

COMMUNITY SERVICE PROGRAM (*PENGABDIAN KEPADA MASYARAKAT*) CHANGES IN GEN Z BEHAVIOR IN CHOOSING A LEADING UNIVERSITY: A CASE STUDY AT SMU KUMNAMU SCHOOL, JUNE 15, 2026

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ABSTRACT

On June 15, 2026, a Community Service (PKM) activity was conducted at SMU Kumnamu School, involving 1 (one) lecturer and 3 (three) students from the Master of Management Study Program at Matana University. The event was attended by 25 students, 1 school principal, and 4 high school teachers. The main objective of this activity was to educate and analyze behavioral changes among Generation Z (Gen Z) in the decision-making process of selecting a leading university. The methods used included interactive counseling sessions and field observation. The results showed that Gen Z has distinctive characteristics in choosing a university, being strongly influenced by social media content, an institution's digital reputation, peer recommendations, and the relevance of study programs to future industry developments. Cost factors and access to online information have become primary considerations, displacing conventional methods such as printed brochures and physical campus visits. This activity made a significant contribution to improving higher education literacy among high school students and is expected to serve as a reference for universities in developing new-student recruitment strategies that are adaptive to Gen Z characteristics. It is recommended that similar programs be conducted periodically with broader participation and more collaborating institutions to continuously monitor Gen Z's evolving preferences and enhance the relevance of higher education outreach efforts.

Keywords: Gen Z; University Selection; Educational Consumer Behavior; Social Media; Community Service

INTRODUCTION

Generation Z (Gen Z), defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, is now entering the transition phase from secondary education to higher education. This generation has grown up in a fully connected digital ecosystem, making them fundamentally different from previous generations in terms of information-consumption behavior, decision-making, and social interaction. These differences also influence how they determine their choice of higher education.

Choosing a university is one of the most important decisions in an individual's life, particularly at the final stage of secondary education. This decision not only affects future career trajectories but also shapes one's social network, professional identity, and worldview. In previous decades, the university-selection process was typically influenced by parental recommendations, school guidance counselors, printed brochures, and education fairs. However, as the digital era becomes increasingly pervasive, this behavioral pattern has undergone a significant transformation.

Recent research shows that Gen Z spends an average of 7 to 9 hours per day interacting with various digital platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter/X. These platforms no longer function merely as entertainment media; they have evolved into primary information sources that Gen Z uses to seek references about higher-education institutions. Reviews from active students, campus content, alumni testimonials, and online campus organization activities directly influence the perceptions of prospective students.

This phenomenon creates a distinct challenge for higher-education institutions seeking to increase new-student enrollment from the Gen Z segment. Conventional marketing strategies that have long been used—such as open houses, school roadshows, and print advertisements—are now considered less effective unless supported by a strong digital-presence strategy. On the other hand, high school students also need adequate literacy to make rational university-selection decisions rather than merely following social media trends.

Based on this context, the Master of Management Study Program at Matana University recognized the importance of conducting a Community Service (PKM) activity specifically targeting high school students to improve higher-education literacy and help them understand a more structured and rational decision-making process when choosing a leading university. This activity also served as a platform for Master of Management students to apply their academic knowledge to real social issues.

Problem Formulation

Based on the background described above, the problem formulation for this PKM activity is as follows:

1. How do Gen Z's behavioral characteristics manifest in accessing and processing information about leading universities?
2. Which factors most dominantly influence Gen Z's decisions in choosing a university?
3. How has the role of digital media shifted compared to conventional media in Gen Z's university-selection process?
4. What can universities and high school students do to respond constructively to these behavioral changes?

Objectives

The objectives of this PKM activity include:

1. Providing education to students of SMU Kumnamu School on changes in Gen Z behavior in the university-selection process.
2. Identifying the dominant factors influencing Gen Z's decisions in choosing a leading university.
3. Improving higher-education literacy capacity among high school students and teachers.
4. Producing practical recommendations for higher-education institutions in designing new-student recruitment strategies responsive to Gen Z characteristics.

Benefits

This PKM activity is expected to provide benefits to various parties, namely: (1) for high school students, this activity improves their understanding in making more rational and well-planned university-selection decisions; (2) for teachers, this activity broadens their insight into Gen Z behavioral dynamics relevant to career guidance processes; (3) for Matana University, this activity contributes to increased brand awareness and institutional reputation within the education community; and (4) for Master of Management students, this activity is an opportunity to develop applied competencies in the field of education marketing management.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Characteristics of Generation Z

Generation Z is a demographic group born in an era when the internet and information technology had already matured. Unlike Millennials, who experienced the transition from the analog to the digital era, Gen Z grew up in a fully digital environment from an early age. Chang and Chang (2023), published in SAGE Open, found that continuous exposure to digital media and social networks is a key driver of attitude formation among digital natives. Their study confirms that Gen Z's distinctiveness stems from the disruptive effect of ongoing digital exposure itself, a perspective that continues to be reinforced by more recent research on Gen Z.

Several key characteristics of Gen Z relevant to university-selection behavior include: (1) deep digital nativeness, in which technology is not merely a tool but a way of life; (2) high skepticism toward paid content and traditional advertising, leading them to trust organic content and peer reviews more; (3) an orientation toward institutional authenticity and transparency; (4) multitasking ability and a preference for concise visual content; and (5) a tendency to consider the sustainability and social values of the institution they choose.

A systematic literature review by Ridwan et al. (2025) identifies Gen Z as value-driven and pragmatic consumers who prioritize authenticity, transparency, and tangible outcomes over brand prestige alone. Unlike the idealistic Millennials, Gen Z tends to be realistic and results-oriented. In the context of university selection, this means they place greater weight on post-graduation job prospects, scholarship availability, and study-program reputation than on the prestige of the university name alone.

Consumer Behavior in the Context of Higher Education

Recent research on higher-education decision-making by Poole et al. (2026), published in the *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, found that prospective students draw on multiple information sources and interact with multiple touch points when making decisions about university study. Their findings indicate that the decision-making process is iterative and individualised rather than following a uniform sequence. In the context of university selection, the concept of “purchase” can be understood as a long-term educational investment. This

perspective extends traditional consumer decision-making frameworks, such as the EKB model, which conceptualises decision-making through stages including need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, choice, and post-choice evaluation. In contrast, Poole et al. (2026) highlights that prospective students engage with multiple information sources and touch points throughout the decision-making process, suggesting that university choice is better understood as an iterative and individualised process rather than a strictly linear sequence.

In studies concerning college choice, Cain (2021), published in the *New York Journal of Student Affairs*, applied Hossler and Gallagher (1987) three-stage model of college choice — predisposition (formation of initial aspirations), search (active information-seeking), and choice (final decision-making) — to examine how contemporary students navigate the college-choice process. This model remains relevant today, although Cain's findings show that the media and information sources used at each stage, including dual-enrollment programs and digital resources, have changed drastically alongside developments in digital technology.

A study by Šola and Zia (2021), published in the *European Journal of Management and Marketing Studies*, found that social media has become one of the most influential information sources in the university-selection process, alongside campus visits and family recommendations. This finding reflects a significant and continuing shift from earlier studies, in which social media had rarely emerged as a dominant factor.

The Influence of Digital Media on University Selection

Digital media, particularly social media platforms, have revolutionized the way prospective students consume information. Instagram allows universities to showcase campus visuals, student life, and academic achievements in an appealing format. TikTok, with its viral short-video format, has become a new medium used by active students to share authentic campus experiences—content that Gen Z trusts more than official university promotional materials.

YouTube enables prospective students to access virtual campus tours, Q&A sessions with lecturers, and in-depth documentation of campus life. Meanwhile, forum platforms such as Reddit and Quora have become spaces for discussion among prospective students seeking information about study programs, campus culture, and the career prospects of a particular university's graduates.

Research by Ruangkanjanes et al. (2022), published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, reveals that the engagement level of a university's social media marketing activities correlates positively with the behavioral engagement of prospective students, with brand equity acting as a mediating factor. Universities that are active and consistent in producing high-quality content across various digital platforms tend to have higher conversion rates in the new-student admission process.

Theoretical Framework

This PKM activity adopts a theoretical framework integrating three main perspectives: (1) the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), which explains how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control shape behavioral intention—in this case, the intention to choose a particular university; (2) the Technology Acceptance Model, synthesized together with the Theory of Planned Behavior in Xue et al. (2024) systematic review in *SAGE Open*, which explains how perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness influence the adoption of technology in searching for university information; and (3) the digital marketing decision journey, described by Labausa et al. (2023) as the nonlinear journey digital consumers take in

making enrollment decisions, in which initial considerations can be shaped by exposure to digital content such as social media presence and university webinars at any time and place.

RESEARCH METHOD

Activity Design

This PKM activity was designed using a participatory action research (PAR) approach that emphasizes the active involvement of participants in the learning process. The activity design was divided into three main phases: the preparation phase, the implementation phase, and the evaluation phase. This approach was chosen because it aligns with Gen Z's characteristic responsiveness to interactive learning, as opposed to one-way lecture methods.

Time and Place of Implementation

The activity was carried out as follows:

- Day/Date: Monday, June 15, 2026
- Location: Hall of SMU Kurnamu School
- Time: 08.00 – 11.00 WIB
- Participants: 25 high school students, 1 school principal, and 4 high school teachers

Implementation Team

Table 1. The PKM Team Consisted of the Following Members

No.	Name	Status	Role in the Program
1	Dr. Hadi Aldo, M.Ak.	Lecturer, Master of Management	Team Leader, Main Speaker
2	Lady Yohana, S.Kom.	Master of Management Student	Speaker
3	Hermawan, S.T.	Master of Management Student	Speaker
4	Andry Rezeky, S.E.	Master of Management Student	Speaker

Implementation Methods and Techniques

The activity was carried out using a combination of several active learning methods, namely:

1. Interactive Lecture: Material delivery by the lecturer/speaker on Gen Z trends, changes in university-selection behavior, and factors that need to be considered. This session was supported by statistical data, visual charts, and real case studies from various universities.
2. Open Q&A Session: A free-flowing discussion between participants and the PKM team on practical questions regarding the university admissions process, scholarships, campus life, and career prospects across various study programs.

Data Collection and Analysis

All qualitative data were then analyzed using thematic analysis, in which observation notes and discussion results were categorized based on recurring themes that emerged. Photo and video documentation was also conducted as supporting secondary data to reinforce the qualitative narrative of the activity.



Figure 1. Documentation of the PKM Activity at SMU Kumnamu School

Evaluation of Activity Outcomes

The evaluation phase was conducted to assess the participants' perceived learning outcomes and their overall response to the educational activity. Immediately after the workshop, participants completed an online questionnaire through Google Forms using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A total of 24 students participated in the evaluation. The questionnaire included statements related to the participants' understanding of the material, relevance of the information, clarity of the speakers, opportunities for discussion, and overall satisfaction with the workshop. In particular, the statement regarding whether the workshop helped participants understand important factors in selecting a university obtained a mean score of 4.67, while the statement concerning the ease of understanding the material obtained a mean score of 4.71. These results indicate a very positive perceived learning response following the educational intervention.

The quantitative responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics by calculating the mean score for each questionnaire item and the overall mean. The overall mean score was 4.63 out of 5.00, which falls within the "Very Good" category based on the predetermined interpretation scale. The highest score was obtained for the statement that similar activities should be conducted regularly at the school (4.79), while the lowest score concerned the adequacy of the activity duration (4.42). The findings suggest that the workshop was well received and was perceived by participants as relevant to their needs as prospective university students. However, because the evaluation used a post-activity satisfaction questionnaire rather than a pre-test and post-test design, the results are interpreted as evidence of perceived understanding and participant response, rather than as a direct measurement of learning gain.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participant Profile

The PKM activity was attended by a total of 30 participants, consisting of 25 students, 1 school principal, and 4 teachers from SMU Kumnamu School. Of the 25 student participants, 13 students (52%) were from grade XI Science, while the remaining 12 students (48%) were

from grade XI Social Studies. The gender distribution of student participants was 15 females (60%) and 10 males (40%).

All 25 student participants reported owning and actively using a smartphone. Social media usage was dominated by Instagram, which was used by all participants (25 students, 100%), followed by TikTok with 23 users (92%), YouTube with 21 users (84%), and Facebook with 19 users (76%). Meanwhile, Twitter/X was used by 8 participants (32%). These findings indicate that Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook were the most widely used social media platforms among the participating students, while Twitter/X had substantially lower usage. The average daily social media usage was reported at 6.8 hours, with peak usage occurring between 19.00 and 22.00 WIB.

Table 2. Distribution of Participants' Social Media Platform Usage

Social Media Platform	Users (n = 25)	Percentage (%)
Instagram	25	100.0%
TikTok	23	92.0%
YouTube	21	84.0%
Facebook	19	76.0%
Twitter/X	8	32.0%

Dominant Factors in University Selection

Table 3. Dominant Factors Influencing University Selection

Selection Factor	Priority Level	Frequency Mentioned
Tuition cost & scholarship availability	Very High	25 of 25
Graduate career prospects	Very High	24 of 25
Reviews/testimonials from active students	High	23 of 25
National university ranking	High	22 of 25
Campus social media content	High	21 of 25
University's digital reputation	Medium–High	19 of 25
Geographic location	Medium	17 of 25
Recommendations from parents/teachers	Medium	16 of 25
Physical campus visits	Low–Medium	12 of 25
Printed brochures/leaflets	Very Low	3 of 25

These findings are consistent with McKinsey's Consumer Decision Journey theory, which states that modern consumers—particularly digital natives—trust user-generated content (UGC) more than officially produced promotional content. Reviews from active students on social media, online discussion forums, and video-sharing platforms are highly credible information sources in the eyes of Gen Z, as they are considered more authentic and unbiased.

Changes in Information-Seeking Behavior

The typical information-seeking journey among Gen Z participants can be described as follows: (1) being organically exposed to campus content on TikTok's For You Page (FYP) or the Instagram feed; (2) visiting the university's official social media profile to gain an initial impression; (3) searching for hashtags related to the university to find content created by active students; (4) visiting the university's official website for technical information such as admissions, tuition fees, and study programs; (5) joining discussion groups or online communities of prospective students; and (6) asking for the opinions of peers who have already conducted their own research.

This pattern reflects a characteristic feature of Gen Z, who conduct parallel research across multiple channels simultaneously rather than in a linear fashion. They also tend to cross-verify information between platforms before reaching a conclusion. This phenomenon is known in the marketing literature as the zero-moment of truth (ZMOT)—a concept introduced by Google (2011)—in which consumers conduct extensive digital research before making a decision.

Theme 1 – Authenticity as a Determinant of Trust: Participants consistently stated that they trust content spontaneously created by active students more than polished official promotional materials. One participant from grade XII noted that authentic student vlogs are far more informative because they show the reality of campus life without staging, making them easier to trust and use as a reference in decision-making.

Theme 2 – Economic Pragmatism: Despite the strong digital influence, participants demonstrated a strong sense of economic awareness. Education costs, scholarship availability, and the estimated return on investment (ROI) of a chosen study program were treated as serious considerations. Several participants explicitly mentioned their habit of systematically comparing total tuition costs across multiple universities before deciding.

Theme 3 – Curriculum Relevance to Industry Trends: Gen Z is highly attuned to changes in industry and the future job market. They actively seek information about study programs relevant to trends in artificial intelligence, environmental sustainability, the creative economy, and health technology. A prestigious university name is not always a guarantee of choice; the relevance of the curriculum to future industry needs is an increasingly dominant consideration in the selection process.

Implications for University Recruitment Strategy

The findings of this PKM activity carry several important implications for universities seeking to improve the effectiveness of new-student recruitment from the Gen Z segment. First, universities need to transform their communication strategy from a broadcast (one-way) model toward an engagement (two-way) model that leverages user-generated content and student-ambassador programs.

Second, marketing budget allocation needs to shift significantly from conventional media to digital media, particularly platforms with high penetration among Gen Z such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. The content produced must be authentic, informative, and aligned with the values that Gen Z holds in high regard, including inclusion, sustainability, and transparency.

Third, information regarding career prospects, alumni testimonials, and curriculum relevance to industry needs to be published more proactively and made easily accessible. Graduate outcome data—such as employment rates, average starting salaries, and industry partnership networks—is highly sought after by Gen Z but is often not made transparently available on university digital platforms

CONCLUSION

Based on the entire series of PKM activities carried out at SMU Kumnamu School on June 15, 2026, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Gen Z exhibits a unique and distinctive behavioral pattern in choosing a university, dominated by the use of social media platforms as the primary source of information, replacing conventional methods such as printed brochures, education fairs, and physical campus visits.
2. The dominant factors influencing Gen Z's decisions in choosing a university are: tuition costs and scholarship availability, graduate career prospects, reviews/testimonials from active students, and national university rankings—all of which are factors that can be digitally accessed and verified.
3. Gen Z's trust in authentic content produced by active students (user-generated content) far exceeds their trust in official university promotional materials, reflecting the values of authenticity and transparency that characterize this generation.
4. Peer influence within the digital ecosystem plays a very significant role, in some cases even surpassing the influence of parents and teachers, making digital word-of-mouth the most effective education-marketing instrument for the Gen Z segment.
5. Economic pragmatism and curriculum relevance to future industry trends are two substantive factors that distinguish Gen Z's decision-making profile from that of previous generations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions above, several recommendations are formulated for various stakeholders:

For Universities and Higher Education Institutions:

1. Develop a digital communication strategy focused on authentic content, including building a structured student-ambassador program to consistently generate high-quality user-generated content.
2. Improve the transparency of graduate outcome data (employment rates, industry networks, alumni achievements) through digital platforms that are easily accessible to prospective students and their families.
3. Allocate a proportional marketing budget to short-video-based social media platforms (TikTok, Instagram Reels) as the primary communication medium for the Gen Z segment.

For High Schools:

1. Integrate higher-education literacy programs more systematically into guidance-counseling programs, particularly regarding navigation of credible digital information sources and critical evaluation of university promotional content.
2. Organize similar activities periodically, involving collaboration with various universities, to provide students with diverse and balanced exposure in the university-selection process.

For Future Research:

1. Conduct longitudinal research to monitor whether the changes in knowledge and attitude achieved through this PKM activity persist and have a real impact on participants' university-selection decisions.
2. Expand the scope of research to various geographic regions to obtain a more comprehensive picture of variations in Gen Z behavior in choosing a university within the Indonesian context.

LIMITATIONS OF THE ACTIVITY

This PKM activity has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the evaluation involved only 24 student respondents, although the activity was attended by 25 students. The evaluation instrument was administered immediately after the workshop using a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire. Therefore, the results primarily reflect participants' perceived understanding, relevance of the material, and satisfaction with the activity rather than objectively measured changes in knowledge. The questionnaire included an item assessing whether the workshop helped participants understand important factors in university selection, which obtained a high mean score of 4.67, while the overall questionnaire means reached 4.63, categorized as "Very Good."

Second, the activity did not employ a pre-test and post-test design, so the PKM team could not quantitatively determine the extent of participants' knowledge improvement before and after the intervention. The evaluation also did not include a longitudinal follow-up to determine whether the knowledge and considerations discussed during the workshop influenced participants' actual university-selection decisions. In addition, the activity involved students from only one school, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other high school students with different educational, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds. Future PKM activities should therefore consider using pre-test and post-test instruments, larger and more diverse participant groups, and follow-up evaluations to obtain stronger evidence of educational impact. The individual response data available in the evaluation provide useful descriptive evidence of participant responses, but they do not provide a direct measure of learning gain.

ACTIVITY DOCUMENTATION

Event Schedule

Table 4. PKM Activity Schedule, June 15, 2026

Time	Activity	Facilitator
08.00 – 08.15	Registration and opening	Committee & Program Team
08.15 – 08.20	Opening prayer	Lady Yohana, S.Kom.
08.20 – 08.30	Speaker introduction	Andry Rezeky, S.E.
08.30 – 08.45	Presentation: Changes in Gen Z Behavior	Lady Yohana, S.Kom.
08.45 – 09.00	Presentation: Gen Z and the Future	Andry Rezeky, S.E.
09.00 – 09.15	Presentation: How to Choose the Right University and Major	Hermawan, S.T.
09.15 – 09.30	Open Q&A session	Entire program team
09.30 – 09.45	Closing remarks	Dr. Hadi Aldo, M.Ak.
09.45 – 10.30	Closing reflection and discussion	Dr. Hadi Aldo, M.Ak.
10.30 – 11.00	Closing and group photo documentation	Entire program team

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The PKM team would like to express its deepest appreciation and gratitude to all parties who supported the successful implementation of this activity, especially: (1) the leadership of SMU Kurnamu School for their warm welcome and facility support; (2) all participating students and teachers for their active and enthusiastic participation; (3) the Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM) of Matana University for institutional support and activity funding; and (4) the Master of Management Study Program of Matana University for its academic guidance and continuous moral support.

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