Symbiosis Institute of Management Studies, Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Range Hills Road, Khadki, Pune 411020, India.

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Furthermore, given the complexity and the diversity of the contextual factors, such as the nature and capabilities of the social media platforms, the student segments of relevance (e.g. domestic and international), and the wide-ranging constructs, antecedents, and outcomes, it is incumbent for scholars to offer a complete and integrative view of the extant knowledge on the topic.

### **1.2. Present state of literature reviews in this field**

A search for journal articles in the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases that systematically review the social media in marketing of HE literature yielded only a few such attempts. This may be because the volume of articles on social media in HE marketing has reached a stage that meaningfully warrants a literature review only in recent years. Harbi and Mohammed Maqsood (2022) reviewed articles over a six-year timeline. Their review encompasses several elements of the digital marketing of the HE domain, with social media marketing of HE research as one of its constituents. Next, Cingillioglu et al. (2023) reviewed articles for a ten-year timeline using a novel algorithmic document sequencing method to offer valuable insights. Their review identifies seven clusters highlighting seven key findings. Overall, the earlier attempts to review the topic lack comprehensiveness in investigating the phenomenon. Pointedly, an elaborate classification of the settings (i.e. domestic or international market context), a summarisation of the methods used or a classification of the variables of interest were found wanting.

As described above, the content analysis of existing reviews reveals the absence of a wide-ranging synthesis of the empirical literature. This leaves room for a state-of-the-art framework-based systematic literature review in the field of social media marketing of HE. Against this background, the aim of this review and the research questions it seeks to answer are stated and explained in the following section.

### **1.3. Purpose and the research questions of this systematic literature review**

This review aims to (1) systematically scrutinise and compile the empirical research on social media in higher education marketing and (2) outline a comprehensive and pertinent research agenda to advance this field. This systematic review contains only empirical studies. This is mainly because such articles are evidence-based and report on clearly defined constructs. Pointedly, the research questions of this review are:

RQ1. What theories, contexts, characteristics, and methods have been applied in the empirical inquiries on social media in higher education marketing?

RQ2. What are the current gaps and future research directions in social media marketing for higher education?

Directed by its two research questions, it was decided to practice the Scientific Procedures and Rationales for Systematic Literature Reviews (SPAR-4-SLR) protocol (Paul et al., 2021) to lead and rationalise decisions in this review and the Theories–Contexts–Characteristics–Methods (TCCM) framework to structure the review (Paul & Rosado-Serrano, 2019).

### **1.4. Originality of this systematic literature review**

Unlike the narrow breadth of the previous attempts to review this topic, this systematic literature review takes an inclusive and orderly approach. The area of the review is explicit to social media in the marketing of HE, and the scope entails multiple constructs concerning the phenomenon. Hence, the present systematic literature review is poised to empower social media in the marketing for HE research field by providing a single-source view of wide-ranging insights.

### **1.5. Deemed contributions of this systematic literature review**

This framework-driven systematic literature review strives to (1) merge the empirical research on social media in the marketing of HE, (2) overcome the shortcomings of extant reviews, and (3) direct

future research in the field. Specifically, this review is designed to make the following three core contributions.

First, this review provides a more structured and inclusive assessment by adopting the SPAR-4-SLR procedure and a TCCM framework-based systematic literature review approach compared to the more basic approach adopted in earlier reviews. The TCCM framework-based approach of this study helps synchronise fragmented knowledge on social media in the marketing for HE research to deliver insights that should help scholars grasp the current state of the empirical literature. This synthesised knowledge of theories of interest, contexts, antecedent classifications and methodologies, in turn, enables a logical way to recognise research gaps and advance a potentially fruitful research agenda to inspire future researchers in the HE marketing domain. Second, the design of this review considers all empirical articles in the field of social media in the marketing of HE regardless of the time of publication. Hence, different from extant reviews, this paper enhances our information on the topic by steering a descriptive analysis of the extant empirical examinations for the most comprehensive review period. Third, unlike earlier reviews, the present study provides a multi-layered arrangement of the variables of interest to paint a more insightful picture of quantitative assessments on the research topic.

### ***1.6. Structure of this systematic literature review***

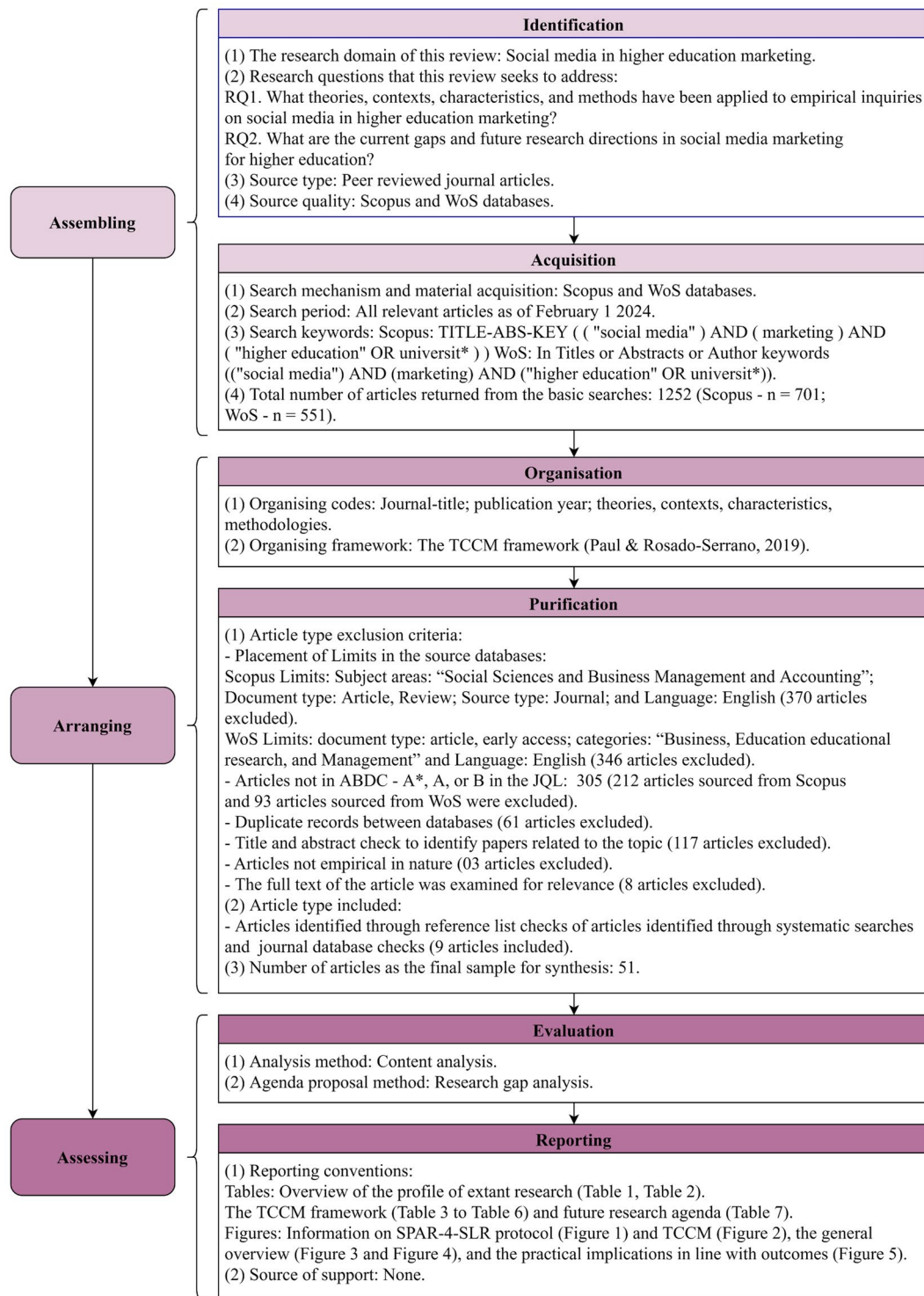
The following section of this framework-based systematic literature review discusses its methodological intricacies. Next is a presentation of the general outline of the articles under review, followed by an overall perspective on the relevant research streams and their thematic focus. After this, by employing the TCCM protocol, the paper discusses the theories, contexts, characteristics, and methods in the reviewed articles to enable a response to this study's initial research question. In the ensuing section, in line with the insights that the TCCM framework provides, a future research agenda on the use of social media in HE marketing, also aligned with the TCCM framework, is presented, thus shedding light on the answer to the second research question that this review seeks to address. This review then offers a portrayal of the implications for practice and theory. Lastly, the conclusion section reiterates the main idea of this review, as well as its main findings and limitations.

## **2. Investigation method**

A systematic literature review approach was chosen for its rigour and procedural replicability to locate, select and synthesise extant studies in response to the stated research aim (Paul & Criado, 2020). To safeguard rigour and transparency in curating the collection of articles on social media in marketing HE, this assessment followed the SPAR-4-SLR protocol (Paul et al., 2021). To enable a precise and holistic understanding of the said research field, a domain-specific framework-based systematic literature review approach – the TCCM review protocol (Paul & Rosado-Serrano, 2019) was used to organise the synthesis of reviewed studies.

### ***2.1. Procedure to curate the articles***

This review followed the SPAR-4-SLR procedure developed by Paul and Criado (2020), which encompasses three main stages: assembling, arranging, and assessing (see Figure 1). Within each of these aforementioned stages are two sub-stages. The assembling phase encompasses literature identification and acquisition, the arranging phase entails literature organisation and purification, and the assessing phase covers literature evaluation and reporting. Further, every sub-stage is characterised by distinct criteria points (Paul et al., 2021). The SPAR-4-SLR protocol enabled a basis for delivering advanced insights and thought-provoking research agendas that will be justified based on sound and pragmatic rationales (Paul et al., 2021). SPAR-4-SLR has earlier been effectively used in marketing discipline-led literature reviews published in top-rated journals (e.g. Ameen et al., 2022; Amoozad Mahdiraji et al., 2024; Pawar, 2023).



**Figure 1.** The SPAR-4-SLR protocol.

### 2.1.1. Assembling

**2.1.1.1. Identification.** The identification course has four items in the following order: (1) domain, (2) research questions, (3) source type and (4) source quality (Paul et al., 2021). Initially, the research domain and the two research questions were itemised. Scopus and WoS were selected as the source databases for their wide acceptance and consistency in the quality of articles (Bhatia et al., 2021; Paul et al., 2021). Additionally, both these databases offered pertinent information to support noteworthy insights into literature reviews (Paul et al., 2021). Two databases (Scopus and WoS) were chosen instead of either to deliver distinguishing but consistent results (Zhao & Strotmann, 2015).

**2.1.1.2. Acquisition.** The second sub-stage of acquisition involved three items: (1) search mechanism and material acquisition, (2) search period, and (3) search keywords (Paul et al., 2021). All the searches were conducted on 1 February 2024, and the search started with the Scopus database. No start or end date was specified in database searches, given the intention to include articles on social media in marketing for HE, irrespective of the publication date. In the Scopus database, the initial search string – TITLE-ABS-KEY (("social media") AND (marketing) AND ("higher education" OR universit\*)) yielded 701 results. Next, in the WoS database, the initial search string (("social media") AND (marketing) AND ("higher education" OR universit\*)) in titles or abstracts or author keywords yielded 551 results.

## **2.1.2. Arranging**

**2.1.2.1. Organisation.** In the organisation part, pertinent bibliographic specifications were initially noted. The literature was coded in line with the organising framework (the TCCM framework advanced by Paul and Rosado-Serrano (2019).

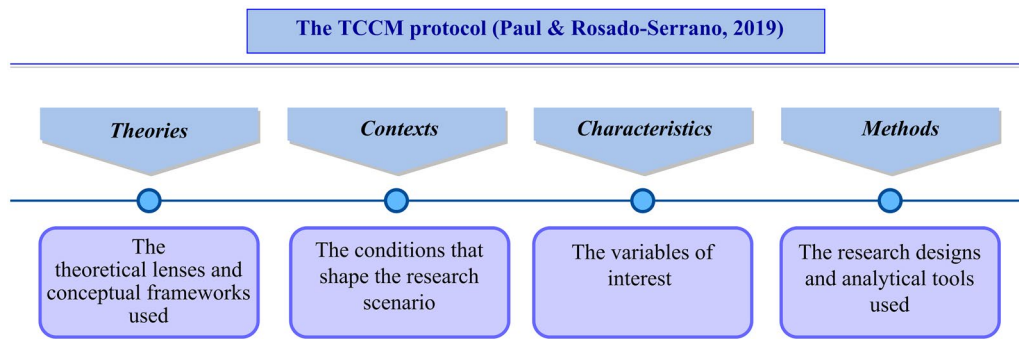
**2.1.2.2. Purification.** The purification course in the article curation ladder entailed executing the article exclusion criterion and ascertaining the articles selected for review. The article exclusion activity followed six-step criteria. Initially, in the Scopus database, limits were placed to include the Subject areas: 'Social Sciences and Business Management and Accounting'; Document type: Article, Review; Source type: Journal; and Language: English. Next, On the WoS database, 'refine' parameters were set to retain document type: Article, early access; WoS categories: 'Business, Education educational research, and Management' and Language: English. Articles in peer-reviewed academic journals (published or 'in press') were prioritised for their rigorous peer-review processes and contribution to furthering knowledge on the particular topic of interest (Paul et al., 2021). The databases' other document categories (e.g. proceedings papers, book chapters) were not considered. At this point, 536 articles remained for further consideration.

Second, papers in journals ranked A\*, A, or B in the ABDC JQL 2022 were listed as the essential quality standard. This source quality criterion offered two fundamental benefits. One focuses on articles with novelty, and two is a more manageable number of articles for assessment. Applying this exclusion criteria resulted in the retention of 231 articles. Third, articles duplicated over the two databases were omitted; 170 remained. Fourth, the respective papers' titles and abstracts were carefully read to check their relevance and articles that had nothing to do with social media in the marketing of HE were removed; at this stage, 53 articles remained. Fifth, we require the article to be empirical. Case studies, purely conceptual contributions, and qualitative literature reviews were excluded. Eventually, after applying all six exclusion criteria points, 50 articles remained. Sixth, the texts of articles that reached this point were read in full to confirm their centrality toward the research domain for this review. Studies that were not explicitly focused on social media in HE marketing were excluded. 42 articles on social media in the marketing of HE qualified as the sample articles to be reviewed. Next, online checks of relevant journals and the reference lists in the articles for inclusion were made. This effort was towards not losing out on articles that had not been traced thus far. This course resulted in the recovery of 9 relevant articles. To finish, a body of 51 articles was subjected to content analysis to evaluate existing knowledge.

## **2.1.3. Assessing**

**2.1.3.1. Evaluation.** Literature was evaluated using thematic and content analysis. The use of the TCCM structure in evaluating the content of the articles in this review improved the reliability of the results. The TCCM protocol also helped recognise research gaps scientifically and inclusively.

**2.1.3.2. Reporting.** The results are itemised in line with the TCCM framework to enhance the transparency and comprehensiveness in reporting results. Additionally, the tables and figures support the understanding presented through the TCCM scheme. The research gaps and future agenda are also reported following the TCCM procedure. Subsequently, the implications of this study are discussed.



**Figure 2.** The TCCM research design.

## 2.2. Organising framework

This systematic literature review employs the TCCM protocol established by Paul and Rosado-Serrano (2019) to organise the reviewed articles (see Figure 2). Further, the TCCM framework facilitated the recognition of knowledge gaps and was a basis for thoroughly offering a future research agenda. This research rationalises the TCCM framework as theory (theories of significance and the logical groupings of these theories), context (the foundations that shape the study), characteristics (the variables under consideration), and methodology (the research approach). Employing the TCCM strategy to assemble the review helped attain a higher level of clarity and coverage, enhancing the utility and impact of this research compared to other domain-centric reviews (Paul et al., 2021). The TCCM framework has been successfully used in several business and management research domain literature reviews published in highly ranked journals (e.g. Aaltonen, 2020; Jain et al., 2024; Pawar, 2023). A possible limitation of this framework may lie in its constrained emphasis on providing in-depth information on a construct's nomological network compared to a more construct-relationship-focused framework (Paul et al., 2023).

## 3. General overview

### 3.1. Publication trends

This review identified 51 articles published in 17 journals. Table 1 offers a view of the journal-wise publication of these articles. Marketing is the foremost field that addresses this topic, and 12 such journals made available 86.3% of the articles in this review. This number indicates the high relevance of this emerging research area to marketing research. Journals in four other fields, such as information systems and strategy and management, also attend to this topic, indicating that social media in HE is an interdisciplinary topic with a high bearing on scholarly works. A large proportion of articles (86.3%) are offered in journals ranked B, while the other articles were published in journals ranked A in the ABDC JQL. Social media in the marketing of HE is a young research discipline that has witnessed a sharp spread in article publications lately. An empirical research article in a 'high quality' journal first appeared in 2011. After a measured start, the eminence of empirical research in the social media marketing of HE has grown exponentially, particularly since 2015 (see Figure 3). This further emphasises the timeliness of this review.

### 3.2. Thematic focus of the reviewed literature

A marketing strategy perspective drove the categorisation of the reviewed articles into five main research streams. These are labelled as (i) social media as a consumer engagement channel, (ii) social media as a branding channel, (iii) the use of social media to influence the enrolment decision-making, (iv) social media as a customer relationship management (CRM) tool and (v) social media as a general marketing and strategic tool. Table 2 summarises the main streams and their respective themes and sub-themes.

**Table 1.** Publications included in this review.

Journal	n	%	Rating	Articles
<i>Journal of Marketing for Higher Education</i>	31	60.8	B	Bonilla et al. (2020), Bonilla Quijada et al. (2022), Brandão and Ramos (2023), Brech et al. (2017), Capriotti et al. (2023), Clark et al. (2017), Condie et al. (2018), Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2011), Edwards and Omillion-Hodges (2022), Eger et al. (2021), Farhat et al. (2021), Gai et al. (2016), Galan et al. (2015), Jan and Ammari (2016), Karadağ et al. (2022), Kethüda and Bilgin (2023), Le et al. (2023), Lee (2023), Lund (2019), Mai To et al. (2022), Mwenda et al. (2019), Peruta and Shields (2017), Peruta and Shields (2018), Pringle and Fritz (2019), Salgado and Vela (2019), Shah et al. (2024), Shields and Peruta (2019), Simiyu et al. (2020), Sorensen et al. (2023), Teng et al. (2015), Zhu (2019).
<i>International Journal of Educational Management</i>	3	5.9	B	Fujita et al. (2017), Perera et al. (2023a), Song et al. (2023).
<i>Corporate Communications: An International Journal</i>	2	3.9	B	Larson and Salvador (2020), Stuart et al. (2017)
<i>Journal of Marketing Management</i>	2	3.9	A	Bolat and O'Sullivan (2017), Lee et al. (2020).
<i>Online Information Review</i>	1	2	B	Soares et al. (2022)
<i>Global Knowledge, Memory and Communication</i>	1	2	B	Momen et al. (2019).
<i>International Journal of Retail &amp; Distribution Management</i>	1	2	A	Assimakopoulos et al. (2017)
<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	1	2	A	Rutter et al. (2016)
<i>Journal of Global Marketing</i>	1	2	B	Wahid and Gunarto (2022)
<i>Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management</i>	1	2	B	Palmer (2013)
<i>Journal of Marketing Communications</i>	1	2	B	Perera et al. (2023a)
<i>Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice</i>	1	2	B	Fujita et al. (2018)
<i>Journal of Nonprofit &amp; Public Sector Marketing</i>	1	2	B	Alfonzo (2023)
<i>Journal of Relationship Marketing</i>	1	2	B	Linville et al. (2015)
<i>Journal of Services Marketing</i>	1	2	A	Burton et al. (2021)
<i>Journal of Service Theory and Practice</i>	1	2	A	Wu et al. (2019)
<i>Studies in Higher Education</i>	1	2	A	Comai (2024)
Total	51	100		

**Figure 3.** Publishing trends.

### 3.2.1. Social media as a consumer engagement channel

Given the collective practice of using social media in communicating with the target consumer set, several studies have focused on social media as a channel for HEIs to engage students. For example, scholars have dealt with the factors that intensify engagement on HEI-created forums on popular social media platforms such as Facebook (Assimakopoulos et al. (2017; Soares et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2019), Instagram (Bonilla et al., 2020; Stuart et al., 2017; Wahid & Gunarto, 2022) and Twitter (Palmer, 2013) (hereafter referred to as X). In a study emphasising student implications such as acculturation, content

**Table 2.** Research streams.

Research stream	Theme	Sub-theme	Examples of explicit issues addressed
<i>Stream 1: Social media as a consumer engagement channel (<math>n_1 = 24</math>)</i>	Social media for student engagement ( $n_{1a} = 21$ ) Social media communication ( $n_{1b} = 3$ )	An analysis of university-posted content for better engagement ( $n_{1a1} = 14$ ) An analysis of student-generated content for better engagement ( $n_{1a2} = 3$ )	Example of $n_{1a1}$ : Analyse the impact of the aspects in post images (Bonilla et al., 2020). Example of $n_{1a1}$ : Investigate the use of university FB sites by students searching for information about their branches (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017). Example of $n_{1a2}$ : Understand student-generated HE experiences-related content (Bolat & O'Sullivan, 2017). Example of $n_{1b}$ : Explain the intricate process of producing effective social networking content (Alfonzo, 2023).
<i>Stream 2: Social media as a branding channel (<math>n_2 = 15</math>)</i>	Brand personality ( $n_{2a} = 5$ ) Brand equity ( $n_{2b} = 4$ ) Online brand communities ( $n_{2c} = 2$ ) Other brand-driven topics ( $n_{2d} = 4$ )	Understanding the impact of brand personality on enrolment behaviour ( $n_{2a1} = 1$ ) Brand equity drivers ( $n_{2b1} = 1$ ) Brand equity development strategy ( $n_{2b2} = 3$ )	Example of $n_{2b1}$ : Evaluating the indirect effect of brand personality on the relationship between social media and the student's behavioural intentions (Simiyu et al., 2020). Example of $n_{2b1}$ : To know the link between brand experience, brand interactivity, and brand engagement on social media (Farhat et al., 2021). Example of $n_{2b2}$ : To know the effects of eWOM on the HEIs' brand equity (Brandão & Ramos, 2023). Example of $n_{2d1}$ : To offer HEIs new ways to increase brand loyalty through social media fan pages (Salgado & Vela, 2019). Example of $n_{2d2}$ : To understand the legitimacy of the typical brand promises of HEIs (Pringle & Fritz, 2019).
<i>Stream 3: Social media to influence the student enrolment decision-making process (<math>n_3 = 5</math>)</i>	Impact of social media on the enrolment decision-making process of students ( $n_3 = 5$ )		Example of $n_3$ : Understanding the information students seek for enrolment decision-making process purposes (Galan et al., 2015). Example of $n_3$ : Understanding the relevance of social media to narrow their search to help make enrolment decisions (Shields & Peruta, 2019).
<i>Stream 4: Social media as a customer relationship management channel (<math>n_4 = 4</math>)</i>	University advocates ( $n_{4a} = 2$ ) Social media relationship capabilities ( $n_{4b} = 2$ )		Example of $n_{4a1}$ : To know the role of social media marketing in converting students into university advocates (Kethüda & Bilgin, 2023). Example of $n_{4a2}$ : To examine social media CRM capabilities (Shah et al., 2024).
<i>Stream 5: Social media as a general marketing and strategic tool (<math>n_5 = 3</math>)</i>	Social media as a general marketing tool ( $n_5 = 3$ )		Example of $n_5$ : Understanding the enablers and challenges to digital marketing (Comai, 2024). Example of $n_5$ : Examining the attitude that HEIs need to use social media to achieve their goals successfully (Zailskaitė-Jakstė & Kuvykaite, 2012).

concerning international student experiences on the HEI's social media was studied with a consumer engagement perspective (Fujita et al., 2017). Furthermore, other studies on engagement include examining the association between engagement and the HEI attributes (e.g. number of students enrolled) (Lund, 2019) and across leading platforms (Capriotti et al., 2023; Sorensen et al., 2023).

In an alternative setting, engagement-focused studies have also examined conversations and content on platforms created by and for HE students. For example, student interactions on a Facebook (FB) page created by students are analysed to engage them further and attain HEI branding objectives (Bolat & O'Sullivan, 2017). Another such instance is a unique study examining user-generated satire (humorous parody) to learn about student engagement in this setting (Larson & Salvador, 2020).

### ***3.2.2. Social media as a branding channel***

Social media can help HEIs create brand awareness irrespective of the geographical location of the host HEI or the student source market (Gai et al., 2016; Galan et al., 2015; Peruta & Shields, 2017). For example, HEIs as brands and the FB page as a medium to communicate relevant information to the target audience, including domestic and overseas students (Brech et al., 2017; Peruta & Shields, 2017). Moreover, the followers of HEIs on social media (e.g. FB) are also associated with the HEI's recruitment success, given that the followers denote brand strength (Rutter et al., 2016). Through their expressions on social media platforms and by forming brand communities, students actively help co-create the HEI brand (Burton et al., 2021; Larson & Salvador, 2020; Le et al., 2023; Peruta & Shields, 2017). Social media boosts HEI brand promotion, allowing universities to create a brand personality and to support differentiation as a response to the ever-increasing competition in the HE industry (Eger et al., 2021; Karadağ et al., 2022).

The literature on the branding of universities is expanding (Lomer et al., 2018; Sataøen, 2019), and in this milieu, lately, scholars have shown particular interest in examining the role of social media. Researchers have empirically examined and offered insights on brand elements such as brand personality (Karadağ et al., 2022; Simiyu et al., 2020), brand equity (Perera et al., 2023a; 2023b), online brand communities (Salgado & Vela, 2019), brand loyalty (Salgado & Vela, 2019; Song et al., 2023) and brand promise (Pringle & Fritz, 2019).

### ***3.2.3. The use of social media to influence the enrolment decision-making***

Extant research on social media in the marketing of university education provides evidence that social media is a prominent means to gain information, post reviews, and share experiences. It influences multiple stages of enrolment decision-making of university students, thereby becoming a potentially effective tool for universities to increase enrolments (Galan et al., 2015; Jan & Ammari, 2016). For example, prospective students use social media prominently in the information search stage (Shields & Peruta, 2019); herein, they seek information through alumni reviews, the opinions from fellow applicants, and other eWOM sources (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Gai et al., 2016; Galan et al., 2015). Gai et al. (2016) propose a five-stage enrolment decision-making in the Chinese international student context. Hence, social media is a relevant tool that influences the enrolment decision-making of students.

### ***3.2.4. Social media as a customer relationship management channel***

To proliferate and achieve goals, it has become imperative for HEIs to sustain a favourable relationship with the target student set. Herein, Clark et al. (2017) find a positive link between students following an HEI over their social media platform(s) and the student's perception of a higher relationship strength with the HEI. Furthermore, the reviewed articles also give insights into how HEI promoters (Kethüda & Bilgin, 2023) and university leaders, represented by business communicators (Edwards & Omilion-Hodges, 2022) might use social media to forge relationships with the target audience and create customer loyalty (Kethüda & Bilgin, 2023; Shah et al., 2024).

### ***3.2.5. Social media as a general marketing and strategic tool***

The studies included in this research stream have examined the enablers and challenges for HEIs to practice social media marketing. For example, Comai (2024) found that the significant challenges for HEIs to practice digital marketing include the knowledge transfer of digital marketing to staff and other stakeholders, the rapidly evolving nature of the tools and technology of digital marketing, and the particular metrics to quantify its success. There are also concerns about social media effectively communicating a unique value proposition. The other research in this stream examines the HEI's attitudes towards social



**Figure 4.** Dispersal of the research streams.

media as an agent for achieving HEI objectives and using videos as a promotion tool by HEIs. For example, Mwenda et al. (2019) note the lack of differentiated offerings as a weakness across advertisement videos of the sample universities.

### 3.2.6. Distribution of the research streams

Our breakdown reveals that examinations of social media as a consumer engagement channel were more frequent than those in all other streams, followed by those on social media as a branding channel (see Figure 4). On the other hand, on a comparative basis, studies on social media as a platform to influence enrolment, as a CRM channel, and as a general marketing tool were conducted less frequently.

## 4. TCCM agenda-guided review of articles

Observing the TCCM agenda (Paul & Rosado-Serrano, 2019), the ensuing sub-sections inform on the theories, contexts, characteristics and methods in the reviewed articles.

### 4.1. Theoretical underpinnings (theories)

A significant proportion (about 75%) of the articles reviewed refer to theories. In these, 31 theories have been used. These 31 theories are aligned to the specific conceptual clusters and, in turn, the five research streams mentioned above (see Table 3). Despite its popularity as a topic in the reviewed literature, the *first* stream, social media as a consumer engagement channel, does not entail many theoretical foundations; two are included under the conceptual cluster of integrated marketing communications and one under consumer engagement. The *second* stream, social media as a branding channel, involves several

**Table 3.** List of theories.

Stream	Conceptual Cluster	Key theoretical approach	<i>n</i>	Sample article(s)
<i>Stream 1: Social media as a consumer engagement channel</i>	Marketing communication (2)	Integrated marketing communication	1	Momen et al. (2019)
	Consumer engagement (1)	Message Credibility Online consumer engagement	1 10	Edwards and Omilion-Hodges (2022) Bolat and O'Sullivan (2017), Bonilla Quijada et al. (2022)
<i>Stream 2: Social media as a branding channel</i>	Brand (10)	Brand image	5	Kethüda and Bilgin (2023), Song et al. (2023)
		Brand equity	4	Momen et al. (2019), Perera et al. (2023b)
		Brand community	4	Burton et al. (2021), Larson and Salvador (2020)
		Brand personality	2	Simiyu et al. (2020)
		Brand engagement	1	Farhat et al. (2021)
		Social Brand Engagement	1	Perera et al. (2023a)
		Brand Promise	1	Pringle and Fritz (2019)
		Corporate branding	1	Rutter et al. (2016)
		Brand positioning	1	Mai To et al. (2022)
		Brand co-creation	1	Le et al. (2023)
		CDM process	3	Gai et al. (2016), Galan et al. (2015)
<i>Stream 3: Social media as a platform to influence enrolment decision-making</i>	Consumer decision-making (1)			
	Consumer behaviour (4)	Elaboration likelihood model	2	Teng et al. (2015)
		Technology Acceptance Model	2	Assimakopoulos et al. (2017)
		Theory of planned behaviour	1	Simiyu et al. (2020)
		Information processing fluency and memory	1	Lee (2023)
	Social (6)	Social identity theory	3	Fujita et al. (2018), Perera et al. (2023b)
		Congruity theory	2	Shah et al. (2024)
		Social exchange theory	2	Clark et al. (2017)
		Self-presentational behaviour	1	Brech et al. (2017)
		Social attraction	1	Edwards and Omilion-Hodges (2022)
		Interaction theory	1	Wahid and Gunarto (2022)
<i>Stream 4: Social media as a CRM channel</i>	CRM (3)	eWOM	4	Galan et al. (2015), Kethüda and Bilgin (2023)
		Relationship quality	1	Clark et al. (2017)
		Consumer satisfaction and loyalty	1	Kethüda and Bilgin (2023)
<i>Stream 5: Social media as a general marketing and strategic tool</i>	Segmenting-targeting-positioning (3)	Market segmentation	1	Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2011)
		Service environment	1	Burton et al. (2021)
		Marketing influencers	1	Burton et al. (2021)
	Competitive advantage (1)	Cost leadership and Differentiation	1	Karadağ et al. (2022)

Note: The number of articles (#) is more than the total reviewed articles because some draw on multiple theoretical approaches.

theories. The concepts often referred to in this research stream are brand image, brand equity, and brand community. The *third* stream, social media as a platform to influence enrolment decisions, entails the CDM process, consumer behaviour and the social perspective clusters. The CDM process model, the elaboration likelihood model, the technology acceptance model, the social identity theory, the congruity theory and the social exchange theory have guided more than one study each. The *fourth* stream, social media as a CRM channel, entails using the concept of eWOM more frequently than the other concepts referred to in this research stream. Finally, the *fifth* stream, social media as a general marketing tool, contains four theories, three in the conceptual cluster of segmenting-targeting-positioning and one under competitive advantage.

#### 4.2. Scope of research (contexts)

Contexts are the conditions that underlie the enquiry (Paul et al., 2017). This analysis deliberates on three contextual conditions that form the basis of the 51 studies under assessment. These conditions are (1) the social media platform(s) of interest, (2) the geographical location of the host HEI and (3) the consumer market orientation of the study (see Table 4). Regarding social media platforms, slightly more than one-third of the articles took a generic view, i.e. do not focus on a particular platform. On the other

**Table 4.** Contextual coverage.

Context	<i>n</i>	%	Sample article(s)
<i>Social media platform(s)</i>			
Various	17	33.3	Kethüda and Bilgin (2023), Perera et al. (2023a)
X and FB	3	5.9	Rutter et al. (2016)
FB, Instagram, and X	2	3.9	Clark et al. (2017)
FB, X, and LinkedIn	1	2	Capriotti et al. (2023)
FB and Instagram	1	2	Fujita et al. (2017)
Weibo and WeChat	1	2	Zhu (2019)
Only ChaseDream	1	2	Gai et al. (2016)
Only FB	13	25.5	Assimakopoulos et al. (2017), Brech et al. (2017)
Only Instagram	4	7.8	Stuart et al., 2017
Only Pinterest	1	2	Linville et al. (2015)
Only X	4	7.8	Edwards and Omilion-Hodges (2022).
University-led self-contained community	1	2	Burton et al. (2021)
Only Weibo	1	2	Wu et al. (2019)
Only YouTube	1	2	Mwenda et al. (2019)
<i>The HEI host country occurrence</i>			
Not host country-specific	2	3.9	Bonilla Quijada et al. (2022)
The U.S.	13	25.5	Larson and Salvador (2020), Peruta and Shields (2018)
The U.K.	6	11.8	Stuart et al., 2017
Australia	5	9.8	Fujita et al. (2017)
Malaysia	3	5.9	Song et al. (2023)
Vietnam	3	5.9	Le et al. (2023)
Canada, China, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Turkey	2 each	3.9 each	Karadağ et al. (2022), Mai To et al. (2022)
Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Greece, Serbia, Brazil, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Kenya, Lithuania, Mexico, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland	1 each	2 each	Sorensen et al. (2023), Simiyu et al. (2020)
<i>Consumer market emphasis</i>			
Generic	46	90.2	Alfonzo (2023), Condie et al. (2018)
International students	5	9.8	Gai et al. (2016), Zhu (2019)

hand, numerous studies specify more than one platform to base their study or focus exclusively on a particular platform. Several studies exclusively base their study on FB, followed by Instagram and X, although to a much lesser extent. This finding is much anticipated, given the worldwide prevalence of these three platforms. The China-based Weibo was the platform of choice in two studies. Regarding the HEI host country background in the reviewed studies, the English-speaking HE systems are dominant, with the U.S. being the frontrunner. The wide assortment of host countries and regions indicates a geographically broad research base in examining the topic. Lastly, in the third condition, it was found that only about 10 per cent of the studies emphasised the overseas market. This is surprising as several developed and emerging HE systems have adopted sophisticated marketing strategies (Pawar, 2023) and policy changes to recruit international students.

#### 4.3. Variables of interest (characteristics)

Founded on the studies employing a quantitative line, 25 articles out of all the studies under review were considered suitable for assessing construct variables and their linkages. The variables were initially grouped based on their role as independent, mediating, moderating, control or dependent; they were then distinguished into sub-groups based on the research streams of the present study (see Table 5). For example, in the social media user engagement research stream – the wide-ranging independent variables category includes posting frequency, posting length, engagement duration, X followers and tweets.

#### 4.4. Research approach (methods)

This section entails the features of the quantitative investigations. Table 6 presents (1) the analytical approach, (2) the data collection mode, (3) the informant groups, and (4) the analytical methods. A noticeably high proportion of studies use a quantitative approach compared to those that adopt a qualitative approach or a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. A possible reason may be that several studies aim to understand user engagement, measured through social

**Table 5.** Variables examined.

Variables	<i>n</i>	Article(s)
<i>Independent variables</i>		
<i>Stream 1: Social media as a consumer engagement channel</i>	14	Brech et al. (2017), Clark et al. (2017), Farhat et al. (2021), Larson and Salvador (2020), Le et al. (2023), Momen et al. (2019), Perera et al. (2023a), Rutter et al. (2016), Shah et al. (2024), Simiyu et al. (2020), Soares et al. (2022), Song et al. (2023), Wahid and Gunarto (2022), Wu et al. (2019)
Posting frequency, posting length, engagement duration		
Students follow the HEI on social media.		
Number of social media sites of the HEI		
Sensory intellectual and behavioural experience		
Source credibility; argument quality; review quantity		
Social media, online display, search engine		
User-generated content (3), firm-generated content		
Followers on X, tweets		
FB likes, talking about		
Social media technology use		
Type of media, posting time		
Social interaction, information sharing, surveillance, Information quality		
Non-verbal information, verbal information		
Communication styles and functions		
<i>Stream 2: Social media as a branding channel</i>	6	Brandão and Ramos (2023), Farhat et al. (2021), Lee et al. (2020), Lee (2023), Salgado and Vela (2019), Shah et al. (2024)
Online brand communities		
Emotional brand attachment		
University brand identification		
Brand name		
Brand experience, brand strength		
Brand interactivity		
<i>Stream 3: Social media as a platform to influence enrolment decision-making</i>	2	Assimakopoulos et al. (2017), Teng et al. (2015)
TAM constructs (e.g. perceived usefulness, ease of use)		
Social influence		
Social identification		
Study abroad online reviews		
<i>Stream 4: Social media as a CRM channel</i>	2	Brandão and Ramos (2023), Lee et al. (2020)
eWOM (2)		
Satisfaction		
<i>Stream 5: Social media as a general marketing and strategic tool</i>	2	Jan and Ammari (2016), Kethüda and Bilgin (2023)
Social media display advertisements		
Social media marketing activities		
<i>The University</i>	1	Brech et al. (2017)
University size, university reputation		
<i>The User</i>	1	Edwards and Omilion-Hodges (2022).
Gender		
<i>Mediating variables</i>		
<i>Stream 1: Social media as a consumer engagement channel</i>	6	Assimakopoulos et al. (2017), Brech et al. (2017), Larson and Salvador (2020), Le et al. (2023), Salgado and Vela (2019), Shah et al. (2024)
User engagement (2)		
Intention to use FB		
The number of fans on a university's FB brand page		
Cognitive and affective responses		
Intensity of use, engagement		
Types of online communities		
<i>Stream 2: Social media as a branding channel</i>	7	Brandão and Ramos (2023), Brech et al. (2017), Farhat et al. (2021), Kethüda and Bilgin (2023), Momen et al. (2019), Perera et al. (2023a), Simiyu et al. (2020)
Brand equity		
FB brand page		
Brand affect		
University image		
Brand image		
Brand credibility		
Brand engagement		
Brand personality		
<i>Stream 3: Social media as a platform to influence enrolment decision-making</i>	3	Jan and Ammari (2016), Lee (2023), Teng et al. (2015)
Student's decision making		
Central arguments, peripheral cues		
Processing fluency (pronunciation and meaning fluency)		
<i>Stream 4: Social media as a CRM channel</i>	3	Kethüda and Bilgin (2023), Shah et al. (2024), Song et al. (2023)
Student satisfaction, student loyalty		
Relationship quality		
Social CRM capabilities		
<i>Moderating variables</i>		
<i>Stream 1: Social media as a consumer engagement channel</i>	4	Lee et al. (2020), Rutter et al. (2016), Le et al. (2023), Shah et al. (2024)
Active vs passive social media usage		
User interaction – links posted		
Customer engagement		
Types of online communities (university/ student-created)		

(Continued)

**Table 5.** Continued.

Variables	<i>n</i>	Article(s)
<i>Stream 3: Social media as a platform to influence enrolment decision-making</i>	1	Simiyu et al. (2020)
Attitude		
<i>The University</i>	2	Lee (2023), Perera et al. (2023a)
University brand name; university ranking		
Location (country of HEI)		
<i>Control variables</i>		
<i>Stream 1: Social media as a consumer engagement channel</i>	4	Brech et al. (2017), Soares et al. (2022), Wahid and Gunarto (2022), Wu et al. (2019)
Engagement duration (time of presence on FB)		
Number of followers		
The timing of posts		
The use of hashtags		
<i>The University</i>	1	Le et al. (2023)
University type (public, private)		
<i>The User</i>	1	Simiyu et al. (2020)
User demographics (gender, age)		
<i>Dependent variables</i>		
<i>Stream 1: Social media as a consumer engagement channel</i>	8	Assimakopoulos et al. (2017), Brandão and Ramos (2023), Brech et al. (2017), Eger et al. (2021), Lund (2019), Soares et al. (2022), Wahid and Gunarto (2022), Wu et al. (2019)
Engagement rate and number of shares (2)		
Actual use of the social media platform (FB)		
Social media engagement		
Absolute interactivity score and relative interactivity		
The number of FB followers and interactions		
Active social media engagement		
Number of likes, comments, emotions		
<i>Stream 2: Social media as a branding channel</i>	8	Farhat et al. (2021), Larson and Salvador (2020), Le et al. (2023), Momen et al. (2019), Perera et al. (2023a), Salgado and Vela (2019), Song et al. (2023), Song et al. (2023)
Brand engagement		
Brand impact		
Brand co-creation		
Brand equity		
Brand loyalty		
Brand image		
<i>Stream 3: Social media as a platform to influence enrolment decision-making</i>	7	Edwards and Omilion-Hodges (2022), Jan and Ammari (2016), Lee et al. (2020), Lee (2023), Rutter et al. (2016), Simiyu et al. (2020), Teng et al. (2015)
Credibility and social attraction		
Student's choice criteria		
Psychological well-being		
Behaviour intention		
University enrolments		
Intention to enrol		
Attitude change		
<i>Stream 4: Social media as a CRM channel</i>	3	Clark et al. (2017), Kethüda and Bilgin (2023), Shah et al. (2024)
Relationship quality		
Positive eWOM		
Customer loyalty		
<i>The University</i>	1	Shah et al. (2024)
University reputation		

Note: Reported frequencies are based on 25 articles. Studies that did not include clear quantitative examinations to establish associations were excluded.

media data involving numerical data such as the number of likes, comments, or shares. The data elicitation sources used most were the respective social media platforms and questionnaire-based surveys. This may be attributed to open-source social media data's ready and ongoing availability compared to the perceived challenges of acquiring data through interviews and focus groups. Many studies sourced information from students, while alumni were prioritised the least compared to the other respondent sets.

With quantitative approaches, structural equation modelling and regression-based analysis were frequently used. The other category included analysis of variance, correlation matrix, factor analysis and mean scores. In the qualitative studies, content and thematic analysis were used often. Notably, netnography was used in multiple studies because it is a social media-based information source. Unexpectedly, given the newness of social media marketing of HE phenomenon, the grounded theory was used only once.

**Table 6.** Research methods.

Method element	<i>n</i>	%	Sample article(s)
<i>Analytical approach</i>			
Quantitative	36	70.6	Brandão and Ramos (2023), Farhat et al. (2021), Lee et al. (2020), Momen et al. (2019)
Qualitative	8	15.7	Bolat and O'Sullivan (2017), Galan et al. (2015), Pringle and Fritz (2019)
Combination	7	13.7	Mai To et al. (2022), Salgado and Vela (2019), Teng et al. (2015)
<i>Data collection mode</i>			
Social media data	24	47	Bolat and O'Sullivan (2017), Gai et al. (2016), Karadağ et al. (2022), Mwenda et al. (2019)
Questionnaire surveys	21	41.2	Assimakopoulos et al. (2017), Clark et al. (2017), Farhat et al. (2021), Le et al. (2023)
Interviews	9	17.6	Shields and Peruta (2019), Alfonzo (2023), Burton et al. (2021), Galan et al. (2015)
Focus group	3	5.9	Bolat and O'Sullivan (2017), Fujita et al. (2017), Salgado and Vela (2019)
Experimental	2	3.9	Edwards and Omilion-Hodges (2022), Lee (2023)
<i>Key informants</i>			
Students (questionnaires and interviews)	26	51	Assimakopoulos et al. (2017), Brandão and Ramos (2023), Edwards and Omilion-Hodges (2022), Jan and Ammari (2016)
Students (as social media users/curators)	22	43.1	Linville et al. (2015), Wu et al. (2019), Wahid and Gunarto (2022), Rutter et al. (2016)
HEI staff	4	7.8	Alfonzo (2023), Comai (2024), Condie et al. (2018)
Alumni	1	2	Brandão and Ramos (2023)
<i>Methodological aspects of quantitative studies</i>			
<i>Statistical methods</i>			
Regression	9	17.6	Clark et al. (2017), Soares et al. (2022)
PLS-SEM	6	11.8	Lee et al. (2020), Salgado and Vela (2019).
AMOS-SEM	5	9.8	Momen et al. (2019), Perera et al. (2023a)
Other	15	29.4	Edwards and Omilion-Hodges (2022), Kethüda and Bilgin (2023), Lee (2023)
<i>Methodological aspects in qualitative studies</i>			
Netnography	4	7.8	Bolat and O'Sullivan (2017), Fujita et al. (2017), Gai et al. (2016)
Content	7	13.7	Edwards and Omilion-Hodges (2022), Karadağ et al. (2022)
Thematic	4	7.8	Comai (2024), Galan et al. (2015)
Grounded theory	1	2	Alfonzo (2023)

Note: The number of articles amounts to more than 51 because some draw on multiple data collection modes and key informants.

## 5. Future research agenda

Research avenues are suggested in line with the aforementioned annotations of this review and based on the TCCM framework (Paul & Rosado-Serrano, 2019). Table 7 lists the anticipated topics for upcoming scholarly investigations in social media marketing of higher education research.

### 5.1. New theoretical viewpoints

Our study showed that the primary construct in the *first* stream, social media as a consumer engagement channel, lacks theoretical substantiation (see Table 3). Herein, the incorporation of relevant value-based theories, such as value co-creation (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014), motivation and consumption value (Ashraf et al., 2019; Kaur et al., 2018; Osei-Frimpong et al., 2022) and service-dominant logic (Hollebeek et al., 2019), can offer fresh insights and empower theoretical development. Next, this review has revealed that stream *two*, social media as a branding channel, has also gained substantial popularity and that the brand-related theoretical viewpoints are wide-ranging. There is a heavy emphasis on brand image, brand equity, and brand community. It is suggested that the theory of brand trust (Li et al., 2020) should be further explored. Like stream *two*, numerous related theories have been used in stream *three*, using social media as a platform to influence enrolment decisions. Nevertheless, extant literature leaves room for the means-end chain and the incentive-motivation theory. In research stream *four*, social media as a CRM channel, it was found that eWOM has often been referred to in the reviewed articles.

### 5.2. New contexts

As seen in the synthesis of reviewed articles (see Table 4), many base their study on popular platforms such as FB, Instagram and X. It would be interesting to note the differences and similarities in social media marketing of universities on different social media podia (e.g. FB versus X or FB versus Instagram).

**Table 7.** Proposed topics for future research based on the TCCM structure.

The TCCM perspective	Proposed research topics based on the identified research gaps
<i>New theoretical viewpoints</i>	University social media-based consumer engagement with the theoretical lens of consumer value, consumption value, and service-dominant logic. A theoretical exploration of brand trust in the context of social media as a university branding channel. Social media as a platform to influence university enrolment decisions with the means-end chain and the incentive-motivation theory perspectives.
<i>New contexts</i>	A comparison of different social media platforms with the marketing of higher education viewpoint (e.g. Instagram versus FB). An exploration of video-driven social media content in the marketing of higher education context. Analysis of consumer data derived from social media accounts created by and for higher education students. A focus on the 'other' popular and emerging platforms (e.g. Telegram, Threads respectively) and the more differentiated platforms (e.g. Clubhouse). A focus on the highly valued international student consumer set. Such studies may focus on the more significant source countries like China and India.
<i>New constructs and associations</i>	Understand the association of social media engagement with relationship quality, enrolment demand, brand trust or brand equity. The mediating role of user characteristics, such as self-efficacy, community experience, and attitude in co-creating the HEI brand using social media.
<i>New methods</i>	Qualitative methods to further explore the phenomenon (e.g. using the grounded theory approach). Sequential mixed methods with qualitative explorations as the initial investigation, followed by a quantitative assessment. Use of advanced AI and ML technology-driven tools to analyse extensive datasets. For example, using computer vision to analyse image content in university-curated social media posts with consumer engagement perspectives.

Also, YouTube features in only one study; exploring more video-driven content on varied social media platforms in the context of student engagement and marketing communication would be interesting. A far smaller number of studies have focused on platforms created by and for students (Larson & Salvador, 2020), leaving scope for scholars to explore more such platforms. In this way, it would be possible to explore enrolment and eWOM behaviour of students in a new light, insights of which would enable suitable marketing strategies to influence enrolment decision-making. Finally, future research could base their investigations on the less explored and rapidly emerging platforms (e.g. Threads) and some more differentiated social media platforms (e.g. Clubhouse).

Results of the analysis in the present review indicate that a lot of social media marketing of HE research is based in three classic international student host countries (namely, the U.S.A., U.K. and Australia). More studies in internationally upcoming and domestically large Asian HE sector countries (e.g. India, China, South Korea) should emerge. Next, regarding the target consumer market, most reviewed studies refer to the domestic markets or do not pointedly differentiate between domestic and international consumer sets in their investigations. Given the inherent trait of social media marketing in reaching out to geographically distant and international consumers, more studies should focus on the highly valued international student consumer set. Internationally mobile students from the globally prominent student markets (e.g. China, India) may be prioritised.

### 5.3. New constructs and associations

The observed constructs inform us that quantitative research in social media marketing of HE has used wide-ranging explanatory variables connected to the role of social media as a consumer engagement channel, a branding channel, and a platform to influence enrolment decisions and as a CRM channel (see Table 5). However, some relevant constructs and variables are yet to be studied. Scholars should isolate and measure the influence of social media engagement on the students' relationship quality with the HEI, enrolment demand, eWOM, brand trust or brand equity (Clark et al., 2017; Rutter et al., 2016; Shah et al., 2024; Wahid & Gunarto, 2022). Furthermore, future research may look at the influence of personal traits of the social media user, such as self-efficacy, community experience and attitude, in a mediation role for HEI brand image or brand co-creation outcomes (Le et al., 2023; Song et al., 2023).

### 5.4. New methods

Regarding the methodologies (see Table 6), it is suggested that given the prevalence of quantitative approaches and the newness of the social media marketing of HE phenomenon, more studies should

adopt in-depth qualitative explorations. In particular, the grounded theory can support theory generation (Goulding, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1997), including the identification of new variables and their relationships in this emerging research area (Pawar & Vispute, 2023). Furthermore, a sequential mixed method comprising an initial qualitative exploration followed by a quantitative assessment is highly recommended for more advanced and inclusive conclusions (Brandão & Ramos, 2023). Also, considering several extant studies have relied on social media data, comparing and confirming those results with fresh qualitative data elicited through interviews and focus groups.

Based on the analysis, it is also suggested that future studies should aim to have the prospective student's parents, relatives, and friends as informants, given their crucial influence on enrolment decision-making (Chen, 2008). Next, future research must use more advanced technology-driven tools to analyse the extensive unstructured datasets of social media (involving text, videos, and audio) that are now used in social science research. For instance, Chen et al. (2023) note the use of machine learning and computer vision (e.g. Google Cloud Vision) that allows social science researchers to analyse big data and evaluate emotions in photos (e.g. EmoDetect). In sentiment analysis, novel models such as T5, GPT-3 or GPT-J will signify future advancement of HE social media marketing research (Rodríguez-Ibáñez et al., 2023).

## 6. Implications for university managers

In a competitive industry environment, using social media to achieve student enrolment targets is an attractive avenue for HEIs. University managers may use the insights offered by this literature review to advance effective social media-led marketing strategies.

### 6.1. A TCCM framework-based view on implications for practitioners

It is recommended that HEI marketing executives seeking to attract students for enrolment purposes reflect on the theories, contexts, characteristics, and methods deliberated in this study. First, this review highlights a range of theories that inform on potential social media marketing strategies. For example, Galan et al. (2015) base their social media-user-generated content analysis on the CDM process model to show that Chinese international students use social media to seek information about the university and read alumni reviews for opinions that could support their enrolment decision. Second, numerous social media platforms are contextually referred to, and studies in domestic and international consumer market settings are highlighted. Third, by focusing on extant empirical studies that entail quantitative examinations, this literature review sheds light on various antecedents, outcomes, and associations that inform HEI managers on suitable marketing strategies. Fourth, the research methods of the reviewed literature are summarised for better insights. Additionally, the five research streams highlighted in this study allow university managers a ready perspective-based reference point to prioritise their social media-based marketing goals.

### 6.2. Outcome-based implications for university managers

The rationale of this review connects with offering acumen to help HEI marketing executives overcome the intensely competitive HE industry environment in terms of the outcomes of social media marketing of HE. These outcomes refer to the assessments that present themselves after behavioural performance or non-performance (Paul & Benito, 2018). Such outcomes of the social media marketing of HEIs have been depicted in line with the research streams recognised in this review (see Figure 5). For example, research stream two entails the brand-based performance outcomes of HE providers; these include brand co-creation and brand loyalty. By understanding the various consequences of social media in HE marketing, university managers may become better placed to employ social media in achieving their marketing objectives.

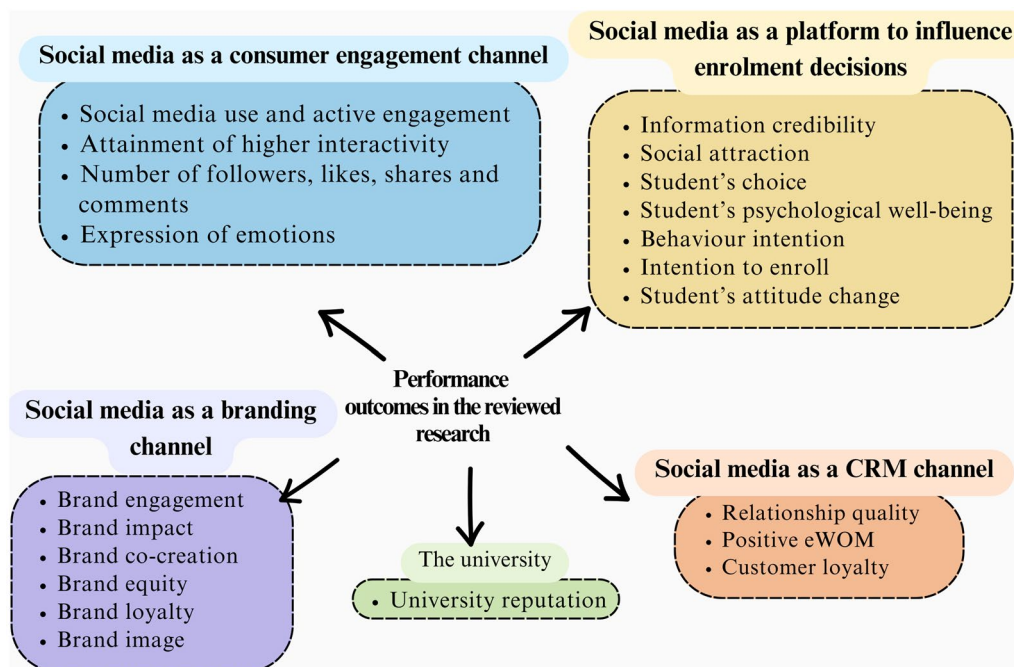


Figure 5. Performance outcomes.

## 7. Implications for scholars

This systematic review is expected to contribute to the current academic knowledge of social media marketing for higher education in different ways. First, with an all-embracing timeline of published empirical articles in the field of social media marketing of HE, this review offers the most inclusive snapshot of scholarly knowledge of the topic. Second, this review recognises and presents a scheme comprising five research streams and their constituent themes. This portrayal helps further clarify the topic from an academic perspective. Third, this review provides a structured assessment of the present literature by adopting a framework-based systematic literature review line of assessment. The TCCM framework-based approach adopted in the present review helps synchronise fragmented academic knowledge on social media in higher education marketing. It also allows scholars to recognise the critical considerations for future research endeavours.

## 8. Conclusion

The agenda of this systematic literature review was two-fold. This review sought to explain (1) what theories, contexts, characteristics, and methods have been applied in the empirical inquiries on social media in higher education marketing and (2) the current gaps and future research directions in social media marketing for higher education. This review adopted a framework-based approach using the theories–contexts–characteristics–methods (TCCM) framework (Paul & Rosado-Serrano, 2019) to comprehensively understand social media marketing for higher education research. The present review was also supported by the SPAR-4-SLR procedure, advanced by Paul and Criado (2020), to lead and rationalise decisions and by the marketing strategy concepts in enabling the classification of articles into streams and their respective themes.

The overall analysis finds that research on social media in the marketing of HE has, for the past decade, been gaining momentum in terms of quality and the number of article publications, although insufficient. This review informs that research in social media marketing of HE focuses strongly on the research streams of consumer engagement, branding, CDM and CRM. The intricacies of the reviewed articles' theories, contexts, characteristics, and methods are presented and explained in a tabular form to support enhanced insights. In particular, Table 3 presents the details of the theoretical foundations that have guided extant research; Table 4 presents the contextual coverage of the current research; Table 5

presents the categorisations of the variables examined; and Table 6 presents the research methods employed in the reviewed articles. Each table highlights the particular elements of relevance and notes the sample articles. The insights gained through the analysis reveal several research gaps concerning theoretical foundations, contextual elements, empirical characteristics and methodological aspects based on which exciting avenues for future research are offered. Stemming from this integrative review, Table 7 offers a future research agenda organised as theories, contexts, characteristics, and methods. The research agenda is elaborated section-wise and with specific cues to help further develop this line of research.

This review has two main limitations. First, the articles that were not in the English language were excluded. Hence, applicable articles in other languages may have been left out. Second, this review samples only empirical studies in journals ranked B or above in the ABDC JQL. Although this criterion supports the article quality motive, the author admits that additional pertinent articles may have missed inclusion in the articles considered for review.

### Author contribution

Sanjay Krishnapratap Pawar: Conceptualisation and Design, Methodology, Analysing and Interpreting the data, Writing the original draft, Review and Editing, Revising critically for intellectual content.

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### About the author

**Sanjay Krishnapratap Pawar** is an Associate Professor at the Symbiosis Institute of Management Studies, Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune, India. He teaches consumer behaviour, marketing strategy and sustainable marketing in MBA programs. Before entering employment in higher education, Sanjay worked in the Indian industry as a marketing professional for several years. Much of his research pertains to international higher education from consumer behaviour and marketing strategy perspectives. He has received funding from several Indian organisations to pursue international student-focused research projects. His research articles, published in esteemed peer-reviewed journals, have contributed to academic knowledge of research methodologies, consumer decision-making processes and marketing strategies.

### ORCID

Sanjay Krishnapratap Pawar  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8497-7553>

### Data availability statement

Data sharing does not apply to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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