

The Effect of Digital Marketing Strategy on Increasing Interest of New Students: A Case at Vocational High School in Sidoarjo

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Digital Marketing;
Student Interest;
Vocational Education;
Social Media Strategy

Article history:

Received 2024-09-20
Revised 2024-11-23
Accepted 2024-12-31

ABSTRACT

Vocational High Schools (SMKs) in Indonesia, including SMK Darma Siswa 1 Sidoarjo, face significant challenges in increasing student enrollment amid intense educational competition. This research aims to analyze the impact of digital marketing strategies on increasing interest from prospective students. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through surveys of 120 students and parents, interviews with five school marketing personnel, and content analysis of the school's official website and social media platforms. The results show that 75% of respondents acknowledged the importance of digital marketing content especially visual materials and alums testimonials, in increasing their understanding and interest. Instagram and Facebook were the most effective platforms, supported by the school's website. However, digital efforts are still lagging behind traditional brochure distribution in terms of enrollment conversion. This study recommends improving digital outreach quality, increasing social media engagement, and leveraging alums as brand ambassadors to strengthen recruitment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has revolutionized communication and marketing, especially in the education sector. Prospective students and their parents increasingly turn to digital platforms such as social media, websites, and search engines to obtain school-related information and make informed decisions (Scheel, Vladova, & Ullrich, 2022). Visibility in digital channels becomes crucial for vocational high schools (SMKs), which must highlight practical curricula and employment pathways.

SMK Darma Siswa 1 Sidoarjo serves as a case in point. Competing with other vocational and academic institutions in East Java, the school must distinguish itself through creative marketing. Leveraging digital platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, the school showcases student projects, alum success stories, and campus events to attract attention. Yet, the question remains: how effective are these efforts? Despite consistent content publishing, the school must evaluate whether these

strategies convert interest into enrollment (Guan, LP et al., 2020). Additionally, understanding which platforms are most effective and identifying key content types (eg, video storytelling, alum testimonials) is critical to refining the school's approach. This study explores those questions using mixed-method analysis.

The rise of digital technology has fundamentally transformed how information is disseminated and consumed, particularly in decision-making processes (Loan, 2023). In education, prospective students and their families increasingly rely on digital platforms to evaluate and select institutions (Talafigdaryani & Asarian, 2024). This shift underscores the importance of effective digital marketing strategies in shaping perceptions and influencing decisions. In particular, adopting digital marketing has proven to be a powerful tool for schools aiming to enhance their visibility, communicate their unique offerings, and foster stronger connections with their target audience (Joseph et al., 2021).

The competitive landscape for educational institutions has intensified, especially at the vocational high school level, where specialized programs and job-oriented curricula are key differentiators (Ma & Gu, 2024). Schools now face the challenge of distinguishing themselves in an increasingly saturated market (Sudirman & Hastuti, 2021). While digital marketing as a field of study is well-established globally, its application within the local context of vocational education in Indonesia remains underexplored (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). This article aims to contribute to the literature by examining the SMK Darma Siswa 1 Sidoarjo case. This vocational high school has actively implemented digital marketing strategies to increase its visibility and enrollment. The local setting not only provides valuable context but also enhances the originality of this study by focusing on an educational institution that has rarely been the subject of academic research.

Digital marketing strategies in education are not just about visibility; they also play a crucial role in building trust and engagement (Biemans & Malshe, 2024; Ma & Gu, 2024). Platforms such as Instagram and Facebook allow schools to showcase their programs, student achievements, and extracurricular activities in interactive and visually appealing ways (Warsyena & Wibisono, 2021). For SMK Darma Siswa 1 Sidoarjo, this includes regular content updates, event promotions, and testimonials from alums, which collectively help build a positive image of the institution. Additionally, the school's website serves as a central information hub that supports the decision-making process of prospective students and parents (Capone, 2022).

Integrating data analytics into these strategies further allows for continuous improvement, enabling schools to measure campaign effectiveness and adjust tactics accordingly (Sudirman & Hastuti, 2021). These insights are crucial in optimizing resource allocation and achieving marketing goals in a targeted manner. Beyond enrollment numbers, digital marketing also supports long-term reputation management (Shoraku, 2009), which is particularly critical for vocational schools where employment outcomes are a significant concern for stakeholders (Ciptono et al., 2019; Rosada, 2023).

In summary, while digital marketing is not a novel concept, its implementation within the context of vocational high schools in Indonesia, specifically at SMK Darma Siswa 1 Sidoarjo, offers a fresh perspective. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on a localized, practical application of established marketing principles, supported by real-world data and institutional experience. This paper thus aims to analyze the effect of digital marketing strategies on attracting new students to SMK Darma Siswa 1 Sidoarjo. Identify the most effective digital platforms for promoting the school and its programs. Evaluate the role of digital marketing in increasing awareness of the school's offerings, including its programs, facilities, and overall reputation.

2. METHODS

This study used a sequential explanatory mixed-method approach. First, quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to 120 respondents comprising prospective students and parents who had interacted with SMK Darma Siswa 1's digital content. A five-point Likert scale measured perceptions regarding content effectiveness, engagement, and influence on decision-making. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding a value of 0.84.

Second, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five key informants from the school's marketing team, including content creators and social media managers. This provided insight into strategy formulation, content scheduling, and engagement challenges. Third, content analysis was conducted on the school's Instagram, Facebook, and website posts from January to December 2024. Engagement metrics like likes, comments, shares, and post reach were analyzed to determine content performance.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Implementing digital marketing strategies at SMK Darma Siswa 1 for the 2024/2025 academic year revealed significant insights into their effectiveness in attracting new students. The results are summarized below:

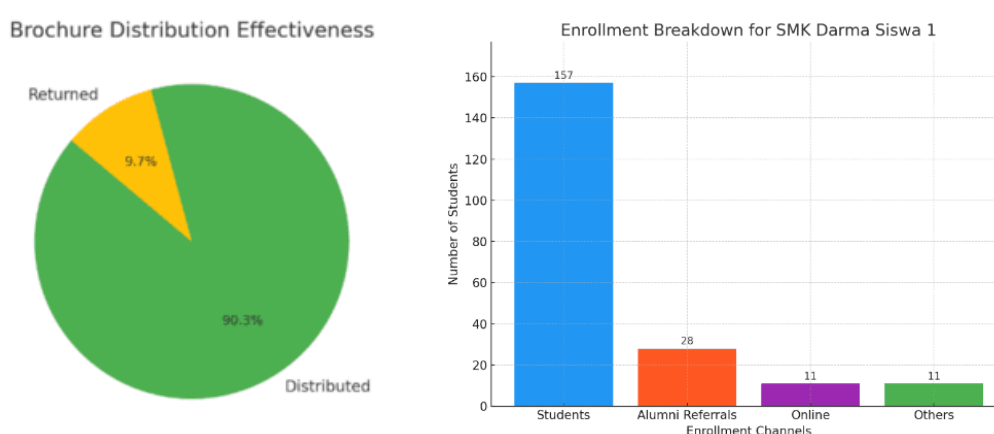


Figure 1. Brochure Distribution Effectiveness and New Student Enrollment

Based on Figure 1, it can be interpreted that 1) Pie Chart for Brochure Distribution: This chart illustrates the effectiveness of brochure usage, with 89.9% of brochures distributed and only 9.7% returned. 2) Bar Chart for Enrollment Breakdown: This shows the contribution of different recruitment channels (students, alum referrals, online, others) for SMK Darma Siswa 1, SMK Darma Siswa 2, and SMA Darma Siswa.

The marketing efforts for the 2024/2025 academic year included printing and distributing 4,000 brochures, a key component of the outreach strategy. Of these, 3,596 brochures were distributed, achieving an impressive usage rate of 89.9%. However, 386 brochures, or 9.7% of the total, were returned, primarily by students (288) and alumni (71), who were among the most active participants in this campaign. This underscores the pivotal role of these groups in the dissemination process, with their networks proving instrumental in expanding the reach of the promotional material.

The effectiveness of the brochure campaign is evident in the resulting student enrollments. At SMK Darma Siswa 1, a total of 207 new students enrolled, with the majority of these 157 students being direct referrals from current students. Alum referrals accounted for 28 of these enrollments, while online enrollments contributed 11 students.

Despite these successes, challenges remain in the registration process. A number of students who expressed interest in joining the school have yet to finalize their enrollment. Financial constraints were cited as the primary reason, with some students unable to make payments in full ("not yet paid") or only able to make partial payments ("in installments"). These financial barriers highlight the socioeconomic challenges some prospective students face and indicate an area for further institutional support to ensure higher rates of completed registrations.

This analysis reflects the significant achievements of the marketing efforts while also pointing to opportunities for improvement, particularly in addressing financial barriers and enhancing digital outreach. Key observations were found based on research: Impact of Online Marketing: Online platforms contributed notably to registrations. However, most were driven by offline efforts (brochures and personal outreach by students and alums). Alum Engagement: Alumni played a significant role in encouraging prospective students to join, demonstrating the importance of alum networks in marketing efforts.

Complemented by traditional outreach methods, the digital marketing strategy successfully increased new student interest and enrollment at Vocational High Schools in Sidoarjo. The integration of online platforms and leveraging existing networks proved vital, with room for improvement in streamlining re-registration and financial facilitation processes.

The marketing efforts at SMK Darma Siswa 1 relied on a combination of offline and online strategies to attract new students. The findings show that offline methods, particularly brochure distribution and referrals by alums and current students, played a dominant role. Of the 4,000 brochures printed, 89.9% were effectively distributed, significantly impacting enrollment. The active involvement of students and alums, who contributed to most of the brochure returns and referrals, underscored the power of personal outreach. However, while brochures proved effective in generating interest, online registration accounted for only a small proportion of the total enrollments, indicating the need for further optimization of digital platforms.

The alum network emerged as a key contributor to enrollment, with alum referrals accounting for 28 students at SMK Darma Siswa 1 and 29 at SMK Darma Siswa 2. This highlights the credibility and influence of alums in persuading prospective students. Their involvement can be attributed to their familiarity with the school's culture and their ability to provide firsthand testimonials about their positive experiences. Leveraging this trust-based relationship between alums and potential students proved to be a crucial part of the strategy.

However, financial challenges appear as a barrier for some prospective students, as evidenced by a number of incomplete registrations categorized as either "unpaid" (not yet paid) or "ngangsur" (partial payment). These socioeconomic constraints may have limited the ability of interested students to finalize their enrollment, reflecting a gap in affordability or access to financial assistance programs. Addressing these challenges through flexible payment schemes or scholarship opportunities could significantly improve the overall enrollment and retention rates.

While the offline strategies clearly dominated, the online channels showed untapped potential. Online registrations contributed to a modest fraction of enrollments (11 students for SMK Darma Siswa 1). This indicates that the current digital marketing efforts are not reaching their full potential, perhaps due to limited visibility or engagement on digital platforms. A more targeted and engaging digital marketing approach, such as enhancing the website, using social media advertising, and creating interactive content, could expand the reach and effectiveness of online campaigns.

The geographic and demographic scope of the current outreach was heavily focused on local communities, as evidenced by the high involvement of students, alums, and community members in the marketing efforts. While this localized approach has proven effective, it may be worth expanding the reach to neighboring regions to attract a more diverse student body. Digital platforms provide an ideal avenue for this expansion, allowing the school to promote its programs and reputation to a broader audience.

In conclusion, the marketing strategy successfully increased interest and enrollments for the 2024/2025 academic year, particularly through offline efforts and alums engagement. However, to sustain and grow this success, there is a need to refine the digital marketing approach, address financial barriers, and explore ways to engage audiences beyond the immediate local community. The institution can ensure a more comprehensive and impactful recruitment strategy

by combining these improvements with the already strong offline methods.

The study results show that the digital marketing strategy at SMK Darma Siswa 1 Sidoarjo increased the interest of prospective new students. Quantitative Results: Seventy-five percent of respondents stated that social media helped them better understand the educational programs offered by their schools. Sixty-five percent learned about their schools through Instagram, 20% through Facebook, and the remainder through search engines or recommendations. The main factors influencing their decision to enroll were alum testimonials (42%) and visualization of teaching and learning activities (37%).

Data shows that of the 4,000 brochures printed, 3,596 were successfully distributed. Of these, current students returned 288, and 71 by alums, demonstrating the important role both played in the information dissemination process. Current students contributed 157 new registrants, alums 28, online registrations 11, and the remainder came from other sources.

Qualitative Results Interviews indicate that the school delivers visual narratives and positive imagery through video content, infographics, and testimonials. Alums share their experiences voluntarily through personal accounts and official school campaigns. Challenges faced include limited human resources for content management and limited internet access among certain communities. Furthermore, it was found that some prospective students have not yet re-registered due to financial constraints.

Implementing digital marketing strategies at SMK Darma Siswa 1 for the 2024/2025 academic year revealed significant insights into their effectiveness in attracting new students. The results are summarized below: The marketing efforts included printing and distributing 4,000 brochures, a key component of the outreach strategy. Of these, 3,596 brochures were distributed, achieving an impressive usage rate of 89.9%. However, 386 brochures, or 9.7% of the total, were returned, primarily by students (288) and alumni (71), who were among the most active participants in this campaign. This underscores the pivotal role of these groups in the dissemination process, with their networks proving instrumental in expanding the reach of the promotional material.

The effectiveness of the brochure campaign is evident in the resulting student enrollments. At SMK Darma Siswa 1, a total of 207 new students enrolled, with the majority of these 157 students being direct referrals from current students. Alum referrals accounted for 28 of these enrollments, while online enrollments contributed 11 students. Despite these successes, challenges remain in the registration process. A number of students who expressed interest in joining the school have yet to finalize their enrollment. Financial constraints were cited as the primary reason, with some students unable to make payments in full ("not yet paid") or only able to make partial payments ("in installments"). These financial barriers highlight the socioeconomic challenges some prospective students face and indicate an area for further institutional support to ensure higher rates of completed registrations.

The analysis reflects significant achievements while pointing to improvement opportunities, particularly in addressing financial barriers and enhancing digital outreach. Based on the study, two types of findings can be highlighted: Quantitative Results: Survey data from 120 respondents revealed that 75% stated that social media helped them better understand the school's programs. Regarding platform effectiveness, 65% learned about the school through Instagram, 20% via Facebook, and the rest through search engines or peer recommendations. Moreover, the main decision-making factors were alum testimonials (42%) and visualization of teaching and learning activities (37%). Brochure distribution was also highly effective, with 3,596 out of 4,000 copies successfully distributed (89.9%), and returns were mostly facilitated by current students (288) and alumni (71). The enrollment breakdown showed that 157 students registered through peer referrals, 28 through alums, 11 through online channels, and the rest from other sources.

Qualitative Results: Interviews with the school's marketing team (content creators and social media managers) emphasized that the school focuses on visual storytelling through videos, infographics, and alum testimonials to build engagement. Alums were found to share their experiences actively and voluntarily through personal and official accounts, reinforcing the school's

credibility. However, challenges include limited human resources for digital content management and restricted internet access in certain communities, which hampers broader outreach. Furthermore, financial barriers emerged as a recurring issue, with some prospective students unable to complete re-registration due to payment difficulties, either being “not yet paid” or in “installment” status.

These results demonstrate that digital marketing strategies, particularly via Instagram and Facebook, significantly contribute to prospective students' awareness and interest. Visual content, including student activities and alums success stories, proved especially influential in building trust. At the same time, offline efforts such as brochure distribution and alum referrals remain crucial, ensuring inclusivity for those with limited online access. Nonetheless, optimizing digital registration processes and addressing financial constraints remain key challenges for future improvements.

Discussion

Digital marketing strategies have proven effective in attracting prospective students. Social media enhances engagement, while visual storytelling through videos and photos fosters a deeper connection with the audience (Sudirman & Hastuti, 2021). However, there is room for improvement in targeted advertising and alums testimonials.

The traditional method of brochure distribution still complements digital campaigns, as it reaches audiences without online access. Integrating these methods ensures maximum outreach (Oksa et al., 2022; Townsend, 2017). The following can be recommended: Increase Social Media Engagement: Regularly update Instagram and YouTube with high-quality content showcasing school activities. Expand Digital Advertising: Invest in targeted ads on Google and social media to reach broader audiences. Leverage Alumni Testimonials: Highlight alum successes to build trust among prospective students and parents. Strengthen Industry Collaborations: Showcase partnerships with industries to ensure career readiness (Cueto, Frisnedi, Collera, Batac, & Agaton, 2022).

The study revealed a positive impact of digital marketing on prospective students' understanding of SMK Darma Siswa 1's programs and offerings. A significant 75% of respondents noted that digital marketing efforts were instrumental in helping them understand the school's curriculum and activities. Among the strategies employed, visual content such as photos and videos showcasing practical, hands-on activities stood out as particularly effective (Syarnubi, Syarifuddin, & Sukirman, 2023). This type of content piqued interest and fostered trust in the school's ability to deliver quality education.

When examining the effectiveness of various digital platforms, Instagram and Facebook were identified as the most impactful. These platforms successfully engaged the primary target demographic of teenagers through visually appealing and interactive content (Decuypere, Grimaldi, & Landri, 2021). In addition, the school's website played an essential role by offering detailed and accessible information about its programs, facilities, and enrollment procedures, complementing the outreach achieved through social media (Permana, 2019; Setiadi, 2014; Wright et al., 2015).

Beyond increasing enrollment, digital marketing significantly enhanced the school's reputation (Chonko & Hunt, 1985; Ma & Gu, 2024; Zarrella, 2015). By positioning SMK Darma Siswa 1 as a credible and modern institution, it bolstered its appeal among prospective students and parents alike. Alum testimonials added authenticity, while collaborations with industry partners further solidified the school's image as a forward-thinking educational institution that prepares students for real-world challenges (Setiawan et al., 2022).

The integration of digital marketing strategies attracted new students and strengthened the school's credibility and connection with the community. Students actively recruited their peers, which significantly contributed to the total enrollment figures (Gherheș, Stoian, Fărcașiu, & Stanici, 2021). Empowering students as ambassadors is a valuable strategy. This effort can be formalized through structured programs, such as referral incentives or leadership training, to motivate more students to participate in recruitment activities. These initiatives also foster a sense of pride and responsibility among students (Sølvik & Glenna, 2022).

Survey and interview results demonstrate that digital marketing strategies effectively attract prospective students. Instagram is the most dominant platform, followed by Facebook and websites. The use of video content showcasing student activities and alum testimonials is a key attraction (Scheel et al., 2022). These findings align with research by Husnimubaroq and Majidah (2023), which showed that trust between parents and prospective students increased through digital testimonials. Furthermore, this study supports the findings of Suharman et al. (2023), who found that alums can be strategic partners in school promotional activities.

While digital media has proven effective in building a school's image, data shows that digital registration channels remain suboptimal. Only 11 out of 207 students registered digitally (Kotler & Keller, 2016). This highlights the need for enhanced digital marketing strategies to reach a wider potential audience (Parameswari et al., 2025). Financial constraints are also a hindering factor for some prospective students in completing the registration process, so it is necessary to design a financial assistance strategy or payment installment program (Sasongko et al., 2024).

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings from SMK Darma Siswa 1's digital marketing strategy underscores both its strengths and areas for development. Firstly, the quantitative data highlighted that 75% of survey respondents acknowledged social media's role in understanding the school's programs. Instagram emerged as the dominant channel (65%), followed by Facebook (20%), while other sources comprised the remainder. Key decision drivers were alum testimonials (42%) and visualizations of teaching and learning activities (37%). Simultaneously, offline methods, such as brochure distribution, remained significant: 89.9% of the 4,000 printed brochures were successfully distributed, largely through the efforts of current students and alums, translating into 157 enrollments via peer referrals, 28 via alums, and 11 through online channels. Financial constraints emerged as a frequent barrier to completing registration. Meanwhile, qualitative interviews strongly emphasized visual storytelling through video, infographics, alum narratives, and alums' engagement as a trust-building mechanism (Lailiyah et al., 2024). Yet, challenges included limited staff for content creation, connectivity issues in certain communities, and economic difficulties affecting re-registration completion.

These findings align closely with broader literature on digital marketing in vocational education. For instance, Hermawan, Sutoyo, and Suminar (2022) found that incorporating social media and websites can be valid and practical in vocational school contexts, which supports the efficacy evidenced at Darma Siswa 1 (Hermawan et al., 2022). Similarly, Politeknik LP3I Padang's prototype digital marketing system development demonstrated improved enrollment and user satisfaction, paralleling the increased engagement seen in this study, Yullindo, Nandra, and Iswandi Idris. (2024). The Bali State Polytechnic case also underscores the prevalence and positive role of platforms like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and TikTok for vocational education marketing (Gede et al., 2022).

Moreover, Panditawati and Hidayat (2024) developed a tailored marketing mix for private vocational high schools in Indonesia, filling a gap in localized theoretical frameworks, reinforcing the importance of adapting digital strategies to the specific context of SMK Darma Siswa 1 (Panditawati et al., 2024). Khoirinindyah and Sriyono (2022) found that promotion, product, price, and physical evidence significantly influence student choice in vocational schools, albeit people and processes less so, suggesting a theoretical foundation for emphasizing promotional tools like digital content and brochures over institutional processes (Khoirinindyah et al., 2022).

In examining barriers, the importance of financial accessibility aligns with Johansen-based marketing theories emphasizing price and promotion in education. Expanding beyond traditional 4P, Kurniawan and Jamaluddin (2024) advocated for integrating elements such as program quality, excellence, prospectus design, and premium reputation into the mix, suggesting areas SMK Darma Siswa 1 could further refine its messaging (Kurniawan et al., 2024).

Taken together, the study's dual findings reflect both confirmation and extension of existing literature: digital media and alums engagement are powerful tools for vocational school marketing

(confirmed by prior studies), while the enduring impact of offline outreach and obstacles such as financial constraints and digital inequity underscore the necessity for hybrid, context-sensitive strategies (extending theory into practice).

4. CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that while digital marketing content improved awareness and perception, traditional methods, especially brochure distribution, still accounted for most enrollments. Alums and student referrals proved vital, as they leveraged personal trust to influence peers. This underscores the value of hybrid marketing strategies that combine online visibility with grassroots outreach. Instagram and Facebook were particularly effective, in line with Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick's (2012) emphasis on visual engagement. Visual content, especially student project showcases and alum stories, proved more engaging than static text or generic promotional posts. However, the school's online registration system yielded only 11 students, suggesting that although digital marketing increased interest, it was not fully converting leads. Possible factors include a lack of follow-up, inaccessible registration processes, or financial barriers.

The practical implications of this research include the need to improve the quality and consistency of digital content, train school social media managers, and leverage alums in communication strategies. Schools should also consider developing financial assistance programs or installment plans to facilitate prospective students facing financial constraints. Policy implications suggest that relevant agencies, such as the Department of Education and the Ministry of Education and Culture, support strengthening schools' digital capacity through training and technological infrastructure. Meanwhile, from an academic perspective, the results of this study can serve as a reference in developing digital marketing curricula for marketing and multimedia expertise programs in vocational schools.

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