Student information preferences and the role of social media in Indonesian higher education

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ABSTRACT

Background: Research has well documented how social media acts as a primary information source for both enrolled and prospective students. However, universities often lack clear, evidence-based guidance on how to engage their internal and external audiences. This knowledge gap forces university public relations (PR) teams to rely on trial and error, often struggling to create impactful content. **Purpose:** This study investigates student preferences for social media content and information sources to enlighten university PR staff who want to improve their institutional communication. **Methods:** This research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining a quantitative survey of 330 students with qualitative insights gathered from focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews with 150 students. The survey included current students because they were once prospective students, so they could give insights as both prospective and current students. **Results:** Students trust unofficial sources (such as community accounts) and direct recommendations from those closest to them more than official university channels. They are also much more interested in authentic, story-based content. **Conclusions:** The implications of these findings suggest that, to increase engagement and institutional image, campus social media teams should consider presenting story-based content and increasing audience interactivity. **Implications:** To strengthen their image and engagement, the teams need to prioritize story-based content, amplify credible community voices, and increase two-way engagement. Universities are also advised to create secondary accounts to post more entertaining and light-hearted content to reduce audience reliance on unofficial sources, and or collaborate with community-driven accounts.

Keywords: Social media strategy; higher education communication; information preferences; student engagement; institutional branding

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INTRODUCTION

Social media has now become the main source of information in various countries. Despite doubts about its accuracy, social media are popular not only among the young but also among the older age group. In Indonesia, social media has become a daily part of most people's lives. In lists of the most social media users by country, Indonesia almost always ranks in the top 10. In fact, the average Indonesian spends almost the entire day 7 hours, 42 minutes on the internet, and more than 3 of those hours are spent on social media (Digital, 2025).

For three years in a row, social media has been the largest source of information for the Indonesian people. Not only to inform them about the current situation, but social media is also used to meet their information needs before making decisions. Social media provides various information about goods and services that can help someone before buying or choosing a particular service provider. Nowadays, social media is considered accountable media by both the public (Reuters, 2024) and professional groups such as journalists (Utami & Prastya, 2024).

The ability of social media to reach a wide audience and enable creative and real-time interactivity has changed marketing, sales, and public relations practices. Various industrial sectors and agencies immediately took advantage of social media for promotional purposes, increasing sales and reputation while maintaining relationships. Although the positive influence of social media on sales is still being debated due to the many studies with contradictory results (Liadeli et al., 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2012; Zhou & Charoensukmongkol, 2020). direct interaction with consumers on social media has been proven to help a company in understanding consumer tastes and developing plans to improve its products and business (Chaing et al., 2021; Dholakia et al., 2004). In public relations practice, social media remains an effective tool for increasing brand awareness (Ansari et al., 2019; Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014) and building a positive image (Seo & Park, 2018), making it a potential public relations tool.

The growing significance of digital technologies and students' active use of social media platforms have led universities to adopt social media marketing strategies (Karadağ et al., 2024). Universities are utilizing various online methods to stay competitive (Sintani et al., 2021). Up until now, social media has been seen as a crucial communication and marketing tool for universities to recruit prospective students and enhance brand visibility (Istikhoroh et al., 2021), despite ongoing debate over its effectiveness in attracting new students.

One study suggests that although students may not report visiting university social media sites or say that social media does not impact their matriculation decision, the vast majority still reported using social media platforms to learn more about the higher education schools under consideration (Peruta & Shields, 2018).

In the practice of higher education public relations, creating a social media account is now a necessity. Universities use social media not only to disseminate messages and increase awareness, but also enhance engagement with their various stakeholders (Nguyen et al., 2021). Several recent studies have explored the use of social media in university settings (Asri et al., 2023; Majid et al., 2025). Research shows that a university's social media presence can greatly impact how its reputation is perceived by students. A strong social media presence enhances students' perceptions of their institution's reputation, which is vital for attracting new students and retaining current ones (Ghani et al., 2023). Effective social media engagement can also positively influence students' attitudes towards campus. Effective social media engagement positively influences students' attitudes towards further education, highlighting the role of reputation in their decision-making (Simiyu et al., 2019). Additionally, social media engagement helps higher education institutions to enhance brand performance through improved brand image and loyalty (Yang et al., 2020) and allows universities to manage their reputations during crises and respond to threats (Khare et al., 2018). As for the internal public, the university's social media has helped students stay connected with peers and institutions (Song et al., 2023).

Besides exploring the use of social media as a tool of image creation and maintenance, scholars are also interested in studying the correlation between university social media and prospective students. University social media serves as the primary source of information for students and prospective students (Peruta & Shields, 2018). It offers direct insights from universities and peer recommendations, which are essential during the information search and evaluation stages of decision-making (Kusumawati, 2019). For Indonesians, academic and non-academic information on social media significantly influences their choice of institution (Oktivera et al., 2024), especially for private universities (Ghani et al., 2023).

Although the impacts are well-known, research on university social media management practices is limited. This has often made university public relations (PR) staff guess what content will generate views, engagement, and ultimately have a positive impact on the institution. Shortly, the staff do not always

have a clue about their audience's preferences. Research on universities' social media also often focuses on the external public (especially prospective students) and rarely addresses the internal public (students), who make up a large share of the followers of the accounts. Research in this area also often overlooks unofficial university-related accounts, which can play a significant role in disseminating information and are frequently preferred by students.

Through a comprehensive examination of students' sources of information, the types of information they expect on social media, and how they talk about their campus, this study aims to help PR staff formulate a strategy. This is important because analyzing relevant data and metrics is crucial for informing effective content strategies that enhance engagement with stakeholders, including prospective and current students and alumni (Maresova et al., 2020). For that reason, instead of conducting a content analysis of university social media, this study asks the students directly.

In contrast to the hypodermic needle theory, which positions audiences as passive and homogeneous message recipients, Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) sees individuals as active, reflective, and rational subjects in selecting media to fulfill specific needs (Katz et al. 1974; McQuail, 2010; Ruggiero, 2000; Sundar & Limperos, 2013). UGT sees students

as communicative actors who consciously evaluate various media channels and make choices based on their relevance, usefulness, and ability to provide psychological and social gratification.

In the Indonesian higher education environment, students' needs for information about the university can be categorized into three main dimensions. First, basic information needs, including quick, clear access to academic information such as registration schedules, academic policies, curricula, and scholarship opportunities. Second, social integration needs, or the need to establish an identity as part of the campus community. In this matter, social media is needed to establish connections with fellow students and gain symbolic recognition within the institutional space. Third, the need for entertainment, where social media is used to relieve academic tension while strengthening students' emotional attachment to the institution (McQuail, 2010; Sundar & Limperos, 2013).

When official university communication channels fail to provide these specific gratifications, students will turn to alternatives. Other accounts, such as unofficial social media accounts or online student community accounts, might be perceived as more responsive, casual, and relevant to their tastes and needs. This behavior confirms that students' media preferences are not solely determined by

institutional authority, but rather by the extent to which the media provides meaningful gratification within their academic and social contexts (Katz et al., 1974; Ruggiero, 2000).

Complementing students' active information selection process, Social Presence Theory provides a crucial conceptual framework for understanding communication preferences in digital spaces. This theory explains the extent to which a medium enables users to perceive the social presence of others as "real," warm, and human in technology-mediated interactions (Gefen et al., 2003; Short et al., 1976; Sundar et al., 2016; Walther, 1996). In the context of contemporary digital communication, social presence is not only determined by the technical characteristics of the medium, but also by symbolic cues, language styles, and interaction patterns that build perceptions of interpersonal closeness (Sundar et al., 2016; Walther, 1996).

For Generation Z students, the perception of a communication channel's humanness is a key factor in establishing trust, emotional affiliation, and sustained engagement. Several studies have shown that young audiences tend to be more responsive to communications that demonstrate a high level of social presence through informal language, empathy, and two-way dialogue compared to impersonal, institutional messages (Gefen et al., 2003; Sundar et al., 2016). This preference explains

why community or unofficial accounts like menfess (short for "mention and confess," an anonymous message-sharing account) or accounts that provide updates on all university admissions are popular. Even more popular and trusted than official university platforms.

Although official university social media has become a fundamental necessity, the gap between the rigid institutional communication style and students' expectations for more human interactions creates unique challenges for public relations practitioners. Students' tendency to trust unofficial accounts or communities such as menfess suggests that social presence and information gratification are determining factors in the effectiveness of digital communication in higher education environments. Therefore, this study aims to explore in depth the preferences of students' sources and types of information content at the State University of Malang to provide evidence-based guidance for public relations staff in formulating communication strategies that are more participatory, authentic, and able to increase engagement with internal and external stakeholders.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a mixed methods approach to combine the strengths of statistical analysis with in-depth contextual understanding.

This integration would enable researchers to capture the complexity of students' information preferences and the role of social media.

The use of mixed methods assumes that a communication phenomenon cannot be adequately understood through a single approach (Creswell et al., 2011; Kreps & Maibach, 2008). By combining various analytical perspectives, this method allows researchers to compare and validate findings, enrich data interpretation, and link quantitative patterns with the underlying social experiences and processes (Axinn & Pearce, 2006). Through this strategy, quantitative and qualitative findings were expected to complement each other. This resulted in a more complete and contextual understanding of the dynamics of institutional communication in the Indonesian higher education environment.

For the quantitative aspect, this research was conducted from August to October 2023. Involving 330 students from UM from various classes (2020-2023) and faculties. The survey was conducted with current students due to their experiences as prospective students. This allows them to provide information on student needs and assess campus social media from an interested perspective. Furthermore, they can share their information-seeking process regarding campus and academic life, both before and after enrolling. Sample selection was carried out in a stratified random manner

to ensure balanced representation from various faculties and groups. Quantitative data were collected using SurveyMonkey, an online survey tool that enables efficient data collection and distribution.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews were used to collect qualitative data. The FGDs consisted of 10 sessions, each with 8-10 participants to facilitate interactive discussions and get collective insights (Krueger & Casey, 2015). FGDs and interviews were conducted to confirm and deepen the survey responses.

Research participants were active UM students from the class of 2020-2022. A total of 150 students participated in this research, selected using purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) to ensure a diversity of perspectives across majors, including the Natural Sciences and Social Sciences. Criteria for selecting participants included 1) active UM student status, 2) active use of UM's official social media platforms, and 3) prior interactions with them. The number of participants was determined based on the principle of data saturation in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2006).

In addition to FGDs, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 informants selected based on criteria, including representatives from various faculties and classes. These interviews allow researchers to gain deeper

insight into individual experiences and perceptions (Seidman, 2006). They aim to gain deeper insight into their personal experiences and specific needs regarding social media information. Interviews were also conducted during the period September to November 2023, carefully recorded for further analysis, and followed the code of ethics for social and humanities research, including maintaining the confidentiality of informants' personal data.

To provide context, a brief institutional background of UM is presented. This contextualization is important to understand students' responses. UM is a public higher education institution located in Malang and Blitar, East Java, Indonesia, established in 1954. Initially named as Perguruan Tinggi Keguruan Malang and later known as IKIP Malang (1964–1999), UM is among the oldest teacher education institutes in Indonesia. It has three campuses: two in Malang City and one in Blitar City. The main campus is in Jalan Veteran, one of the main corridors of education and student activities in Malang.

This research specifically involved students enrolled at Campus 1, the main campus, which is currently undergoing infrastructure development, including the construction of new buildings and the launch of new study programs. A proportion of respondents were drawn from newly established study programs

that still have provisional accreditation status. This condition is a critical contextual factor, as the Indonesian labor market commonly prioritizes graduates from programs accredited A (Excellent). In contrast, newly opened study programs are typically eligible to attain the maximum accreditation level, "B," during their initial phase of implementation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the digital age, prospective students have access to a vast array of resources when researching potential universities. It makes the process of choosing an institution both rich in opportunity and fraught with complexity. With the proliferation of online platforms, traditional sources of information, such as people (parents, teachers, and peers), brochures, and campus visits, are now complemented by a range of digital tools, including university websites, social media, online reviews, and student forums. With the high number of users and time spent on social media, it is reasonable to assume that this tool may be the main source of information for university choice. However, looking at the survey results, it is not always the case.

The students discussed how they first learned about the university. It turns out that social media does play a role as a source of
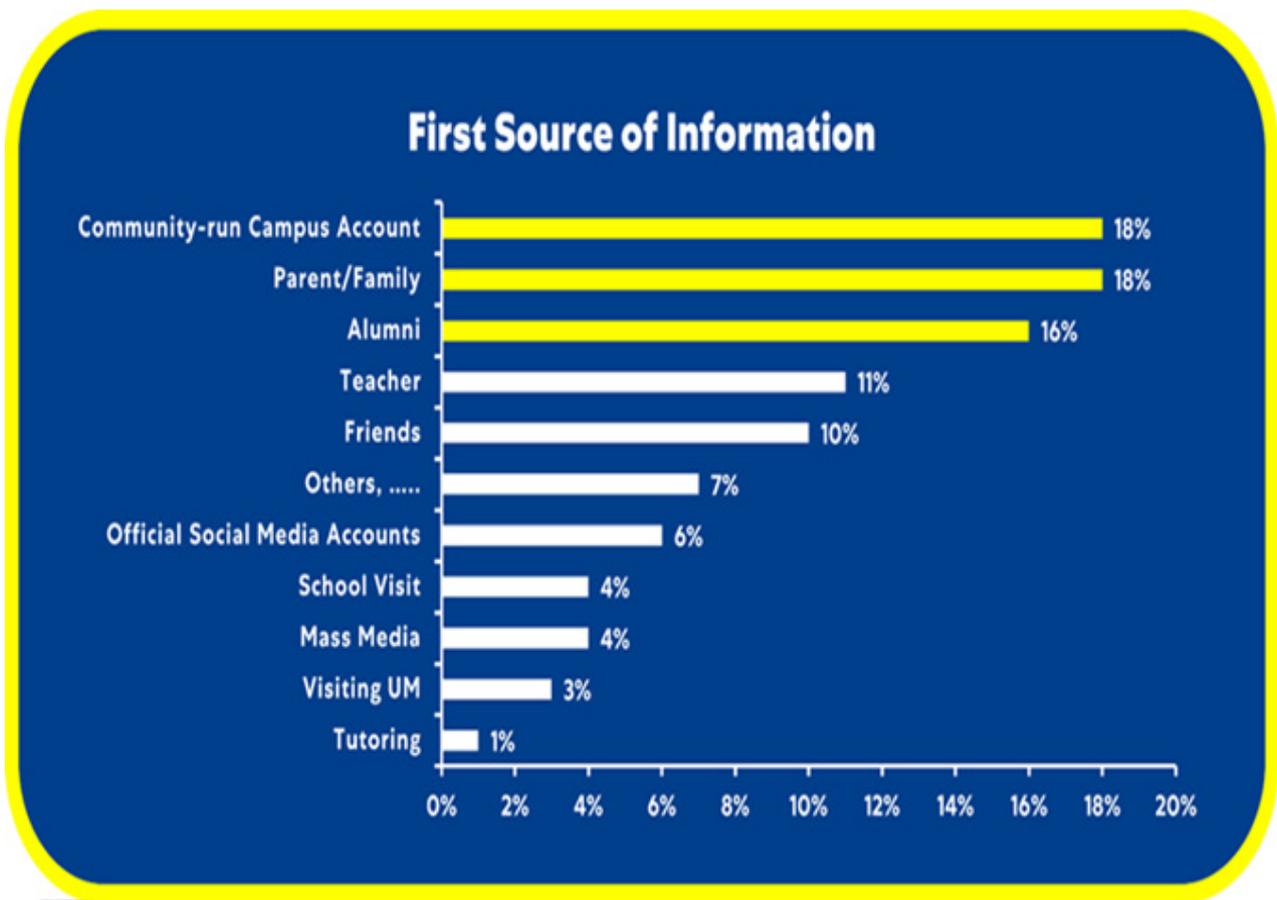
Source: Author Data, 2024

Figure 1 Students' First Source of University Information

information. Sadly, it was not the campus's official social media (see Figure 1). Students said they know more about admission or even academic info from community-run social media. Most students mention the importance of community-run social media accounts that share information about public universities in Indonesia (e.g., @kejarptn.id, @masukptn, etc.) or specific campuses (e.g., @infoUM, @ mahasiswaUM). These accounts are not owned by the campus but actively post information about various campuses, or even specific campuses, for economic purposes.

When they were prospects, they loved following non-specific accounts not only for up-to-date information but also to save time. Those accounts provide information from multiple universities, so they do not have to visit each university's website and social media accounts individually. This tendency to follow unofficial account continue after they are accepted. Unofficial social media is preferred for the variety of information. Where they not only share academic information but also art events, sometimes even promotional information about food, English academies, and so on.

Another important finding of the survey is the role of friends, teachers, and family as

sources of information. This finding aligns with a previous study on factors influencing university decision-making among high school students. Several studies have found the important role of family in university selection; nuclear and extended family members have become important sources of information that can be trusted (Ishak et al., 2011). Families are the primary source of information about which university to attend, and their opinions and expectations are the most influential factor (Muradi et al., 2018).

These parents often suggest universities to help their children gain better job opportunities (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Briggs (2006) also recognizes the important role of teachers in students' university choice, besides parents and siblings. However, Price et al. (2003) argued that parents, friends, and teachers are mainly influential in choosing a program and not a university. On the other hand, parents may also influence their children's university decision-making due to financial support considerations (Murphy, 1981).

During the discussion session, students shared that they turn to people they know for university references. That group of people could give their reference both directly and indirectly. Indirect reference could form in a story. Whether family or friends who are alumni or current students of UM often share their campus life, which helps prospective students familiarize themselves with the institution and leads to enrollment intention.

This storyline, as highlighted by Medupin (2023), is engaging because it transforms complex information into relatable narratives. This is particularly relevant in the context of higher education, where prospective students often seek not just information, but also connection and inspiration from their potential institutions. The second form of reference is the indirect one, in which the message can be more direct, such as clear suggestions to choose UM over other universities, praise for UM, or even a statement that UM is better than other universities. These references are mostly related to UM. Whether they are alumni, married to an alumni, current students, or friends of alumni or students.

From the FGDs, students preferred more personal testimonials or suggestions about the university. Personal experiences are perceived to be more valuable than statistics and dry information. An alumni, parent, or teacher story or suggestion about the university is preferred.

One of the participants, K (20), believed the words came from his seniors because they had really experienced it. He stated that even his parents' campus experiences are outdated, but he still considered their opinion, especially

regarding campus quality and job prospects of a study program. Following the logic of purchasing goods, alumni or current students' words work like a consumer's review. And prospective students are just like prospective consumers who regard other people's reviews to be trustworthy and credible (Pornpitakpan, 2004).

The parents' valuable input could be the deciding factor, rendering other aspects irrelevant. An example of this is students who choose new study programs that are not even accredited and lack laboratories. Although students admit that university rankings and accreditation status are important, they are not the decisive factors. MI (19), a student who joined a new study program, said his parents convinced him to take it, even though the program is new and its accreditation is still in progress. His parents said that if it is under a public university, then the quality can be trusted. It looks like, aside from perceptions of validity, face-to-face communication allows people to express their concerns and ask questions, which is often more challenging in online settings.

Personal sources, whether by phone, chat, or face-to-face interaction, can create a dialogue and an immediate reason. Students often mention the availability of answers to their questions when they prefer talking about university with family, friends, or a teacher. The

delay in answering on social media, where they often do not get a reply, makes traditional word of mouth still important in influencing university decision-making. Friends, family, and other word-of-mouth sources are extremely valuable when consumers perceive formal sources as less available or hard to access (Bloom, 1989; Sapienza, 1989). This word of mouth, along with environmental and social conditions, influenced students' choices positively (Wadhwa, 2016).

This positive attitude towards storytelling and personal sources is also reflected in information-seeking behaviors on social media. Before choosing a university, some students admit that they are looking for campus vlogs from their students. Instead of specifically searching for an account, they would rather enter a keyword or hashtag related to the campus to see various student-made videos. Students see that story as more interesting, reliable, and informative, especially to illustrate campus life. In conclusion, it is safe to assume that whether it comes from people they know or strangers they found online, personal sources are loved for their personal nuance, perceived authenticity, and interactivity.

These results indicate that university public relations needs to improve their social media presence and engagement through story-based content, not just infographics and announcements, and interaction. It is worth

considering studies that found a significant positive relationship between perceived interactivity and outcome variables such as attitude and behaviour (Hudson et al., 2016; Vendemia, 2017). Additionally, as more parents use social media, it is a good idea to compile information not only for prospective students but also for parents. Lastly, although it may not align with the trend of digital platforms, maintaining a strong, positive attitude towards private sources, maintaining visibility and good relations with alumni and teachers will probably pay off well by increasing university brand awareness and the likelihood of enrollment, especially for universities.

In recent years, social media has become a crucial platform for university students to share their views and experiences about their campuses. This shift marks a significant change in how students communicate and form opinions about their institutions. Students use social media to connect; they love sharing their daily life and things they love to generate responses from others (Ryan et al., 2014; Yang & Brown, 2013). This behavior should be captured and leveraged through collaboration among university PR staff, given that it has become apparent that students would like to actively participate in creating social media content (Eger et al., 2019).

This practice can be found in Universitas Sebelas Maret. This campus asked its international students to use hashtags to promote their university, acting as micro-influencers within their social networks (Gardiana et al., 2022). This grassroots promotion not only increases the university's visibility but also creates a sense of community. Student-generated content often appears more authentic and relatable than official university communications, thereby resonating more with audiences (Gardiana et al., 2022).

Although students' post is more relatable, they are not without risk. Apparently, students not only use social media to post their daily lives or something entertaining. Students use social media to voice opinions and advocate for change (Hamid et al., 2022), thereby enhancing their university experience and fostering a sense of activism. But social media could also be an outlet for students to express disappointment or criticism of institutions (Arifin, 2024; Arrizqi & Nasukha, 2023), which risks the institution's reputation.

Connected to their phone 24/7, almost 90% of respondents admit regularly share their campus experience on social media (see Figure 2). The questionnaire also reveal that the respondents shared their experiences of sharing negative aspects of the university on social media. Luckily, most students said they never share the negative side of themselves on social
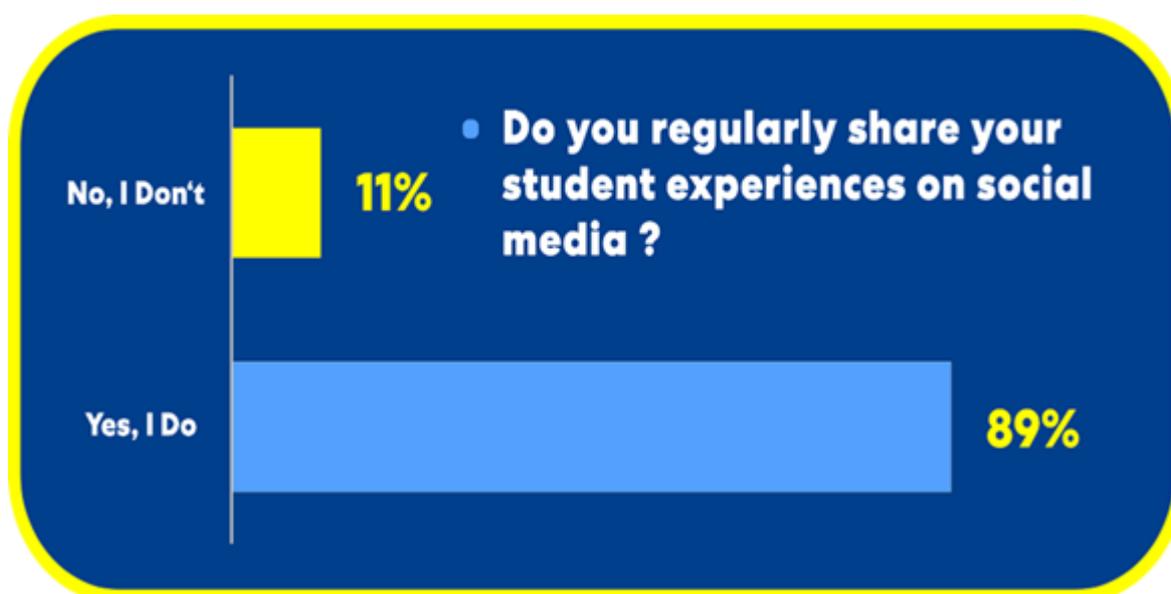
Source: Author Data, 2024

**Figure 2 Students' Sharing Behavior on Social Media**
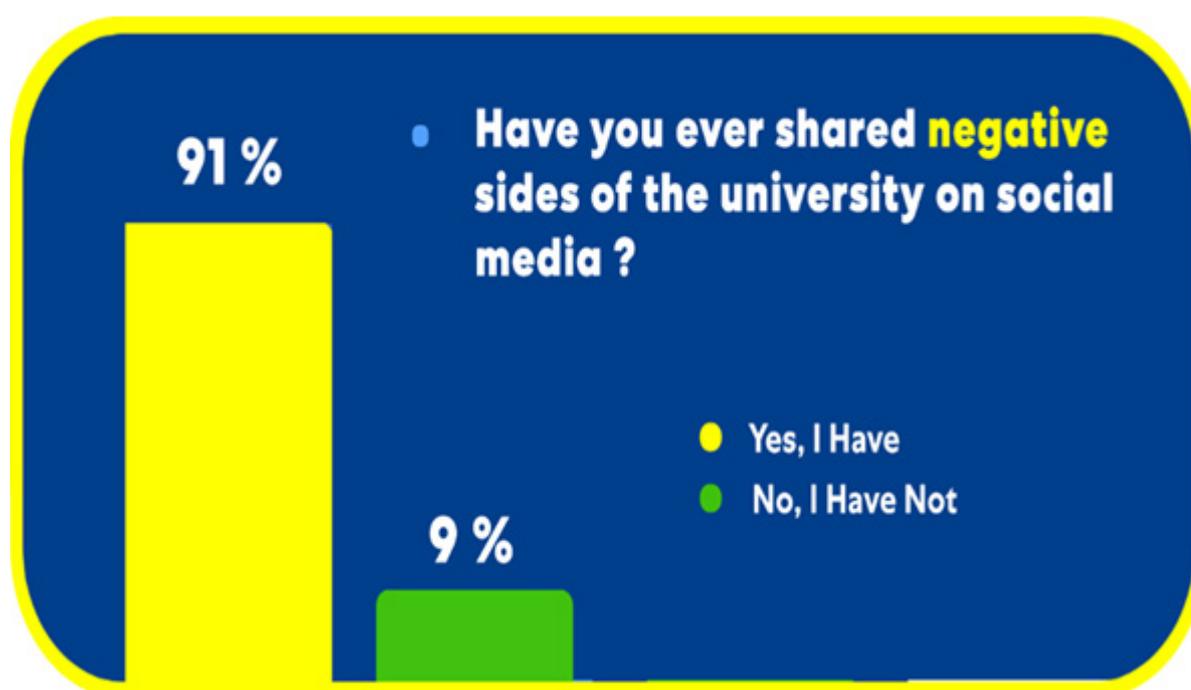
Source: Author Data, 2024

Figure 3 Sharing Negative of University Side on Social Media

media (see Figure 3). However, deeper digging into the FGDs revealed that this behavior does not mean they have no complaints. This avoidance of online complaining is motivated by several reasons. One to be preferred over other channels, such as WhatsApp groups, online talks, menfess accounts, or their second accounts. This practice is driven by several reasons, from safety and interactivity in more private spaces to emotional resonance and
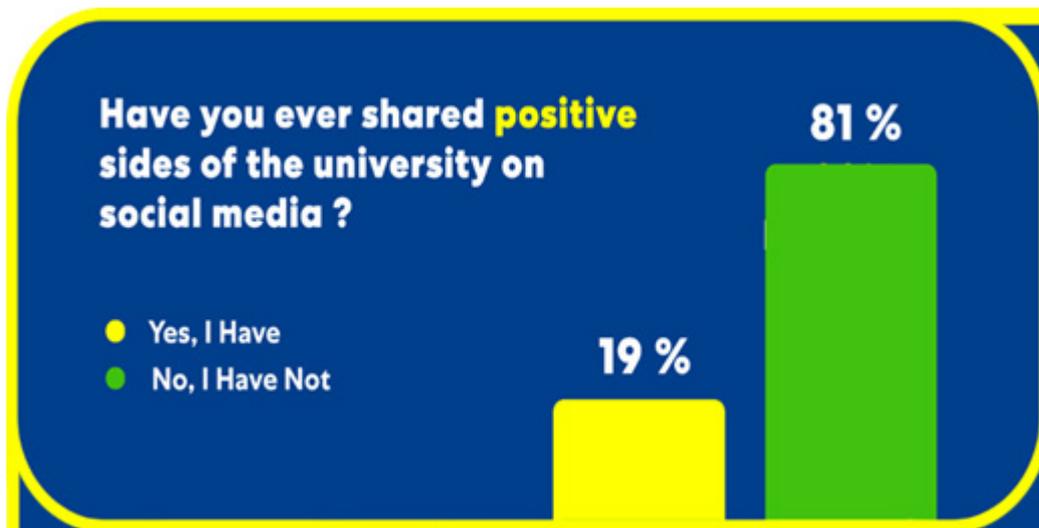
Source: Author Data, 2024

Figure 4 Sharing Positive University Side on Social Media Statistics

personal branding issues, as they don't want to be labeled as negative.

This shows that decisions regarding various negative information on social media are based on considerations of profit and loss (cost-benefit analysis). Students may consider the risks of openly criticizing institutions in the public sphere, especially when it affects their self-image or social relationships. In relationships between students and universities, criticism is commonplace, while social media is seen as too open or risky. Cook & Rice (1998) and Lawler & Thye (2007) explain that individuals tend to avoid behavior that could harm them. This tendency is even stronger in open social interactions witnessed by a wide audience, as individuals consider the risks of social evaluation, reputation, and symbolic consequences that may arise from actions in public spaces. In other words, students prefer

to consider the long-term benefits of their self-image rather than venting their disappointment on social media, which is more permanent and visible to many people.

While impressive quantitative metrics might initially reassure university PR staff, they don't necessarily guarantee a crisis-free environment. Negative word of mouth, particularly when shared offline, can still tarnish an institution's reputation. Nowadays, it doesn't take a large-scale campaign to spark a PR crisis; a single viral post can quickly escalate into a full-blown scandal.

In accordance with previous findings where students are hesitant to be perceived as 'negative,' it is not surprising that almost all respondents admit they have ever shared the good side of the campus on social media as shown at Figure 4. The qualitative data shows that students love sharing their campus life,

including their academic experience, social life with other students, and campus facilities, and they receive compliments for it. This finding aligns with a previous study that found that social media is increasingly a tool students choose to express their academic experiences (Junco, 2012).

During the FGD, a student said he only loves to share the class situation when he was in the new building because it looked "aesthetic." Students also love it when compliments about the nice facilities come from their friends at higher-ranking universities.

The positive information shared by these students should be welcomed, as consumers usually judge information from others as trustworthy and credible (Pornpitakpan, 2004). User-generated social media communications have a greater influence on consumers' overall perception of a brand than company-created social media communications. In the context of higher education in Indonesia, this means that students' stories can significantly influence prospective students' and the public's perceptions of their institutions. In conclusion, digital storytelling among students in Indonesia serves as a powerful mechanism to increase engagement and promote their universities.

Additionally, receiving positive feedback when they post about their campus can foster students' pride and sense of community, as positive social validation on social media has a major impact on individual well-being and sense of identity (Hoffner & Bond, 2022; Pang, 2022). When users receive positive feedback and validation through likes, comments, and shares, it triggers the release of dopamine in the brain, creating feelings of pleasure and satisfaction (Bucyte, 2023; Okanovic & Agnès, 2023).

Higher education institutions now realize the importance of social media platforms for many communication purposes. Social media has become an essential tool for universities to reach a wider audience, engage with students, faculty, other institutions, and the public (Jeong & Jalali, 2019). From marketing, student recruitment, student support, alumni communication, and crisis management, all are now involving this media (Palmer, 2013). Students nowadays even rely heavily on the campus's official social media for academic-related information, more than on the university website or campus staff. Social media is also a key factor in institutional branding, which has become an essential element in the management of educational institutions (Hasanah et al., 2023). Administrators and leaders in higher education institutions have recognized the importance of conveying a consistent brand message not only to external but also internal audiences (Judson & Taylor, 2014).

Good communication with the internal public is essential, as it can foster loyalty. Specifically, student loyalty increases when students feel that their university communicates effectively with them and meets their various needs, including through social media (Maresova et al., 2020). It is why identifying students' expected types of information on campus social media is crucial to fulfilling their needs, making them feel touched, and keeping them engaged.

Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn are valuable tools for promoting higher education programs and engaging prospective students (Safi et al., 2023). However, those platforms are nothing without the ability to drive engagement. Content that engages and enhances the consumer experience is essential for driving engagement and influencing behavior (Anjorin et al., 2024). In the university context, research has shown that social media engagement significantly influences university (Ahmadi, 2019). Universities that actively engage with their audience on social media platforms can enhance relationships, trust, authenticity, visibility, and branding, which are essential for maintaining a positive image and attracting prospective students (Ann Voss & Kumar, 2013). Social media engagement itself goes beyond mere interactions; it involves creating value for audiences. This is why social

media staff should not only focus on driving engagement but also on providing critical information about academic programs, campus life, and admissions processes (Ulfa et al., 2023).

Engagement on social media also mediates between student satisfaction and involvement in higher education (Simbolon & Yanti, 2021). Social media engagement also represents the strength of personal relationships, values adopted, and considerations in the use of social media (Hermita et al., 2023). Studies have also highlighted the role of social media engagement in driving enrollment among prospective students, underscoring the need for universities to develop effective engagement strategies on these platforms (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Knowing the importance of engagement on a university's social media platforms and understanding the desired content type are essential to driving and maintaining engagement. By actively engaging their audience on social media, higher education institutions can build a vibrant online community, attract prospective students, and enhance the overall educational experience for their stakeholders.

This research involved internal audiences as respondents. Therefore, it is natural that many students follow the university's official social media platforms. However, being a follower does not automatically reflect satisfaction

with the content presented. Research findings show that some students even stated that they no longer follow the university's official social media accounts, even though they had previously been active followers.

Students generally find university social media more relevant during the pre-registration phase. This is especially true when they are still prospective students seeking information about registration and admissions. After officially becoming students, perceptions of content usefulness tended to decline. One respondent, AF (19), stated that: "But after I was accepted as a student, most of the information was no longer relevant. Interestingly, most important announcements were shared in the study program WhatsApp group, and the unimportant ones were rather."

This statement indicates a shift in information channel preferences, from institutional social media to more direct, contextual communication channels, such as study program WhatsApp groups. In terms of information usefulness, students demonstrated diverse assessments, influenced by the relevance of the content, its accessibility to daily academic needs, and the efficiency of the communication channel used.

Some informants felt that the information presented was less relevant or acceptable once the need for it had passed. However, another informant, A (19), stated that although the information was occasionally important, its presence was often overshadowed by other information deemed insignificant, making the main message less visible and less well received by students. Another dissatisfied student said, "Maybe it is important for the university, but I do not know for the students... It often feels more like a social media platform to promote the campus officials." Students are also unhappy when the campus posts about students' achievements, featuring the faces of campus officials. They perceived it as inappropriate; the students should be the ones under the spotlight. From the discussion, it can be said that most students do not see the official social media as bad, but they do not find it relatable or engaging, and they feel it is rarely about them.

Quantitative data mining shows that six main types of information are expected by more than 50% of respondents on university social media: 1) academic information, 2) scholarships, 3) student activities, 4) photos of campus atmosphere, 5) study program information, and 6) student achievements. These top answers shown in Figure 5 can give us at least three insights. First, students want information that helps their campus life, whether academic, scholarship, or study program-related. Second, they want social media to also display content that puts students at the center (e.g., student
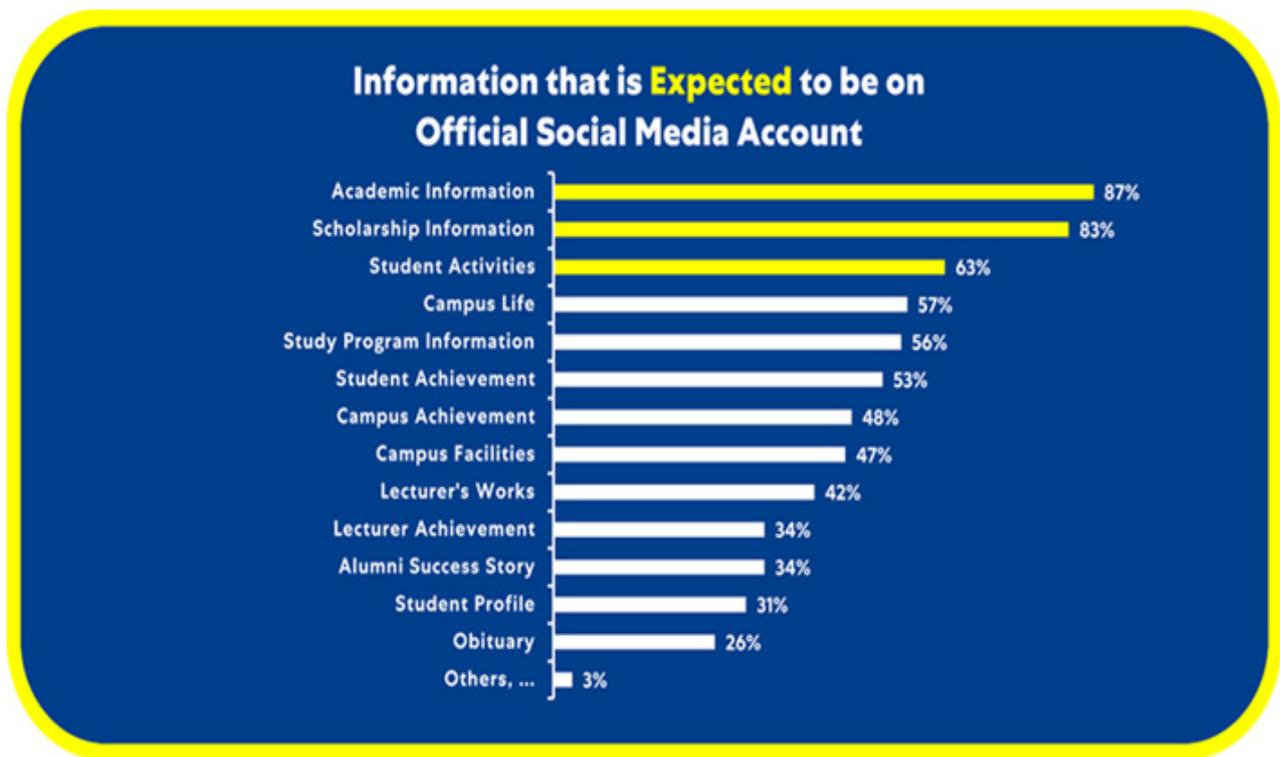
Source: Author Data, 2024

Figure 5 Sharing Positive of University Side on Social Media Statistics

activities and achievements). Lastly, the role of visual storytelling cannot be ignored. The demand for photos of campus scenes is evidence that visual elements, such as images and videos, play an important role in increasing engagement on social media platforms (Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019). Studies examining university public relations practices on social media found that high communication efficiency with students was achieved primarily through posting photos and videos. This visual aspect attracts attention and encourages further interaction, as audiences are more likely to engage with visually stimulating content. Additionally, the impact of storytelling goes beyond engagement; it also shapes the public's perception of higher education. First-

person narratives in social media content can generate higher levels of engagement and connectedness, which is important for effective online marketing (Pachucki et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study provides insight into the dynamics of student information preferences within the evolving social media ecosystem in Indonesian higher education. Key findings suggest that social media has not completely replaced traditional communication channels. In this study, official campus accounts ranked below parents, teachers, and alumni as sources of information about higher education. This does

not mean that students do not seek information through social media; rather, it means that unofficial social media platforms are preferred. Therefore, at least for now, good relationships with alumni and high school teachers may have a more significant impact on generating input from new students, both in terms of quantity and quality.

Nevertheless, social media optimization is certainly essential. Especially for the general public, social media is a primary source of information for meeting basic needs and fostering identity and a sense of belonging. Like most Indonesians, college students prefer content that resonates with personal narratives and experiences. Students find authentic, relatable content more engaging and impactful.

One of the study's findings relates to student preferences. They prefer campus community accounts over official accounts created by the university. Students tend to view official institutional accounts as rigid, formal, and often slow to respond to pressing issues. In contrast, unofficial accounts have a stronger "social presence" because they use a more humane and community-based style. This situation demonstrates a shift in information authority. Information power no longer lies in the formal position of an institution, but rather in the level of authenticity and speed of interaction offered by these organic accounts.

This research complements studies on university public relations by highlighting the crucial role of active students as "internal publics." To date, many studies have focused solely on social media as a marketing tool for recruiting new students. However, this study demonstrates that managing information for existing students is far more complex and requires two-way communication. In the future, the success of university communications will no longer be measured by the number of announcements posted, but by the extent to which the campus can appear more "human" to compete with community accounts.

The managerial implications of this research are clear for public relations practitioners in higher education. Universities should no longer view unofficial community accounts as threats or competitors. Universities should rather view them as models for understanding student information preference. Campus social media teams should start using a more relaxed storytelling style. Furthermore, information delivery should be streamlined, and digital customer service functions should be further enhanced. Universities are also advised to consider creating secondary accounts to post more entertaining and light-hearted content to reduce audience reliance on unofficial sources, and or collaborate with community-driven accounts.

While useful, this research still has limitations. It focused only on State University of Malang (UM). Therefore, the results may differ if applied to private universities or universities outside Java. Future research should examine the psychological impact of anonymous accounts like menfess. Furthermore, it is also important to examine how social media algorithms spread hoaxes among students. In conclusion, universities need more than just having social media accounts. They must transform into more responsive, honest, and caring entities that address students' needs.

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