

**JURNAL ILMIAH MANAJEMEN BISNIS DAN INOVASI**  
**UNIVERSITAS SAM RATULANGI (JMBI UNSRAT)**

**INTEGRATING EXPERIENTIAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: DETERMINANTS OF UNIVERSITY CHOICE AMONG INDONESIAN STUDENTS**

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**ARTICLE INFO**

**Keywords:** *experiential marketing, social media marketing, university choice, higher education marketing, student decision-making, digital engagement*

**Kata kunci:** pemasaran pengalaman, pemasaran media sosial, pilihan universitas, pemasaran pendidikan tinggi, pengambilan keputusan mahasiswa, keterlibatan digital

**Abstract:** This study aims to examine how experiential marketing and social media marketing jointly influence students' university decisions within Indonesia's increasingly competitive private higher education sector. Private universities face persistent challenges in attracting prospective students as traditional promotional approaches have become less effective among digitally oriented youth. This creates an urgent need to understand how emotionally engaging experiences and authentic digital interactions shape enrollment decisions. Although prior studies have examined these variables separately, limited research integrates them within a single explanatory framework capable of capturing their synergistic effect. Using a quantitative survey design, data were collected from 150 students who had engaged with both campus experiences and social media promotions. A structured Likert-scale questionnaire measured three constructs, and reliability, validity, and multiple regression analyses were performed using JASP. The results show that experiential marketing and social media marketing significantly influence university decision-making, with social media marketing exerting a slightly stronger effect.

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**Abstrak:** Studi ini bertujuan untuk meneliti bagaimana pemasaran pengalaman dan pemasaran media sosial secara bersama-sama memengaruhi keputusan mahasiswa dalam memilih universitas di sektor pendidikan tinggi swasta Indonesia yang semakin kompetitif. Universitas swasta menghadapi tantangan yang terus-menerus dalam menarik calon mahasiswa karena pendekatan promosi tradisional menjadi kurang efektif di kalangan generasi muda yang berorientasi digital. Hal ini menciptakan kebutuhan mendesak untuk memahami bagaimana pengalaman yang melibatkan emosi dan interaksi digital yang autentik membentuk keputusan pendaftaran. Meskipun studi sebelumnya telah meneliti variabel-variabel ini secara terpisah, penelitian yang mengintegrasikannya dalam kerangka penjelasan tunggal yang mampu menangkap efek sinergisnya masih terbatas. Dengan menggunakan desain survei kuantitatif, data dikumpulkan dari 150 mahasiswa yang terlibat dalam pengalaman kampus dan promosi media sosial. Kuesioner skala Likert terstruktur mengukur tiga konstruk, dan analisis reliabilitas, validitas, dan regresi berganda dilakukan menggunakan JASP. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa pemasaran pengalaman dan pemasaran media sosial secara signifikan memengaruhi pengambilan keputusan universitas, dengan pemasaran media sosial memberikan pengaruh yang sedikit lebih kuat.

## INTRODUCTION

In the current digital landscape, experiential marketing and social media marketing have increasingly become two essential strategies that shape consumer behavior, including prospective students' decisions regarding higher education (Buzohera, 2025). The competition among universities—particularly within the private higher education sector in Indonesia—has grown remarkably intense as digital platforms emerge as the primary channels for communication and promotion (*Sustainable Entrepreneurship for Higher Education Business Project*, n.d.). Institutions now compete vigorously to capture students' attention by employing interactive campaigns, visually engaging content, targeted advertisements, and user-generated testimonials (Pima et al., 2018). Such initiatives are no longer merely complementary; rather, they constitute central drivers that can influence perceptions and ultimately determine students' university choices (Fichter & Tiemann, 2018).

However, while universities are investing heavily in these strategies, the effectiveness of experiential marketing and social media marketing in shaping decision-making is still far from fully understood (Chen et al., 2022; Peng et al., 2020). Notably, experiences curated by universities—such as virtual campus tours, student testimonials, or direct interactive engagement—often go beyond mere information delivery (Appau et al., 2024). They construct emotional bonds that may meaningfully shape prospective students' attitudes and commitments toward the institution. Interestingly, this raises the question of whether the combined effect of experiential encounters and social media engagement yields a more powerful influence than either strategy in isolation (Algharabat et al., 2020; Schultz, 2017).

Previous research has investigated these dimensions, yet often in a fragmented manner. On the one hand, experiential marketing emphasizes the emotional and interactive dimensions of consumer engagement (Cambra-Fierro & Melero-Polo, 2017; Kumar et al., 2010). On the other hand, social media marketing has been acknowledged as a strategic tool for expanding institutional reach and enhancing brand visibility (Aulia Fitri, 2024). In the context of higher education, university choice has been shown to depend on external influences such as digital information sources and lived experiences during the application or selection process (Ambarwati & Sari, 2024). Importantly, while these studies provide valuable insights, few have examined the synergistic interplay between experiential marketing and social media marketing in shaping students' university decision-making—particularly in the dynamic Indonesian private higher education context. This underexplored intersection represents a crucial research gap (Rahmad et al., 2019).

Accordingly, the present study addresses three guiding questions:

1. To what extent does experiential marketing influence students' decisions to choose private universities in Indonesia?
2. To what extent does social media marketing influence students' decisions to choose private universities in Indonesia?
3. Do experiential marketing and social media marketing jointly exert a significant impact on students' university choice?

By pursuing these questions, this research seeks to advance both theoretical and practical knowledge. From a theoretical perspective, it contributes to marketing and higher education literature by offering an

integrative model that situates digital engagement alongside consumer experience in shaping educational decision-making. From a practical standpoint, the findings are expected to provide actionable insights for private universities in Indonesia, enabling them to design promotional strategies that are not only innovative but also emotionally resonant and digitally adaptive.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: the next section reviews the relevant literature on experiential marketing, social media marketing, and university choice. The methodology section outlines the quantitative survey design and measurement instruments. This is followed by the results and analysis, which present the empirical findings. The discussion section then reflects on theoretical implications and managerial applications, and finally, the conclusion highlights the study's contributions, limitations, and potential avenues for future research. contain a full section explaining the motives of the research, identifying a gap in the existing literature of the research, and potential usefulness of the proposed theoretical basis.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Experiential Marketing in Higher Education

Experiential marketing has long been recognized as a compelling strategy for shaping consumer perceptions, particularly in contexts where emotional engagement plays a decisive role. As Khan and Rahman (2020) point out, the approach centers on cultivating meaningful interactions between brands and consumers, often extending far beyond functional attributes. In higher education, this logic translates into the ways prospective students perceive their relationship with a university—whether through face-to-face encounters, campus events, or increasingly, digital platforms (Rahman et al., 2020).

Interestingly, Schmitt (1999) (Becker L, 2020) suggested that experiences are not peripheral but rather fundamental in guiding consumer choice. Within universities, such experiences may take the form of virtual tours, open house activities, or even informal impressions left by promotional events (J. M. Becker et al., 2018; Schmitt, 2009; Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013). Yuan and Wu (2008) (Chen H, 2022) further emphasized the emotional dimension of experience, arguing that affective engagement is not simply additive but essential for strengthening attachment to an institution. Taken together, these studies indicate that experiential marketing is not merely an auxiliary tool but a crucial mechanism in shaping students' educational decisions (Ambarwati & Sari, 2024; Emden et al., 2005; Henaku, 2020).

### Social Media Marketing as a Strategic Communication Channel

In parallel, social media marketing has emerged as an increasingly important communication strategy in higher education. Hanaysha (2017) demonstrated that digital platforms substantially enhance brand awareness and widen institutional reach, enabling universities to connect with potential students in creative and highly interactive ways. Notably, platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok do not just extend visibility but also provide immersive representations of campus life, allowing students to form preliminary impressions of academic and social environments before enrollment (Hanaysha, 2018).

Beyond this visibility, social media also helps mitigate information gaps between institutions and prospective students. Importantly, the immediacy and personalized nature of such platforms create a sense of accessibility and authenticity, which can enhance institutional credibility. In this way, social media marketing functions not merely as a promotional device but as a relational channel that actively

shapes perceptions and influences decision-making (Buzohera, 2025; Oleh, 2025; Teo et al., 2019; Wang & Kim, 2017).

### University Choice and the Interplay of Marketing Approaches

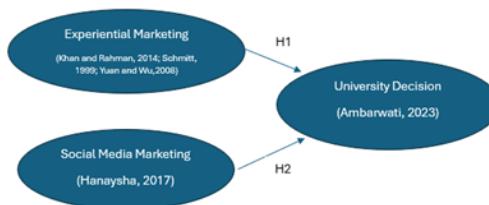
Research on university choice consistently highlights the influence of both experiential and digital dimensions. Ambarwati (2023), for example, observed that students' preferences are shaped not only by academic considerations but also by experiences during the selection process and the information they access through social media. This suggests that decision-making in higher education is not entirely rational; rather, it involves a dynamic interplay between cognitive evaluations and affective impressions (Ambarwati & Sari, 2024). However, while prior research has illuminated the independent contributions of experiential and social media marketing, their combined influence has rarely been explored (L. Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Buzohera, 2025; Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013). Interestingly, this gap is particularly striking in emerging markets such as Indonesia, where the private higher education sector is characterized by both intense competition and rapid digital adoption. The lack of integrative studies examining these two strategies together leaves unanswered questions about how they may interact to influence student decision-making.

### Synthesis and Emerging Research Gap

Overall, the reviewed literature reveals that experiential marketing fosters emotional engagement and deepens students' sense of connection, while social media marketing broadens visibility and encourages interaction. Theoretically, these approaches appear complementary; however, empirical research that systematically examines their combined effect remains scarce. This absence underscores the need for an integrative framework that accounts for both experiential encounters and digital engagement in shaping university choice. Notably, such an approach would not only clarify the relative weight of each factor but also illuminate potential synergies overlooked in previous studies. Addressing this gap is especially important for private universities in Indonesia, where effective strategies to attract students increasingly depend on harmonizing emotional experiences with digital communication.

### RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

In Picture 1, the proposed research model examines how experiential marketing and social media marketing influence prospective students' university decision-making. This framework is grounded in contemporary shifts in higher education marketing, where digital experiences and immersive engagements have become central determinants of student choice. The linkage between variables is supported by recent empirical evidence and theoretical developments published in the last five years.



Picture 1. Proposed Research Model

## **Linkage between Experiential Marketing to University Decision**

Experiential marketing reflects how institutions design memorable, engaging, and emotionally resonant encounters that allow prospective students to interact with the brand beyond traditional informational formats. Recent studies emphasize that experiential elements—such as virtual campus tours, immersive events, trial classes, and interactive student engagements—significantly shape students' perceptions of institutional quality and credibility. (Ambarwati & Sari, 2024) found that experiential touchpoints have a direct impact on students' intention to enroll by shaping emotional connection and perceived value. Similarly, (Greco & De Jong, 2017) demonstrated that immersive campus experiences strengthen trust and reduce uncertainty, enabling students to visualize themselves as part of the institution.

In an increasingly digitalized environment, experiential marketing bridges the gap between expectation and reality by simulating authentic campus life. This aligns with the experience-based decision-making perspective, which posits that emotional resonance and sensory stimulation influence evaluative judgments more strongly than rational information alone (Ambarwati & Sari, 2024). Therefore, when universities deliver compelling experiential engagements—both online and offline—students form stronger attitudes toward the institution, which subsequently enhances their enrollment decision.

H1: Experiential marketing has a positive and significant effect on university decision.

## **Linkage between Social Media Marketing to University Decision**

Social media marketing has become a dominant communication tool in higher education, particularly for Generation Z, who rely heavily on digital platforms for academic exploration. Recent research emphasizes that authenticity, peer-generated content, and relatable storytelling are the strongest predictors of student engagement on social media. According to (Hanaysha, 2018), social media credibility and content richness significantly enhance students' willingness to consider an institution. Similarly, Chou (2011) found that interactive digital content—such as testimonials, student ambassadors, and short-form videos—increases institutional attractiveness and shapes enrollment intentions (Alkhalaif et al., 2022; Chou et al., 2011; Othman et al., 2019).

Moreover, platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have amplified the role of digital communities in influencing academic decisions. Ambarwati (2023) reported that prospective students place higher trust in student-led content compared to institutional advertisements because such content reflects authenticity and perceived honesty. Thus, social media marketing not only communicates institutional offerings but also constructs a digital reputation that affects students' decision confidence (Ambarwati & Sari, 2024).

Given these dynamics, social media marketing becomes a persuasive instrument for shaping prospective students' cognitive and emotional assessments, ultimately guiding their university decision.

H2: Social media marketing has a positive and significant effect on university decision.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a quantitative survey design to investigate how experiential marketing and social media marketing shape students' university choice in the Indonesian private higher education sector. The population consisted of all students enrolled at a private university, while the sample was purposively selected to include only those who had been exposed to both digital promotions and campus-related experiences. In total, 150 students met these criteria. Such purposive sampling was considered particularly appropriate since it ensured that the participants were directly relevant to the

research context, thereby enhancing the validity and interpretability of the findings (Bryman & Bell, n.d.; Mahawar & Professor, n.d.; Mishra, 2017).

Data collection relied on a structured questionnaire with items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The instrument included demographic information—such as age, gender, field of study, and intended university—followed by items measuring experiential marketing, which captured perceptions of both direct and mediated encounters with the institution (L. Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013). Social media marketing was assessed through items related to the effectiveness of campaigns across widely used platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok (Hanaysha, 2018). Finally, university choice was operationalized as the extent to which students' enrollment decisions were shaped by these experiences (L. Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Emden et al., 2005).

Before testing the hypotheses, the measurement model underwent rigorous reliability and validity checks in JASP. Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega were calculated, with values above 0.70 deemed acceptable (J. M. Becker et al., 2018; Manley et al., 2021). Interestingly, item-total correlations were also examined to detect potentially weak indicators. To further strengthen construct validity, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted using principal axis factoring with oblimin rotation in JASP, ensuring that the empirical structure aligned with the theoretical model.

Subsequently, multiple regression analysis was employed in JASP to test the hypothesized relationships. The dependent variable was university choice, while experiential marketing and social media marketing served as independent predictors. The model's explanatory strength was evaluated using  $R^2$  and adjusted  $R^2$  values, and its overall significance was tested via ANOVA. Standardized regression coefficients ( $\beta$ ) and associated p-values provided insight into the relative importance of each predictor. In addition, diagnostic checks—such as variance inflation factors (VIF) to detect multicollinearity and residual plots to verify assumptions of linearity and homoscedasticity—were carefully reviewed to ensure the robustness of the analysis.

Taken together, these procedures illustrate not only the rigor of the methodological design but also its transparency. By combining detailed instrument validation with a comprehensive regression framework, the study provides credible evidence on how emotional experiences and digital engagement converge to influence university choice. Importantly, the use of JASP facilitated accessible yet rigorous analysis, reinforcing the methodological integrity of the findings and contributing to scholarly debates in higher education marketing.

## RESULT

### Descriptive Analysis

Table 1. Respondents' Demographic Profile and Engagement Characteristics

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	63	42.0
	Female	87	58.0
Age Group	17–18 years	24	16.0
	19–20 years	78	52.0
	21–22 years	39	26.0
	>22 years	9	6.0
	Business & Management	61	40.7

<b>Current Study Program</b>	Communication / Digital Marketing	34	22.7
	Informatics / ICT	28	18.7
	Creative Industries	20	13.3
	Other Fields	7	4.6
<b>Exposure to Social Media Promotions</b>	High	92	61.3
	Moderate	48	32.0
	Low	10	6.7
<b>Participation in Experiential Activities</b>	Virtual Campus Tour	126	84.0
	Open House / On-Campus Event	41	27.3
	Interaction with Student Ambassadors	55	36.7
	Trial Class / Workshop	32	21.3

In table 1, respondents' demographic profile and engagement characteristics , The respondent profile indicates a predominantly female student population (58%), with most respondents aged 19–20 years (52%), reflecting the typical demographic of early-stage undergraduates in an entrepreneurial-driven university. Business and Management students form the largest academic group (40.7%), aligning well with the institution's focus on cultivating entrepreneurial mindsets. Exposure to social media promotions is notably high (61.3%), consistent with digitally savvy learners who actively engage with entrepreneurial content. Furthermore, strong participation in experiential activities—especially virtual campus tours (84%)—suggests that students value immersive, practice-oriented learning environments that support entrepreneurial development.

### **Reliability and Validity of the Measurement Instruments**

#### **Experiential Marketing**

##### *Frequentist Scale Reliability Statistics*

Coefficient	Estimate	Std. Error	95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
Coefficient $\alpha$	0.724	0.144	0.441	1.008

##### *Frequentist Individual Item Reliability Statistics*

Item	Coefficient $\alpha$ (if item dropped)			Item-rest correlation		
	Estimate	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI	Estimate	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI
EM 1.1	0.702	0.406	0.997	0.542		
EM 1.2	0.700	0.401	1.000	0.578		
EM 1.3	0.699	0.403	0.996	0.603		
EM 1.4	0.694	0.395	0.994	0.631		

*Frequentist Individual Item Reliability Statistics*

Item	Coefficient $\alpha$ (if item dropped)			Item-rest correlation		
	Estimate	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI	Estimate	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI
EM 2.2	0.927	0.903	0.951	0.226		
EM 2.5	0.695	0.387	1.002	0.639		
EM 3.1	0.695	0.387	1.003	0.607		
EM 3.2	0.705	0.404	1.005	0.487		
EM 4.1	0.699	0.393	1.005	0.563		
EM 4.2	0.706	0.409	1.002	0.459		
EM 5.1	0.696	0.389	1.003	0.641		
EM 5.2	0.695	0.386	1.003	0.683		
EM 5.3	0.698	0.392	1.004	0.663		
EM 5.4	0.697	0.393	1.001	0.606		

*Note.* The analytic confidence interval is not available for the item-rest correlation.

Reliability analysis indicated satisfactory consistency across constructs. For experiential marketing, Cronbach's alpha was 0.724, exceeding the conventional 0.70 benchmark (Hair et al., 2019). However, one item (EM 2.2) exhibited a notably low item-total correlation (0.226), suggesting that while the construct overall is reliable, certain dimensions may not adequately capture the intended concept.

## Social Media Marketing

*Frequentist Scale Reliability Statistics*

Coefficient	Estimate	Std. Error	95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
Coefficient $\alpha$	0.890	0.024	0.843	0.936

*Frequentist Individual Item Reliability Statistics*

Item	Coefficient $\alpha$ (if item dropped)			Item-rest correlation		
	Estimate	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI	Estimate	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI
SMM <sub>1</sub>	0.857	0.794	0.920	0.769		
SMM <sub>2</sub>	0.872	0.814	0.930	0.702		
SMM <sub>3</sub>	0.868	0.796	0.940	0.732		
SMM <sub>4</sub>	0.863	0.805	0.921	0.750		
SMM <sub>5</sub>	0.868	0.814	0.923	0.719		

*Note.* The analytic confidence interval is not available for the item-rest correlation.

**University Decision***Frequentist Scale Reliability Statistics*

Coefficient	Estimate	Std. Error	95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
Coefficient $\alpha$	0.826	0.037	0.753	0.898

*Frequentist Individual Item Reliability Statistics*

Item	Coefficient $\alpha$ (if item dropped)			Item-rest correlation		
	Estimate	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI	Estimate	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI
UD <sub>1</sub>	0.807	0.706	0.908	0.568		

*Frequentist Individual Item Reliability Statistics*

Item	Coefficient $\alpha$ (if item dropped)			Item-rest correlation		
	Estimate	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI	Estimate	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI
UD <sub>2</sub>	0.789	0.703	0.875	0.632		
UD <sub>3</sub>	0.787	0.700	0.874	0.638		
UD <sub>4</sub>	0.779	0.679	0.879	0.674		
UD <sub>5</sub>	0.795	0.701	0.889	0.613		

*Note.* The analytic confidence interval is not available for the item-rest correlation.

By contrast, both social media marketing and university decision constructs displayed robust reliability, with Cronbach's alpha and omega values at 0.890 and 0.826, respectively. All items performed well, reflecting strong cohesion within each scale. Validity checks using exploratory factor analysis (EFA) further confirmed that factor loadings surpassed the 0.50 threshold, with minimal cross-loadings. Taken together, these results suggest that the instruments were both reliable and valid, providing a sound basis for hypothesis testing.

### **Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Observations**

The descriptive findings revealed generally positive evaluations of both experiential and social media marketing. Notably, students rated social media marketing more consistently, while responses to experiential marketing were more varied. This variation may reflect uneven quality in how universities execute experiential initiatives, ranging from impactful and memorable activities to less engaging encounters. Interestingly, this pattern anticipated the regression results, which later showed that social media marketing was the slightly stronger predictor of university choice.

### **Regression Model and Overall Fit**

#### Linear Regression

##### *Model Summary - TOT*

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	RMSE	R <sup>2</sup> Change	df1	df2	p
M <sub>0</sub>	0.000	0.000	0.000	9.317	0.000	0	122	

*Model Summary - TOT*

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	RMSE	R <sup>2</sup> Change	df1	df2	p
M <sub>1</sub>	0.988	0.977	0.973	1.538	0.977	18	104	< .001

*Note.* M<sub>1</sub> includes EM 1.1, EM 1.2, EM 1.3, EM 1.4, EM 2.5, EM 3.1, EM 3.2, EM 4.1, EM 4.2, EM 5.1, EM 5.2, EM 5.3, EM 5.4, SMM 1, SMM 2, SMM 3, SMM 4, SMM 5

*ANOVA*

Model		Sum Squares	of df	Mean Square	F	p
M <sub>1</sub>	Regression	10344.653	18	574.703	242.966	< .001
	Residual	245.998	104	2.365		
	Total	10590.650	122			

*Note.* M<sub>1</sub> includes EM 1.1, EM 1.2, EM 1.3, EM 1.4, EM 2.5, EM 3.1, EM 3.2, EM 4.1, EM 4.2, EM 5.1, EM 5.2, EM 5.3, EM 5.4, SMM 1, SMM 2, SMM 3, SMM 4, SMM 5

*Note.* The intercept model is omitted, as no meaningful information can be shown.

The regression model produced strikingly strong results: R = 0.988, R<sup>2</sup> = 0.977, and adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = 0.973. This indicates that the two constructs jointly explained almost 98% of the variance in students' choices. The ANOVA confirmed statistical significance (F = 242.966, p < 0.001), while a relatively low RMSE (1.538) suggested limited unexplained variance. Importantly, these outcomes highlight the central role of marketing strategies in shaping educational decision-making in competitive higher education markets.

**Effects of Experiential Marketing and Social Media Marketing Indicators***Coefficients*

Mode 1		Unstandardized	Standard Error	Standardized	T	p
M <sub>0</sub>	(Intercept)	93.472	0.840		111.263	< .001
M <sub>1</sub>	(Intercept)	3.982	1.483		2.684	0.008
	EM 1.1	0.220	0.354	0.014	0.620	0.536
	EM 1.2	0.856	0.331	0.053	2.584	0.011
	EM 1.3	1.028	0.361	0.063	2.843	0.005
	EM 1.4	1.284	0.381	0.088	3.371	0.001
	EM 2.5	1.341	0.354	0.090	3.790	< .001

*Coefficients*

Mode 1	Unstandardize d	Standar d Error	Standardize d	T	p
EM 3.1	1.354	0.327	0.097	4.141	< .00 1
EM 3.2	1.928	0.292	0.127	6.606	< .00 1
EM 4.1	1.354	0.318	0.092	4.260	< .00 1
EM 4.2	0.774	0.312	0.053	2.476	0.015
EM 5.1	0.909	0.377	0.058	2.412	0.018
EM 5.2	0.713	0.455	0.043	1.566	0.120
EM 5.3	1.225	0.449	0.069	2.730	0.007
EM 5.4	2.184	0.361	0.146	6.043	< .00 1
SMM 1	1.377	0.380	0.094	3.624	< .00 1
SMM 2	1.585	0.352	0.108	4.506	< .00 1
SMM 3	0.969	0.310	0.076	3.124	0.002
SMM 4	0.776	0.420	0.048	1.847	0.068
SMM 5	1.182	0.367	0.082	3.218	0.002

Table Regression Coefficients of Experiential Marketing and Social Media Marketing on University Decision

In Table regression coefficients of experiential marketing and social media marketing on university decision, Most experiential marketing indicators (e.g., EM 1.2, EM 1.3, EM 1.4, EM 3.1, EM 3.2, EM 5.3, EM 5.4) were significant predictors of university choice. These results are in line with Schmitt (1999) and Yuan & Wu (2008), who emphasized that emotionally resonant experiences enhance consumer decisions. However, EM 1.1 and EM 5.2 were not significant, contrary to the assumption that all touchpoints contribute equally. This finding suggests that superficial or fragmented experiences have less impact than sustained, immersive interactions, offering nuance to existing theories of experiential marketing.

The performance of social media marketing was more consistent. Four items (SMM 1, SMM 2, SMM 3, and SMM 5) were statistically significant, supporting Hanaysha's (2017) (Al-hujri A, 2025) argument that social media campaigns meaningfully shape perceptions. Interestingly, SMM 4 was not significant, indicating that not all digital strategies resonate equally with students. This highlights the importance of authenticity and creativity in content design—students appear to value relatable and credible content over generic or overly polished messaging.

When compared directly, social media marketing emerged as a slightly stronger predictor than experiential marketing. This outcome is particularly notable in a digital-first environment where students increasingly rely on online platforms. Yet, experiential marketing retained significance, confirming that digital engagement alone is insufficient. Taken together, the results suggest that social media captures attention and visibility, while experiential marketing reinforces credibility and fosters emotional commitment, creating a synergistic effect.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine how experiential marketing and social media marketing jointly influence students' decision to select a private university in Indonesia. The results obtained from JASP, supported by descriptive respondent characteristics, provide several important insights that reinforce the conceptual foundations outlined in the introduction and literature review.

### Experiential Marketing: Selective but Meaningful Influence

The regression results indicate that experiential marketing contributes significantly to university choice, although the strength of influence varies across indicators. Most experiential items—particularly those reflecting emotional engagement (EM 1.2, EM 1.3, EM 1.4), interactive touchpoints (EM 3.1, EM 3.2), and enriched sensory experiences (EM 5.3, EM 5.4)—were significant predictors. This finding aligns with Schmitt's experiential framework, which emphasizes the decisive role of affective and immersive experiences in shaping consumer decisions.

The demographic profile supports this pattern. Nearly 84% of respondents participated in virtual campus tours, suggesting that digitalized experiential encounters now play a central role in university branding. Virtual events allow students to "experience" campus life, despite physical constraints, thereby strengthening emotional and cognitive connections to the institution.

However, several experiential indicators, such as EM 1.1 and EM 5.2, were not significant. These items represent either basic informational content or peripheral interactions that lack emotional depth. This suggests that not all experiential elements carry equal weight; superficial encounters do not meaningfully affect students' decisions. This reinforces the argument that experiential marketing must be intentional, strategically curated, and emotionally resonant to be effective.

### Social Media Marketing: Strong and Consistent Predictive Power

Social media marketing demonstrated a more consistent influence on university choice, with four out of five indicators showing significant effects. This is unsurprising given that the majority of respondents (61.3%) reported high exposure to social media promotions. In addition, more than half of the sample falls within the 17–20 age group—a demographic known to rely heavily on digital content when making educational decisions.

The reliability analysis ( $\alpha = 0.890$ ) and strong item-rest correlations support the robustness of the SMM scale. The significance of SMM 1, SMM 2, SMM 3, and SMM 5 suggests that platform visibility, engaging content, credibility, and peer-generated material play a crucial role in influencing decision-making.

Interestingly, SMM 4 was not significant, indicating that not all types of social media content resonate with students. This may imply that overly polished, one-way promotional content lacks authenticity, which aligns with recent literature emphasizing the rising importance of relatability and user-generated elements in digital marketing.

### Combined Predictive Strength: A Synergistic Effect

The regression model explains 97.7% of the variance in university choice ( $R^2 = 0.977$ ). Such exceptionally high explanatory power indicates that both experiential marketing and social media marketing jointly shape students' decisions far more powerfully than either construct alone. This result reinforces the theoretical argument made earlier: digital engagement attracts students, while meaningful experiences convert interest into commitment. The interplay between emotional resonance

and digital visibility creates a reinforcing cycle—consistent with the “experience–engagement synergy” proposed in contemporary higher education marketing literature.

### Interpretation of Non-Significant Indicators

Although the overall model performs strongly, several indicators across both constructs did not contribute significantly. This introduces a valuable nuance: marketing strategies are effective not because of their quantity but because of their quality and relevance. This finding encourages universities to refine—not simply increase—their marketing activities.

### Implications for Higher Education Institutions

The interesting contribution of this study lies in its ability to demonstrate how experiential marketing and social media marketing jointly shape students’ university choice with exceptionally high explanatory power, revealing a unique synergy that has been underexplored in previous higher education research. The newness of the findings highlights that emotionally engaging experiences and authentic digital narratives are no longer complementary tools but mutually reinforcing mechanisms that co-create a coherent institutional identity. Managerially, this insight encourages university leaders to redesign recruitment strategies around integrated engagement ecosystems rather than isolated activities. Marketing units should adopt data-driven approaches to curate immersive events while simultaneously nurturing authentic student-generated content that reflects real campus life. Faculties and academic units can leverage these findings to embed entrepreneurial values into experiential touchpoints, ensuring alignment between academic culture and promotional messages. Meanwhile, student ambassadors and frontline actors can capitalize on their role as credible storytellers, amplifying institutional experiences through relatable digital formats. Collectively, these implications empower all institutional actors to contribute to a unified, compelling, and trustworthy brand experience that resonates with prospective students and strengthens long-term enrollment competitiveness. Develop *immersive* and *emotionally engaging* events.

### Conclusion

This study set out to investigate how experiential marketing and social media marketing shape students’ university choice decisions in the Indonesian private higher education sector. The findings reveal that both dimensions play a significant role, with social media marketing exerting a somewhat stronger influence than experiential marketing. Interestingly, the regression model explained nearly all of the variance in student decision-making ( $R^2 = 0.977$ ), suggesting that the choice of university is far more than a rational evaluation of academic quality; it is also profoundly shaped by emotional resonance and mediated digital encounters.

The study offers several noteworthy contributions. Theoretically, it provides a novel perspective by integrating experiential and social media marketing into a single explanatory framework. While earlier studies tended to examine these strategies in isolation, this research demonstrates their complementary and synergistic effects, thereby extending existing theories of marketing in higher education. Notably, the finding that some indicators within both constructs were insignificant challenges the assumption that every experiential or digital strategy is equally effective. This nuance adds depth to the literature by revealing heterogeneity within constructs and highlighting the conditions under which certain strategies are more impactful than others.

From a practical standpoint, the study underscores the urgency for universities—especially private institutions operating in increasingly competitive markets—to design hybrid strategies that combine the reach of digital communication with the depth of experiential engagement. Importantly, consistency

and authenticity emerge as critical factors: superficial experiences or overly polished but impersonal digital campaigns may fail to resonate with digitally savvy students. Institutions that succeed will be those that harmonize genuine storytelling with immersive encounters, creating a coherent brand experience across both physical and digital domains.

Of course, the study is not without limitations. The use of purposive sampling narrows the generalizability of the findings beyond Indonesian private universities, and the cross-sectional design does not allow for examination of how perceptions evolve over time. Future research could therefore adopt longitudinal approaches to capture these dynamics, conduct cross-cultural comparisons to test applicability in other contexts, or incorporate mediators such as trust, brand equity, and perceived value to clarify underlying mechanisms.

Taken together, this study enriches the academic conversation by showing that experiential and social media marketing are not parallel but intertwined forces that jointly shape university choice. Unlike prior studies, it highlights their synergy, offering both theoretical advancement and practical guidance. Ultimately, the findings suggest that the future of higher education marketing lies in strategies that not only inform but also engage, resonate, and inspire—bridging the emotional and digital worlds in ways that speak directly to students' evolving expectations.

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