FROM RECRUITMENT TO RETENTION: STRATEGIC MARKETING COMMUNICATION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION MANAGEMENT IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the dynamics of marketing communication (marcom) within Vietnamese universities, focusing on the balance between student recruitment and stakeholder engagement. The study aims to identify the key marcom activities, channels, and messaging strategies employed, assess the performance indicators and evaluation metrics, and explore how universities engage with stakeholders beyond prospective students. An in-depth interview approach was employed, involving ten representatives from higher education institutions in Vietnam. The findings reveal that Vietnamese universities predominantly focus their marcom efforts on student recruitment, with a combination of digital marketing and traditional methods like open days and school visits. Enrollment figures and digital metrics are the primary performance indicators used to assess effectiveness. However, the study highlights a lack of comprehensive communication strategies that encompass broader institutional goals and stakeholder engagement. The need for a balanced approach and alignment with institutional values is emphasized to enhance overall institutional competitiveness, support strategic planning, and contribute to education management practices.

Keywords: university marketing, higher education, marcom, marketing communication, student recruitment, Vietnam

ABSTRAK

*Penelitian ini mengkaji dinamika komunikasi pemasaran (*marketing communication / marcom*) di universitas-universitas Vietnam, dengan fokus pada keseimbangan antara perekrutan mahasiswa dan keterlibatan pemangku kepentingan. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi aktivitas, saluran, dan strategi pesan utama yang digunakan dalam marcom; menilai indikator kinerja dan metrik evaluasi; serta mengeksplorasi bagaimana universitas menjalin hubungan dengan pemangku kepentingan selain calon mahasiswa. Pendekatan wawancara mendalam digunakan dalam penelitian ini, melibatkan sepuluh perwakilan dari institusi pendidikan tinggi di Vietnam. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa universitas di Vietnam secara dominan memfokuskan upaya marcom pada perekrutan mahasiswa, dengan memanfaatkan kombinasi pemasaran digital dan metode tradisional seperti* open day *dan kunjungan ke sekolah. Angka pendaftaran dan metrik digital menjadi indikator kinerja utama yang digunakan untuk menilai efektivitas. Namun, penelitian ini menyoroti kurangnya strategi komunikasi yang komprehensif yang mencakup tujuan kelembagaan yang lebih luas serta keterlibatan pemangku kepentingan. Kebutuhan akan pendekatan yang seimbang dan selaras dengan nilai-nilai institusi ditekankan guna meningkatkan daya saing kelembagaan secara keseluruhan, mendukung perencanaan strategis, dan berkontribusi pada praktik manajemen pendidikan.*

Kata kunci: pemasaran universitas, pendidikan tinggi, marcom, komunikasi pemasaran, perekrutan mahasiswa, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Marketing communication (marcom) has become an essential constituent of the globalized world's higher education, defining the brand identity and influencing stakeholder attitudes. In Vietnam, where the higher education landscape is changing rapidly, understanding how marketing communication works in universities is crucial to success.

Although much research has been conducted on marketing practice in higher education worldwide (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Karaosmanoglu & Salman, 2019), little has explored the marketing communication practices of Vietnamese universities. Most of the existing studies are in general terms, focusing on themes like stakeholder engagement or relationship marketing (Camilleri, 2020; Mogaji et al., 2023). Much less attention has been given to how Vietnamese institutions implement marcom, especially in efforts to balance recruitment and reaching out to other key constituencies like faculty, alumni, industry partners, and local communities. This study tries to fill this gap by examining how Vietnamese universities approach marcom, not only as an instrument for recruitment, but also as an institutional strategic role in broader communication. By conducting interviews with ten representatives from higher education institutions across Vietnam, this study seeks to uncover insights into the strategies, channels, and metrics utilized in marketing communication efforts.

The research problem addressed in this study revolves around the predominant focus on student recruitment in university communication, potentially overshadowing engagement with other stakeholders. Thus, the research questions guiding this study are as follows:

RQ1. What are the key marcom activities, channels, and messaging strategies employed by Vietnamese universities?

RQ2. What performance indicators and metrics are commonly used by Vietnamese universities to assess the effectiveness of their marcom strategies?

RQ3. How do Vietnamese universities engage and communicate with various stakeholders beyond student recruitment, including faculty members, staff, alumni, industry professionals, and the local community?

This research, going with the current discourse in education management, considers marketing communication as being crucial in the implementation of governance and stakeholder alignment in higher learning institutions. This study thus contributes to broader debates regarding the role of communication in achieving management-related goals within an increasingly competitive and globalized forward higher education environment by examining marcom strategies in the context of organizational leadership and strategic planning. Through these research questions, this study seeks to provide valuable insights into the dynamics of marketing communication within Vietnamese universities, offering practical implications for enhancing institutional branding and stakeholder engagement strategies in the higher education sector.

2. Literature review
2.1. Marketing in higher education

The academic environment is increasingly competitive, necessitating the strategic implementation of marketing principles to distinguish institutions from their peers (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Marketing within higher education is defined as identifying, creating, and delivering messages to target audiences to establish brand awareness, mold brand perception, and ultimately influence behavior in a manner that aligns with institutional objectives and market demands (Kotler & Fox, 1995). In the realm of higher education, marketing strategies are essential to facilitate exchanges of value, ensuring that the institution's offerings resonate with the needs and expectations of the target market.

The marketing mix, traditionally comprising the 4Ps framework (product, price, promotion, and place), has evolved to include three additional dimensions: people, process, and physical evidence (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Tukur et al., 2019). These elements are further elucidated in the context of higher education, where the product refers to the educational programs offered, price pertains to the fees charged, promotion encompasses various promotional activities, physical evidence relates to the quality of the institution's facilities, and people signify the human resources that contribute to the learning experience. The integration of these elements is essential to construct a robust marketing framework capable of effectively reaching and engaging with diverse stakeholders.

Different tools were employed by universities around the world to support these marketing activities. Research by Smedescu et al. (2016) and Harjadi and Fatmasari (2017) highlights some of the key tools, including:

- Advertising: Universities utilize indoor/outdoor advertisements, brochures, and leaflets targeting high school students and parents.
- Promotional events: Events, exhibitions, and campus visits provide platforms for engagement and brand promotion.
- Public relations: Rituals like academic year openings and publications, including university magazines, contribute to public relations efforts.
- Direct marketing: While not widely practiced, personalized communication through letters targets prospective students and alumni.
- Interactive marketing: Websites, social media presence, and massive open online courses (MOOCs) are used to engage potential students and stakeholders.
- Word-of-mouth/Buzz marketing: Limited in higher education due to academic image concerns, primarily linked to social media content.
- Personal selling: Academic and administrative staff play pivotal roles,

impacting the overall service quality and student experience.

In addition, in recent days, marketing within universities has transitioned, leveraging social media, content marketing, and SEO (search engine optimization) strategies to engage a wider audience (Kusumawati, 2019). Personalized communication, driven by data-driven insights, has allowed institutions to tailor messages, fostering stronger engagement and connections with prospective students (Karaosmanoglu & Salman, 2019). In addition to these digital strategies, marketing and communications also involve physical events, community engagement, and face-to-face interactions (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). Developing positive relationships with local communities and communicating effectively with diverse stakeholder groups are necessary elements of university marketing strategies.

2.2. Stakeholder communication in higher education

The cultivation of a positive perception through strategic stakeholder communication plays a vital role in enhancing the brand equity of higher education institutions (Chiparo, 2021). It is essential to note that this positive perception is not merely an outcome of marketing strategies but is deeply entwined with the quality and nature of relationships established through various communication channels. In the dynamic and competitive higher education landscape, universities are compelled to reassess their priorities, integrate digital communication mediums, and embrace relationship marketing strategies that prioritize value creation (Mogaji et al., 2023). Stakeholder communication is not just a strategic imperative; it is a holistic approach to creating a favorable university image, fostering meaningful connections, and securing long-term success in the competitive higher education landscape.

Within the context of higher education, stakeholders encompass a broad spectrum of individuals and entities, including students, faculty members, staff, parents, alumni,

donors, community stakeholders, and government bodies. Effective communication within these groups is a two-way process, requiring institutions to actively seek feedback and address concerns (Rajhans, 2018). It is through this dynamic interaction that universities can genuinely understand the expectations and requirements of their stakeholders, thereby shaping a more responsive and relevant communication strategy (Camilleri, 2020). A study conducted by Mogaji et al. (2023) underscores the necessity of an integrated relationship marketing system tailored to higher education, founded on mutual exchange and promises. This approach necessitates meticulous planning, stakeholder identification, prioritization, and the establishment of persistent communication channels.

The advent of digital communication tools has significantly reshaped the landscape of stakeholder engagement. Institutional websites, social media platforms, and direct SMS are now recognized as indispensable avenues for interacting with stakeholders (Chiparo, 2021). To effectively leverage digital marketing for brand promotion, universities are advised to engage prospective students through conversations, surveys, and informative content disseminated across various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and LinkedIn (Camilleri, 2020). These platforms offer a distinct opportunity for higher education institutions to amplify brand awareness, garner insights into the preferences and needs of potential applicants, and capitalize on the influential power of word-of-mouth publicity generated through social interactions.

2.3. Current challenges and imbalances in Vietnamese universities

The Vietnamese higher education sector has experienced substantial evolution in recent years, marked by the proliferation of private universities and an increased emphasis on branding and marketing activities. However, it is important to note that private universities currently make up around 20-25% of all higher education institutions in Vietnam, yet they enroll only approximately 10-16% of tertiary students (Zhou et al., 2019). Most students still try to get admitted in the public universities, thus showing that private universities may have limited resources, status, and institutional capacity, which could affect their marketing.

Universities in Vietnam have often overlooked the criticality of a systematic brand communication strategy in their branding efforts (Ly-Le et al., 2024). The deficiency in developing a clear brand image and implementing strategic digital marketing initiatives poses a significant obstacle to achieving success in the competitive international arena, as evidenced by their performance in global rankings. These institutions must strike a balance between student recruitment and comprehensive brand development to maintain a robust presence.

Conversely, public universities in Vietnam have traditionally regarded communication as an integral aspect of institutional management. However, the overemphasis on teaching and learning can undermine their competitiveness against the backdrop of the growing presence of private and semi-private educational entities (Tran & Le, 2020). This one-dimensional focus may result in communication strategies that are reactive rather than proactive, thus weakening the coherence and impact of their brand messaging.

The lack of a strategic communication framework leads to an ad hoc dissemination of information, which in turn, hinders the formation of a cohesive brand image (Ly-Le et al., 2024). These institutions must adopt a more strategic approach to communication that is aligned with their brand identity and objectives. This will enable them to navigate the challenges posed by the evolving educational landscape effectively.

In summary, the integration of digital marketing and relationship marketing strategies is essential for Vietnamese universities to enhance their brand equity and effectively communicate with stakeholders. By prioritizing stakeholder engagement,

universities can foster meaningful relationships and, consequently, improve their competitive position in the global higher education market. A strategic reorientation towards proactive and integrated communication practices will facilitate the advancement of these institutions and ensure their sustainability in the face of growing competition.

3. Research design

This research employed an in-depth interview approach to explore the dynamics of marketing communication within Vietnamese universities. The sample was selected using purposive sampling. Twenty representatives, responsible for communication within higher education institutions across Vietnam, were selected for the interviews. These representatives were chosen from a diverse range of universities to capture a comprehensive understanding of the landscape. The participants' profiles are as below:

Table 1. Interview participants' profiles

Participant	Gender	Working unit
NCL01	male	University Board
NCL02	female	Admission and Communication Department
NCL03	male	Admission and Communication Centre
NCL04	female	Marketing team
NCL05	male	Admission and Public Relations Centre
NCL06	male	Student Internship Experience Centre
NCL07	Female	Marketing team
NCL08	Male	Department of Student Affairs
NCL09	Female	Admission and Communication Department
NCL10	male	External Affairs Office
CL01	male	Enrollment and Business Relations Centre
CL02	male	Admission and Brand Development Office
CL03	female	Administrative Office and Equipment Management
CL04	male	Communication and Public Relations Centre
CL05	female	Digital Marketing Team
CL06	male	Admission and Communication Department
CL07	female	Department of Education Quality Assurance
CL08	male	Faculty of Business and Management
CL09	female	Admission and Communication Department
CL10	male	Marketing team

(Note: CL denotes a participant from a public university, while NCL denotes a participant from a private university)

The interviews were structured to cover key aspects related to marketing strategies for student recruitment, assessment of communication efforts with various stakeholders, and the identification of potential gaps or imbalances between marketing and communication practices. The interviews were conducted in person or via virtual platforms, depending on the participants' preferences. Open-ended questions were used to encourage comprehensive responses and insights into the nuances of marketing and communication practices within these institutions.

Prior consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. The participants could withdraw

at any point during or after the interviews without consequences.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis, which includes familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, review, definition, and final write-up, was employed to identify recurring patterns, themes, and discrepancies across the interviews. This method allowed for the systematic organization and interpretation of qualitative data obtained from the interviews.

4. Results

4.1. Sole focus and singular messaging aimed at prospective students

In both public and private universities, communication is closely tied to student recruitment, with a primary focus on quantity rather than quality. All participants emphasized this tie, indicating that all information disseminated must align with recruitment efforts.

"Our school defines marketing and communication must be for student recruitment purposes. So, all our communication objectives are related to recruitment and admission." - Respondent NCL06.

Participants highlighted the prevalence of traditional marketing activities such as open days and school visits, which are typically organized in major urban centres to reinforce institutional presence and garner wider attention. These events, while serving as essential platforms for interaction between prospective students and university representatives, tend to be underpinned by a one-dimensional communication approach that centers exclusively on recruitment.

"This year we'll organize activities for welcoming new students, opening ceremonies, commemorating Teacher's Day, and so on. Communication just follows these plans and communication materials support those events." - Respondent CL02.

Digital marketing, including SEM, GDN, and social media advertising, played a prominent role in the recruitment landscape. While traditional advertising methods were limited, online platforms allowed for diverse content delivery, from informational clips to annual campaigns and live streams.

"We constantly produce social-first content targeting high school students during the enrollment period. Beyond that, communication activities reduce significantly." - Respondent CL05.

Innovative strategies, such as mentorship programs, industry-specific workshops, and on-demand campus visits, have been implemented by some universities to foster enduring connections with prospective students. These initiatives aim to enhance the understanding of academic offerings and demonstrate a commitment to a more holistic recruitment approach. Nonetheless, the overarching messaging across these activities remains predominantly focused on student recruitment, reinforcing the centrality of admissions in higher education marketing efforts.

4.2. Diverse evaluation methods

Vietnamese universities use a variety of evaluation methods, which can be identified into three main categories: enrollment-based, event-based, and digital metrics.

Participants highlighted a strong reliance on enrollment figures as a measure of marketing and communication success. Aligned with the communication focus on prospective students, Vietnamese universities choose enrollment to be the main evaluation method. However, this method faces limitations, since certain programs are harder to recruit students, despite extensive advertising efforts. Social perception significantly influences student choices; as programs are preferred, while other programs like agriculture are usually neglected. In many cases, brand image and communication efforts are only supportive tools, not the sole determinants of enrollment success.

Event-based evaluation methods involve assessing the impact of specific recruitment events, such as open days or workshops, by monitoring student interest and engagement levels. This is typically achieved through the distribution and

collection of feedback forms that capture the attention and retention of information by prospective students.

"We design a simple form for interested students... After each recruitment or activity, we gather these forms to assess our effectiveness based on the number of students we reached." - Respondent NCL03.

In response to the emergence of digital marketing activities, the schools adopted digital metrics to evaluate the use of online tools like Facebook, YouTube, or websites. The metrics involve quantifying reach, interactions, and conversions. These metrics aid in evaluating reach, interaction, and conversion rates, allowing marketing teams to optimize channels for better engagement.

"We don't have a formal evaluation framework. Sometimes, I feel we rely too much on what 'seems' to work based on social media comments." - Respondent NCL09.

"Assessment in the communication realm is challenging. However, with digital marketing, it's a bit easier to quantify. We evaluate interactions on website posts, website visits, fan pages, and social media platforms." - Respondent CL04.

However, the study participants acknowledged the challenges inherent in accurately assessing communication efforts, which often stem from the constraints in human resources and budgetary limitations.

"To get a precise evaluation, we must rely on external resources like a specialized agency or tool to gather market information, analyze digital performance, and more. However, our institution faces constraints in human resources and budget, so the evaluations are only relative." - Respondent CL04.

4.3. Imbalanced priorities and the need for comprehensive communication strategies

The interview participants agreed that in Vietnam, university communication primarily serves recruitment purposes, with private institutions often leading in marketing efforts. However, there is an urgent need for a more balanced approach that encompasses broader institutional objectives, community engagement, and industry partnerships. While some universities have taken steps towards this, such efforts remain sporadic.

Vietnamese universities exhibit a varied approach to strategic communication, with the majority having communication departments or centers bearing diverse titles such as branding, public relations, marketing, or admissions. While most institutions engage in diversified communication and advertising activities through dedicated communication centers, larger universities integrate communication efforts with student employment support centers or public relations and business relations departments. This integration underscores a broader university goal beyond student recruitment, emphasizing community service and industry connections.

Despite some universities having clear strategies, the overall landscape reveals a lack of comprehensive communication strategies beyond recruitment. Many institutions struggled with translating overarching institutional goals into specific communication strategies, as highlighted by respondent CL04, who pointed out the need for specialized communication professionals to articulate long-term strategies effectively.

"We lack professionally trained personnel. We mostly rely on experience or whatever knowledge we have. For a specific communication strategy that evolves over stages, we probably need to hire professionals." - Respondent CL04.

Moreover, while most universities had yearly operational plans, these often-lacked direct alignment with broader strategic goals. Respondents noted that communication activities typically followed academic calendars, with materials and events supporting scheduled activities but lacking a cohesive, strategic approach.

"Usually, we base it on the academic year plan. This year, we'll organize activities for welcoming new students, opening ceremonies, commemorating Teacher's Day, and so on. Communication just follows these

plans, and communication materials support those events." - Respondent CL02.

To address these challenges, participants advocated for the development of integrated communication strategies that serve a multitude of stakeholders beyond the realm of student recruitment. This shift requires institutional leaders to recognize the strategic significance of communication, invest in professional expertise, and integrate communication planning with broader institutional development objectives. Only through such an approach can universities in Vietnam aspire to establish a robust and sustainable communication framework that effectively addresses the diverse requirements of all stakeholders.

4.4. Discussion
4.4.1. Vietnamese universities employ recruitment - centric marcom strategies

Responding to the first research question, which is "*What are the key marcom activities, channels, and messaging strategies employed by Vietnamese universities?*", the results of this study highlight that Vietnamese universities primarily focus their marcom efforts on student recruitment. This approach encompasses a multitude of activities, ranging from traditional methods such as open days and school visits to contemporary digital strategies including social media advertising and search engine marketing (SEM). The primary intent of these activities is to foster engagement with prospective students, amplify awareness of the institution's educational offerings, and ultimately, bolster enrollment figures. Furthermore, the study reveals that these universities employ a spectrum of evaluation methods to assess the efficacy of their marcom strategies, encompassing both traditional indicators such as enrollment numbers and innovative digital metrics.

These findings align with previous assessments of marketing in higher education (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Tukur et al., 2019), as Vietnamese universities use both traditional and digital marketing approaches, such as promotional activities, advertising, and interactive marketing, to promote their institutions. However, the skew towards recruitment in the communication strategies identified in this study diverges from the literature's emphasis on the criticality of stakeholder communication and relationship marketing in higher education (Chiparo, 2021; Mogaji et al., 2023).

Compared with studies in more developed higher education markets, such as Karaosmanoglu and Salman's (2019) which located institutional branding and alumni engagement at the core, the author assessed that Vietnamese universities still adopt a narrower marcom scope. This reflects a development gap in the evolutionary stage of the strategic direction of marcom in developing higher education systems.

Interestingly, the study also reiterates Lowrie (2007) observation that institutions in developing contexts often mirror commercial advertising techniques without integrating relational or long-term stakeholder engagement strategies. In Vietnam, although increasing digital engagement exists, the majority of communication content is still recruitment-oriented and not pushing brands to a greater degree. Such a recruitment-oriented strategy may be derived from various systemic and contextual factors. Vietnamese universities, especially private ones, rely heavily on tuition fees as a significant source of income, so student recruitment serves as the leading performance metric (Ly-Le et al., 2024). In addition, state-driven quality assurance systems usually value enrollment figures over long-term stakeholder relationships, enforcing a short-term communications logic (Tran & Le, 2020). Compounding this issue, few marcom professionals are formally taught integrated communication or branding strategies, and consequently implement more ad hoc and operational instead of strategic outreach (Kusumawati, 2019). Finally, as competition for universities intensifies, universities emphasize short-term recruitment dividends over long-term stakeholder relationships.

4.4.2. Focusing on enrollment and digital metrics

The second research question of this study is "*What performance indicators and metrics are commonly used by Vietnamese universities to assess the effectiveness of their marcom strategies?*" This study reveals that Vietnamese universities commonly use enrollment figures and digital metrics as measures of their marcom performance. Enrollment figures serve as a primary measure of success, reflecting the impact of communication efforts on student recruitment. Additionally, digital metrics such as website visits, social media interactions, and conversion rates are employed to evaluate the reach and engagement of online marketing activities.

These findings are consistent with the previous literature on higher education marketing, which discussed the use of enrollment figures as one of the indicators of measuring the success of marketing strategies (Kotler & Fox, 1995). Literature (e.g., Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020) also highlighted the importance of digital marketing tools such as social media platforms and websites in engaging prospective students. The research findings support this emphasis on enrollment and digital metrics, showing consistency with the literature.

However, while universities typically use a broader range of evaluation methods beyond enrollment or digital metrics, such as event-based assessments and traditional advertising metrics (Smedescu et al., 2016; Harjadi & Fatmasari, 2017), the present research findings indicate a predominant reliance on enrollment and digital metrics in Vietnamese universities. This gap aligns with Rajhans (2018)'s findings on the disconnection between communication measures and stakeholder relationship management at many institutions. While the engagement of Vietnamese universities via digital tools is being measured, the derived insights are rarely linked to broader institutional performance indicators or value-based communication outcomes.

4.4.3. A predominant emphasis on student recruitment

To remind, the third research question of this study is "*How do Vietnamese universities engage and communicate with various stakeholders beyond student recruitment, including faculty members, staff, alumni, industry professionals, and the local community?*" The research findings indicate that Vietnamese universities primarily engage and communicate with various stakeholders beyond student recruitment through sporadic and limited efforts. While there are some initiatives targeting faculty members, staff, alumni, industry professionals, and the local community, the focus remains on student recruitment. Initiatives such as mentorship programs and industry-specific workshops are implemented to cultivate relationships beyond conventional recruitment avenues. However, these activities often lack the cohesive strategic communication frameworks that are essential for effective stakeholder engagement.

This contrasts with the previous literature, which emphasized the importance of stakeholder communication beyond recruitment in higher education institutions (Chiparo, 2021). The literature highlighted the need for universities to prioritize relationship marketing strategies and engage with diverse stakeholders through various communication channels (Mogaji et al., 2023). However, the research findings suggest a limited integration of these principles in Vietnamese universities, with communication efforts predominantly geared toward recruitment.

The deviation from previous literature may be attributed to the competitive higher education landscape in Vietnam may pressure universities to prioritize student recruitment over other stakeholder engagements to maintain enrollment numbers and financial stability. Additionally, resource constraints and a lack of strategic communication planning may hinder universities from effectively engaging with

diverse stakeholder groups beyond recruitment channels.

4.4.4. Implications for universities

The research findings have several important implications for universities, not only in Vietnam but also in other countries where competition is similarly high.

The predominant emphasis on student recruitment and the marginalization of comprehensive communication strategies for broader stakeholder engagement underscores the imperative for universities to adopt a more balanced approach that encompasses various institutional objectives, community involvement, and strategic alliances with industry.

To achieve this balance, universities must prioritize relationship marketing strategies, invest in professional competencies, and harmonize communication planning with their overarching institutional development goals. This holistic approach will enable them to construct robust and resonant branding frameworks capable of serving the multifaceted needs of all stakeholders, thereby enhancing their competitiveness and societal impact.

From a policy and management perspective, these findings stress that aligning marcom activities with institutional mission and strategic planning can foster coherence across departments, ensuring that communication supports broader educational goals. Second, marcom's performance metrics, if included in institutional KPIs, can inform professionalizing marcom activities in universities can enhance autonomy and strategic capacity, particularly in systems transitioning toward international competitiveness. More balanced institutional focus, triggered by both internal planning and external policy incentives, has the potential to place universities strategically in a more competitive higher education environment.

4.4.5. Limitations and future research

As this study primarily focused on communication strategies related to student recruitment, it could overlook other important stakeholders and aspects of higher education branding. Future research could examine the impact of different marketing communication approaches on key outcomes such as student enrollment, stakeholder engagement, and institutional reputation. Additionally, investigating the perspectives of external stakeholders such as students, parents, and industry professionals could provide a more holistic understanding of marketing communication dynamics in Vietnamese universities.

Moreover, the sample size of twenty representatives and the use of qualitative data from interviews may limit the generalizability of findings. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating a larger and more diverse sample, possibly including quantitative data analysis to provide broader insights into marketing communication practices.

5. Conclusion

This research aimed to explore marketing communication practices within Vietnamese universities, focusing on the dynamics between marketing strategies and communication efforts with various stakeholders. The study addressed the problem of the predominant focus on student recruitment in university communication, potentially neglecting other stakeholders and aspects of higher education branding.

In light of these findings, universities in Vietnam need to confront the identified challenges and shortcomings in their marketing communication practices. This transformation may necessitate the development of inclusive communication strategies that prioritize stakeholder engagement, foster community partnerships, and are congruent with institutional values and goals. Additionally, institutional leaders also need to recognize communication as a strategic function instead of an operational function. As marketing and communications departments join as active stakeholders in planning and evaluation activities, marcom plans can be modified to support not only enrollment but also education quality,

alumni, and international branding programs. Such modifications are important to position higher education institutions as leaders in a knowledge economy and ensure long-term sustainability and efficacy.

Moving forward, it is imperative for universities in Vietnam to address the identified gaps and challenges in marketing communication practices. This may involve developing comprehensive communication strategies that prioritize stakeholder engagement, fostering community partnerships, and aligning with institutional values and goals.

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