

Social Media Capability Maturity Model For Students Recruitment: Applied On Saudi Arabian Public Universities

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Abstract-

In light of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (KSA) Vision 2030, aims to reduce oil dependency by diversifying exports, including Higher Education (HE), this study introduces a Social Media Capability Maturity Model (CMM) for improving international student recruitment at Saudi Arabian Public Universities (SAPUs). The CMM is framed within the AIDA model (Awareness, Interest, Desire, and Action) and draws a benchmark from the Public Universities of Scotland (UScots).

Purpose– *The proposed model (Social Media Capability Maturity Model) provides a structured approach to enhancing SAPUs' social media capabilities, achieving their recruitment goals, and contributing to the broader objectives of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.*

Design/methodology/approach -*The research approach encompassed three key aspects: (i) a comprehensive literature review to evaluate the role of social media in higher education and global student recruitment; (ii) a series of interviews conducted at selected SAPUs to gauge the extent of social media utilization in international student recruitment efforts; and (iii) a structured comparative analysis of social media practices for international student recruitment between SAPUs and Scottish universities.*

Findings - *The study highlights a gap in social media marketing strategies between SAPUs and UScots, with SAPUs lagging behind. It proposes a framework for assessing their social media capabilities in international student recruitment and provides guidance for improvement. The findings provide practical recommendations for policymakers and social media managers.*

Research limitations/implications – *The analysis draws on published content from a small sample of SAPUs and Scottish universities and seeks the views of staff responsible for recruiting international students at Saudi universities on the effectiveness of the content.*

Practical implications – *This study expands knowledge on the importance of the strategic role of social media in SAPUs to address international student recruitment and marketing challenges.*

Social implications – *Increasing the international student population at SAPUs is one strategy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's 2030 vision to reduce its dependency on oil exports.*

Originality/value- *The proposed social media CMM provides SAPUs with a pragmatic framework for assessing their existing social media capabilities in international student recruitment and outlines targeted guidance for enhancing these efforts. The study extends theoretical insights by advancing the understanding of both the CMM and the AIDA models within the context of international student recruitment marketing. The managerial implications translate into actionable recommendations for policymakers and social media managers within SAPUs, highlighting best practices for effective international student recruitment initiatives. The abstract maintains objectivity, abstains from introducing unsupported results, and refrains from exaggerating principal conclusions..*

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Keywords: *Saudi Arabian Public Universities (SAPUs); Public Universities of Scotland (UScots); Social Media Capability Maturity Model (CMM); AIDA Model (Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action); International Student Recruitment; Higher Education (HE).*

INTRODUCTION

The approaches to Social Media Marketing are subject to change as a result of the turbulent business climate and rising client sophistication. This dilemma has hastened the demand for governance of business process improvement. (Ladzani, 2016).

This study considered that this new strategic approach is urgently needed to develop an integrated framework for the use of social media as one of the main pillars in promoting and achieving the desired results. In this framework, the AIDA marketing model, which represents awareness, interest, desire, and action, has been compiled with the new CMM model for the development of a road map for SAPUs that will enhance their efficiency in strategies for recruiting international students within Saudi government universities.

Overall, the objective of this research, in light of the new relationships between marketing, social media, and international student employment, is to determine the exact differences between social media practices through comparative analysis, which assesses the performance of SAPUs at the standard of public universities in Scotland. (UScots). Based on well-established research models, this phase was followed by a complex examination of international student employment practices in SAPUs, which was achieved through a series of interviews. It included senior and middle managers and thus captured a comprehensive set of perspectives. Furthermore, the study expanded its scope to measure the impact of social media marketing on the perceptions of international students at SAPUs.

A social media CMM model for international student recruitment in SAPUs has also been developed. This carefully enhanced model has been calibrated on the basis of insights from a wide-ranging literature review, an accurate comparison of social media strategies, and experimental interviews conducted at King Abdul-Aziz University.

The research extends beyond the theoretical basis to include practical administrative implications. By making actionable recommendations, policymakers and social media managers within SAPUs have been able to move on complex terrain to effectively recruit international students; research has been able to fill a critical gap in the literature; and the CMM framework has been integrated with the AIDA marketing model to guide the recruitment efforts of international students supported by social media in SAPUs.

In short, the study promoted understanding of the role of social media in the marketing of higher education, drawing on a selective mix of models and empirical visions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper focuses on marketing academic programs to international students. Marketing includes the behaviors and activities required to sell academic programs to global markets. In light of achieving this marketing methodology through social media, it has been proposed to use marketing communication models to facilitate the proper implementation of marketing objectives through social media. (Nieves- Casanovas et al.,2020)

Digital Marketing and Social Media in H.E.

Regarding digital marketing and social media in the context of higher education, it is defined as “the use of digital technologies to create integrated, targeted, and measurable communications that help acquire and retain customers while establishing deeper relationships with them.” (Jadhav and Yallatti, 2018). Digital marketing is a subsection of marketing that adopts a variety of techniques to promote brands by enhancing customer engagement and trust in online marketing content [24]. Digital marketing can be viewed from a broad business perspective, which includes an organization's goals, vision, and strategy, digital marketing, organizational structure, culture, and creating digital marketing

processes [25]. In addition, this study uses broad and narrow perspectives. The broader perspective is reflected in how organizational settings (e.g., structure and performance metrics) are structured to support the implementation of a digital marketing strategy. The narrower perspective is represented in how digital marketing tools help in purely marketing activities such as branding [26– 27]. Digital marketing is becoming increasingly important in the higher education sector. Universities and colleges use different digital channels and strategies to attract and engage prospective students,

communicate their unique value propositions, and establish relationships with current and future stakeholders. Digital marketing efforts in higher education may include search engine optimization, content marketing, email marketing, social media marketing, online advertising, and other methods. It is essential for organizations to understand the digital landscape, use insights from data, and implement targeted campaigns to effectively reach and engage their target audience.

Table 1. Characteristics of Digital Marketing Communication Channels

| Channel | literature in HE marketing | Characteristic(s)/objective(s) |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| E-mail Marketing | Štefko et al. (2015) | Maximizing customer relationship management through personalized e-mails |
| Social Media Marketing | Irfan et al. (2018) Khan et al. (2017) Momen et al. (2019) Nevzat et al. (2016) Peruta and Shields (2017; 2018) Rutter et al. (2016) | Fosters students' engagement. Influences the university ranking. Improves brand awareness, brand image and brand equity. |
| Mobile Marketing | Hyder et al. (2019) McCabe and Weaver (2019) Shaltoni (2016) Zinn and Johansson (2015) | Attracts and targets new student generation. Ease and convenience of use Includes various channels including social media, SMS, e-mail, mobile search. |
| Paid Search | Antoun et al. (2016) Fierro et al. (2017) | The utilization of search engines technologies to increase the chances of matching international students' search through location selection, and keywords. |
| Organic Search | Li et al. (2014) McMahon and Griffy-Brown (2009) | Cost-effective High credibility and trust due to targeting high organic traffic. Can be enhanced by formulating accurate and |

Robusta algorithms.

| | | |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Website s | Soegoto (2018) Kittle and Ciba (2001) Pegoraro (2006) | Websites can positively impact upon the university brand image, brand recognition and brand loyalty when supplemented with advanced technologies e.g., Laravel. |
| Display Ads | Jan and Ammari (2016) | Raises awareness and encourages responsiveness and visitation of the university's website. |

Digital marketing allows for a better understanding of the needs of international students through two-way communication and the use of web analytics, which improves customer relationship management and the university brand-building process. Because it is data-driven, digital marketing allows organizations to track and retarget customers who visit their websites and social media platforms. This allows for the delivery of more cost-effective, measurable, attractive, and personalized marketing campaigns that match the needs and desires of targeted international students, which in turn makes international student recruitment more effective [29, 30].

Without proper implementation, digital marketing can lose credibility and become a source of marketing noise, leading customers to ignore messages. [32].

Strategic Social Media Marketing

Strategic social media marketing plays a crucial role in enhancing customer engagement and customer relationship management in higher education. It allows universities to disseminate information, increase brand awareness, and create opportunities for online interaction, content creation, and market research [38]. In order for universities to effectively leverage social media marketing to recruit international students, they must understand the dynamics of engagement across social media platforms, consider the influence of culture, acknowledge the role of culture in social media management, and

identify key implementation drivers by adopting a strategic approach and leveraging the unique characteristics of each platform [39]. In the context of higher education, several points should be addressed to effectively utilize social media marketing. First, it is important to understand how different social media platforms engage their target audience of international students [41, 38]. Each platform has unique characteristics, and universities must take cultural differences into account when choosing social media platforms and crafting the content of the marketing message to match cultural values [42, 43]. Different cultures may have different preferences and usage patterns that can influence how messages on social media are understood and interpreted [44]. Therefore, universities choosing which platforms are compatible with the administration they wish to be recognized for enhances the effectiveness of social media campaigns and improves engagement with international students. [43]. Generating brand awareness and facilitating cross-communication enables higher education social media managers to use a range of social media programs to achieve student recruitment goals. These programs provide institutions with opportunities to exchange information, showcase campus life, respond to inquiries, and foster a sense of community [38]. However, social media managers may face challenges in using social media as a marketing technique due to limited organizational capacity and support [40]. It is important to view social media marketing as a strategic rather than an operational activity, with long-term plans that ensure continuous learning, monitoring, and adaptation based on feedback [39]. Social media marketing can also be used as a tool to recruit students into higher education. They have the potential to enhance branding activities, personalize digital communications, and enhance online student engagement

[43]. Feedback obtained through social media platforms allows students abroad to collaborate on digital marketing content [43]. The presence of technological infrastructure, such as semantic web technologies, can enhance the performance of social media in higher education [47, 48, 49]. Effective monitoring and evaluation of customer data is crucial to making informed decisions [39]. The ability to communicate, which includes developing user-generated content and properly sharing it online, is also essential in social media marketing [50].

The AIDA Model

In this context, the study decided to use the AIDA model, which is the process that organizations use to nurture potential customers. The AIDA model is a prominent marketing framework that describes the stages a customer often goes through before making a purchase. The AIDA marketing model is used to target specific audiences at different times across the customer journey and engage with the brand online through various digital marketing activities. Since then, his theory regarding different communication methods has become widely used in the marketing industry. The AIDA model [14, 20, 21] represents four hierarchical stages of marketing communications to enhance customer engagement and sales growth: (1) awareness; (2) interest; and (3) desire. and (4) work. The funnel-shaped model presents three psychological stages that a target customer goes through when exposed to marketing communications: cognitive, affective, and conversational (Table 2.1). While providing guidance for planning and implementing digital communications [13],

Table 2. AIDA Model

| Customer Psychology | AIDA Model | Marketing Objective |
|----------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Cognitive (mental process) | Awareness | Increasing awareness and attraction |
| Affective (emotional) | Interest | Boosting likability of products/services |
| Conative (behavior) | Desire | Shifting needs to wants |
| | Action | Encouraging actual purchase |

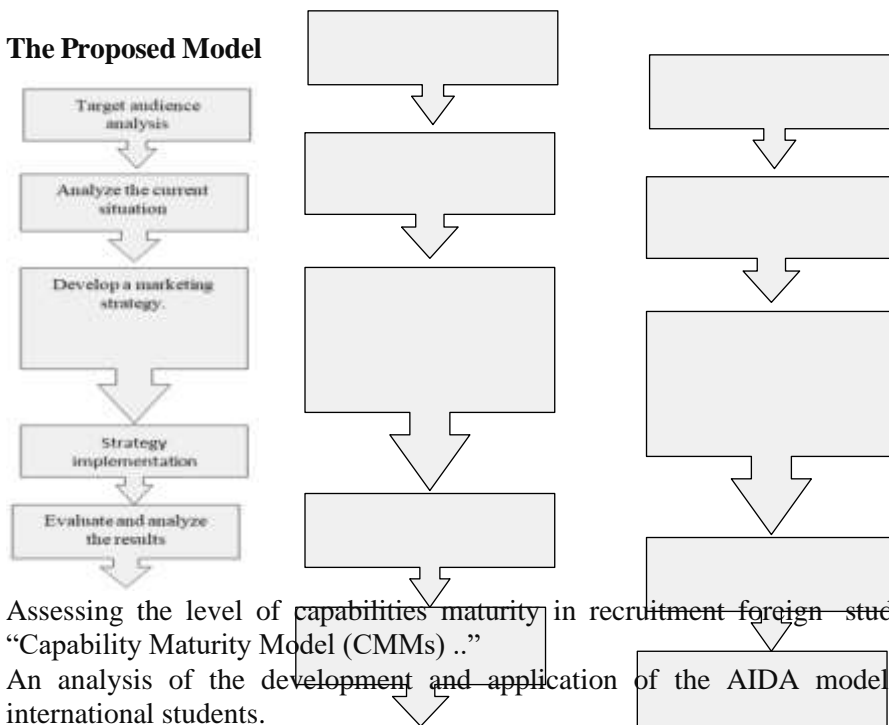
It is commonly used to understand and direct marketing efforts, especially in traditional advertising situations, to analyze and direct marketing activities. Furthermore, the AIDA model has been revised and used in digital marketing approaches, particularly in the context of social media and online engagement, to take into account the complexities of customer journeys and the nature of multi-channel interactions. However, it is necessary to recognize the limitations of the AIDA model, such as its focus on pre-purchase behavior and neglect of post-purchase behavior. Evaluating post-purchase behavior is an important social media performance control technique to measure customer satisfaction, for example. The research modified the action component of the AIDA model to incorporate marketing strategy implementation drivers, emphasizing their importance in the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies. This approach coincides with previous recommendations to develop “actionable metrics” as a solution to digital marketing challenges. [22]

Capability Maturity Model (CMMs)

The Capability Maturity Model model is a framework used to measure and improve the quality and efficiency of processes in various fields, including higher education [1]. It provides a systematic approach to evaluating and enhancing organizational processes, with an emphasis on radical modifications to enhance effectiveness and efficiency. The competency model is a valuable framework for measuring and improving the quality and efficiency of higher education operations, including social media marketing for student recruitment. By assessing their current level of maturity and following the roadmap that enables universities to enhance their capabilities, implement best practices, and achieve

higher levels of effectiveness and efficiency in marketing via social media. This model provides a structured approach to improving operations and can be adapted to align marketing activities with the overall goals of the organization. In the context of social media marketing for student recruitment in higher education, the CMM model can be used to assess an institution's current level of maturity in using social media as a marketing tool [3]. Universities can identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas that need improvement and develop a roadmap to enhance their marketing capabilities through social media [3]. This model provides a guide for implementing best practices and achieving higher levels of effectiveness and efficiency [3]. There are two types of typical representation for each of these mechanisms: continuous representation and gradual representation [4]. The program focuses on specific processes that are aligned with the organization's goals and typically includes four levels of maturity: incomplete, implemented, managed, and defined [4]. On the other hand, the staged representation includes a standardized series of improvements and is based on five stages: initial, defined, managed, defined, quantitatively managed, and optimized [4]. In the context of higher education, most learning management models traditionally focus on measuring and improving learning and teaching processes [5]. However, there is a need to align these processes with marketing activities in order to effectively use social media marketing to recruit students [5]. Learning management models can help universities monitor quality in administrative activities, improve student and staff learning processes, evaluate social inclusion mechanisms, develop quality assurance systems, improve the quality of e-learning, and improve the quality of academic programs and their ability to recruit international students [5].

The Proposed Model



- Assessing the level of capabilities maturity in recruitment foreign students using the “Capability Maturity Model (CMMs) ..”
- An analysis of the development and application of the AIDA model in recruiting international students.
- Determine specific recruitment and marketing goals for foreign students.
- Develop a marketing strategy based on the principles of the AIDA model.
- Determine the capabilities required to implement the marketing strategy and improve them based on the “Capability Maturity Model (CMMs)”.
- Apply the marketing strategy defined according to the AIDA stages and use social media based on the results of “The Social Media Marketing Maturity Model”.
- Improve organizational and operational capabilities to enhance effectiveness in recruiting international students using the Capability Maturity Model (CMMs). Develop a marketing strategy. Target audience analysis.
- The recruitment stages and their impact on international students can be identified using the AIDA model, which can then be used to design an effective marketing plan.
- The effectiveness of international student recruitment can be increased by enhancing organizational and operational capabilities using Capability Maturity Models (CMMs). A skills improvement plan can be created and implemented after determining the current level of abilities and the level necessary to achieve the employment goals of international students.

| | | | | | | |
|----------------|------|-----|-----|-----|----|-----------------------------|
| King Abdulaziz | 172 | 152 | 275 | N/A | 2 | A: 50% I:35% D: 10% A:5% |
| King Faisal | 254 | 64 | 330 | N/A | 8 | A: 50% I: 35% D: 10% A:5% |
| Najran | 166 | 48 | 145 | N/A | 12 | A: 50% I: 35% D: 10% A:5% |
| Ha'il | 192 | 62 | 121 | N/A | 19 | A: 50% I: 35% D: 10% A:5% |
| King Saud | 295 | 230 | 91 | N/A | 1 | A: 50% I: 35% D: 10% A:5% |
| Total KSA | 1079 | 556 | 962 | | | |
| Glasgow | 146 | 105 | 83 | 7 | 2 | A: 35% I: 25% D: 25% A: 15% |
| Dundee | 105 | 368 | 85 | 59 | 2 | A: 35% I: 30% D: 20% A: 20% |
| Aberdeen | 175 | 230 | 80 | 53 | 3 | A: 30% I: 25% D: 20% A: 25% |
| Q. Margaret | 240 | 125 | 36 | 114 | 15 | A: 20% I: 30% D: 25% A: 25% |
| Strathclyde | 125 | 123 | 79 | 59 | 8 | A: 30% I: 30% D: 25% A: 15% |
| Total Scotland | 971 | 951 | 363 | | | |

Data Collection:

Data collection comprises three sequential phases (Stage 1):

Phase 1: Identification of social media posts by SAPUs and UScots on internet websites and platforms to establish the initial scope.

Phase 2: Review of social media capabilities in international student recruitment, focusing on Twitter due to its popularity among SAPUs and UScots.

Phase 3: Content analysis of Twitter posts for SAPUs and UScots based on AIDA elements.

Interviews (Stage 2)

Semi-structured interviews are conducted to explore the use of social media marketing for international student recruitment at KAU. Semi-structured interviews strike a balance between structured and unstructured questions, allowing for deep exploration while maintaining focus. The interviews target KAU's staff at different managerial levels and enrolled international students. Phases of interviews are:

Phase 1: Interviews with managers responsible for strategic planning of international student recruitment, based on literature review and research objectives.

Phase 2: Interviews with Social Media managers at KAU to further explore capabilities and strategies.

Phase 3: Interviews with international students to gain insights into their recruitment experiences.

Data Analysis:

Qualitative Content Analysis (Stage 1)

Qualitative content analysis is chosen as the method for exploring and describing the social media stories generated by universities. This method is well-suited for uncovering latent patterns embedded in textual data, allowing for the development and evaluation of models and theories.

We analyzed the content of more than 5,000 Twitter, Facebook and Instagram accounts, posts made between 20 February and 31 June 2023, across SAPU and previously identified Scottish. The entries we examined were made by university staff, and current and prospective international students. We determined who belonged to any of the four business process categories (A, I, D, A), and we also identified duplicate themes.

Grounded theory principles guide the data analysis process. Data coding follows three key steps:

Initial Coding: Word-by-word and line-by-line coding to develop initial codes.

Focused Coding: Identification of recurring patterns leading to the construction of themes.

Theoretical Coding: Development of grounded categories to establish theoretical frameworks.

Memo Writing

Two strategies, triangulation, and reflexivity, are employed to enhance the credibility of the research:

Triangulation: Combining qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews as a triangulation strategy.

Reflexivity: Memo writing throughout the research process to mitigate biases and reflect on the analytical journey. Memos serve as tools for critical reflection, aiding in the development of theoretical concepts, and facilitating a deeper understanding of categories, relationships, and alignment with existing literature.

RESULTS

Phase 1 (International Recruitment Policymakers)

Awareness:

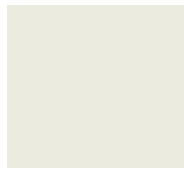
i. Brand Recognition

- Pro-activeness versus Reactiveness:
- Program Level:
- Cultural Background:

ii. Brand Differentiation:

| Interviewee number | i. Brand Recognition criteria | Findings |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Interviewee 01 | "We have noticed that certain programs attract more attention... engineering programs are more popular among international students... certain programs are recognized and demanded by students from specific regions..." | |
| | Pro-activeness versus Reactiveness | |
| Interviewee 02 | :"...some of our academic programs are highly recognized by international students due to their global reputation..." | The research findings indicate that the brand recognition of academic programs varies across KAU. Some well-established programs with strong reputations attract international students more effectively, while others face |

challenges in gaining recognition.



| | | <i>Program Level</i> | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Table I. Brand Recognition | Interviewee 05 | "Our approach is usually more reactive... We respond to inquiries rather than proactively engage with students..." | The study discerns a significant distinction between proactive and reactive approaches to brand recognition. Interviewees reveal that some units within KAU actively engage with potential international students, while others rely on reactive measures to respond to inquiries and interactions. Proactive strategies, marked by consistent engagement, are generally perceived as more effective in establishing and enhancing brand recognition. |
| | <i>Cultural Background:</i> | | |
| | Interviewee 08 | "...it's essential to understand the cultural backgrounds of our potential students... it how we design expectations of diverse cultural backgrounds for our optimal brand recognition strategies..." | The influence of cultural backgrounds on brand recognition strategies is highlighted in the interviews. Interviewees stress the importance of tailoring approaches to resonate with the preferences and influences of diverse cultural backgrounds for our brand recognition |
| | | ii. Brand Differentiation criteria | Interviews results |
| | | number | |
| Table I. Brand Differentiation | Interviewee 03 | "It's crucial to differentiate our programs... students need to see the distinct value of our offerings..." | The interviews underscore the importance of brand differentiation among KAU's academic programs and faculties. Highlighting unique strengths, specializations, and features helps the university stand out and attract a diverse pool of international students. |
| | Interviewee 07 | "Our approach is to focus on the unique features of our programs... we highlight what makes us stand out from other universities..." | |
| | Interviewee 10 | "Brand differentiation is key... we emphasize the strengths and unique qualities of our programs..." | |

Interest

- i. Social Engagement:
- ii. Professional and Personal Development:

| Interviewee number | i.Social Engagement criteria | Findings |
|--------------------|------------------------------|----------|
|--------------------|------------------------------|----------|

Table I. Professional and Personal Development

| | | |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| interviewee 04 | "We actively engage with students on social media... we create posts that encourage interaction and discussions..." | Social engagement emerges as a significant factor in generating and maintaining interest among potential international students. Active and meaningful interactions on social media platforms contribute to sustaining interest and fostering positive perceptions about the university. |
| interviewee 06 | "Our focus is on creating engaging content... we want our social media platforms to be a space where students can interact with us..." | |
| interviewee 09 | "Social engagement is crucial... we aim to keep the conversation going and build a sense of community..." | |

Table I. Professional and Personal Development

| interviewee number | Professional and Personal Development criteria | Findings |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| interviewee 02 | "Our programs offer both academic and personal development... students are interested in opportunities for growth..." | The interviews highlight the significance of emphasizing both professional growth and personal development in international recruitment efforts. Programs that promise skill enhancement and personal enrichment are more appealing to potential students. |
| interviewee 07 | "We focus on the value of our programs in terms of both career advancement and personal enrichment..." | |
| interviewee 10 | "Potential students are looking for programs that offer not just education but also personal development..." | |

Desire:

Digital marketing business processes:

- i. Unfocused Appeal.
- ii. Credible Appeal
- iii. Emotional Appeal

| Interviewee number | Unfocused Appeal criteria | Findings |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Interviewee 01 | "We've noticed that some of our campaigns lack a clear focus... they don't resonate with the students' specific interests..." | Some recruitment efforts lack a focused appeal that addresses specific needs and preferences of potential students. This lack of focus can hinder engagement and |
| Interviewee | "Our appeal needs to be more focused... we should tailor our messages to | |

Table I.

| | | | |
|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------|
| 03 | address the unique needs of different interest groups of students..." | among the target audience. | Unfocused Appeal |
|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------|

| Interviewee number | Credible Appeal criteria | Findings | |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| interviewee 05 | "Credibility is key... students want to know that they are choosing a reputable institution..." | Strategies that emphasize the credibility of KAU's academic programs, | Table I. Credible Appeal |
| interviewee 07 | "We emphasize the quality of our faculty and programs... credibility is important in attracting students..." | faculty expertise, and institutional reputation have a positive impact on generating desire among | |
| interviewee 09 | "Students need to trust our institution... emphasizing credibility helps build that trust..." | potentia l international students. | |

| Interviewee number | Emotional Appeal criteria | Findings | |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| interviewee 04 | "Sharing success stories of our international students creates an emotional connection... it inspires potential students..." | Incorporating emotional elements, such as success stories of current international students and | Table I. Emotional Appeal |
| interviewee 06 | "We aim to evoke positive emotions through our content... sharing stories of student experiences on campus..." | positive campus experiences, resonates with potential students and contributes to their desire to join KAU. | |
| interviewee 08 | "Emotional appeal is crucial... students want to envision themselves succeeding and thriving at our university..." | | |

Action

- i. Connection with Personal Messages.
 - ii. Structural Underpinning.
 - iii. Process Improvement.
 - iv. Lack of Technological Awareness.
- i. Connection with Personal Messages:
 - Disconnection with the Personal Messages:
 Occasional Connection with the Personal Messages:

| | Interviewee number | Disconnection with the Personal Messages criteria | Findings |
|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Table I. Disconnection with the personal Messages | interviewee 03 | "Our messaging needs to be more personal... students should see themselves in our messages..." | Some recruitment efforts lack a direct connection with personal messages and experiences that resonate with potential students. This disconnection can hinder the effectiveness of recruitment strategies. |
| | interviewee 05 | "Sometimes our messages feel disconnected from the students' reality... we need to bridge that gap..." | |
| | interviewee 08 | "Personalized messages are essential... students want to feel that we understand their aspirations..." | |

| | | Interviewee number | Occasional Personal Messages criteria | Connection with the Personal Messages | Findings |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|--|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Table I. Occasional Connection with the Personal Messages | | Interviewee 01 | "We try to include personal stories of students in our content... it's a way to connect on a deeper level..." | | Some units occasionally succeed in aligning their messages with the personal experiences and aspirations of international students, leading to more effective communication. |
| | | Interviewee 06 | "When we share students' achievements, we notice increased engagement... it resonates with them..." | | |

ii. Structural Underpinning:

- Responsibilities and Process:
- Inter-Functional Coordination:
- Governance and Bureaucracies:

| | | Interviewee number | Responsibilities and Process criteria | Findings |
|---------------------------------------|--|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Table I. Responsibilities and Process | | Interviewee 02 | "Having clear roles and responsibilities is crucial... it streamlines our efforts and ensures efficiency..." | The research underscores the significance of clear responsibilities and processes within KAU's recruitment strategies. Properly defined roles facilitate effective Execution and coordination of efforts across various units and departments. |
| | | Interviewee 04 | "We have a well-defined process... everyone knows their role and how things should be executed..." | |
| | | Interviewee 09 | "Having a structured process is essential... it prevents confusion and ensures consistency..." | |

| | | Interviewee number | Inter-Functional Coordination criteria | Findings |
|----------------------------------------|--|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Table I. Inter-Functional Coordination | | Interviewee 04 | "Collaboration between different units is key... it ensures a unified approach and maximizes our impact..." | Cross-functional collaboration between deanships and colleges emerges as a critical determinant of success in international student recruitment. Effective coordination enhances the deployment of social media platforms and marketing strategies |
| | | Interviewee 05 | "Cross-functional coordination is challenging but necessary... it helps us pool our resources and expertise..." | |
| | | Interviewee 10 | "We work closely with various departments... a coordinated effort allows us to leverage each other's strengths..." | |

| Interviewee | ance and Bureaucracies criteria | Findings |
|-------------|---------------------------------|----------|
|-------------|---------------------------------|----------|

| number | | | |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Interviewee 03 | "Our content goes through approval processes... while it ensures compliance, it can slow down our response time..." | The study highlights the impact of MOE regulations on the recruitment process. A centralized system ensures content alignment with cultural and ethical norms, but it can also impede rapid responses to inquiries and limit innovative strategies. | Table I. Governance and Bureaucracies |
| Interviewee 07 | "We have to adhere to regulations... sometimes it's a challenge to balance compliance with agility..." | | |
| Interviewee 8 | "MOE regulations guide our content... but we need flexibility to adapt to the dynamic recruitment landscape..." | | |

iii. Process Improvement.

- ****Enquiry Management:****
- Technology Platforms.

| Interviewee number | Enquiry Management criteria | Findings | |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Interviewee 01 | "We learn from student inquiries... it helps us understand their needs and tailor our responses..." | Proactive and reactive learning approaches play a pivotal role in improving recruitment processes. Utilizing feedback and predictive learning from student inquiries and interactions helps refine strategies. | Table I. Enquiry Management |
| Interviewee 06 | "Feedback from inquiries is valuable... it guides us in fine-tuning our messaging and approach..." | | |
| Interviewee 09 | "We analyze common questions from students... it informs our content creation and improves our processes..." | | |

| Interviewee number | Technology Platforms criteria | Findings | |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Interviewee 02 | "Our platform choices are data-driven... we analyze engagement to determine which platforms resonate with students..." | The choice of social media platforms is influenced by a combination of engagement metrics, student preferences, and the nature of content. The decision-making process underscores the importance of continuous improvement based on feedback from international students. | Table I. Technology Platforms |
| Interviewee 04 | "We consider where our target audience spends time... it informs our platform selection and content strategy..." | | |
| Interviewee 10 | "We stay updated on platform trends... it helps us adapt our strategy and stay relevant to students' preferences..." | | |

| | number | criteria | Findings |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Table I. Lack of Tecnological Awareness | Interviewee 05 | "We rely on our technical team for insights... their expertise is vital in Understanding platform dynamics..." | The study reveals limitations in addressing certain questions due to the limited technical expertise of some interviewed participants. The involvement of individuals directly managing social media technologies is crucial for comprehensive insights. |
| | Interviewee 07 | "Technical knowledge is important... it helps us make Informed decisions about our online presence..." | |
| | Interviewee 08 | "Our team handling social media has a deep understanding... it allows us to strategize effectively and track results..." | |

In conclusion, this integrated analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of KAU's international student recruitment strategies, highlighting the nuances of brand recognition, interest generation, desire creation, and action-oriented approaches. It underscores the role of structural coordination, governance dynamics, process enhancement, and technology platform choices in shaping KAU's recruitment efforts.

Phase 2 (Social Media Managers)

In this section, the findings from Phase 2 of the study are presented. The results include findings consistent with Phase 1, as well as new general findings that emerged during this phase.

i. Findings Consistent with Phase 1:

Many of the findings in Phase 2 aligned with the results obtained in Phase 1. These consistencies validated the initial observations regarding the challenges and opportunities associated with international student recruitment at Saudi Arabian Public Universities (SAPUs).

ii. New General Findings:

Phase 2 introduced new insights that contributed to a deeper understanding of the dynamics influencing international student recruitment strategies at SAPUs.

Action

Within Phase 2, specific actions taken by SAPUs in response to the challenges and opportunities of international student recruitment were identified. These actions encompassed various aspects of technological infrastructure, organizational structures, staff skillsets, government oversight, funding, and competition.

i. Technological Infrastructure

The technological infrastructure that SAPUs employed for international student recruitment played a critical role in shaping their strategies.

- Limited Technological Infrastructure:
- Reliance on Others' Technological Infrastructure
 - Personalized Technological Infrastructure:

| Interviewee number | Technological Infrastructure criteria | Findings |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Interviewee 11 | "Our budget is very limited which prevents us from hiring senior media managers and professionals... We also have a very limited budget which prevents us from purchasing such advanced tools." | (i) Limited Technological Infrastructure Limited technological resources posed challenges to effective international student recruitment strategies. Budget constraints hindered SAPUs from adopting advanced tools and technologies for digital marketing. |
| | | (ii) Reliance on Others' Technological Infrastructure: Some SAPUs depended on external parties, such as the central university administration, for technological support. This reliance on shared resources influenced the autonomy of their digital marketing efforts. |
| | | (iii) Personalized Technological Infrastructure In contrast, personalized technological infrastructures enhanced SAPUs' flexibility and control over digital marketing activities, allowing them to tailor strategies to their specific needs. |

i. Organizational Structures and Staff Skillsets in Digital Transformation

The organizational structures and skillsets of staff members were key determinants of SAPUs' success in digital transformation for international student recruitment.

Miscellaneous

The miscellaneous categories of government oversight and funding, as well as competition, emerged as significant factors impacting international student recruitment strategies at SAPUs.

(i) Government Oversight and Funding

| Interviewee number | (i) Government Oversight and Funding | Findings |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Interviewee 13 | "...if at least 25% of our academic programs became tuition-based, we will strongly need strategic marketing and advertising strategies." | Government oversight and funding significantly affected SAPUs' financial capabilities for international student recruitment. Reduced financial support from the Ministry of Education (MOE) compelled SAPUs to explore alternative funding sources. |

Table I. Government Oversight and Funding

ii. Competition

Competition among SAPUs, both domestically and internationally, was a critical element influencing international student recruitment strategies.

- Internal Competition
- Domestic and International Competition
- Competition and Alliance with Industry

Table. Competition Domestic and International Competition Competition and Alliance

with Industry

| Interviewee number | (i) Internal Competition criteria | Findings |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Interviewee 18 | "The achievements of my work made a good example across the university which made other Social media accounts in the university imitate our approach based on the reputation we have. | SAPUs engaged in internal competition, monitoring the Social Media activities of other colleges within their university. This practice spurred innovation and the development of unique brand identities. |
| | i) Domestic and International Competition criteria | Findings |
| Interviewee 18 | "King Khalid University was one of the biggest competition to us in terms of developing an attractive content to the distance learning students..." | SAPUs closely monitored local and international universities to learn from their marketing strategies. The identification of competitors was driven by reputation, status, and content appeal. |
| | (iii) <i>Competition and Alliance with Industry criteria</i> | Findings |

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>"The maritime sector, in general, is our competition... this has led to creating one platform on WhatsApp for our college with our competitors..."</p> | <p>Some SAPUs shifted their focus from competition with other academic institutions to collaboration with industry. They formed partnerships that aligned academic programs with industry needs, enhancing student employability</p> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

These findings shed light on the intricate interplay of technological infrastructure, organizational structures, staff skillsets, government oversight, funding, and competition in shaping international student recruitment strategies at SAPUs.

Phase 3 (Prospective and Registered International Students)

In Phase 3, interviews were conducted with prospective and registered international students to understand their perceptions and experiences regarding Social Media use by Saudi Arabian Public Universities (SAPUs) for international student recruitment.

Awareness

- i. Brand Recognition
- ii. Brand Differentiation

| Interviewee number | Findings |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Interviewees (21, 24, 25) | i. Brand Recognition Interviewees acknowledged varying levels of **Brand Recognition** among SAPUs. Some recognized universities like King Abdulaziz University (KAU) |

| | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Table I. | | due to their reputation and world rankings, which led to higher engagement on Social Media platforms. |
| Brand Recognition | Interviewees (19, 21, 25) | ii. Brand Differentiation |
| Brand Differentiation | | Brand Differentiation was a challenge as universities' messaging and content often lacked distinctiveness, making it difficult for students to differentiate between SAPUs. |

Interest

- I. Educational and Environmental Background
- II. Education Quality
- III. Professional Development

| Interviewee number | Findings |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | <i>i. Educational and Environmental Background</i> |
| Interviewees (21, 22, 24) | Educational and Environmental Background** influenced students' interests. Students with maritime-related backgrounds showed interest in The College of Maritime, while others sought universities aligned with their fields. |
| | <i>ii. Education Quality</i> |
| Interviewees (21, 23, 26) | Education Quality played a role in sparking interest. Universities known for high-quality education and career prospects attracted students. |
| | <i>iii. Professional Development</i> |
| Interviewees (21, 22, 23) | Professional Development was a key interest factor. Universities with successful graduates who secured quick employment gained students' interest. |

Table I. Educational & Environmental Background Education Quality Professional Development

Desire

- I. Unfocused Appeal
- II. Credible Appeal
- III. Need for Emotional Appeal

| Interviewee number | Findings |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | <i>i. Unfocused Appeal</i> |
| Interviewees (19, 21, 23, 28) | **Unfocused Appeal** indicated inconsistencies in messaging styles that led to negative reactions among students. Lack of harmony undermined credibility. |
| | <i>ii. Credible Appeal</i> |
| Interviewees (21, 23, 26) | Credible Appeal used evidence-based communication. The College of Maritime showcased successful alumni to highlight program benefits. |
| | <i>iii. Need for Emotional Appeal</i> |
| Interviewees (19, 22) | Need for Emotional Appeal expressed students' desire for emotional appeals that fostered a sense of closeness and connection with the university. |

Table I. Educational & Environmental Background Education Quality Professional Development

Action

- i. Disconnection with Personal Messages
- ii. Occasional Connection with Personal Messages

| Interviewee number | Findings |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | <i>i. Disconnection with Personal Messages</i> |
| Interviewees (20, 21, 28) | Disconnection with Personal Messages indicated universities often delivered one-way communication, lacking urgency in personalized responses. |
| | <i>ii. Occasional Connection with Personal Messages</i> |
| Interviewees (21, 23, 26) | Occasional Connection with Personal Messages highlighted efforts to address queries, albeit with occasional delays. |

Table I. Disconnection with Personal Messages Occasional Connection with Personal Messages

Miscellaneous

- i. Recruitment Experience of International Students
- ii. Limited Impact of Social Media
- iii. Content Inadequacy

iv. International students as Digital Natives

| Interviewee number | Findings | | |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| | i. Recruitment Experience of International Students | | |
| Interviewees (21, 22, 24) | **Recruitment Experience of International Students** revealed fair treatment during recruitment, but concerns over the lengthy admission process and its impact on application rates. | Table I. Recruitment Experience of International Students Limited Impact of Social Media Content Inadequacy International students as Digital Natives | |
| | ii. Limited Impact of Social Media | | |
| Interviewees (19, 20, 21, 23) | Limited Impact of Social Media indicated the varying effectiveness of platforms across countries and students' preference for alternative platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook. | | |
| | iii. Content Inadequacy | | |
| Interviewees (20, 25, 26, 28) | Content Inadequacy highlighted dissatisfaction with content quality, lack of updates, and content that did not reflect student achievements. | | |
| | iv. International students as Digital Natives | | |
| Interviewees (20, 22, 23, 24) | International Students as Digital Natives explored students' role in managing Social Media accounts and communication. Students often played a part in connecting with prospective students. | | |

These findings provide a comprehensive understanding of international students' perspectives on Social Media engagement and communication strategies used by SAPUs for international student recruitment.

Discussion

The discussion section aims to analyze and interpret the results obtained from Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3 of the study in the context of previous research and the working hypotheses. It also examines the broader implications of the findings and suggests potential directions for future research.

Brand Awareness and Recognition

The results from all three phases underscore the significance of Brand Awareness and Recognition as a critical factor in international student recruitment. The recognition of certain Saudi Arabian Public Universities (SAPUs), such as King Abdulaziz University (KAU), demonstrates the impact of universities' reputations and world rankings on attracting prospective students.

Messaging Strategies for Engagement

Our study's findings concerning the Messaging Strategies for Engagement highlight the importance of tailored content to capture students' interest. The interviewees' insights underscore the need for clear differentiation between SAPUs' messaging, which supports previous research emphasizing the significance of brand differentiation in attracting international students.

Appeal Strategies

The findings related to the Appeal Strategies demonstrate the complexity of attracting international students through social media. The identified themes of Unfocused Appeal, Credible Appeal, and Need for Emotional Appeal highlight the dynamic nature of appealing to a diverse student population. Our study echoes previous research that underscores the importance of a multi-dimensional appeal strategy to cater to different student preferences e.g., Durkin et al. 2012; Jovanović et al. 2017; Kim et al. 2017.

Communication Effectiveness

The discussions surrounding Communication Effectiveness unveil the challenges of personalized interactions on Social Media platforms. The dichotomy between Disconnection with Personal Messages and Occasional Connection with Personal Messages underscores the need for universities to enhance their responsiveness and personalized communication with prospective students.

International Students as Digital Natives

The role of International Students as Digital Natives in managing Social Media content

reveals an opportunity for universities to leverage students' expertise in crafting engaging content. This approach aligns with prior research that suggests involving students in content creation to enhance authenticity and relatability.

CONCLUSIONS

The exploration of international student recruitment strategies through the lens of the Capability Maturity Model (CMM) has revealed a multifaceted journey marked by evolving stages of growth and refinement. Spanning across the comprehensive insights gleaned from the preceding four sections, this holistic conclusion encapsulates the intricate tapestry woven through the levels of the CMM framework.

The research aptly set the stage by articulating the foundational prerequisites crucial for orchestrating a successful voyage along the CMM trajectory. Senior management buy-in, organizational readiness assessment, and the cultivation of a compelling institutional brand identity emerged as pivotal pillars that underpin the entire progression.

Advancing into next part, that spotlight illuminated the nascent phases of Level 1 "Initial" and Level 2 "Managed." Here, the narrative unfurled the challenges encountered by institutions in their earliest forays into Social Media Marketing for international student recruitment. The formative stage was characterized by sporadic efforts, often encumbered by an absence of strategic alignment and a coherent understanding of customer needs. As institutions advanced to the managed level, a shift towards strategic intent became palpable, with a focus on brand differentiation, engagement, and the strategic deployment of resources.

Transitioning to Level 3 "Defined" emerged as a pivotal turning point in the journey. The emphasis on consistency and a refined understanding of international exposure underscored the necessity of multilingual engagement, inter-departmental cooperation,

and the development of tailored appeals to resonate with diverse student segments. As institutions endeavored to attract and retain international students, a more structured approach to decision-making, technological infrastructure, and performance metrics came to the forefront.

Embarking on the penultimate stage outlined in Level 4 "Quantitatively Managed" beckoned institutions to delve into the realm of quantifiable justifications. Rigorous evaluation, monitoring, and cost-benefit analysis guided the decision-making process, underpinning institutions' capacity to leverage Social Media platforms with precision. Internal resources and refined technological tools took center stage, reflecting a matured approach to engagement and recruitment strategies.

Level 5 "Optimization." Here, institutions are propelled by data-driven insights, harnessing technology and innovation to propel recruitment endeavors to new heights. Brand advocacy, global impact, and immediate responsiveness converged in a harmonious symphony, epitomizing the culmination of a holistic approach to international student recruitment.

In synthesis, this holistic exploration provides a comprehensive roadmap for higher education institutions aiming to harness the transformative potential of Social Media Marketing for international student recruitment. The journey is one of continuous growth, guided by the CMM framework, where strategic alignment, organizational cohesion, and technological prowess converge to elevate institutions' global visibility, engagement, and competitive edge. As the educational landscape continues to evolve, this model offers a steadfast guide to navigate the complexities of international student recruitment, culminating in a crescendo of success in a dynamic and interconnected world.

Through leveraging insights from this holistic study, institutions can sculpt their unique path to achieving excellence in international student recruitment, embracing the essence of each CMM level to shape a promising future where global connections flourish and knowledge knows no boundaries.

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