



Factors Of Social Media Marketing Influencing Gen Z's Decision On Choosing University In Vietnam

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Abstract

Research purpose:

This study investigated the impact of social media marketing (SMM) on Gen Z's university choice in Vietnam. Specifically, this study chooses five independent variables: informativeness, trendiness, customization, interactivity, and word-of-mouth, which are the forces of SMM that affect university decision-making through perceived usefulness, perceived trust, and attitudes.

Research motivation:

The rapid rise of social media has transformed the way Gen Z consumes information and makes decisions. This study is motivated by the need to understand how social media marketing strategies influence the university selection process among Vietnamese Gen Z.

Research design, approach, and method:

This study used a quantitative research method, gathers data from a sample of 335 Gen Z individuals in Vietnam, aged 18 to 27, through an online survey, and then analyses the data using PLS-SEM.

Main findings:

This study found that SMM strongly influences the choice of perceived usefulness as a reference. Perceived Usefulness also improves attitude, which affects university choice. SMM does not affect perceived trust, confirming that some gen Zers do not trust social media information. This study also shows that cognitive attitude partially influences Gen Z's school choice, whereas affective attitude does not.

Practical/managerial implications:

The findings indicate that SMM has some impacts on Gen Z students' university choice in Vietnam, proofing the importance of SMM on universities' marketing plans. However, it also presents a challenge for higher educational institutions to develop effective and appropriate SMM strategies to enhance trust and attract potential students.

Keywords: Social media marketing, Perceived usefulness, Cognitive attitude, Gen z's decision on choosing university.

1. INTRODUCTION

The realm of higher education is increasing in competitiveness thanks to the fast increase of universities, both domestically and internationally. The number of higher education institutes (HEIs) in Vietnam rose from 150 in 2009 to 244 in 2023, indicating a growth of 62% (An, 2023; Hong, 2023). Moreover, the increasing preference of Vietnamese students to pursue education overseas necessitates local colleges to not only compete against one other but also contend with international institutions. This highly competitive environment motivates institutions to enhance their reputations, quality, and marketing strategies in order to attract best students. HEIs have adopted SMM as a recognized and valuable marketing technique (Peruta & Shields, 2017). In the United States, 61% of college admissions offices used social media platforms as a means of attracting potential students (Turner, 2017). Additionally, Turner (2017) asserted that marketers at HEIs have acknowledged the importance of SMM in their integrated marketing communications strategies for recruiting students. In order to stay ahead of the competition, numerous institutions in Vietnam have adopted SMM as a very successful method for communication, promotion, and content updates.

In higher education, selecting a university is an important and demanding decision for many young people. A number of

people believe that enrolling in the appropriate educational institution can greatly improve their quality of life and future opportunities. This highlights the importance of careful consideration and sufficient involvement before making such a decision. Over the years, many researchers have developed comprehensive models to better understand the university selection process and acknowledge the significance of higher education. These models assess a variety of factors including costs, financial aid, reputation, educational programs and quality, social and cultural activities, advice from family and friends, as well as individual aptitudes and educational objectives (Olson, 2018). However, in an era of advanced technology and widespread use of social media, there are many new factors that may influence student's decision making on choosing their university to study like social media, (electronic) word of mouth.

Previous studies have thoroughly examined the influence of SMM on consumer behavior and intentions, as well as its role in the educational environment, especially regarding university communications and students' decisions on which university to choose (Bilgin, 2018; Howell, 2019; Kim & Ko, 2010; Logan et al., 2012; Nguyen et al., 2021; Seo & Park, 2018; Turner, 2017; Ural & Yuksel, 2015). Additionally, the Stimulus – Organism – Response theory has served as a fundamental basis for studying customer intentions and decisions, offering a strong framework for evaluating the impact of different elements on behavior. This model emphasizes the substantial influence of individuals' attitudes on their intentions and actions. This notion has been confirmed in various research using both integrated attitude models and distinct affective and cognitive attitudes (Nagoya et al., 2021; Yang & Yoo, 2004). Additionally, many research has investigated many characteristics that affect the intention to use services and customer behavior, especially perceived usefulness (Ahmed et al., 2017; Wiedmann et al., 2010) and perceived trust (Ling et al., 2011; Nguyen & Huynh, 2018; Pappas, 2016).

Unlike past generations, Generation Z shows more of an appetite for independence. Their main means for communicating with the outside world are a range of electronic equipment, including laptops and cellphones, which they depend much on. Socializing, sharing knowledge, buying, even studying depend on these devices. The familiarity of this generation with technology helps them to move and operate in both real and virtual worlds. Their technological skills help them to rapidly and effectively search for and filter information, therefore enabling informed decision-making (Dolot, 2018). Though they are impatient, Gen Z members are distinguished by their passion to learn and fast thinking (Singh & Dangmei, 2016). But their great reliance on multitasking technology has added to the attention deficit disorders and poor focus of this generation (Dolot, 2018). Furthermore, social media is being more and more included into Gen Z's daily activities. Apart from keeping in touch with friends, they resort to social networks to fill in the time and entertain (Mude & Undale, 2023). On social media, members of Generation Z in Vietnam are able to openly express their personalities, despite the fact that each platform takes a different approach (Nielsen, 2022). They enjoy sharing stories, images, videos with friends as well as their opinions and ideas on Instagram or Facebook. Whereas they communicate with family, friends, and coworkers via Zalo, they utilize YouTube or TikTok to provide entertainment through video content. Moreover, social media has been identified as one of the primary information sources for Generation Z. However, they do not fully trust the information they find there. They are highly skeptical of online sources, particularly online reviews (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020). Thus, certain individuals may find the social media posts made by universities to be less credible.

The impact of SMM on user habits and behaviors, especially when it comes to important choices such as selecting a university, is clearly increasing. In an attempt to attract a greater number of prospective students, it is imperative for higher education institutions (HEIs) to understand the factors that influence students' college and university decisions, given the intensive competition in the sector (Bélanger et al., 2014). Universities are presently and will remain focused on Gen Z, which comprises many students who have not yet enrolled in university. Based on the above discussion, this study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) What factors of social media marketing influence Gen Z's decision on choosing a university in Vietnam? (2) How significant are the impacts of these factors on Gen Z's university choice decisions?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1. The Stimulus – Organism – Response (SOR) Theory

A theoretical foundation for comprehending human behavior is provided by the stimulus-organism-response (SOR) hypothesis, which was initiated by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) and then advanced by Jacoby (2002). By examining the influence of external stimuli (S) on the internal state of the individual (O), the SOR framework elucidates how the stimulation of cognitive or affective processes induces an individual's behavior (R). According to Sampat and Raj (2022), the SOR theory allows for the assessment of people's progressive thinking processes as they anticipate, internalize, and respond to stimuli from both the external environment and their own cognitive processes. Therefore, the SOR model clarifies how variables outside of an individual's control can affect their internal mental operations, emotional responses, and behavior (Sun et al., 2021).

According to Fu et al. (2021), users' psychological or perceptual states can be influenced by external or environmental factors, which are referred to as stimuli (S). As conceptualized by the SOR model, a series of personal perceptions and the ensuing behavioral and psychological responses are triggered by external stimuli. These stimuli have the ability to activate

both cognitive and emotional aspects of the user (O), then leads to the user's behavioral response (R). Previous studies have suggested that SMM can function as an external environmental stimulus (Sohaib et al., 2022). For instance, engaging content, advertisements, and interactive posts on social networking sites can influence the user's cognitive and emotional states. Increased brand recognition and positive sentiments towards the brand are two outcomes of a chain reaction that begins with exposure to these stimuli, which affects consumers' perceptions and emotions like trust and satisfaction (Sohaib et al., 2022).

Then, the organism pertains to the individual's experience or sensation, as proposed by Tandon et al. (2021), encompassing the cognitive, psychological, and emotional states of the individual, as emphasized by Duong (2023). This issue comprises various components, including attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and perceptions (Jacoby, 2002). Individual users study preceding environmental cues, employing their cognition and emotion to thoughtfully evaluate the pertinent information prior to outward response (Sun et al., 2021). Prior research (Moon et al., 2017; Sohaib et al., 2022) has indicated that perceived usefulness, perceived trust, and attitudes of individuals can constitute the organism. For example, when a user encounters a new technology or service, their perception of its usefulness and trustworthiness, as well as their pre-existing attitudes towards similar technologies, will influence their overall reaction. These internal states mediate the association between the stimulus and the user's response.

Lastly, the outcomes of individuals are determined as their behavioral responses (R) from organisms (Perez-Vega et al., 2021). The research conducted by Sultan et al. (2021) emphasizes the significance of behavioral responses, which include both behavioral intentions and subsequent behaviors. These responses provide valuable insights into how individuals make decisions in different contexts, such as consumer behavior, healthcare choices, and educational paths. Decisions on which university to attend are examples of behavioral responses in the context of SOR theory as it applies to higher education.

2.2. The influence of social media marketing on perceived usefulness

Social media marketing (SMM) is an online marketing strategy that utilizes social networking platforms to achieve communication objectives (Liao & Hsu, 2020) by creating and disseminating content that enhances brand visibility and customer retention. Through the execution of marketing initiatives via digital networks, companies and associations can engage with prospective customers, hence enhancing the benefit to their stakeholders (Tuten, 2023). Prior research has emphasized the components of SMM initiatives across various settings. Kim and Ko (2010) categorized SMM characteristics into five main groups: customization, trendiness, entertainment, interaction, and word of mouth. Sano (2015) found four basic elements of SMM in a research concentrated on insurance services: interaction, trendiness, customizing, and perceived risk. Alalwan (2018) underlined three essential elements defining SMM: interactivity, informativeness, and perceived relevance. Building on these fundamental studies, this study identifies as informativeness, trendiness, customization, interactivity, and word-of-mouth the elements of SMM.

Additionally, perceived usefulness (PU) is the degree to which an individual feels employing a given system would improve their job performance (Davis et al., 1989). The concept is very important for figuring out if people will adopt and keep using a tool. PU in this study can be defined as the degree to which prospective students believe that participating in SMM will assist them in making an informed decision regarding their higher education. These marketing tools are more likely to be trusted and used by students if they think that SMM gives them useful information and helps them make good decisions. By providing easily available, relevant, and interactive content, SMM significantly influences the perceived usefulness (PU). The quick development in internet technology helps SMM to be effective, so enhancing people's view of its importance. Gupta and Singharia (2021) underline how easily accessible convenient social media platforms improve users' degree of involvement and cognition. Siagian et al. (2023) discovered that people who use social media sites frequently have higher PU due to constant updates and interactions. Furthermore, SMM promotes community expansion and word-of-mouth communication, which increases its PU (Siagian et al., 2022). Therefore, it is assumed that:

H1: Social media marketing positively affects perceived usefulness.

2.3. The relationship between social media marketing and perceived trust

Social media marketing includes informativeness, trendiness, customization, interactivity. Informativeness is the capability of social media platforms to deliver relevant and high-quality product information (Arli, 2017). Additionally, trendiness is described as offering the most recent information on products or services (Godey et al., 2016). In the context of SMM, customization is based on direct interactions with individual users, distinguishing it significantly from traditional advertising media. This method makes it possible to provide personally tailored information produced by several sources, hence improving perceived control and consumer satisfaction (Ding & Keh, 2016). Interactivity is an important feature of SMM, as it reflects how successfully SMM facilitates the exchange of thoughts and information between companies and customers, as well as among consumers themselves (Dessart et al., 2015). Finally, word-of-mouth is the communication made by possible, real, or former consumers regarding a good, brand, or organization on social media platforms. This is consumers sharing brand material on their blogs and debating ideas with friends. It also entails consumers trading, distributing, and uploading knowledge. Word-of-mouth is a great technique because of its perceived credibility; customers

freely create and distribute brand-related information, therefore impacting friends, peers, and the public (Reza Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). While negative word-of-mouth could erode brand trust and equity (Lee et al., 2008), good one might help to create positive opinions of brands (Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017).

SMM is critical for building consumer trust. Communication channels on social media give critical chances for organizations to engage with their audience, creating social support and influencing trust (Hajli, 2015). Trust can be developed by positive social media reviews, comments, and ratings. Furthermore, the social bonds formed during these exchanges boost consumer trust (Chahal & Rani, 2017). Raniya et al. (2023) found that SMM has a substantial impact on trust, highlighting the importance of authentic engagement and positive user interactions in establishing and retaining trust. Through SMM, HEIs can build potential student's trust on their quality. From the given description, the following hypothesis can be derived:

H2: Social media marketing positively affects perceived trust.

2.4. The influence of perceived usefulness and attitude

Attitudes significantly influence decision-making processes. Bartels et al. (2010) observed that favorable attitudes towards a behavior enhance the probability of engaging in that behavior. The literature in social psychology indicates that attitudes consist of both affective and cognitive components (Crites et al., 1994). Affective and cognitive attitudes are two distinct constructs in socio-psychology (Yang & Yoo, 2004) that significantly impact purchase intentions and behaviors (Moon et al., 2017; Suparno, 2020). Suparno (2020) identified that affective attitudes significantly impact online purchase intentions for halal products, whereas Moon et al. (2017) demonstrated that cognitive attitudes play a more substantial role in purchase decisions. Fishbein and Ajzen (1977) argue that cognitive attitudes play a vital role in elucidating the connection between attitudes and behavior, as they offer a rational foundation for decision-making. In higher education, students' cognitive attitudes toward universities are shaped by factual information regarding the institution's performance and offerings. Affective attitudes develop from evaluative beliefs shaped by an individual's morals and experiences. For instance, in the context of higher education, a student's emotional response towards a university can significantly impact their choice, based on how the institution's environment and culture align with their personal values and emotional preferences.

The acceptance of individuals to adopt a new application is closely linked to their perception of its potential to enhance their performance (Hung et al., 2014). The new application must prioritize time savings, efficiency, and accuracy. Many studies have proved that perceived usefulness can influence consumer attitudes (Marakarkandy et al., 2017). The research conducted by Selim (2003) indicated that students' perceptions of the course website significantly influenced their attitudes towards its use, suggesting that students needed to recognize the website as effective in enhancing their performance. Therefore, PU has a strong association with users' satisfaction, which builds their attitude towards using information through SMM during selecting university. Based on above discussions, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H3: Perceived usefulness positively affects cognitive attitude.

H4: Perceived usefulness positively affects affective attitude.

2.5. The relationship between perceived trust and attitude

Perceived trust is a crucial factor influencing the adoption and effectiveness of SMM, particularly in the context of Generation Z's decision-making process for choosing universities in Vietnam. Due to the inherently uncertain and dynamic nature of social media, trust has been identified as a direct determinant of user attitudes (Lin, 2011). Trust is multifaceted and has been defined in various ways in the previous literature. Trust is defined as the bilateral commitment that no participant in a transaction will take advantage of another's weaknesses. PytlikZillig and Kimbrough (2016) elaborate on this concept by characterizing trust as the willingness to believe in another party's actions, grounded in the anticipation that they will act suitably, even in the absence of oversight or control. This definition emphasizes the need of integrity, kindness, and competence in developing trust (Lin, 2011). Because of the related risks and ambiguity, trust is critical in online environments including social media sites (Cheng & Chen, 2021). Users have to think the information given is accurate and the institutions they deal with will keep their word of mouth. For gen Z students in Vietnam who mostly rely on social media for information and decision-making about their academic paths, this idea is very important.

Consumer attitudes are significantly influenced by perceived trust, which is a crucial aspect. Trust pertains to the consumer's assurance in the accuracy and integrity of the information or source. Studies have shown that trust plays a crucial role in influencing opinions. Gefen et al. (2003) emphasized the positive impact of trust on users' perceptions of online platforms, resulting in favorable attitudes and increased acceptance levels. Similarly, Hajli (2014) discovered that trust in social media interactions has a positive impact on attitudes towards social commerce, leading to increased user engagement and participation. Consequently, it is plausible that perceived trust impacts student's attitudes.

H5: Perceived trust positively affects cognitive attitude.

H6: Perceived trust positively affects affective attitude.

2.6. Attitude and University choice decision

In Vietnamese context, the process of choosing a university is impacted by several key variables consisting of family member recommendations, the reputation of the institution, student expectations, and university advertising (Khoi & Esangbedo, 2019). The process of choosing a university in Vietnam consists in several elements well ingrained in the society and culture of the nation. Family recommendations show the communal framework of Vietnamese society, in which respect between generations and family ties are fundamental in guiding personal actions (Djcfanse, 2023). Additionally, the focus on university reputation shows the value of education as a tool of upward mobility since it reflects society's taste for reputable schools perceived to offer greater employment options and social status. Students' goals show an ambitious perspective; many of them hope to use their degree as a launching pad for even more achievement. Meanwhile, it is obvious that university advertising is having a greater impact on moulding views and decisions than expect, emphasizing the relevance of increasing importances of marketing and modern promotional tactics. Furthermore, according to a study, 63% of students searched at least one institution online before applying for admission (Turner, 2017). Thus, by providing a variety of information about colleges, SMM has a certain impact on students' judgments on their academic path.

The cognitive attitude when choosing a university involves the logical evaluation of various aspects of university such as academic reputation, career prospects, programmes, or financial issues. Prospective students will compare financial issues and other factors offered with those being promoted by competing institutions in order to check their suitability and then make the choice decision (Wilkins et al., 2013). Whereas, the affective attitude when choosing a university involves the emotional responses and feelings that a prospective student has towards a university. Emotions and moods, whether positive or negative, can influence the decisions individuals make (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). Sense of belonging, a crucial emotional response, significantly affects students' decisions to choose and remain at a university (Strayhorn, 2018). Thus, it can be seen that both cognitive and affective attitudes can affect the decision on choosing university, so the following hypotheses can be stated:

H7: Cognitive attitude positively affects university choice decision.

H8: Affective attitude positively affects university choice decision.

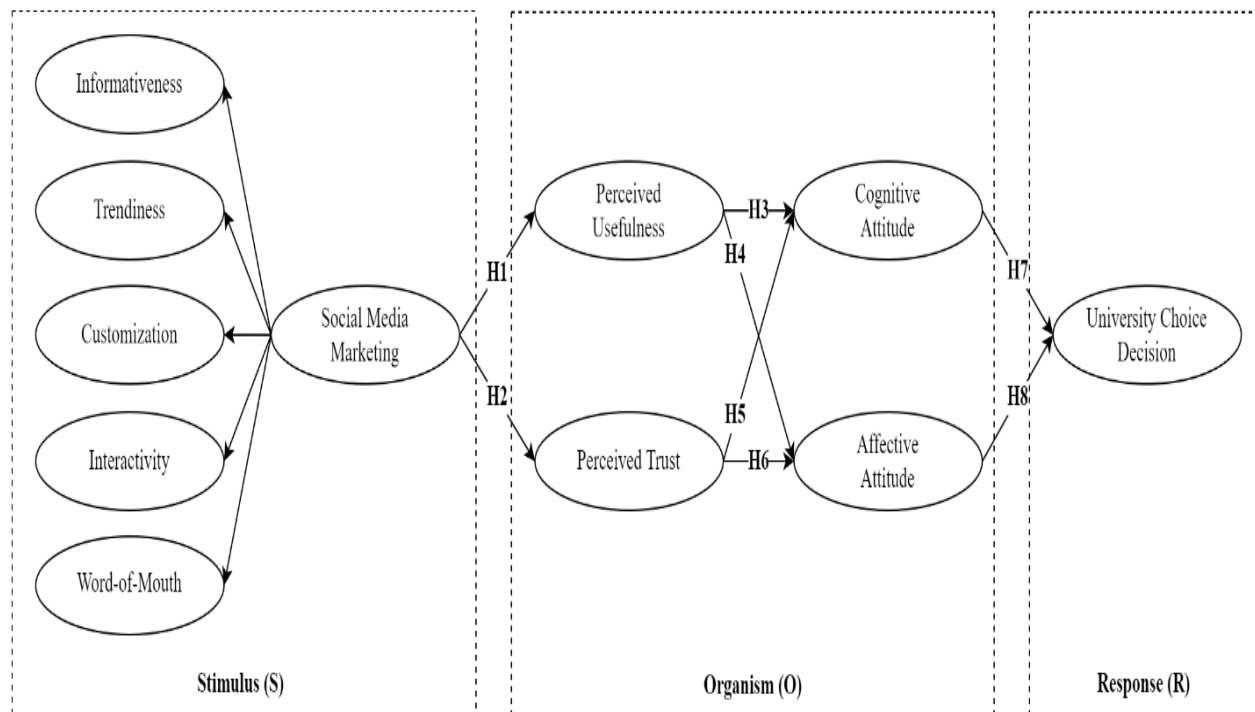


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework of the study

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

The conceptual framework model provides an explanation for applying quantitative independent and dependent variable relationships, thereby laying the groundwork for a quantitative research methodology approach. It served as the

foundation for creating hypotheses to be tested through a research strategy that included systematic and rigorous procedures. According to Stockemer et al. (2019), the quantitative method is the most effective for determining relationships between variables and evaluating hypotheses. Furthermore, this study collects empirical data via questionnaires based on a theoretical framework of people behavior, opinions, and attitudes. Data collecting is based on hypotheses drawn from current theories. As a result, the deductive technique is used throughout this study (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

3.2. Sampling and data collection

This research includes a sample of individuals from the Gen Z demographic in Vietnam, aged 18 and above, who are either about to enroll, already attending, or have already graduated from university. The online survey employed convenience sampling due to the easy availability, accessibility and voluntary participation. The surveys were made using Google Forms and sent out through Facebook, Zalo, and Messenger, this helps survey reach people from far place efficiently and save time and costs. Additionally, with the support of friends and colleagues, the survey was distributed to their friends and relatives who were of the same age as Gen Z. Respondent anonymity was guaranteed, and the study's objective was explicitly articulated.

From May 1, 2024, to June 1, 2024, the survey was carried out. The comprehensive survey was initially distributed to acquaintances, colleagues, and relatives with a request to further disseminate it to individuals who met the specified criteria. Following that, the survey expanded its reach to broader audiences through various social media groups. As a means of enhancing responsiveness and motivation, survey participants are rewarded with presents following each survey. Then, 335 completed questionnaires were considered acceptable.

3.3. Measurement

A standardized self-administered questionnaire is employed to collect data. To maximize the validity of the measures and allow comparison of study outcomes with prior research, construct measures were customized from earlier investigations. This research includes six constructs: SMM, perceived usefulness, perceived trust, cognitive attitude, affective attitude and university choice decision. The measurement of SMM was modified from empirical research of Bilgin (2018); Kim and Ko (2010); Logan et al. (2012); Seo and Park (2018); Ural and Yuksel (2015). Perceived usefulness was measured by an adapted from Ahmed et al. (2017) and Wiedmann et al. (2010), while perceived trust from Ling et al. (2011); Nguyen and Huynh (2018); Pappas (2016). The measurement of cognitive and affective attitudes was modified from Nagoya et al. (2021). Finally, the university choice decision was measured by an adjusted from Nguyen & Nguyen (2022).

The Likert scale serves as a common tool for assessing individuals' attitudes or opinions. In surveys utilizing this criterion, participants are required to convey their perspective on a particular problem by assessing it from strongly agree to strongly disagree, with a neutral option representing neither agreement nor disagreement (Chyung et al., 2017). According to earlier research on educational choice, a five-point scale is consistent in its use, with a balanced ratio of positive and negative replies and a neutral point (Huong, 2021; Pandeya, 2023). However, a seven-point Likert scale is utilized in this study, as compared to five-point scale, this scale is slightly more reliable (Russo et al., 2021) and a (small) increase in scale reliability is primary and user convenience, time restraints, and ease of use are secondary.

3.4. Reliability and validity

Validity and reliability are crucial features of quantitative research measures and are widely recognized as key indications of a study's quality. Both methods are specifically employed to assess the precision and suitability of the scales utilized in the various variables of the data (Malhotra, 2020). Construct validity, which is difficult to establish, relates with item compatibility, scale efficacy, and core theory assumptions. Construct validity assesses the extent to which a construct is accurately measured or operationalized. On the other hand, research validity examines the correlation between the items developed and the theoretical foundation being used (Bell & Bryman, 2007). On the contrary, reliability refers to the ability of a research study to be repeated multiple times and yield consistent results, even when the outcome is the same. Reliability refers to the degree of consistency in a research notion, which can be determined by conducting the study multiple times in the future (Bell & Bryman, 2007). By using statistical software SmartPLS 3, the study has been checked to ensuring the reliability and validity of the model, in addition to pilot study and face validity.

3.5. Data analysis with PLS-SEM using SmartPLS

Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) is a modeling approach that serves as an alternative to covariance-based structural equation modeling (SEM). Various reasons for using PLS-SEM have been extensively researched in the methodological literature (Hair et al., 2013). To evaluate the expected correlations between the study's components in descriptive statistics, PLS-SEM, an implicit structural equation modeling method, was employed. Many studies have discovered that this strategy is especially beneficial for simultaneously assessing complex model interactions incorporating latent or unobserved variables. This study utilized a higher order reflective-reflective model to minimize the number of path model relationships, leading to increased simplicity of the model (Sarstedt et al., 2019). This approach also minimizes collinearity among formative indicators by offering a way to reorganize indicators and/or constructs across

different specific subdimensions of the broader abstract construct (Hair et al., 2023).

SmartPLS 3 software is employed to assess this higher order construct in this research. The model is estimated using a two-stage methodology including a construction technique based on latent variable scores (Henseler, 2010). The measurement model is first approximated by means of factor loadings and reliability assessments between items and latent variables. At this point, the researcher must assess the construct's reliability and validity (Hair et al., 2011). Measure reliability is the inner consistency of constructs' items. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) are two ratios to examine construct dependability. Construct dependability is established when Cronbach's alpha and CR surpasses 0.7, as stated by Hair et al. (2022) and DeVellis and Thorpe (2021). Moreover, if the outer loadings of an object are more than 0.6, it can be kept in the model (Moores & Chang, 2006). According to Hock and Ringle (2010), even if the average variance extracted (AVE) is greater than 0.5, discriminant validity is verified. And discriminant validity is assessing through the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). The relationships between each construct are illustrated by the path coefficients that are obtained by estimating the structural model in the second phase, after assessing the multi-collinearity through variances inflation factor (VIF).

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Descriptive analysis

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents (n=335)

Variable	Levels	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	141	42.1
	Female	193	57.6
	Others	1	0.3
Educational status	High school student	31	9.3
	University student	186	55.5
	Graduated	118	35.2
University major group	Business and Economics	118	35.2
	Engineering and Technology	54	16.1
	Health Sciences	43	12.8
	Education	38	11.3
	Law and Political Science	32	9.6
	Architecture and Construction	29	8.7
	Others	21	6.3
Social media using time	Less than 1 hour	25	7.5
	1-2 hours	40	11.9
	2-3 hours	77	23.0
	3-4 hours	96	28.7
	More than 4 hours	97	29.0
Most using social media platform	Facebook	128	38.2
	Instagram	50	14.9
	TikTok	92	27.5
	YouTube	61	18.2
	Others	4	1.2

Table 1 presents the respondents' profile, including gender, educational status, university major, and their social media using habit. As shown in Table 1, most of the respondents were female (57.6%) and currently studying in universities. Respondents majoring in Business and Economics dominates with 35.2%, following the Engineering and Technology with 16.1%. Table 1 presents the respondents' profile, including gender, educational status, university major, and their social media usage habit. According to the data presented in Table 1, the majority of the participants were female, accounting for 57.6% of the total. Additionally, 55.5% of the respondents said that they were now studying in universities. Among the respondents, 35.2% are majoring in business and economics, while 16.1% are studying engineering and technology. All 335 respondents acknowledged that they utilize social media. Regarding their use of social media, 29% reported using it for more than four hours each day, and 38.2% said they use Facebook most frequently. Especially, during the selection process, 320 out of 355 (95.5%) respondents simultaneously employed social media to acquire information about universities.

4.2. An evaluation of higher-order constructs

This study conducted a thorough analysis to simplify the theoretical model using a second-order reflective-reflective model.

4.2.1. Lower-order constructs

This stage of reflective model focus on assessing the lower-order constructs (LOCs) which satisfy the criteria of internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity and ignoring and omitting higher-order constructs (HOCs) results (Sarstedt et al., 2019).

Factor loading

Hulland (1999) states that in an exploratory investigation, outside loadings greater than 0.40 are acceptable. According to Hair et al. (2022), reflective indicator loadings greater than 0.7 are supposed to imply that the latent construct is likely real, whereas 0.5 is seen as acceptable. Sometimes outer loading values greater than 0.60 are acceptable (Moores & Chang, 2006). Outer loading refers to the relationship between the construct and the indication. This study used a cut-off value > 0.60 as advised by (Moores & Chang, 2006) and the coefficient of the Outer Loadings of the LOCs is higher than 0.60, indicating that all LOCs are statistically significant in the model.

Construct reliability and validity

The results of Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) are displayed in Table 2. Hair et al. (2017) propose that the evaluation of dependability should prioritize the use of Cronbach's Alpha and CR rho_c. Construct dependability is established when Cronbach's Alpha is greater than 0.7 and the CR surpasses 0.7, as stated by Hair et al. (2023) and DeVellis (2012). The Cronbach's Alpha values in this study ranged from 0.741 to 0.882, while the CR rho_c values ranged from 0.852 to 0.919. These values demonstrate a strong level of reliability and consistency within the reflecting constructions.

Table 2. Convergent Validity and Reliability (LOCs level)

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
AA	0.807	0.874	0.634
CA	0.790	0.864	0.613
CT	0.769	0.896	0.811
IN	0.824	0.919	0.850
IT	0.768	0.896	0.811
PT	0.882	0.913	0.678
PU	0.800	0.870	0.626
TR	0.795	0.907	0.830
UC	0.741	0.852	0.659
WM	0.753	0.858	0.669

Convergent validity

The AVE results displayed in Table 2 indicate a minimum value of 0.613. Hock and Ringle (2010) assert that a scale demonstrates convergent validity when the AVE is equal to or greater than 0.5. Consequently, convergent validity is not a cause for concern.

Discriminant validity

The degree to which a construct is empirically differentiated from other constructs is known as its discriminant validity (Rönkkö & Cho, 2022). Discriminant validity is assessed by examining the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). In the context of HTML, Kline (2023) proposes that a value below 0.85 is indicative of discriminant validity.

Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of LOCs

	AA	CA	CT	IN	IT	PT	PU	TR	UC	WM
AA										
CA	0.841									
CT	0.153	0.253								
IN	0.149	0.285	0.478							
IT	0.327	0.292	0.195	0.631						

PT	0.329	0.362	0.069	0.039	0.058					
PU	0.580	0.710	0.273	0.192	0.222	0.407				
TR	0.210	0.293	0.811	0.844	0.389	0.042	0.185			
UC	0.550	0.697	0.158	0.148	0.252	0.301	0.582	0.201		
WM	0.242	0.330	0.411	0.362	0.632	0.148	0.349	0.418	0.300	

The cross-loadings of all manifest LOCs are shown by the results shown in Table 3. This verifies that the manifest variables within each construct appropriately reflect the designated latent variable and affirms the model's ability to differentiate among various variables.

4.2.2. Higher-order construct

Validating higher order Social Media Marketing (Reflective – Reflective)

Table 4. SMM's Convergent Validity and Reliability

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
SMM	0.776	0.843	0.518

The results presented in Table 4 demonstrate that the SMM has high reliability and convergence when the Cronbach's Alpha and CR indices are both greater than 0.7, and the AVE is greater than 0.5.

4.3. Structural model

Subsequent to the assessment of the measurement model's validity and reliability, an analysis of the proposed structural model is conducted.

4.3.1. Assessing multi-collinearity

Analyzing Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) helps one to identify and solve possible multicollinearity-related issues before undertaking hypothesis testing.

Multicollinearity distorts the results obtained from several linear regression. Multicollinearity results in exaggerated variances in the regression coefficients, therefore rendering them statistically irrelevant and widening their confidence ranges.

VIF scores of 5 or greater indicate substantial collinearity issues among the indicators of formatively assessed constructs. However, collinearity issues can occur even with a VIF as low as 3, according to Becker et al. (2014). The VIF values should ideally be below or near 3.

Table 5. Inner VIFs

Hypothesis	VIF
AA -> UC	1.815
CA -> UC	1.815
PT -> AA	1.138
PT -> CA	1.138
PU -> AA	1.138
PU -> CA	1.138
SMM -> PT	1.000
SMM -> PU	1.000

4.3.2. Hypotheses testing

Table 6 shows important results in the original sample, including P values and f-square concerning the hypotheses under examination in this study on the effect of SMM on numerous variables impacting the university choice among Generation Z. The findings demonstrate the extent to which SMM influences perceived usefulness (PU) and its subsequent impact on cognitive attitude (CA) and affective attitude (AA) toward selecting a university.

The hypothesis H1, which posits a positive relationship between SMM and PU, is strongly supported as the p values is

$0.000 < 0.05$. The effect of SMM on PU is slightly ($f\text{-square} = 0.086$). This indicates that effective social media strategies partly enhance the perceived usefulness of university-related information among prospective students. PU, in turn, shows a robust positive effect on CA ($p\text{ values} = 0.000 < 0.05$, $f\text{-square} = 0.362 > 0.35$) and medium effect on AA ($p\text{ values} = 0.000 < 0.05$, $f\text{-square} = 0.203 > 0.15$), suggesting that when students find the information useful, it significantly shapes their cognitive and emotional attitudes towards universities.

Table 6. Result of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Path	Original sample (O)	P values	f-square	Status
H1	SMM -> PU	0.282	0.000	0.086	Accepted
H2	SMM -> PT	0.050	0.412	0.003	Rejected
H3	PU -> CA	0.522	0.000	0.362	Accepted
H4	PU -> AA	0.419	0.000	0.203	Accepted
H5	PT -> CA	0.130	0.003	0.023	Accepted
H6	PT -> AA	0.145	0.004	0.024	Accepted
H7	CA -> UC	0.457	0.000	0.163	Accepted
H8	AA -> UC	0.120	0.100	0.011	Rejected

Notes: SMM: Social media marketing; PU: Perceived usefulness; PT: Perceived trust; CA: Cognitive attitude; AA: Affective attitude; UC: University choice decision

However, SMM has barely any effect on PT ($p\text{ value} = 0.424 > 0.05$, $f\text{-square} = 0.003 < 0.02$). This means that SMM might not be enough to get students to trust on its own. SMM doesn't instantly make people trust institutions more. Instead, it has a small but noticeable effect on how people feel about the university brand (AA) ($p\text{ value} = 0.004 < 0.05$, $f\text{-square} = 0.024 > 0.02$) and how they feel about consumers (CA) ($p\text{ value} = 0.003 < 0.05$, $f\text{-square} = 0.023 > 0.02$).

Moreover, CA has normal effects on UC ($p\text{ value} = 0.000 < 0.05$, $f\text{-square} = 0.163 > 0.15$), therefore underlining the important part cognitive attitudes play in the students' decision-making process. This suggests that students are significantly more inclined to select an institution if they assess it favorably based on their cognitive processes. According to the statistical analysis, the impact of AA on UC is not significant ($p\text{ value} = 0.100 > 0.05$, $f\text{-square} = 0.011 < 0.02$), indicating that emotional attitudes may not have a considerable impact in the final decision-making process.

Table 7. R-square

Constructs	R-square	R-square adjusted
AA	0.239	0.234
CA	0.337	0.333
PT	0.003	0.000
PU	0.080	0.077
UC	0.297	0.292

Notes: AA: Affective attitude; CA: Cognitive attitude; PT: Perceived trust; PU: Perceived usefulness; UC: University choice decision

The R-square values in Table 7 indicate the extent to which SMM affects different elements that influence the university choice of Generation Z. SMM accounts for 7.7% of the variance in PU ($R\text{-square} = 0.077$) and has a negligible direct effect on PT ($R\text{-square} = 0.003$). CA is significantly influenced, with 33.3% of its variance explained ($R\text{-square} = 0.337$), while AA shows a 23.4% variance explained ($R\text{-square} = 0.234$). As the effect of AA in UC is not significant, 29.2% of UC ($R\text{-square} = 0.292$) is explained by CA.

5. Discussions and contributions

Gernally, this research findings show that 95.5% of survey participants confirmed that they used social media for research when choosing universities, solidifying this study. This study presents some detailed insights into the important impact of social media marketing on the university selection process for Gen Z in Vietnam. The empirical evidence from this study

substantiates the hypotheses that SMM impacts perceived usefulness (PU) and cognitive attitude (CA), which in turn affect university choice decisions. However, factors of SMM do not totally help HEIs create students' Perceived Trust in them, and Affective Attitude seems not to contribute to explaining university choice decisions.

By applying the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework, this study makes a substantial contribution to the body of knowledge on marketing management in the field of higher education in a number of ways. Social media as external stimulus has direct impacts on student's university decision making. The data analysis confirms that the elements of SMM—informativeness, trendiness, customization, interactivity, and word-of-mouth—are crucial in enhancing perceived usefulness among Gen Z students. This aligns with earlier findings, such as Gupta and Singharia (2021), which demonstrated that social media platforms' accessibility and continuous updates enhance users' engagement and cognitive processing. Similarly, Siagian et al. (2022) found that frequent social media users reported higher PU due to the constant flow of relevant information and interactive content. In the context of Vietnamese higher education, the implication is that universities need to prioritize providing timely and informative content to sustain high levels of perceived usefulness among potential students. Regular updates about academic programs, campus events, and student life on social media can keep the target audience engaged and informed, thereby increasing the perceived value of the university.

The study's results reveal a strong association between perceived usefulness and both cognitive and affective attitudes towards university choice. Perceived usefulness has significant impacts on cognitive attitude, thoughts and beliefs about the subject. The positive impact of PU on cognitive attitude suggests that students' rational evaluations of a university's academic offerings, reputation, and career prospects are significantly influenced by the perceived benefits of SMM. This supports the notion that when students find the information provided via social media useful and relevant, they are more inclined to cultivate a positive cognitive perspective regarding the university. Because university choice is an important decision for each person, logical thinking and assessment come first. Vietnamese Gen Z must consider many elements, such as location, tuition fees, financial aid, academic programs, or institution's quality due to their family background, goals, and expectations. Therefore, social media serves as an ideal platform to access information from universities, alumni, and current students.

The findings suggest that cognitive attitude has substantially influencing university choice decisions while affective attitude does not influence Vietnamese Gen Z's students' choice decision. This observation is in line with the work of Moon et al. (2017), who found that cognitive attitudes are more influential in decision-making processes compared to affective attitudes. In the Vietnamese context, this suggests that while emotional factors are important, rational evaluations of a university's offerings and reputation play a more crucial role in the decision-making process of Gen Z students. Universities should leverage this insight by emphasizing their academic strengths, career prospects, and overall value proposition in their marketing strategies. Detailed information about faculty qualifications, research opportunities, alumni success stories, and career services should be highlighted to appeal to the cognitive evaluations of prospective students.

Moreover, in contrast to Nagoya et al. (2021)'s research, this study shows different results regarding the impact of affective attitude on university choice. The emotional experiences of students in Indonesia play a significant role in influencing their decision to choose a university. This difference could be explained by cultural and socioeconomic disparities between Vietnam and Indonesia. The importance placed on emotional factors in decision-making processes may stem from different cultural values, educational priorities, and economic conditions in each country. While affective attitudes are important in Indonesia, they may not carry the same significance in Vietnam when it comes to making decisions about which university to choose. In Vietnam, other factors may have a greater influence on these decisions.

This study specifically assists institutions contemplating the use of social media as a marketing strategy to engage students' attention. Social networking platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram have shown a growing utilization among young people. As these young people often do not engage with traditional media, these social media platforms have become crucial channel for university marketers to reach this demographic segment. HEIs often face a dilemma in developing effective SMM strategies. The findings suggest to HEI's managers and marketers they should prioritize the delivery of valuable, relevant, and up-to-date content through social media, tailor messages to individual preferences, and foster interaction to engage prospective students effectively. By incorporating trendiness and interactive content, universities can enhance their brand perception, leading to higher perceived usefulness among Generation Z. Additionally, word-of-mouth remains crucial, as peer recommendations via social platforms help shape cognitive attitudes towards universities. Moreover, recognizing that Generation Z is often skeptical of online information, HEIs should focus on building trust by being transparent and authentic in their communications. Universities could provide real-life testimonials from current students or alumni and showcase behind-the-scenes content to create a more relatable and trustworthy image.

6. Conclusion, limitation and future research directions

Based on a sample of 335 Gen Z respondents, this study confirmed that SMM has a significant impact on the selection of perceived usefulness as a benchmark. Additionally, perceived usefulness enhances attitude, which influences college decision. Perceived trust is unaffected by SMM, indicating that some Gen Zers do not believe information from social

media. Additionally, this study demonstrates that while emotional attitude has no effect on Gen Z's school choice, cognitive attitude does. The results demonstrate the significance of SMM for university marketing strategies by showing that it has some influence on Gen Z students' choice of university in Vietnam. Higher education institutions, however, face a difficulty in creating acceptable and successful SMM tactics to build trust and draw in new students.

Despite significant efforts, it's crucial to recognize certain limitations of this research. Firstly, the study confined its focus to the analysis of social media platforms as sources of information for students, overlooking to consider the wider implications that social media marketing could have on the decision-making process involved in choosing an educational institution. This limited perspective may neglect other important elements of SMM that could influence students' decisions in different behaviors. Secondly, the study generalized its findings by considering social media platforms collectively without accounting for the unique characteristics of specific platforms, which may lead to different outcomes. Finally, the research did not explore any moderating variables within the proposed framework, including personality traits or family income, which may significantly influence students' choices (Coenen et al., 2021; Hotz et al., 2018).

Future research should broaden its focus beyond the limited informational function of social media marketing and investigate the broader implications it has on the decision-making processes of students. This study primarily examines the ways in which students utilize social media for information gathering; however, it is crucial to explore additional aspects of social media marketing, such as its role in enhancing brand awareness, promoting engagement, and influencing perceptions of a university's quality. These broader aspects could clarify the extent to which SMM truly impacts students' decisions in selecting an institution.

Furthermore, it is essential to examine each social media platform in isolation. Each platform exhibits distinct characteristics, target demographics, and modes of interaction, which may influence students in different ways. Future research should explore these platform-specific attributes more thoroughly to comprehend how each distinctly impacts students' choices and inclinations while they seek the appropriate educational institution. Finally, future research should examine the moderating effects of individual differences, such as personality traits and socioeconomic factors like family income, on the decision-making process. By including these moderating factors, researchers could provide more personalized insights, helping educational institutions to design marketing strategies that resonate better with different student groups.

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