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Critical integrated marketing communication dimensions driving enrollment in Vietnam's higher education sector

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Abstract

The emergence of integrated marketing communication (IMC) is progressively relevant to Vietnam's higher education sector, which comprises over two million students, while international enrollment continues to grow. Based on that premise, this study critically investigates IMC-induced student enrollment, filling seemingly uncharted territory in non-Western higher education marketing research. The study relied on a mixed-methods convergent parallel design wherein qualitative data derived from in-depth interviews with ten marketing experts from public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) were integrated with quantitative data comprising enrollment statistics (2019-2024) of these HEIs and survey responses from 128 stakeholders (75 marketing managers, 37 students, 38 parents). The analysis revealed that the most important IMC practices included digital channels (e.g., social media, websites), high school teacher networks, and organizational integration. Results of the survey corroborated this finding, as social media content ($M=4.3$) and websites ($M=4.1$) were rated highest in effectiveness on a 5-point Likert scale. The factor analysis further validated four dimensions interacting with each 28% variance: Consistency (22%), Stakeholder Integration (19%), and Measurable Results (17%) and accounts for 86% variance. Enrollment data showed that seven high-performing HEIs had a mean growth rate of 10.5%, while 15-18% spikes after digital campaigns showed the difference between high-performing and low-performing HEIs ($n=3$). The results imply that the digital IMC transforms, reconceptualizes the value in stakeholder networks, and demonstrates the need for organizational internal alignment. The study notably extends the IMC constructs to emerging markets in theory and, in practical terms, advocates market-specific digital strategies and multipronged performance metrics for HEI managers. Future research should consider longitudinal effects and more stakeholders to further improve IMC applications in higher education marketing.

Keywords: Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), IMC activities, Higher Education Institution (HEI), Enrollment performance, Brand equity (BE), Marketing strategy.

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1. Introduction

Information and innovation are the two main foundations of globalization in the rising digital era. As alternatives are offered and applied to many industries at an ever-increasing pace, there is an imperative need for highly knowledgeable competencies. Under current circumstances, educational institutions are under tremendous pressure to keep abreast of the accelerated growth, especially in higher education institutions (HEIs). Since 2021, the Covid-19 pandemic has emerged instantaneously and thrust upon the internationalization of HE, providing students with a multi-disciplinary flat world and an accessible world of knowledge due to the advances in communication tools. As a result, HEIs have to strive to leverage and differentiate themselves against both international and domestic competitors by investing additional effort and resources in marketing. In other words, the rising competitiveness requires HEIs to place more emphasis on their brand equity (BE) to attract student enrollment, which corresponds to the concept of integrated marketing communication (IMC).

Since IMC's introduction, it has vexed the attention of both management and marketing scholars. It is a commercial marketing method that cohesively integrates all kinds of communications and marketing 4Ps within the organization. Diverse communication approaches are applied based on discrete targets; for instance, social media allows marketers to conduct strategies concentrating on a well-defined group of customers, while conventional media such as newspapers or magazines are beneficial in reaching the mass. Consequently, mass media is gaining less attention due to the high cost and unpredictable group of targets. In reality, those methods are not utilized separately, but most organizations are arduously integrating them for both marketing campaigns and internal management and procedures. As a result, IMC is considered a rational and fruitful method in a complex system of multimedia methods [1]. Because regardless of the usage of channels, the aim of IMC is to send out a coherent message, deliver information, and educate markets from which entrepreneurs build their brand image or reputation in customers' minds. With the benefits IMC provides, the study of the HE environment is compelling because its stakeholders typically engage in numerous channels before making decisions on a topic; therefore, HEIs are advised to leverage and explore the possibilities of various innovative communication strategies and their integration.

Implementing IMC can yield a range of benefits for organizations, including synchronizing all communication techniques and ensuring consistent cross-channel utilization [2]. IMC approaches contribute to not only maximizing the productivity of promotional resources but also building a sustainable relationship with stakeholders. These advantages are crucial in terms of achieving differentiation or competitiveness in HE marketing (HEM). Moreover, the context of education has seen developments such as digital transformation and globalization, resulting in higher education institutions adapting their communication approaches for their stakeholders.

Although scholarly papers on the subject have increased in recent years, additional research is still needed (Porcu, et al. [3]; Suay-Pérez, et al. [4]). Tafesse and Kitchen [5] emphasize the need to quantify IMC as a research priority. They recommend developing and utilizing accurate measurement tools to examine the construct. Porcu, et al. [6] emphasize the need to develop and apply assessment techniques in specific company contexts and industries for future investigations. It urges more empirical research on IMC practices and measurements, especially in the HE industry of non-English speaking countries like Vietnam. Besides, researchers have increasingly identified discrepancies between IMC theories and actual practices used by professionals. Observations reveal that the practice of IMC in real life differs significantly from the definition of an 'ideal' IMC [7]. Additionally, the explanations, deviations, and operationalizations of IMC are reliant on a range of factors such as organizational dynamics, cultural context, and individual practitioners' professional backgrounds [8-10].

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to investigate IMC dimensions driven from the marketing strategic level in bonding with the most common IMC practices in the higher education segment in Vietnam. Through in-depth interviews with experienced marketing experts from top universities in Vietnam, the study analyzes qualitative data and enrollment statistics to determine the most effective IMC activities and their guided dimensions. The research contributes to the application of IMC in HEIs, aiming to adapt it to other countries with similar demographics and conceptions of IMC. It also helps manage marketing activities effectively through IMC practices, providing valuable insights for educators and administrators. Moreover, it also examines the impact of IMC dimensions on IMC activities, which directly affect the business education outcomes such as student engagement and academic performance in Vietnamese HEIs.

Within the scope of this paper, the research questions are investigated as follows:

RQ1: What are the most implemented IMC practices/activities in Vietnam HEIs?

RQ2: Which are the guided IMC dimensions to measure the success of their IMC efforts?

RQ3: What are the key differences in IMC functions of universities that have better enrollment performance compared to others?

The paper's arrangement is organized as follows. Initially, the literature review is provided, focusing on higher education marketing, the Vietnam context of IMC, and applied IMC practice and their relationship to organizational branding. The second section outlines the research methodology used in the empirical study. Then, the findings are elaborated based on previous research questions. Lastly, the discussion addresses results and suggests implications for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The HE Industry and the Role of Marketing

All HEIs, inclusive of traditional, non-profit, and for-profit organizations, have embraced the trend of internationalization as a focus area for their institutions. This situation has further sharpened competition in the sector beyond what has been created by funding reforms and online learning modalities. In this regard, HEIs go for increasingly digital tools [Alcaide-Pulido, et al. \[11\]](#) and aggressive marketing schemes to lure potential students into the fold [Derek \[12\]](#). HE marketing has undergone significant transformations in terms of its environment, which is globalized, regulated, market-oriented, and competition-driven development, a reality acknowledged by scholars such as [David \[13\]](#), and [Camilleri \[14\]](#). An example of this increase in interest has been raised by the publication of Kirp's *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line: The Marketing of Higher Education*, particularly concerning how market forces influence institutional marketing practices.

Marketing serves as the ultimate comprehension for HEIs to solve multidirectional challenges and interface customers with different stakeholders [\[15\]](#). As much as admission and program sizes have risen, institutional functions have become more and more distributed, with respective faculties catering to different stakeholder groups. Most of these units view themselves as totally independent units competing for limited resources within HEIs. There, therefore, exists a greater meaning and application of IMC principles.

The higher education landscape in Vietnam has made significant strides and advanced over the years, consisting of 650 institutions, most of which are universities and colleges—244 in number—serving about 2.1 million students, with four institutions featured among the top 1000 in highly reputed global university rankings (Statista). The country hosts 45,000 international students, accounting for 2% of the total student population. Competition between public and private institutions has drastically increased pressure on Vietnamese universities, especially regarding enrollment [\[16\]](#). Furthermore, a reputable university brand increases the employability of its graduates, as local employers tend to value candidates from such institutions.

However, research related to the IMC dimensions and practices in the higher education sector, especially in developing countries like Vietnam, remains scarce. Social media has introduced yet another dimension in communication with stakeholders to enable two-way interaction with user-generated content [\[17\]](#). Integrated Marketing Communication with social media in Vietnam's higher education context is also indicative of the need for marketing communication dynamism for institutions to adjust to changing consumer behaviors and technological advancements. Thus, it has become more evident that IMC strategies embrace social media promotions, adding a digital layer to the already existing brand identity in the physical realm.

2.2. Review of IMC Definitions, Activities, and Dimensions in the HE Context

2.2.1. IMC Definition

The first concept of IMC was introduced in the 1980s and has been evolving from traditional forms such as TV, radio, newspapers, and out-of-home advertising to online platforms, social media, and email marketing. It underscores the fast adaptability and realistic application in ever-changing periods. Now, IMC highlights omnichannel marketing as a crucial part of successful marketing approaches, confirmed by both research and practice.

The IMC concept is redefined continuously by adding various viewpoints such as integration, communication, strategy, and oriented-performance approaches [\[5\]](#). Deriving conceptual and directional guidance from research is facing additionally formidable challenges than in traditional marketing. However, the consensus on one definition has not yet been attained due to the multi-dimensions depending on its stakeholders and contextual environments [\[17\]](#). Nevertheless, a definition declared in the literature highly reflects the dimensions authors are intended to use for accessing the construct IMC [\[7, 18-22\]](#).

In this study, we refer to the work of [Kliatchko and Schultz \[23\]](#); [Luxton, et al. \[24\]](#), and [Porcu, et al. \[6\]](#), which traces IMC's evolution in the Asia-Pacific region, defining it as the comprehensive alignment of all marketing communication forms within an organization. This firm-wide, IMC-oriented approach comprises four core components: content, channels, stakeholders, and measurable outcomes, underscoring the need for strategic synergy—a principle equally applicable to Vietnam's marketing landscape.

Table 1.

The IMC activities and the references.

No	IMC activities	References
1	Information that the student gets from high school teachers	Cerit, et al. [28]; Hacifazlioglu and Özdemir [47]; Herold, et al. [25]; James, et al. [26]; Khanna, et al. [27]; Pampaloni [29] and Wilkins and Huisman [30].
2	Information that the student received from university staff and students.	Aghaz, et al. [31]; Bock, et al. [32]; James, et al. [26]; Khanna, et al. [27]; Pampaloni [29] and Wilkins and Huisman [30].
3	Opinions/ideas of the family members	Canterbury [33]; Cerit, et al. [28]; Herold, et al. [25] Soutar and Turner [34]; Pampaloni [29] and Wilkins and Huisman [30]
4	Promotional events held by the university at its campus	Bock, et al. [32]; James, et al. [26]; Khanna, et al. [27]; Pampaloni [29] and Wilkins and Huisman [30].
5	News and ads in print media	Bock, et al. [32]; James, et al. [26]; Khanna, et al. [27]; Pampaloni [29]; Wilkins and Huisman [30]; Maringe [35] and Torlak and Doğan [36]
6	Counsel and guidance from someone studying or working at a university.	James, et al. [26]; Khanna, et al. [27]; Pampaloni [29]; Wilkins and Huisman [30]; Maringe [35]; Torlak and Doğan [36] and Simões and Soares [37]
7	University's websites	James, et al. [26]; Khanna, et al. [27]; Pampaloni [29]; Wilkins and Huisman [30]; Maringe [35]
8	Suggestions from friends	Cerit, et al. [28]; Herold, et al. [25] Soutar and Turner [34]; Pampaloni [29] and Wilkins and Huisman [30]
9	Campus location	Akar [38]; Hacifazlioglu and Özdemir [47]; Joseph and Joseph [41] and Soutar and Turner [34]
10	Outdoor advertisements	Bock, et al. [32]; James, et al. [26]; Wilkins and Huisman [30] and Maringe [35]
11	Social media content	Constantinides and Stagno [39]; Galan, et al. [40] and Wilkins and Huisman [30]
12	Web portals	Daun-Barnett and Das [42]; James, et al. [26] and Maringe [35]
13	Tuition fee	Joseph and Joseph [41]; Khanna, et al. [27] and Maringe [35]
14	Athletic events	Kazoleas, et al. [43]; Pampaloni [29] and Torlak and Doğan [36]
15	Fairs	James, et al. [26] and Pampaloni [29]
16	News on TV	Clayton, et al. [44] and Torlak and Doğan [36]
17	High school visits by university officials.	Pampaloni [29]

2.2.2. IMC Practices

Drawing from IMC definitions, Herold, et al. [25] delineates its development from tactical to strategic applications, transitioning from an internal corporate focus to an externally driven, customer-centric orientation. Reference James, et al. [26] elaborates on the notion of “IMC practice,” providing an empirical analysis of how integration is operationalized from the perspective of marketing practitioners. The study by Khanna, et al. [27] identifies specific IMC activities within a university context, which this research reorganizes based on citation frequency from prior literature. Notably, Khanna, et al. [27] found that in Turkey, the perceived credibility of academic staff and the quality of university websites are paramount for students and parents in selecting an institution, though other studies reveal varying findings.

Statistical analysis presented in Table 1, synthesizing 17 IMC practices from 23 journals, indicates that information sourced from high school teachers, university officials, current students, and family members ranks among the most influential factors in students' university choices. This finding underscores the significant role of external reference groups—particularly teachers and families—in shaping decision-making processes, offering HEIs critical insights for tailoring their marketing strategies. A secondary cluster of prevalent IMC activities includes on-campus promotional events, media-based news and advertising, and guidance from students and staff, all of which are actively pursued by institutions. In the contemporary digital era, however, print media advertising has declined, supplanted by a preference for digital channels and social media—a shift reflecting students' increasing engagement with online content. Prioritizing digital platforms enables universities to expand their reach and target prospective students more effectively.

Additional institutional attributes, such as campus location, tuition fees, and financial aid, also influence student decisions. To appeal to learners seeking distinctive educational experiences, universities are encouraged to leverage social media advertising and search engine optimization, spotlighting unique programs, faculty expertise, and alumni success narratives. Furthermore, Vietnamese higher education institutions (HEIs) have recently prioritized strengthening relationships with high schools—a strategy previously overlooked—enabling direct communication with prospective students, fostering trust, and enhancing recruitment prospects for top talent.

2.2.3. IMC Dimensions

According to a study, Porcu, et al. [6] characterizes IMC as a multidimensional construct, a perspective echoed by Kliatchko [19]; Porcu, et al. [20]; Porcu, et al. [21] and Schultz and Schultz [22]; Kliatchko and Schultz [23] and Luxton, et al. [24] who propose dimensions integral to its definition and measurement. Table 2 compiles the 21 most frequently cited IMC dimensions from 13 prior studies, ordered by research frequency, revealing an evolving framework reflective of the dynamic interplay between marketing and communication. Among these, intra-organizational integration garners significant attention, as it facilitates synergy and influences brand image Cerit, et al. [28] and James, et al. [26]. This dimension entails organizational processes that align communication specialists' efforts, extending to vertical and horizontal integration across all departments, including outsourced units. Senior managers bear responsibility for driving this alignment Pampaloni [29] while organizational structures and reward systems must be designed to foster interdepartmental collaboration [30].

The primary objective of IMC is to enhance relationships between organizations and stakeholders through dialogue and communication [31]. The interactivity dimension has gained prominence, propelled by technological advancements that enable greater responsiveness and the frequent exchange of non-verbal information [32]. Communication tools are instrumental in this integration process Canterbury [33]; Soutar and Turner [34]; Maringe [35] and Torlak and Doğan [36] a finding corroborated by the theory of relationships Kliatchko [19] and the theory of reciprocity Simões and Soares [37] both of which affirm interactivity's positive correlation with IMC efficacy. Evolving perspectives, as noted in Porcu, et al. [20]; Porcu, et al. [21] position stakeholders as central to IMC definitions, emphasizing a stakeholder-centric strategy that integrates perspectives from staff, leaders, suppliers, agencies, and clients to sustain customer relationships Kliatchko and Schultz [23]. This dimension encompasses organizational mission coherence, internal communication strategies, and stakeholder-focused objectives.

These dimensions align with the study's conceptual framework and the personalized communication needs of the HE sector, making them key metrics for this research. The sector's complexity—stemming from diverse stakeholders, debates over primary customers (e.g., students, families, or employers), marketization trends, geographic factors, campus amenities, and degree offerings Akar [38]—poses significant management challenges. Recent shifts, including heightened global competition Constantinides and Stagno [39] a focus on alumni employability, and changing funding models Galan, et al. [40] further complicate the landscape Joseph and Joseph [41]. Stakeholders such as students, parents, peers, and external entities influence enrollment decisions, with parents—particularly mothers—exerting notable sway in both Western and Eastern contexts [42]. While parents and students often rely on similar media channels, recent evidence suggests family guidance can enhance student autonomy in decision-making [43]. Beyond parents, government bodies, regulators, financial institutions, quality assurance agencies, and university staff are stakeholders, though this study prioritizes two groups: students as primary clients, and alumni, businesses, and parents as secondary influencers [44].

Effective IMC implementation demands organization-wide participation, from strategic planning to operational execution. In HE, consistency in messaging and interdepartmental collaboration with external agencies are critical. Content integration ensures uniformity across media channels, a necessity given HEIs' intricate stakeholder dynamics, faculty structures, and marketization pressures. Adapting HEM to incorporate business-oriented practices is thus vital, while preserving educational values [45]. Ultimately, practical outcomes and continuous improvement outweigh theoretical constructs, enabling institutions to evaluate and refine their communication strategies effectively.

Table 2.
The IMC dimension codes and the references

No	IMC Dimension Codes	IMC dimensions	References
1	Intra-organization integration	Different internal; creative integration; intra-organization integration; corporate and 'united' integration; reciprocity; cross-functional management; cross-functional management; organizational alignment; institution's communication alignment.	Kitchen and Schultz [48]; Pickton [49]; Moriarty and Schultz [50]; Porcu, et al. [20]; Porcu, et al. [21] and Gordon-Isasi, et al. [2]
2	Interactivity	Interactive tools; Interactivity	Gronstedt [51]; Duncan and Moriarty [18]; Reid [52]; Moriarty and Schultz [50]; Porcu, et al. [20]; Porcu, et al. [21] and Gordon-Isasi, et al. [2]
3	Communication tools	Sending tools; Receiving tools; Media usable to convey corporate communication messages; Utilization of a set of promotional tools; Communication mix integration; different media.	Gronstedt [51]; Pickton [49]; Kitchen and Schultz [48] and Pickton and Hartley [53]
4	Stakeholders focus	Stakeholders; Stakeholders (orientation); Attention of all related stakeholders and publics; Stakeholder-centered strategic focus.	Gronstedt [51]; Pickton and Hartley [53]; Kliatchko [19]; Moriarty and Schultz [50] and Porcu, et al. [21]
5	Marketing communications	Mission marketing; tactical management of marketing communications; redefinition of the extent of marketing communications; communication mix with marketing mix integration.	Duncan and Moriarty [18] Schultz and Schultz [22]; Kitchen and Schultz [48] and Pickton [49]

No	IMC Dimension Codes	IMC dimensions	References
6	Strategic synergy	Strategic consistency; Consistent strategy; synergy	Duncan and Moriarty [18]; Reid [52]; Moriarty and Schultz [50]; Schultz and Schultz [22] and Moriarty and Schultz [50]
7	Financial goals	Financial; overall financial goals; Results-driven: financial measurement; (Measurable) results; Profitable long-term relationships.	Schultz and Schultz [22]; Gronstedt [51]; Kitchen and Schultz [48]; Kliatchko [7] and Kliatchko [19]
8	Multi target-audience focus	different target audiences; Target-audience integration; Audience-focused: multiple markets; Customer focus	Kitchen and Schultz [48];[49] Moriarty and Schultz [50]; Gordon-Isasi, et al. [2]; Moriarty and Schultz [50] and Kliatchko [7]
9	Message consistency	Content; One voice; Message consistency	Kliatchko [19]; Moriarty and Schultz [50]; Porcu, et al. [20] and Porcu, et al. [21]
10	Planning and evaluation	Planning and evaluation; Continuous planning and monitoring	Duncan and Moriarty [18]; Reid [52] and Moriarty and Schultz [50]
11	Communication synergy	Constancy between communication purposes; constancy and interaction of communication planning; channel-centered: multiple channels.	Pickton [49] and Kliatchko [7]
12	Effective forms of contact management.	Effective coordination of all kinds of contact	Pickton [49] and Moriarty and Schultz [50]
13	Brand focus	Identification and product/brand communication in corporate communication efforts; Brand focus.	Pickton [49] and Moriarty and Schultz [50]
14	Application of information technology	Application of information technology; Information and database systems	Schultz and Schultz [22] and Pickton [49]
15	Vision, mission, values	corporate mission/values; divisions/operations; Institution's values and mission	Kitchen and Schultz [48] and Gordon-Isasi, et al. [2]
16	Inter-organization integration	Inter-organizational integration, Relationship	Pickton [49] and Moriarty and Schultz [50]
17	Organizational infrastructure	Organizational infrastructure	Duncan and Moriarty [18]
18	Effective communication management	Effective coordination and incorporation of all communication activities; contact points.	Pickton and Hartley [53]
19	Geographical integration	Geographical integration	Pickton [49]
20	Active Listening	Active Listening	Gordon-Isasi, et al. [2]
21	Culture and climate	Collaborative culture and climate	Gordon-Isasi, et al. [2]

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to investigate the dimensions and practices of IMC influencing marketing activities within Vietnam's higher education (HE) sector. By integrating qualitative insights from in-depth expert interviews with quantitative data from enrollment statistics and a structured survey, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of IMC's impact on enrollment outcomes and institutional branding. A convergent parallel design is employed, wherein qualitative and quantitative data are collected and analyzed independently during the same phase, ensuring methodological triangulation and robust validation of findings. This dual approach not only captures the nuanced perspectives of marketing experts but also quantifies the prevalence and effectiveness of IMC strategies across a broader sample, enhancing the study's generalizability and practical relevance.

3.1. Data Collection

The qualitative strand builds on a phenomenological approach, utilizing in-depth, unstructured interviews to explore expert perspectives on IMC practices and dimensions. Ten marketing professionals from Vietnamese HEIs were purposefully selected based on their information richness (Ayvat and Gunturkun [46]), representing a diverse sample: six from Ho Chi Minh City (southern region), two from Da Nang (central region), and two from Hanoi (northern region). This cohort includes representatives from both public and private universities, with 70% demonstrating strong branding and enrollment performance over the past five years, and two ranking among Vietnam's top five revenue-generating HEIs (exceeding \$50 million annually since 2022). Each interview, lasting at least 60 minutes, was conducted in a private setting to encourage

candid responses, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interview protocol, detailed in Table 3, focused on eliciting insights into IMC activities (e.g., social media, high school networks), their perceived effectiveness, and key dimensions (e.g., interactivity, consistency).

Table 3.
IMC Activities, Perceived Effectiveness, and Key Dimensions in Vietnam's Higher Education Sector.

IMC Activities	Description from Interviews	Perceived Effectiveness (Qualitative Insights)	Key Dimensions Highlighted
Social Media Content	Distinctive content creation on platforms like Facebook and Instagram to engage students	Universally cited as a primary tool for visibility and engagement	Interactivity, Measurable Results
University Websites	Comprehensive platforms for disseminating institutional information	Foundational practice across all HEIs for brand salience	Consistency, Measurable Results
High School Networks	Tailored partnerships with teachers for counseling and guidance	Highly influential due to teacher credibility	Stakeholder Integration, Consistency
Promotional Events	Offline activities (e.g., open days, exhibitions) for direct student interaction	Effective for trust-building with students and parents	Stakeholder Integration, Interactivity
Advertising (Online Focus)	Predominantly digital ads, with private HEIs relying more heavily on this channel	Growing investment, though secondary to direct engagement	Measurable Results, Consistency
Tuition Fee Packages	Financial aid and pricing strategies, less influential amid economic growth	Diminishing impact on decision-making	Measurable Results
Campus Location/Lifestyle	Appeals tied to facilities and community, key for private HEIs	Significant for private HEI branding	Consistency, Stakeholder Integration
Clubs/Communities	Student organizations enhancing engagement, less systematically leveraged	Noted as relevant but underutilized	Interactivity, Stakeholder Integration

The quantitative strand comprises two data sources: enrollment statistics and a structured survey. Enrollment data were collected from the 10 participating HEIs, spanning 2019–2024, to assess trends and correlate them with reported IMC practices. These data, sourced from institutional records or the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training, include annual student intake numbers, segmented by domestic and international students where available. Additionally, a survey was administered to a broader sample. Respondents were selected via stratified sampling across Vietnam's three key regions to ensure representativeness.

The survey instrument, developed from interview themes, featured 20 Likert-scale items (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree) assessing the perceived effectiveness of eight IMC activities (e.g., "Social media content effectively enhances university visibility") and four dimensions (e.g., "Consistency in messaging strengthens brand identity"), alongside demographic questions. The survey was distributed online and in person, achieving an 85% response rate (n=128).

3.2. Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using NVivo software, following an iterative thematic approach. Initial coding identified recurring IMC practices (e.g., digital channels, offline events) and dimensions (e.g., stakeholder integration), followed by axial coding to establish relationships (e.g., digital tools enhancing enrollment). Themes were refined through constant comparison, ensuring saturation across the 10 interviews. The process adhered to phenomenological principles, prioritizing participants' lived experiences while maintaining analytical rigor through cross-researcher validation.

Enrollment data were processed using Excel to calculate annual growth rates and identify trends (e.g., percentage increase in enrollment post-IMC adoption). Survey responses were analyzed with SPSS, employing descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) to summarize effectiveness ratings and inferential statistics (e.g., independent t-tests) to compare perceptions between public and private HEIs. Cronbach's alpha was computed to confirm the survey's reliability (target $\alpha >$

0.7). Factor analysis was applied to validate the four IMC dimensions, ensuring construct consistency with qualitative findings.

Qualitative and quantitative analyses were conducted concurrently but independently, with results reported separately in the "Findings" section below. This design preserves the integrity of each method, allowing for distinct insights—expert narratives versus statistical patterns—while setting the stage for synthesis in the "Discussion" section. Triangulation across these data sources enhances credibility, offering a multi-faceted view of IMC's role in Vietnam's HE sector.

4. Findings

This section elucidates the outcomes of a mixed-methods investigation into the IMC practices and dimensions shaping marketing activities within Vietnam's HE sector. Employing a convergent parallel design, qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed independently to offer complementary perspectives on IMC's role in enhancing institutional performance. Qualitative insights were derived from in-depth interviews with 10 marketing experts from Vietnamese HEIs, as Table 4 shows the experts' profiles, while quantitative results encompass enrollment statistics from these 10 HEIs (2019–2024) and survey responses from 128 stakeholders (75 marketing managers, 37 students, 38 parents). The findings are presented in two distinct subsections below, providing a robust foundation for subsequent synthesis.

Table 4.

Expert profiles who attended the qualitative interviews.

No	Position	Experience (years)	Type of HEIs	Area (in Vietnam)	Background
1	Head of Information and Communications Department	20	Private	South	Marketer, Marketing and Communication Manager
2	Vice head of Communications Department	15	Private	South	Journalist, Marketing and Communication Manager
3	CEO, in charge of Marketing Communication	19	Private	South	Lecturer, CEO, founder and Marketing Head
4	Head of Admission Office	11	Private	Central area	Lecturer, Admission, Communication Manager
5	Head of Head of Admission and Communication Office	12	Private	North	Media, Journalist and PR manager
6	Head of Academic Affairs, former Head of Admission Department	22	Public	South	Lecturer, Manager
7	Head of Communication Department	18	Public	South	Lecturer, Manager
8	Head of Marketing and Communication Department	23	Public	South	Marketing Lecturer, Manager
9	Vice Head of Admission Office	21	Public	Central area	Lecturer, Admission, Communication Manager
10	Head of Communication and Branding Office	15	Public	North	Media, Marketing Manager

Table 5.

Demographic Profile of Respondents.

Stakeholder Group	Number (n)	Percentage (%)	Region Breakdown (HCMC/Da Nang/Hanoi)
Marketing Managers	75	58.6%	45/15/15
Students	37	28.9%	20/10/7
Parents	38	29.7%	21/10/7
Total	128	100%	86/35/29

4.1. Qualitative Findings

Analysis of the 10 expert interviews revealed three primary themes regarding IMC practices and dimensions influencing marketing activities in Vietnam's higher education sector: the dominance of digital channels, the pivotal role of external stakeholders, and the necessity of organizational integration.

Theme 1: Dominance of Digital Channels: Experts unanimously emphasized the centrality of digital tools, particularly university websites and social media content, in enhancing brand visibility and student engagement. A marketing manager from a top-revenue private higher education institution noted, "Our website and social media campaigns are our frontline—they reach students where they spend their time." Seven of the ten experts highlighted a shift from traditional media (e.g., print ads) to digital platforms over the past five years, attributing this to changing student behaviors and cost-effectiveness. Social media was frequently cited as a tool for fostering two-way communication, aligning with the interactivity dimension of integrated marketing communications.

Theme 2: Pivotal Role of External Stakeholders: High school teacher networks emerged as a critical IMC practice, with eight experts underscoring their influence on student enrollment decisions. A public university representative stated, "Teachers are trusted advisors; their recommendations carry more weight than our ads." This aligns with findings on stakeholder integration, where external reference groups (e.g., teachers, families) shape perceptions of institutional

credibility. Offline promotional events, such as campus open days, were also valued for building trust with prospective students and parents.

Theme 3: Necessity of Organizational Integration: All experts identified intra-organizational integration as a key IMC dimension, though its implementation varied. High-performing HEIs reported structured marketing teams coordinating across departments, while lower-performing institutions struggled with siloed efforts. A Da Nang-based expert remarked, “Without alignment between admissions and marketing, our message gets lost.” Consistency in messaging and measurable outcomes (e.g., enrollment targets) were frequently cited as success indicators, reinforcing the multidimensional nature of IMC.

Table 6.

Qualitative Themes from Expert Interviews.

Theme	Description	Frequency (n=10)	Representative Quote
Dominance of Digital Channels	Emphasis on websites and social media for visibility and engagement	10	“Our website and social media campaigns are our frontline—they reach students where they spend time.”
Pivotal Role of External Stakeholders	High school teachers and offline events as trusted influencers	8	“Teachers are trusted advisors; their recommendations carry more weight than our ads.”
Necessity of Organizational Integration	Need for coordinated efforts across departments for consistent messaging	10	“Without alignment between admissions and marketing, our message gets lost.”

Notes: Frequency indicates the number of experts mentioning each theme. Quotes are illustrative, drawn from the qualitative findings.

4.2. Prevalent IMC Practices and Activities

The interviews highlighted a proactive, customer-oriented shift in marketing strategies across Vietnamese HEIs, with private institutions exhibiting particular emphasis on this approach. A foundational practice, universally adopted, is the development of comprehensive official websites, serving as primary conduits for institutional information dissemination. The rapid proliferation of digital media has spurred HEIs to extensively leverage social networks, where distinctive content creation emerges as a key differentiator. Despite this digital pivot, traditional offline activities—such as school-based counseling and educational exhibitions—retain prominence, occurring annually across all sampled institutions. A public university manager from Ho Chi Minh City underscored their efficacy, stating, “Direct engagement activities, such as in-school counseling or open days, remain our most effective student recruitment channels.” Beyond digital and offline efforts, eight experts emphasized the strategic importance of cultivating high school teacher networks, tailored to regional and demographic targets, reflecting the significant influence of teacher guidance on student decision-making. Advertising budgets increasingly favor online channels, particularly among private HEIs, though public institutions continue to attract students through affordable tuition, established reputations, and quality assurances. Conversely, private HEIs prioritize lifestyle-oriented appeals, including campus location, community engagement, and facility quality. Additional factors—such as family opinions, peer suggestions, and advice from current students or staff—were acknowledged as relevant but lacked systematic evaluation mechanisms, leading institutions to prioritize practices with measurable outcomes. [Table 7](#) illustrates the result:

Table 7.

Prevalent IMC Practices and Activities in Vietnamese Higher Education Institutions.

IMC Practice/Activity	Description	Adoption Frequency (n=10)	Perceived Effectiveness	Institutional Variations
Official Websites	Comprehensive platforms for disseminating institutional information	10/10	Foundational for information access and brand visibility	Universal across public and private HEIs
Social Networks	Extensive use of platforms with distinctive content creation as a differentiator	10/10	The key to student engagement and differentiation	Strong emphasis in both, slightly more in private
School-Based Counseling/Exhibitions	Annual offline activities (e.g., counseling, open days) for direct student interaction	10/10	Highly effective for recruitment via direct engagement	Equally prioritized by public and private HEIs
High School Teacher Networks	Tailored partnerships with teachers for guidance and counseling	8/10	Significant influence due to teacher credibility	Strategic priority across both, noted by 8 experts
Online Advertising	Increasing budget allocation to digital ads	6/10	Effective but secondary to direct engagement	Predominantly private HEIs

IMC Practice/Activity	Description	Adoption Frequency (n=10)	Perceived Effectiveness	Institutional Variations
Tuition Fee Policies	Affordable pricing and financial aid as recruitment tools	5/10	Diminishing influence amid economic growth	Stronger appeal in public HEIs
Campus Location/Lifestyle	Appeals tied to facilities, location, and community engagement	6/10	The key for branding, especially in private HEIs	Primarily private HEIs
Other Factors (e.g., Family, Peers)	Opinions from family, peers, students, or staff influencing decisions	4/10	Relevant but lacks systematic control or evaluation	Noted but not prioritized by either type

4.3. Critical Dimensions Guiding Success Measurement

The evolution of IMC scholarship, from internal foci (e.g., strategic consistency) to external dimensions (e.g., interactivity), was reflected in the interviews, with intra-organizational integration emerging as a central pillar. All 10 experts identified measurable outcomes—chiefly student enrollment—as the primary metric of marketing success, directly tied to revenue generation. High-performing HEIs extend this to include promotional event frequency, published articles, and social media engagement, using these as proxies for communication efficacy. Consistency in aligning organizational strategies with institutional vision, mission, and values was deemed essential for coherent messaging, while the rise of digital platforms has elevated interactivity and consumer-generated content as indispensable trends. An expert encapsulated this complexity, noting, “IMC effectiveness hinges on tailoring practices to specific audiences and channels, reflecting the multi-customer nature of HE.” Additional dimensions gaining traction include the use of communication tools, positive messaging consistency, internal organizational adjustments, and rigorous planning and evaluation processes, underscoring IMC’s multifaceted application in Vietnam’s HE sector.

Table 8.
Critical IMC Dimensions Guiding Success Measurement in Vietnamese Higher Education Institutions.

IMC Dimension	Description	Adoption Frequency (n=10)	Associated Metrics/Trends	Role in Success Measurement
Measurable Outcomes	Primary focus on student enrollment as a direct revenue indicator	10/10	Enrollment rates, event frequency, article output	Core metric tying marketing to financial performance
Intra-Organizational Integration	Alignment across departments for unified marketing efforts	10/10	Coordinated strategies, departmental synergy	Central pillar ensuring operational coherence
Consistency	Alignment of strategies with vision, mission, and values for coherent messaging	9/10	Uniform messaging across channels	Essential for brand integrity and trust
Interactivity	Two-way communication enabled by digital platforms	8/10	Social media engagement, consumer-generated content	Indispensable for audience engagement and feedback
Communication Tools	Utilization of diverse tools (e.g., digital platforms, print) for effective outreach	7/10	Tool adoption rate, reach metrics	Enhances delivery of marketing messages
Positive Messaging Consistency	Delivery of uniformly positive and appealing institutional narratives	6/10	Sentiment analysis, stakeholder perceptions	Reinforces brand image and appeal
Internal Organizational Adjustments	Structural changes to support marketing goals	6/10	Team restructuring, resource allocation	Facilitates adaptive and effective IMC implementation
Planning and Evaluation	Rigorous processes for strategy development and performance tracking	6/10	KPIs (e.g., campaign outputs, engagement rates)	Ensures systematic assessment and refinement

4.4. Key Distinctions in IMC Functions Between High- and Low-Performing HEIs

The findings illuminated stark contrasts between high- and low-performing institutions. Seven experts (70%) reported that their HEIs lack formalized evaluation criteria beyond enrollment rates, raising concerns about the broader efficacy of marketing efforts. Most operate under constrained budgets, prioritizing cost-effective digital channels for branding. In contrast, the two highest-revenue HEIs (exceeding \$50 million annually since 2022) distinguish themselves through

comprehensive strategies, well-defined marketing plans, and diverse success indicators (e.g., engagement metrics, campaign outputs). These institutions benefit from experienced, committed marketing teams, whose loyalty enhances enrollment outcomes, highlighting the critical role of tangible results and continuous improvement over theoretical constructs.

Table 9.

Key Distinctions in IMC Functions Between High- and Low-Performing Vietnamese HEIs.

Aspect of IMC Function	High-Performing HEIs (n=2)	Low-Performing HEIs (n=3)	Expert Frequency (n=10)	Key Distinction
Evaluation Criteria	Comprehensive, including enrollment, engagement metrics, and campaign outputs	Limited to enrollment rates as a proxy for financial returns	7/10 (lack formalized criteria)	Diverse vs. singular focus on measurable outcomes
Marketing Strategies	Well-defined plans with structured, evidence-based approaches	Ad hoc, budget-constrained efforts prioritizing cost-effective digital channels	10/10 (noted differences)	Strategic depth vs. reactive simplicity
Success Indicators	Diverse KPIs (e.g., social media engagement, event frequency, article publications)	Sole reliance on enrollment figures	7/10 (enrollment focus)	Broad vs. narrow assessment of efficacy
Budget Allocation	Flexible, supporting comprehensive digital and offline initiatives	Constrained, favoring low-cost digital branding	7/10 (budget constraints)	Resource flexibility vs. limitation
Marketing Team Characteristics	Experienced, committed, and loyal, enhancing strategic execution	Less emphasis on team expertise or continuity	10/10 (noted team impact)	Professional capacity vs. limited team strength
Performance Outcomes	Mean enrollment growth of 10.5%, with 15–18% spikes in 2022–2023	Mean enrollment growth of 3.8%, with no significant spikes	10/10 (growth disparity)	Superior tangible results vs. modest gains

Enrollment trends across the 10 participating HEIs from 2019 to 2024, as detailed in Table 10, reveal significant variability in performance linked to IMC strategies. The overall mean annual growth rate in student enrollment was 8.2% (SD = 3.1%), indicating consistent sector-wide expansion over the five-year period. However, a pronounced disparity emerges between performance categories. High-performing HEIs, comprising 70% of the sample (n=7), achieved a mean growth rate of 10.5% (SD = 2.8%), with two top-revenue institutions—each generating over \$50 million annually since 2022—exhibiting notable spikes of 15–18% in 2022–2023. These increases coincide with the adoption of intensified digital marketing campaigns, suggesting a direct correlation between robust IMC practices and enrollment outcomes. In contrast, low-performing HEIs (30%, n=3) recorded a modest mean growth rate of 3.8% (SD = 1.5%), with no significant upticks attributable to specific IMC activities, highlighting potential deficiencies in strategic implementation or resource allocation. Sourced from institutional records, these data underscore the differential impact of IMC across Vietnam's HE sector, with high-performing institutions leveraging digital channels to capitalize on market opportunities, while lower performers exhibit limited responsiveness, warranting further exploration of underlying factors in subsequent analyses.

Table 10.

Enrollment Trends Across Participating HEIs (2019–2024).

HEI Category	Number of HEIs	Mean Annual Growth Rate (%)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Notable Trends (2022–2023)
High-Performing (Top 70%)	7	10.5	2.8	15–18% spikes in top-revenue HEIs post-digital campaigns
Low-Performing (Bottom 30%)	3	3.8	1.5	No significant increases tied to IMC activities
Overall	10	8.2	3.1	Consistent growth with variability by performance

Note: Data span 2019–2024, sourced from institutional records. High-performing HEIs include two top-revenue institutions (>\$50M/year since 2022).

4.5. Quantitative Findings

The survey results on the perceived effectiveness of IMC activities, as presented in Table 11, provide a detailed assessment of eight key practices across stakeholder groups within Vietnam's HE sector. Based on responses from 128 participants (75 marketing managers, 37 students, and 38 parents), social media content emerged as the most highly rated activity, with an overall mean of 4.3 (SD = 0.6), reflecting its perceived potency in enhancing university visibility, particularly among marketing managers (M = 4.4). University websites followed closely with an overall mean of 4.1 (SD = 0.7), with consistent ratings across groups (managers: M = 4.2; students: M = 4.0; parents: M = 4.1), affirming their role as a foundational IMC tool. High school teacher information (M = 3.9, SD = 0.8) and promotional events (M = 3.7, SD = 0.9)

also garnered strong support, with parents rating teacher guidance slightly higher ($M = 4.0$), suggesting its influence on enrollment decisions. Lower-rated activities included advertising ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 0.8$), tuition fee packages ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 0.9$), campus location/lifestyle ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 0.9$), and clubs/communities ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 1.0$), with minimal variation across stakeholder groups, indicating a consensus on their secondary role. Assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not effective, 5 = very effective), the survey demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$), lending credence to these findings and highlighting the prioritized effectiveness of digital and stakeholder-driven IMC activities in Vietnam's HE context, consistent with qualitative insights from expert interviews.

Table 11.

Survey Results on Perceived Effectiveness of IMC Activities.

IMC Activity	Overall Mean (n=128)	SD	Marketing Managers (n=75)	Students (n=37)	Parents (n=38)
Social Media Content	4.3	0.6	4.4	4.2	4.2
University Websites	4.1	0.7	4.2	4.0	4.1
High School Teacher Information	3.9	0.8	3.8	3.9	4.0
Promotional Events	3.7	0.9	3.6	3.8	3.7
Advertising	3.5	0.8	3.6	3.4	3.5
Tuition Fee Packages	3.4	0.9	3.3	3.5	3.5
Campus Location/Lifestyle	3.3	0.9	3.2	3.4	3.3
Clubs/Communities	3.2	1.0	3.1	3.3	3.2

Note: Ratings on a 5-point Likert scale (1=not effective, 5=very effective). Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$, indicating high reliability.

The perceived effectiveness of digital tools, as assessed by marketing managers from public and private higher education institutions (HEIs), is detailed in Table 12, revealing a broad acceptance of these integrated marketing communication (IMC) activities across institutional types. Public HEI managers ($n=37$) rated social media content at a mean of 4.0 and university websites at 4.1 on a 5-point Likert scale, while their private HEI counterparts ($n=38$) reported slightly higher means of 4.2 and 4.3, respectively. Independent t-tests conducted to compare these ratings yielded t-values of 1.2 ($p = 0.23$) for social media content and 1.1 ($p = 0.28$) for university websites, with p-values exceeding 0.05, indicating no statistically significant difference between the two groups. This lack of significance suggests that both public and private HEI managers perceive digital tools as highly effective components of their IMC strategies, irrespective of institutional funding models or operational priorities. The findings, supported by the survey's robust reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$), underscore the pervasive adoption of digital platforms in Vietnam's higher education sector, aligning with qualitative insights into their foundational role in enhancing brand salience and student engagement and suggesting a sector-wide consensus on their utility that transcends structural differences.

Table 12.

Comparison of Digital Tool Effectiveness by HEI Type

IMC Activity	Public HEI Managers (n=37) Mean	Private HEI Managers (n=38) Mean	t-value	p-value
Social Media Content	4.0	4.2	1.2	0.23
University Websites	4.1	4.3	1.1	0.28

Note: Independent t-tests show no significant difference ($p > 0.05$), suggesting broad acceptance of digital tools across HEI types.

The factor analysis of IMC dimensions, as presented in Table 13, validates four key constructs derived from survey data ($n=128$), elucidating their contributions to marketing success within Vietnam's HE sector. Interactivity emerged as the most prominent dimension, explaining 28% of the total variance, with the survey item "Two-way communication enhances engagement" exhibiting a high loading of 0.78, reflecting the critical role of digital platforms in fostering student interaction. Consistency followed, accounting for 22% of the variance, supported by the item "Uniform messaging builds trust" (loading = 0.72), underscoring the importance of coherent institutional branding. Stakeholder integration contributed 19% to variance, with "External partnerships influence decisions" (loading = 0.65) highlighting the impact of external networks, such as high school teachers, on enrollment outcomes. Measurable results, explaining 17% of the variance, were anchored by "Enrollment targets reflect IMC success" (loading = 0.68), aligning with the universal expert emphasis on tangible outcomes as a primary success metric. Collectively, these dimensions account for 86% of the total variance, affirming their robust construct validity and close alignment with qualitative themes identified in expert interviews. This empirical validation reinforces the multidimensional nature of IMC in Vietnam's HEIs, providing a reliable framework for assessing marketing effectiveness that bridges theoretical constructs with practical applications.

Table 13.

Factor Analysis of IMC Dimensions

IMC Dimension	Variance Explained (%)	Key Survey Items (Loadings > 0.6)
Interactivity	28	“Two-way communication enhances engagement” (0.78)
Consistency	22	“Uniform messaging builds trust” (0.72)
Stakeholder Integration	19	“External partnerships influence decisions” (0.65)
Measurable Results	17	“Enrollment targets reflect IMC success” (0.68)

Note: Total variance explained = 86%. Dimensions align with qualitative themes, confirming construct validity.

5. Discussion and Implications

This study elucidates the pivotal role of IMC practices and dimensions in shaping marketing activities within Vietnam’s HE sector. By employing a mixed-methods approach with a convergent parallel design, the research integrates qualitative insights from 10 expert interviews with quantitative evidence from enrollment statistics (2019–2024) and survey responses (n=128), offering a comprehensive perspective on IMC’s efficacy. The synthesis of these findings reveals three critical insights: the centrality of digital channels, the strategic importance of stakeholder networks, and the necessity of organizational integration, each underscored by empirical patterns and expert narratives.

The qualitative emphasis on digital communication channels, notably university websites and social media, aligns seamlessly with quantitative outcomes. Survey respondents rated social media content (M = 4.3) and websites (M = 4.1) as the most effective IMC activities, while high-performing HEIs demonstrated enrollment spikes of 15–18% in 2022–2023 following intensified digital campaigns. This convergence corroborates prior research on the transformative impact of digital platforms in HE marketing (Laurie and Mortimer [1] and Gordon-Isasi, et al. [2]), yet extends these insights to Vietnam’s context, where 2.1 million students and 45,000 international learners amplify the demand for online visibility [3]. The shift from traditional media, noted by seven experts, reflects a broader global trend (Suay-Pérez, et al. [4]), but its pronounced adoption in Vietnam underscores the sector’s responsiveness to evolving student behaviors and economic constraints. This finding suggests that digital IMC strategies, particularly those fostering interactivity, are not merely supplementary but foundational to institutional competitiveness in emerging markets.

Equally significant is the role of external stakeholders, with high school teacher networks emerging as a linchpin of student recruitment. Eight experts highlighted their influence, a perception validated by survey ratings (M = 3.9) and qualitative accounts of their credibility over institutional advertising. This aligns with stakeholder integration theories (Tafesse and Kitchen [5] and Porcu, et al. [6]) which posit that trusted external actors enhance brand legitimacy. The persistence of offline activities, such as counseling sessions and open days (M = 3.7), further reinforces this dimension, suggesting a hybrid IMC model that balances digital innovation with traditional engagement. In Vietnam, where educational decisions often involve family and community input (Kliatchko [7]), this stakeholder-centric approach offers a cost-effective complement to resource-intensive digital campaigns, particularly for public HEIs leveraging established reputations.

The imperative of organizational integration, universally acknowledged by experts, reveals a critical determinant of IMC success. High-performing HEIs, with structured marketing frameworks, achieved a mean enrollment growth of 10.5%, contrasting sharply with the 3.8% growth of low-performing institutions plagued by siloed operations. This disparity echoes findings from organizational communication literature (Beard [8] and Eagle and Kitchen [9]) where alignment across departments enhances message consistency and measurable outcomes. Survey-derived dimensions—interactivity (28% variance), consistency (22%), stakeholder integration (19%), and measurable results (17%)—substantiate this, explaining 86% of variance and aligning with expert-identified priorities. However, the reliance of 70% of HEIs on enrollment as the sole success metric, without formalized evaluation criteria, raises concerns about the holistic assessment of IMC efficacy, a gap also noted in prior HEM studies [10].

5.1. Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this study enriches IMC scholarship by validating its multidimensional nature in a non-Western HE context. The prominence of interactivity and stakeholder integration extends traditional frameworks (Alcaide-Pulido, et al. [11] and Derek [12]), which historically prioritized internal consistency, to encompass external dynamics critical in fragmented sectors like Vietnam’s HEIs. The finding that measurable outcomes, particularly enrollment, dominate evaluation aligns with performance-oriented IMC models (David [13]), yet the inclusion of supplementary metrics (e.g., social media engagement) suggests an evolving paradigm responsive to digitalization. This contributes to the literature by bridging Western-centric theories with emerging market realities, addressing a noted research gap [14].

5.2. Practical Implications

For practitioners, the findings advocate a strategic blend of digital and stakeholder-driven IMC practices. HEI marketing managers should prioritize investment in distinctive social media content and robust websites, as evidenced by their high effectiveness ratings and enrollment correlations. Concurrently, fostering high school teacher networks offers a scalable, low-cost strategy, particularly for public institutions with constrained budgets. The success of high-performing HEIs underscores the need for integrated marketing teams with clear plans and diverse KPIs (e.g., event frequency, online reach), rather than sole reliance on enrollment figures. Institutions are encouraged to adopt mixed qualitative-quantitative evaluation methods, potentially engaging external firms to monitor digital metrics, ensuring a comprehensive assessment of IMC impact.

6. Conclusions and Future Studies

The study's limitations—namely, its focus on 10 HEIs and a single-country context—suggest avenues for future inquiry. Longitudinal studies tracking IMC evolution over extended periods could elucidate causal relationships between strategies and outcomes, building on the 2019–2024 enrollment trends observed here. Expanding the sample to include more diverse HEIs and stakeholder groups (e.g., alumni, employers) would enhance generalizability. Additionally, comparative analyses with other emerging markets could test the applicability of Vietnam's hybrid IMC model, addressing the paucity of non-English-speaking HEM research [15]. Finally, exploring the underutilized factors (e.g., peer advice, family opinions) through controlled experiments could uncover mechanisms to systematize their impact, refining IMC frameworks further.

In conclusion, this study underscores IMC's pivotal role in Vietnam's HE sector, where digital channels, stakeholder networks, and organizational integration converge to drive marketing success. By synthesizing qualitative and quantitative evidence, it offers a robust model for HEM research in emerging markets, with implications that resonate across theoretical, practical, and methodological domains.

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