Integrating Social Media Marketing and Brand Gestalt: An Empirical Analysis in Educational Institutions

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study endeavors to assess the effectiveness of Social Media Marketing (SMM) on the brand gestalt of educational institutions, with a specific focus on universities. In particular, the research aims to examine the impact of SMM on 4S dimensions of brand gestalt: story, sensescape, servicescape, and stakeholders. The research design employed is descriptive causal, utilizing primary data collected through a survey of 209 samples consisting of private university students in North Sulawesi, Indonesia. Data analysis was carried out using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), supported by the SmartPLS statistical program. The results of the analysis reveal a positive and significant influence of SMM on all four dimensions of brand gestalt: story, sensescape, servicescape, and stakeholders. These findings shed light on the crucial role of social media in shaping robust brand perceptions. *This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-SA license.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has evolved into a potent communication tool, impacting not only individuals but also organizations. On an individual level, the expanding influence of social media has significantly transformed various facets of life, spanning social, economic, political, cultural, and educational dimensions (Wulyatiningsih dan Mandagi 2023). Simultaneously, for organizations, technological advancements, particularly in the realm of social media, have become integral components of their business strategies (Anjel dkk. 2022). The rise of social media in the digital landscape has facilitated widespread adoption, attributed to its ability to encourage interactions and serve as a connecting channel between users, mirroring real-life engagements (Mesra dkk. 2021; Sijabat, Rantung, dan Mandagi 2022). Social media operates as a reciprocal communication channel, fostering engagement between organizations and their stakeholders (Poluan, Pasuhuk, dan Mandagi 2022). The strategic utilization of social media provides numerous advantages, including the capacity to reach a diverse audience, cost-effectiveness, and seamless integration into the daily lives of the general populace (Warbung dkk. 2023).

The escalating number of social media users has become a catalyst for a paradigm shift among numerous companies, propelling them to embrace social media-based marketing strategies.

Organizations derive value from harnessing social media to bolster marketing endeavors, elevate customer awareness, and foster the growth of virtual brand communities (Warbung dkk. 2023; Mandagi 2023). Recognizing the vast and diverse audience present on these platforms, businesses strategically pivot towards leveraging the expansive user base to broaden their market reach. This shift is not merely a response to the sheer magnitude of social media users, but a calculated effort to tap into the dynamic nature of online interactions and consumer behavior. As highlighted by (Waworuntu, Mandagi, dan Pangemanan 2022), the overarching goal is not only to establish a pervasive digital presence but also to actively engage with the audience, creating a symbiotic relationship that extends beyond traditional marketing channels

In this digitally connected era, contemporary consumers have evolved into discerning participants in the online marketplace. Social media has emerged as a pivotal tool in their decision-making process, serving as a virtual marketplace where information is readily accessible from various locations (Warbung dkk. 2023). The immediacy and ease with which consumers can access product details, reviews, and recommendations contribute to the influential role of social media in shaping purchasing decisions (Banjarnahor dkk. 2023). Businesses, therefore, recognize the paramount importance of not only being present on these platforms but also actively participating in the ongoing conversations to remain relevant and responsive to the dynamic needs and preferences of their target audience ("Honne and Tatemae Social science research with Japanese people: a qualitative approach Cédric FORT UNIZ RUIZ," t.t.). In this context, social media-based marketing goes beyond conventional advertising; it becomes a dynamic channel for real-time interaction, enabling companies to glean valuable insights, elicit feedback, and garner suggestions directly from their consumer base (Wulus dkk. 2022). This two-way communication is not only instrumental in shaping marketing strategies but is also crucial for fostering a sense of brand loyalty and trust among consumers who increasingly seek authenticity and engagement in their interactions with businesses (Rotty dkk. 2022; Mandagi 2023). As companies navigate the landscape of social media-based marketing, they recognize that the pursuit of growth is intricately tied to their ability to adapt, engage, and resonate with the contemporary consumer within the ever-evolving digital ecosystem (Banjarnahor dkk. 2023).

The surge in social media usage has triggered a profound transformation within the education sector in Indonesia, with a discernible impact on the landscape of higher education. The escalating number of universities, propelled by the accessibility and interconnectedness facilitated by social media, has given rise to heightened competition among educational institutions (Marhareita, Kila, dan Mandagi 2022). This competitive environment compels these institutions to adopt a continuous pursuit of excellence, not merely as a strategic imperative but as an indispensable facet in their efforts to enhance public appeal and attract prospective students (Jonathan, Rantung, dan Mandagi 2023). This perspective is underscored by the findings of researchers such as (Wijaya 2009), who assert that the increasing prevalence of social media amplifies the need for educational institutions to distinguish themselves through academic prowess, innovative programs, and an engaging campus culture.

In alignment with (Kelejan dkk. 2022) viewpoint, the positive image of an educational institution emerges as a pivotal determinant in the decision-making process of prospective students. As social media becomes an influential conduit for disseminating information, shaping perceptions, and fostering community engagement, educational institutions must strategically manage their online presence to cultivate a positive brand image (Anjel dkk. 2022). This positive image not only contributes to the institution's competitiveness but also plays a pivotal role in attracting high-caliber students, forging collaborative partnerships, and securing support from various stakeholders. Consequently, the confluence of social media dynamics and the evolving educational landscape underscores the imperative for institutions to navigate this digital terrain adeptly, leveraging social media as a strategic tool for reputation management, community building, and sustained growth.

(Faradiza dan Suyanto 2017) lay the foundation for understanding brand gestalt, introducing the concept that underscores the unified perception of specific elements by customers in relation to a brand. Building on this, (Mandagi 2023) take a step further in the conceptualization of brand gestalt by

introducing dimensions that enrich the understanding of this unified perception. These dimensions comprise narrative (story), sensory experience (sensescape), physical environment (servicescape), and the involvement of stakeholders in the brand experience. This comprehensive framework offers a nuanced perspective on how customers holistically perceive and engage with a brand. Recent empirical studies contribute valuable insights into the significance of brand gestalt in various aspects of consumer behavior. Specifically, research by (Toding dan Mandagi 2022), (Rondonuwu dan Mandagi 2023), collectively affirm the pivotal role of brand gestalt in shaping customer satisfaction. Moreover, Mandagi's work (2023) and collaborative studies (Mandagi et al., 2022; Rondonuwu & Mandagi, 2023) shed light on the influential connection between brand gestalt and fostering brand loyalty. Additionally, the research conducted by Wulyatiningsih & Mandagi (2023) explores how brand gestalt influences customer behavior, providing a holistic perspective on the multifaceted impact that unified brand perception can have on the overall consumer experience. In essence, the evolving conceptualization of brand gestalt, enriched by recent empirical evidence, underscores its pivotal role in shaping various dimensions of consumer-brand interactions in the contemporary marketplace.

Despite the considerable body of research dedicated to exploring the effects of social media marketing (SMM) on brands, as evidenced by studies such as those conducted by Sidik & Mandagi (2022), Waworuntu et al. (2023), Sijabat et al. (2022), Poluan et al. (2022), Warbung et al. (2023), Wulus et al. (2022), Kainde & Mandagi (2023), and Wowor et al. (2022), there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning empirical investigations that specifically link SMM with brand gestalt. This gap is particularly pronounced in the context of educational institutions, where the landscape is characterized by intensified competition. In response to this competitive environment, educational institutions find themselves compelled to embrace social media as an indispensable tool for establishing and nurturing sustainable relationships with stakeholders while simultaneously preserving a competitive edge in the educational sector (Kelejan et al., 2022; Jonathan et al., 2023). Understanding the profound influence of SMM becomes paramount in this scenario, as it plays a pivotal role in optimizing social media as a strategic lever for building and enhancing the brand of educational institutions (Marhareita et al., 2022). Consequently, this study is strategically positioned to delve into a comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of SMM on the branding of educational institutions.

2. METHOD

Aligned with the research objectives, specifically aimed at discerning the role of Social Media Marketing (SMM) in shaping the brand image of educational institutions, the chosen research design is descriptive causal. The study's population comprises students from private universities in North Sulawesi, Indonesia. The sampling method employed is convenience sampling, resulting in a sample size of 209, which exceeds the recommended minimum sample size as outlined by Hair et al. (2017). Considering the 24 indicators utilized in this study, the recommended minimum sample size, calculated by multiplying the number of indicators by 5, is 130.

Demographic data pertaining to the sampled respondents is presented in Table 1, detailing information such as gender, age, and year of study. Among the 209 respondents, 117 were male (56%), while 92 were female (44%). The age distribution of respondents ranged from 18 to 25 years, with the majority falling within the 21-year age bracket (35%). In terms of education level, respondents were categorized into level 2 (31%), level 3 (42%), and level 4 (27%).

Table 1. Demographic Data of Respondents

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	92	44
	Female	117	56
Age	18	17	8
	19	28	14
	20	50	24
	21	73	35
	22	27	13
	23	6	3
	24	5	2
	25	3	1
Year of study	2	64	31
	3	89	42
	4	56	27

The primary data utilized for testing the hypotheses and addressing the problem formulation in this study are derived from a questionnaire instrument. The questionnaire comprises 26 statements, serving as indicators for the variables under investigation. Specifically, the Social Media Marketing (SMM) variable is gauged through 7 statements, drawing from the work of Kim and Ko (2012), while the Brand Gestalt variable is assessed using 19 indicator items adopted from (Mandagi dan Aseng 2021).

Initiating the data analysis process, descriptive statistics are computed using the SPSS program. This step aims to verify the accurate input of data, ensure the sample size aligns with the returned questionnaires, and confirm that the data adheres to the designated scale. Subsequently, the analysis proceeds to structural equation modeling (SEM), a system of linear equations that integrates multiple constructs. SEM has garnered widespread use in social research for testing theoretical models, as noted by (Lebo dan Mandagi 2023). This comprehensive approach enables a nuanced exploration of the relationships between the selected variables, providing a robust foundation for the study's overarching objectives.

3.   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 presents statistical descriptions for the six variables assessed in the study, offering insights into the central tendencies and variabilities of respondent ratings. On average, respondents rated Social Media Marketing (SMM) at 4.59, Stories at 5.46, Sensescape at 5.39, Servicescape at 5.6, and Stakeholder at 5.08. These mean values illuminate the central tendencies of respondent assessments for each variable. Accompanying these means, the standard deviations provide information about the dispersion or variability in responses.

For the SMM variable, the standard deviation is 1.46, indicating a relatively higher degree of variability in respondent ratings. The Story variable, on the other hand, exhibits a standard deviation of 1.33, suggesting a moderate level of agreement among respondents. Similarly, the Sensescape and Stakeholder variables demonstrate standard deviations of 1.3 and 1.39, respectively, pointing to a moderate level of variability. In the case of Servicescape, a standard deviation of 1.42 indicates a relatively higher level of variability in respondent ratings.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistic Variable

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.Dev
SMM	209	1	7	4.59	1.46
Story	209	1	7	5.46	1.33
Sensescape	209	1	7	5.39	1.3
Servicescape	209	1	7	5.6	1.42
Stakeholder	209	1	7	5.08	1.39

Prior to hypothesis testing, a preliminary evaluation of the measurement model is conducted. The primary objective of the measurement model is to assess the validity and reliability of each variable. The measurement models, as addressed in this study, were analyzed utilizing the Partial Least Square (PLS) method, facilitated by SmartPLS 3.2 statistical software. The outcomes of the measurement model testing, including the factor loading of each indicator, are presented in Figure 1 below.
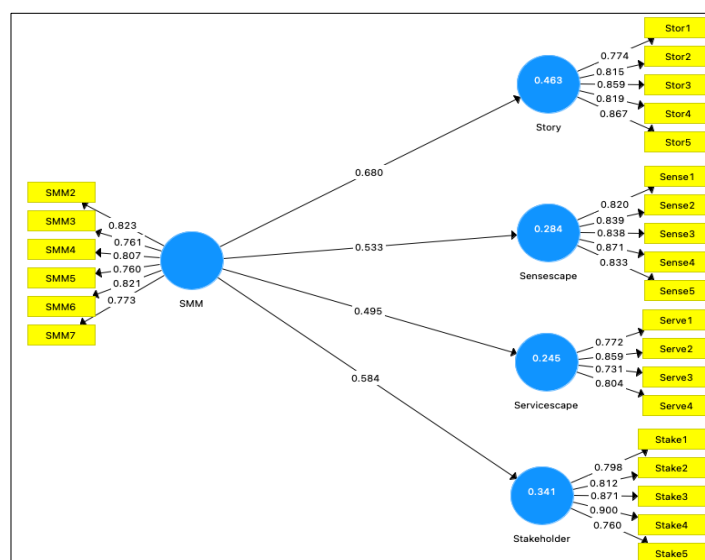

Figure 1. Measurement Model Test Results

The assessment of convergent validity involves examining the loading factor values for each indicator within each variable. After eliminating unqualified indicators, the outcomes of the second stage of the measurement model testing are illustrated in Figure 1 and Table 3. The results of the measurement model test indicate that the loading factor values for all indicators surpass 0.7. Consequently, convergent validity is established for the variables in this study.

Table 3. Variable Indicators and Factor Loading

Variable	Indicator	Factor Loading
SMM	SMM2	0.82
	SMM3	0.76
	SMM4	0.81
	SMM5	0.76
	SMM6	0.82
	SMM7	0.77
Story	Stor1	0.77
	Stor2	0.82

	Stor3	0.86
	Stor4	0.82
	Stor5	0.87
Sensescape	Sense1	0.82
	Sense2	0.84
	Sense3	0.84
	Sense4	0.87
	Sense5	0.83
Servicescape	Serve1	0.77
	Serve2	0.86
	Serve3	0.73
	Serve4	0.80
Stakeholder	Stake1	0.80
	Stake2	0.81
	Stake3	0.87
	Stake4	0.90
	Stake5	0.76

In this study, discriminant validity checking was conducted through an examination of specific criteria, namely the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio. The Fornell-Larcker criterion validity test involved comparing the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each variable with the correlation between model variables. Analysis of the results presented in Table 4 revealed that the square root of the AVE exceeded the correlation between variables. Therefore, it can be concluded that the indicators and variables employed in this study demonstrated strong discriminant validity.

Table 4. Fornell-Larcker Criterion Discriminant Validity Test Results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
SMM (1)	0.79				
Sensescape (2)	0.53	0.84			
Servicescape (3)	0.5	0.68	0.79		
Stakeholder (4)	0.58	0.59	0.65	0.83	
Story (5)	0.68	0.71	0.57	0.66	0.83

Additionally, the study examined discriminant validity through the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio. According to this criterion, discriminant validity is established when the ratio value for all variables is below 0.9. Table 5 presents the results, revealing that the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio value for all variables in this study was below 0.9. Consequently, it is inferred that, based on the analysis of the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio, all variables exhibited satisfactory discriminant validity.

Table 5. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
SMM (1)				
Sensescape (2)	0.59			
Servicescape (3)	0.58	0.81		
Stakeholder (4)	0.65	0.66	0.75	
Story (5)	0.76	0.8	0.68	0.74

Moreover, reliability testing was employed to ascertain the level of consistency exhibited by the data. In this study, the variables were scrutinized by analyzing Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The outcomes of the reliability testing for the three indicators are presented in Table 6. According to the results depicted in the table, the test outcomes for all variables indicate a Cronbach's alpha score exceeding 0.70, a composite reliability score surpassing 0.70, and an AVE score exceeding 0.50. Consequently, it can be inferred that all variables examined in this study demonstrated commendable reliability.

Table 6. Reliability Test Results

	CA	rho_A	CR	AVE
SMM	0.88	0.88	0.91	0.63
Sensescape	0.9	0.9	0.92	0.71
Servicescape	0.8	0.82	0.87	0.63
Stakeholder	0.89	0.9	0.92	0.69
Story	0.89	0.89	0.92	0.69

After ensuring that reliability and validity were achieved, the subsequent analysis involved testing the structural model to examine hypotheses. The results of the structural model testing, which assessed the significance value of the path coefficient, are presented in Figure 2 and Table 7.
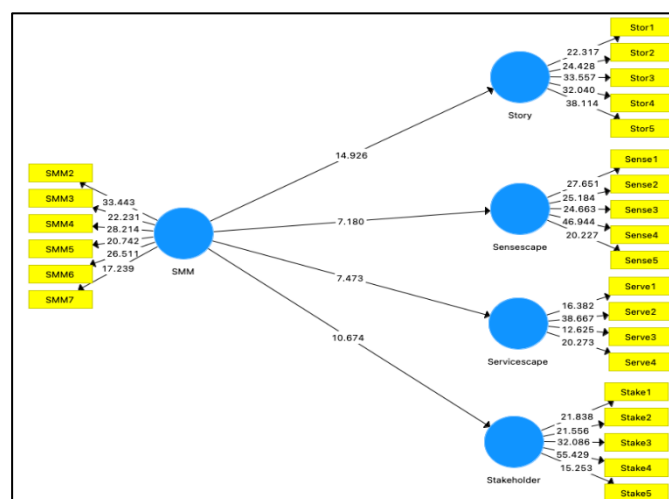

Figure 2. PLS Structural Model Testing Results

Table 7. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path Relations	STDEV	T Stat	P Values	Significant?
H1	SMM -> Story	0.05	11.23	0	Yes
H2	SMM -> Servicescape	0.06	10.91	0	Yes
H3	SMM -> Sensescape	0.06	10.31	0	Yes
H4	SMM -> Stakeholder	0.05	12.83	0	Yes

The first hypothesis (H1) posits a relationship between SMM and the Story variable. The results robustly support this hypothesis, with a notably low p-value of 0, signifying high statistical significance. This discovery implies a significant and positive correlation between SMM and customers' perceptions or experiences, particularly concerning the storytelling aspect. This observation aligns seamlessly with existing literature that underscores the pivotal role of SMM in shaping consumer

perceptions and experiences through the art of storytelling(Mandagi, Centeno, dan Indrajit 2022; Hanani 2020). For instance, (Siddik Romadhan dan Suttrisno 2021) have elucidated the narrative power of social media in crafting compelling brand stories. Furthermore, Sijabat et al. (2022) discovered that the storytelling element embedded in SMM functions as a potent mechanism for brands to emotionally engage with their audience. The positive relationship between SMM and brand story unearthed in this study resonates with previous research assertions, underscoring that a strategic and well-crafted use of storytelling within SMM significantly contributes to customers' overall perceptions. This alignment not only adds empirical weight to the existing body of literature on SMM but also reinforces the theoretical foundations emphasizing the importance of storytelling in shaping customers' perceptions and experiences through social media channels.

Hypothesis H2 posits a correlation between SMM and the Servicescape variable. The findings robustly validate this hypothesis, supported by a remarkably low p-value of less than 0.001. The results unequivocally demonstrate a significant and meaningful relationship between SMM and the Servicescape variable, underscoring the influence of social media marketing on the virtual or physical environment associated with a service. This result aligns seamlessly with prior research acknowledging the multifaceted impact of social media on the servicescape (Mandagi, 2023; Mandagi & Aseng, 2021; Siddik et al., 2022). Mandagi (2023) particularly emphasizes the pivotal role of SMM in shaping brand or service perception, influencing consumer behavior, and ultimately contributing to the overall customer experience. Within this context, the Servicescape variable, encompassing both physical and virtual dimensions, emerges as a critical dimension (Rantung dkk. 2023). The existing body of literature consistently underscores the significance of the service environment in shaping customer perceptions, satisfaction, and loyalty (Anjel dkk. 2022). This further solidifies the identified relationship between SMM and the Servicescape variable, emphasizing the interconnected nature of social media's impact on the broader customer experience landscape

The third hypothesis (H3) posits a relationship between SMM and the Sensescape variable. The results strongly support this hypothesis, with an extremely low p-value of less than 0.001. This implies a highly significant and positive association between SMM and respondents' sensory perceptions or experiences related to the content or information presented through social media. Numerous studies in the field of marketing and consumer behavior support the idea that effective SMM has a tangible impact on consumers' sensory experiences. For instance, research by (Sijabat, Rantung, dan Mandagi 2022)posits that compelling and visually appealing content on social media platforms can stimulate positive sensory responses among users, enhancing their overall engagement. This aligns with the idea that well-crafted SMM has the potential to captivate not only the cognitive but also the sensory faculties of the audience (Waworuntu, Mandagi, dan Pangemanan 2022). Moreover (Rotty dkk. 2022), findings of suggests that content with a strong emotional appeal can create lasting sensory impressions. When consumers perceive social media content as emotionally resonant, it tends to leave a more vivid imprint on their sensory experiences.

Hypothesis H4 posits a relationship between SMM and the Stakeholder variable. The empirical findings robustly support this hypothesis, as evidenced by an exceptionally low p-value of 0. This outcome underscores a significant and meaningful correlation between SMM and stakeholders, emphasizing the considerable impact of social media marketing on perceptions and relationships with various stakeholders. These findings harmonize with the existing literature in the field, which has extensively explored the dynamics of social media's influence on stakeholder relationships, consistently emphasizing its profound effects on perceptions and interactions. For example, recent studies by (Poluan, Pasuhuk, dan Mandagi 2022) and (Wulus dkk. 2022) have delved into the concept of social media as a relationship-building tool. These scholars highlight how active engagement on social media platforms contributes to the cultivation of stronger connections with stakeholders. The alignment of our findings with these studies further solidifies the understanding that social media, as a dynamic communication tool, plays a pivotal role in shaping meaningful relationships and influencing stakeholder dynamics.

4. CONCLUSION

This empirical study investigated the multifaceted relationships between SMM and four S brand gestalt dimensions (story, sensescape, servicescape and stakeholder), shedding light on the intricate dynamics within the digital marketing landscape. The first hypothesis revealed a robust and statistically significant correlation between SMM and the Story variable, aligning seamlessly with existing literature that emphasizes the influential role of storytelling in shaping consumers' perceptions and experiences through social media channels. This not only adds empirical weight to the existing body of knowledge on SMM but also reinforces theoretical foundations highlighting the pivotal role of storytelling in crafting a compelling brand narrative.

Moving on, the second hypothesis explored the connection between SMM and the Servicescape variable, with findings affirming a substantial relationship. This result aligns with prior research underscoring the multifaceted impact of SMM on the servicescape, emphasizing its critical role in shaping brand or service perception and contributing to the overall customer experience. The interconnected nature of social media's influence on the broader customer experience landscape is evident, highlighting the significance of the virtual or physical environment associated with a service.

The third hypothesis delved into the relationship between SMM and the Sensescape variable, uncovering a highly significant and positive association. Numerous studies in the field of marketing and consumer behavior support the idea that well-crafted SMM has tangible effects on consumers' sensory experiences, emphasizing the potential to captivate both cognitive and sensory faculties. This aligns with research suggesting that visually appealing and emotionally resonant content on social media platforms can stimulate positive sensory responses among users, leaving a lasting impression.

Lastly, the fourth hypothesis explored the connection between SMM and the Stakeholder variable, revealing a significant and meaningful correlation. These findings resonate with existing literature, which consistently emphasizes the profound impact of social media on stakeholder relationships. The study adds empirical evidence to the understanding that active engagement on social media platforms contributes to the cultivation of stronger connections with stakeholders, affirming the dynamic role of social media as a relationship-building tool. In essence, this research contributes valuable insights to the evolving landscape of digital marketing, emphasizing the intricate interplay between SMM and key variables that shape perceptions, experiences, and relationships in the contemporary business environment.

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