

From Digital Engagement to Enrollment Intention: The Mediating Role of Campus Attractiveness among Prospective University Students

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ABSTRACT

The increasing reliance on digital platforms has significantly transformed how prospective students evaluate and select higher education institutions. Universities no longer compete solely through academic quality, accreditation, facilities, or tuition affordability, but also through the strength of their digital marketing presence. This study aims to examine the influence of digital marketing dimensions on students' behavioral intention to apply through campus attractiveness as a mediating variable. Specifically, this research investigates how digital content quality, social media engagement, website usability, online brand reputation, and search engine visibility affect campus attractiveness, and how campus attractiveness subsequently influences students' behavioral intention to apply. A quantitative approach was employed, with data collected through structured questionnaires administered to 120 Grade 12 high school students in Surabaya, Indonesia, from both public and private schools. The data were analyzed using SPSS, including validity and reliability tests, normality tests, multiple regression analysis, t-tests, F-tests, and Sobel tests to examine the direct and mediating effects among variables. The results indicate that digital content quality, social media engagement, online brand reputation, and search engine visibility have a positive and significant effect on campus attractiveness. However, website usability, although positively related, does not have a statistically significant effect on campus attractiveness. Furthermore, campus attractiveness has a positive and significant effect on students' behavioral intention to apply. The Sobel test results confirm that campus attractiveness mediates the effects of digital content quality, social media engagement, online brand reputation, and search engine visibility on behavioral intention to apply, but does not mediate the effect of website usability. These findings provide important insights for higher education institutions in optimizing their digital marketing strategies to enhance campus attractiveness and increase students' application intentions. The study contributes to the literature on higher education marketing by highlighting campus attractiveness as a key psychological mechanism through which digital engagement shapes prospective students' enrollment-related decision-making.

Keywords: digital marketing, campus attractiveness, behavioral intention to apply, higher education marketing, student decision-making

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital platforms have become one of the most influential interfaces through which prospective students encounter, evaluate, compare, and develop preferences toward higher education institutions. In Indonesia, this shift is particularly relevant because internet access and social media use have become embedded in the daily information-seeking behavior of young consumers. DataReportal reported that Indonesia had approximately 212 million internet users at the beginning of 2025, while APJII reported that internet penetration had reached 79.5% in 2024, reflecting the strong digital environment in which prospective students now search for educational information (APJII, 2024; DataReportal, 2025). This condition has changed the competitive logic of higher education marketing. Universities are no longer evaluated only through academic reputation, accreditation status, program quality, tuition fees, facilities, or graduate

employability, but also through the strength of their digital presence, the quality of their online communication, and the attractiveness of their institutional image across digital platforms.

The increasing role of digital marketing in higher education reflects a broader transformation in how universities communicate institutional value to prospective students. Recent studies have shown that digital marketing practices are becoming strategic instruments for universities because they influence student experience, awareness, consideration, and choice behavior. Benchekroun et al. (2024) emphasized that content marketing, social media, and other digital marketing practices contribute to student experience in the university context, while Eum (2025) found that digital marketing channels such as departmental websites, blogs, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook affect students' perceptions and choices in higher education. These findings indicate that digital marketing is not merely a promotional activity, but a strategic mechanism for shaping students' cognitive and emotional evaluations of an institution. In the context of prospective university students, digital engagement can function as an early-stage decision stimulus that influences whether a campus is perceived as attractive, credible, relevant, and worthy of application.

The present study is grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response perspective, which provides a suitable theoretical lens for explaining how digital marketing stimuli influence students' internal evaluations and subsequent behavioral intentions. Within this framework, digital marketing dimensions such as digital content quality, social media engagement, website usability, online brand reputation, and search engine visibility operate as external stimuli. Campus attractiveness represents the organismic or internal evaluative response, while behavioral intention to apply represents the behavioral outcome. Kaur et al. (2026) recently applied this logic in the higher education context by demonstrating that university website usability and brand attributes influence application intention, with university attractiveness functioning as a mediating mechanism. Their study also highlights that attractiveness serves as a cognitive and emotional filter through which prospective students interpret digital interaction and institutional branding before forming application intentions. This supports the argument that digital engagement may not directly translate into application intention unless it first strengthens the perceived attractiveness of the university.

Digital content quality is a central element in higher education marketing because content is the primary medium through which universities communicate their value proposition to prospective students. High-quality digital content enables universities to present academic programs, lecturer competence, student achievements, graduate outcomes, campus facilities, scholarships, international exposure, student activities, and institutional identity in a clear, relevant, and persuasive manner. In the higher education context, content quality is not limited to visual aesthetics; it also includes informational accuracy, relevance, credibility, consistency, timeliness, and usefulness for student decision-making. Benchekroun et al. (2024) argued that content marketing in universities helps create attractive and engaging brand content, particularly because digitally connected students expect communication that is relevant to their needs and capable of enhancing their experience with the institution. Therefore, when prospective students perceive university digital content as informative, credible, and engaging, they are more likely to evaluate the campus as attractive. This argument supports the proposition that digital content quality positively influences campus attractiveness.

Social media engagement also plays an important role in shaping prospective students' perceptions of campus attractiveness. Unlike traditional promotional media, social media enables two-way interaction through comments, direct messages, live sessions, short videos, virtual campus tours, testimonials, user-generated content, influencer or alumni narratives, and real-time responses to student inquiries. Li et al. (2025) found that social media communication and brand image positively affect international students' enrollment-related preferences, with interactivity, transparency, authenticity, academic reputation, internationalization, and cultural diversity emerging as important factors in shaping enrollment intentions. Their findings also indicate that social media communication contributes to brand image formation, which subsequently influences students' enrollment-related decisions. In higher education marketing, this means that social media engagement can strengthen campus attractiveness by making the institution appear more responsive, accessible, authentic, student-centered, and socially credible. Thus, social media engagement is expected to have a positive influence on campus attractiveness.

Website usability is another critical digital touchpoint because the official university website often functions as the most authoritative source of admission-related information. Prospective students use university websites to search for study programs, curriculum structures, tuition fees, scholarships, accreditation status, facilities, admission procedures, career prospects, and contact channels. A website that is easy to navigate, mobile-friendly, visually organized, fast, and informative can reduce cognitive effort and increase students' confidence in the institution. Conversely, a confusing, outdated, or poorly structured website may weaken the perception of institutional professionalism. Kaur et al. (2026) found that university website usability positively affects intention to apply and that university attractiveness can mediate the influence of website-related attributes on students' application decisions. This suggests that website usability is not merely a technical feature, but part of the broader digital experience through which prospective students assess whether

a campus is credible, modern, and attractive. Accordingly, website usability is expected to positively influence campus attractiveness.

Online brand reputation further strengthens campus attractiveness because higher education is a high-involvement service decision characterized by long-term consequences, perceived risk, and substantial personal and family investment. Prospective students do not only evaluate formal institutional claims; they also interpret reputation signals from online reviews, alumni stories, media exposure, search results, rankings, accreditation information, social media conversations, testimonials, and public achievements. Li et al. (2025) demonstrated that brand image is an important mechanism linking social media communication to enrollment-related preferences, while Kaur et al. (2026) showed that university brand attributes influence application intention through university attractiveness. These studies suggest that online reputation can reduce perceived uncertainty and increase the desirability of an institution. A university with a strong online brand reputation is more likely to be perceived as credible, trustworthy, prestigious, and socially valued. Therefore, online brand reputation is expected to have a positive effect on campus attractiveness.

Search engine visibility is also increasingly important because prospective students often begin their university search journey through search engines. Before directly visiting a campus, contacting admission officers, or attending open house events, students may search for information about recommended universities, study programs, scholarships, tuition fees, admission requirements, rankings, graduate prospects, and campus location. When a university appears prominently in search results, it has a greater opportunity to enter the student's awareness and consideration set. Recent research on digital marketing strategies in Indonesian private universities highlights that search engine optimization enhances the visibility of university websites, increases organic traffic, and contributes to institutional credibility in the eyes of prospective students. However, Eum (2025) found that search engine marketing did not significantly affect department selection or brand awareness in the Korean higher education context, indicating that the effect of search-based visibility may vary across institutional and national settings. This mixed evidence makes search engine visibility an important variable to examine further, particularly in Indonesia, where digital search behavior is strongly embedded in students' early-stage information acquisition.

Campus attractiveness is positioned as the mediating construct in this study because prospective students rarely make application decisions based on isolated digital cues. Instead, they integrate multiple digital experiences into an overall evaluation of whether a university is desirable, credible, suitable, and worth pursuing. Campus attractiveness reflects the extent to which a university is perceived as appealing as a future educational destination. This perception may be shaped by academic quality, campus life, institutional image, facilities, social environment, digital communication, and reputational signals. Wilkins and Huisman (2013) showed that information and opinions gained through personal relationships and media explained a substantial portion of prospective students' attachment and membership intentions toward international branch campuses. More recently, Kaur et al. (2026) confirmed that university attractiveness plays a mediating role in the relationship between digital and brand-related factors and intention to apply. These findings support the argument that campus attractiveness functions as a psychological bridge between digital engagement and enrollment-related behavioral intention.

Behavioral intention to apply represents the prospective student's willingness, readiness, or tendency to submit an application to a university. This construct is important because it captures the movement from awareness and evaluation toward action-oriented decision-making. In the higher education context, intention to apply is not formed only by exposure to digital marketing, but by the student's interpretation of whether the university is personally relevant, credible, attractive, and capable of supporting future academic and career aspirations. Recent studies on digital marketing and student enrollment indicate that digital communication, student engagement, institutional branding, personalization, trust, and transparency influence prospective students' willingness to apply or enroll. For example, Al-Dmour et al. (2025) showed that AI-driven marketing tools can enhance student recruitment by improving accessibility, engagement, and transparency, although trust remains a critical factor in shaping willingness to apply. This reinforces the view that digital strategies must first create positive institutional perceptions before they can generate stronger enrollment intentions.

Despite the growing body of literature on digital marketing in higher education, several research gaps remain. First, many previous studies have examined social media, websites, content marketing, brand image, or digital advertising separately, while fewer studies integrate multiple digital marketing dimensions into a single model explaining campus attractiveness and behavioral intention to apply. Second, prior research has often focused on direct effects on student choice, enrollment intention, or application intention, while the mediating mechanism of campus attractiveness remains less developed. Third, empirical evidence on search engine visibility in higher education marketing remains limited and somewhat inconsistent, especially when compared with the more established evidence on social media engagement and website usability. Fourth, studies focusing on prospective university students in Indonesia remain important because student decision-making in this context is shaped by digital exposure, peer influence, family consideration, institutional

reputation, and perceptions of campus appeal. Therefore, this study responds to these gaps by examining the role of campus attractiveness as a mediating mechanism between digital marketing dimensions and behavioral intention to apply.

Accordingly, the primary objective of this research is to examine the influence of digital content quality, social media engagement, website usability, online brand reputation, and search engine visibility on campus attractiveness, and to analyze the effect of campus attractiveness on behavioral intention to apply among prospective university students in Surabaya, Indonesia. In addition, this study investigates whether campus attractiveness mediates the relationships between each digital marketing dimension and behavioral intention to apply. By positioning campus attractiveness as a mediating variable, this study offers a more comprehensive explanation of how digital engagement is transformed into enrollment intention. Theoretically, this research contributes to the higher education marketing literature by extending the digital marketing and university attractiveness framework in the context of prospective student decision-making. Practically, the findings are expected to assist university leaders, admission managers, and digital marketing teams in designing more integrated recruitment strategies that strengthen content quality, social media engagement, website usability, online reputation, and search visibility as interconnected drivers of campus attractiveness and application intention.

1.1. Digital Engagement in Higher Education Marketing

Digital engagement has become a central construct in higher education marketing because prospective students increasingly interact with universities through digital content, social media platforms, institutional websites, online reviews, and search engine results before making application decisions. In this study, digital engagement is conceptualized through five dimensions: digital content quality, social media engagement, website usability, online brand reputation, and search engine visibility. These dimensions represent the major digital touchpoints through which prospective students form perceptions of a university. Recent research by Benchekroun et al. (2024) confirms that digital marketing practices, including content marketing and social media, significantly influence student experience in the university context. Similarly, Kharisma and Agzumi (2026) found that digital marketing dimensions such as social media, university websites, digital content, and online advertising positively influence prospective students' university choice decisions in Indonesia. These findings support the argument that digital engagement should not be treated merely as promotional exposure, but as a strategic process that shapes students' cognitive and affective evaluation of higher education institutions.

The theoretical logic of this study is aligned with the Stimulus-Organism-Response perspective, which explains how external stimuli influence internal psychological evaluations and subsequent behavioral responses. In the present research model, digital marketing dimensions function as stimuli, campus attractiveness represents the internal evaluative mechanism, and behavioral intention to apply represents the response. Kaur, Verma, and Kaushik (2026) recently applied this perspective in higher education by examining the influence of university website usability and brand attributes on application intention, with university attractiveness serving as a mediating variable. Their study provides direct conceptual support for positioning campus attractiveness as a psychological mechanism that translates digital and brand-related stimuli into application intention.

1.2. Digital Content Quality and Campus Attractiveness

Digital content quality refers to the degree to which university-generated digital content is perceived as informative, relevant, credible, clear, updated, visually appealing, and useful for prospective students. In higher education marketing, content quality is essential because universities offer intangible and high-involvement services. Prospective students cannot fully experience the educational service before enrolment; therefore, they rely heavily on digital information to infer academic quality, campus life, institutional credibility, graduate prospects, and student experience. High-quality digital content may include program descriptions, lecturer profiles, student testimonials, alumni achievements, virtual campus tours, scholarship information, career outcomes, and stories of student activities. When such content is well-designed and relevant to prospective students' needs, it can reduce uncertainty and strengthen the perception that the university is attractive and professionally managed.

Recent research supports the strategic role of digital content in university marketing. Benchekroun et al. (2024) argue that content marketing in higher education helps institutions create engaging brand content and improve student experience. Their study shows that digital marketing practices in the university context are no longer limited to information dissemination; rather, they contribute to the formation of experience and perception. In the Indonesian context, Kharisma and Agzumi (2026) also identify digital content as one of the dimensions of digital marketing that

influences prospective students' university choice decisions. These studies indicate that digital content quality can shape campus attractiveness because content becomes the primary medium through which students evaluate whether a university is credible, relevant, modern, and desirable.

Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Digital Content Quality has a positive effect on Campus Attractiveness.

1.3. Social Media Engagement and Campus Attractiveness

Social media engagement refers to the extent to which prospective students interact with university social media content through likes, comments, shares, direct messages, live sessions, short videos, user-generated content, testimonials, and other forms of online participation. In higher education marketing, social media engagement is important because it allows universities to communicate in a more interactive, relational, and authentic manner. Unlike conventional promotional channels, social media enables two-way communication between universities and prospective students. This interaction can make the institution appear more accessible, responsive, transparent, and student-centered.

Pawar (2024), in a systematic literature review of social media in higher education marketing, shows that social media is used across five major areas: student engagement, university branding, enrollment decision-making, relationship management, and strategic marketing. This indicates that social media engagement has moved beyond simple promotional communication and has become an important mechanism for shaping students' institutional perceptions. Li et al. (2025) further found that social media communication and brand image influence international students' enrollment intentions, with interactivity, authenticity, transparency, academic reputation, internationalization, and cultural diversity functioning as important factors in student decision-making. In Indonesia, Sriyanto et al. (2024) also found that social media marketing activities influence prospective students' intention to choose higher education institutions through trust and brand recognition. These findings suggest that social media engagement can increase campus attractiveness by strengthening perceived authenticity, trust, emotional connection, and social proof.

Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: Social Media Engagement has a positive effect on Campus Attractiveness.

1.4. Website Usability and Campus Attractiveness

Website usability refers to the extent to which a university website is easy to access, easy to navigate, mobile-friendly, visually organized, fast, informative, and capable of helping prospective students obtain relevant information efficiently. The university website remains one of the most authoritative digital channels because it provides official information regarding study programs, tuition fees, scholarships, accreditation, facilities, curriculum, admission procedures, career prospects, and contact points. A usable website can reduce students' cognitive effort and increase their confidence in the institution. Conversely, a poorly designed website may create frustration, uncertainty, and negative perceptions of institutional professionalism.

Kaur, Verma, and Kaushik (2026) provide strong empirical support for the role of website usability in higher education application decisions. Their study examines university website usability and university brand attributes based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response paradigm and finds that university attractiveness mediates the relationship between these digital and brand-related factors and intention to apply. This finding is directly relevant to the present research because it shows that website usability may influence application intention not only directly, but also through students' perception of the university as attractive. Therefore, website usability should be understood not simply as a technical feature, but as an institutional signal that shapes perceived professionalism, accessibility, and campus attractiveness.

Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H3: Website Usability has a positive effect on Campus Attractiveness.

1.5. Online Brand Reputation and Campus Attractiveness

Online brand reputation refers to prospective students' perception of a university's credibility, prestige, trustworthiness, public image, and institutional value based on digital information. In higher education, reputation is especially important because university choice is a high-involvement decision with long-term academic, financial,

social, and career implications. Prospective students often evaluate online reputation through accreditation information, rankings, alumni success stories, social media discussions, student testimonials, online reviews, media coverage, institutional achievements, and public visibility. A strong online brand reputation can reduce perceived risk and increase the perceived desirability of a campus.

Recent studies support the importance of reputation and brand image in higher education choice. Li et al. (2025) found that brand image plays an important role in shaping international students' enrollment intentions, particularly in connection with social media communication. Erazo-Ordoñez et al. (2024) also concluded that favorable reputation and strong brand image contribute substantially to purchase intention toward educational services in private universities. In addition, research on student-university online involvement shows that online interaction can help create and improve institutional reputation and identity. These findings indicate that online brand reputation strengthens campus attractiveness because prospective students are more likely to perceive reputable institutions as credible, prestigious, trustworthy, and worth applying to.

Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H4: Online Brand Reputation has a positive effect on Campus Attractiveness.

1.6. Search Engine Visibility and Campus Attractiveness

Search engine visibility refers to the extent to which a university appears prominently and accessibly in search engine results when prospective students search for information related to study programs, tuition fees, scholarships, accreditation, campus location, career prospects, admission procedures, or university recommendations. In the early stages of student decision-making, search engines often serve as the first gateway to university information. A university with strong search visibility is more likely to enter the prospective student's awareness and consideration set. Search engine visibility also functions as a credibility cue because institutions that are easy to find online may be perceived as more established, accessible, and professionally managed.

Although empirical studies specifically examining SEO in higher education remain relatively limited compared with studies on social media and websites, recent literature recognizes search visibility as an important component of digital marketing strategy. Sadikov (2025) notes that search engine visibility, content marketing, and targeted advertising have become crucial for universities competing in saturated education markets, although many institutions still lack structured SEO and CRM strategies. Kharisma and Agzumi (2026) also found that digital marketing significantly affects prospective students' university choice, with online channels functioning as important determinants of institutional preference and confidence. These findings support the assumption that search engine visibility can enhance campus attractiveness by improving discoverability, accessibility, and perceived institutional credibility.

Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H5: Search Engine Visibility has a positive effect on Campus Attractiveness.

1.7. Campus Attractiveness and Behavioral Intention to Apply

Campus attractiveness refers to the degree to which prospective students perceive a university as desirable, appealing, credible, suitable, and worth considering as a future educational destination. In this study, campus attractiveness functions as an internal evaluative construct that captures students' overall perception of the institution after being exposed to digital marketing stimuli. Campus attractiveness may be shaped by academic reputation, campus facilities, student life, institutional identity, digital communication quality, perceived credibility, and emotional appeal. A university that is perceived as attractive is more likely to generate positive intention among prospective students because attractiveness reduces uncertainty and strengthens perceived institutional fit.

Kaur, Verma, and Kaushik (2026) found that university attractiveness has a meaningful role in explaining students' intention to apply, supporting the view that attractiveness functions as a cognitive and emotional filter in application decision-making. Similarly, studies on higher education digital marketing show that student decisions are influenced not only by objective information, but also by online experiences, institutional trust, reputation, and perceived value. Artiyani (2025), for instance, found that inbound digital marketing influences enrollment interest and that university reputation and brand awareness mediate this relationship. These findings suggest that when prospective students perceive a campus as attractive, they are more likely to move from passive information search to active application intention.

Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H6: Campus Attractiveness has a positive effect on Behavioral Intention to Apply.

1.8. The Mediating Role of Campus Attractiveness

Campus attractiveness is positioned as a mediating variable because digital engagement does not automatically produce behavioral intention to apply. Prospective students may view digital content, interact with social media, access university websites, encounter online reputation signals, or find a university through search engines, but these digital experiences must first be interpreted as meaningful and attractive before they generate application intention. This logic is consistent with the Stimulus-Organism-Response perspective, where external digital stimuli influence internal psychological evaluation, which subsequently shapes behavioral response. Kaur, Verma, and Kaushik (2026) provide direct empirical support for this mechanism by showing that university attractiveness mediates the effect of website usability and brand attributes on application intention. Their findings justify the argument that attractiveness is not merely an outcome of digital marketing but also a mechanism through which digital engagement is converted into enrollment-related intention.

The mediating role of campus attractiveness is also supported by studies showing that digital marketing affects student decisions through intervening perceptual variables such as brand image, trust, reputation, and awareness. Li et al. (2025) found that brand image mediates the relationship between social media communication and international students' enrollment intentions. Sriyanto et al. (2024) found that trust and brand recognition mediate the relationship between social media marketing activities and prospective students' interest in choosing higher education institutions. Artiyani (2025) also found that university reputation and brand awareness mediate the relationship between inbound digital marketing and enrollment interest. These studies suggest that prospective students' behavioral intentions are rarely shaped by digital marketing exposure alone; rather, they emerge through internal evaluative mechanisms that make the institution appear credible, attractive, and worth pursuing.

Therefore, this study proposes the following mediation hypotheses:

H7: Campus Attractiveness mediates the effect of Digital Content Quality on Behavioral Intention to Apply.

H8: Campus Attractiveness mediates the effect of Social Media Engagement on Behavioral Intention to Apply.

H9: Campus Attractiveness mediates the effect of Website Usability on Behavioral Intention to Apply.

H10: Campus Attractiveness mediates the effect of Online Brand Reputation on Behavioral Intention to Apply.

H11: Campus Attractiveness mediates the effect of Search Engine Visibility on Behavioral Intention to Apply.

1.9. Behavioral Intention to Apply

Behavioral intention to apply refers to the willingness, readiness, or likelihood of prospective students to submit an application to a university. In higher education marketing, this construct represents an important pre-enrollment outcome because it reflects the transition from awareness and evaluation to action-oriented consideration. Prospective students may be aware of many universities, but they will only apply to institutions that they perceive as relevant, credible, attractive, and aligned with their academic and career aspirations. Therefore, behavioral intention to apply is shaped by both rational and affective considerations, including program quality, perceived institutional reputation, campus attractiveness, digital experience, family influence, peer opinion, and perceived future benefits.

Recent studies demonstrate that digital marketing and institutional perception are important predictors of student enrollment-related intention. Li et al. (2025) showed that social media communication and brand image influence international students' enrollment intentions. Kharisma and Agzumi (2026) found that digital marketing positively affects prospective students' university choice decisions, including enrollment intention, institutional preference, and confidence in the chosen institution. These findings support the argument that behavioral intention to apply can be strengthened when digital engagement successfully enhances students' perception of the university as attractive, trustworthy, and relevant to their future goals.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts the framework presented in Figure 1 to investigate the influence of Digital Content Quality, Social Media Engagement, Website Usability, Online Brand Reputation, Search Engine Visibility, and Campus Attractiveness on Behavioral Intention to Apply, specifically in the context of prospective university students in Surabaya, Indonesia. The key objective is to examine how digital marketing dimensions shape students' perceptions of Campus

Attractiveness, and how Campus Attractiveness ultimately influences Behavioral Intention to Apply. In addition, this study investigates the mediating role of Campus Attractiveness in the relationship between digital marketing dimensions and Behavioral Intention to Apply.

Data for this research were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 120 Grade 12 high school students in Surabaya. The respondents were selected because they are in the final stage of secondary education and are actively considering university options. Based on Table 2, the age distribution of respondents shows that the majority were 17 years old, accounting for 65.0% of the sample, followed by 18-year-old students at 30.0%, and 19-year-old students at 5.0%. Regarding school type, as shown in Table 3, 53.3% of the respondents came from public senior high schools, while 46.7% came from private senior high schools. This composition indicates that the sample represents prospective university students from both public and private secondary education backgrounds.

The questionnaire was designed to measure seven main variables: Digital Content Quality, Social Media Engagement, Website Usability, Online Brand Reputation, Search Engine Visibility, Campus Attractiveness, and Behavioral Intention to Apply. The data were analyzed using SPSS. Validity and reliability tests were conducted to ensure the quality of the research instruments. Multiple regression analysis and t-tests were used to examine the significance of the direct relationships among variables. Furthermore, the Sobel test was employed to assess the mediating effect of Campus Attractiveness on the relationship between each digital marketing dimension and Behavioral Intention to Apply. The data collected provide valuable insights into how digital engagement influences prospective students' perceptions of campus attractiveness and contributes to a deeper understanding of the factors driving enrollment intention in higher education.

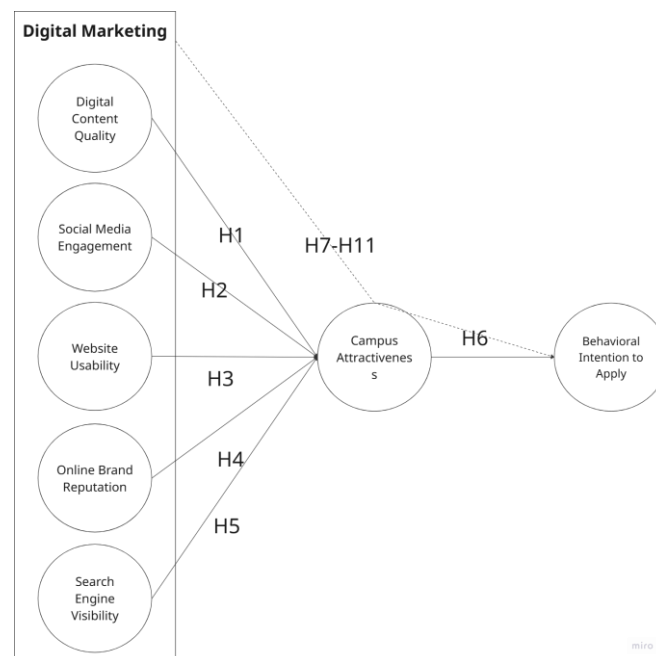


Figure 1. Research Model

Source: Researcher, 2026

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1. Characteristics of Respondents

In any research endeavor, understanding the characteristics of respondents is important for interpreting the findings accurately. In this study, respondent characteristics are presented based on gender, age, and school type. These demographic factors are relevant because prospective students' perceptions of digital marketing, campus attractiveness, and intention to apply may vary according to their personal background and educational environment. Since the respondents are Grade 12 high school students, the sample represents individuals who are at a critical stage of considering university options and making enrollment-related decisions.

Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents Based on Gender

No	Description	Qty	Percentage
1	Male	58	48.3%
2	Female	62	51.7%
	Total Qty	120	100%

Source: Questionnaire respondents, 2026

Based on Table 1, out of a total of 120 respondents, 48.3% are male and 51.7% are female. This indicates that the sample is relatively balanced, although female respondents represent a slightly larger proportion. This gender distribution provides useful insight into the demographic composition of the respondents and helps explain the diversity of perceptions regarding university digital content, social media engagement, website usability, online brand reputation, search engine visibility, campus attractiveness, and behavioral intention to apply.

Table 2. Characteristics of Respondents Based on Age

No	Description	Qty	Percentage
1	17 years old	78	65.0%
2	18 years old	36	30.0%
3	19 years old	6	5.0%
	Total Qty	120	100%

Source: Questionnaire respondents, 2026

Based on Table 2, out of a total of 120 respondents, the majority are 17 years old, accounting for 65.0% of the sample. The second-largest group consists of 18-year-old students, representing 30.0% of respondents, while 19-year-old students account for only 5.0%. This age distribution is consistent with the profile of Grade 12 high school students who are generally at the final stage of secondary education. This group is highly relevant to the research context because students in this age range are actively searching for information about universities, comparing study programs, evaluating campus attractiveness, and forming their intention to apply.

Table 3. Characteristics of Respondents Based on School Type

No	Description	Qty	Percentage
1	Public Senior High School	64	53.3%
2	Private Senior High School	56	46.7%
	Total Qty	120	100%

Source: Questionnaire respondents, 2025

Based on Table 3, the majority of respondents come from public senior high schools, comprising 53.3% of the sample. Meanwhile, 46.7% of respondents come from private senior high schools. This distribution shows that the study includes students from both public and private educational backgrounds, making the sample more representative of prospective university students in Surabaya. The inclusion of both school types is important because students from different school environments may have different levels of exposure to university promotion, digital information, social media content, and online search behavior. Therefore, this respondent composition provides a useful basis for examining how digital engagement influences campus attractiveness and behavioral intention to apply among prospective university students.

3.2. *Validity, Reliability, and Multicollinearity Test*

The data collected through the questionnaire were processed and analyzed using SPSS software. The analysis produced outputs such as corrected item-total correlation and Cronbach's alpha, which were used to evaluate the validity and reliability of each questionnaire item based on the indicators of each variable. For the validity test, the corrected item-total correlation value should exceed the minimum threshold of the r-table. With 120 respondents, the minimum r-table value at the 5% significance level is approximately 0.179. For reliability, the Cronbach's alpha value must be above 0.70 to indicate acceptable internal consistency (Ghozali, 2017). In addition, multicollinearity was assessed using tolerance and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). The model is considered free from multicollinearity when the tolerance value is greater than 0.10 and the VIF value is below 10.

Table 4. Validity, Reliability, and Multicollinearity Test

Variable	Indicator	Validity Test	Reliability Test	Tolerance	VIF
Digital Content Quality (DCQ)	DCQ1	.612	.812	.421	2.375
	DCQ2	.687			
	DCQ3	.641			
Social Media Engagement (SME)	SME1	.598	.824	.388	2.577
	SME2	.715			
	SME3	.669			
Website Usability (WU)	WU1	.521	.741	.512	1.953
	WU2	.604			
	WU3	.573			
Online Brand Reputation (OBR)	OBR1	.646	.833	.365	2.740
	OBR2	.722			
	OBR3	.681			
Search Engine Visibility (SEV)	SEV1	.557	.764	.476	2.101
	SEV2	.633			
	SEV3	.592			
Campus Attractiveness (CA)	CA1	.672	.846	-	-
	CA2	.748			
	CA3	.701			
Behavioral Intention to Apply (BIA)	BIA1	.681	.858	-	-
	BIA2	.759			
	BIA3	.716			

Source: SPSS, 2026

The results of the validity, reliability, and multicollinearity tests presented in Table 4 indicate that all indicators used in this study are valid and reliable. Each corrected item-total correlation value is higher than the minimum r-table value of 0.179, indicating that all questionnaire items are valid for measuring their respective constructs. Furthermore, all Cronbach's alpha values exceed 0.70, confirming that the measurement items have acceptable internal consistency. The multicollinearity test also shows that all tolerance values are greater than 0.10 and all VIF values are below 10. Therefore, the independent variables in this study are free from multicollinearity problems and are appropriate for further regression analysis.

3.3. Normality Test

The normality test was conducted to evaluate whether the residuals in the regression model were normally distributed (Ghozali, 2017). In this study, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was applied to examine the normality of the residuals. If the Asymp. Sig. value is greater than 0.05, the residuals are considered normally distributed, indicating that the regression model is suitable for further analysis.

Table 5. Normality Test

No.	Equation	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	Critical Number	Description
1	DCQ, SME, WU, OBR, SEV → CA	0.067	0.05	Normal
2	CA → BIA	0.074	0.05	Normal

Source: Researcher, 2026

Based on Table 5, the Asymp. Sig. values for both regression equations are greater than the threshold of 0.05. The first equation, which examines the influence of Digital Content Quality, Social Media Engagement, Website Usability, Online Brand Reputation, and Search Engine Visibility on Campus Attractiveness, has an Asymp. Sig. value of 0.067.

The second equation, which examines the influence of Campus Attractiveness on Behavioral Intention to Apply, has an Asymp. Sig. value of 0.074. These results indicate that the residuals in both regression models are normally distributed. This conclusion is further supported by the P-P Plot, where the data points are distributed closely along the diagonal line, confirming that the normality assumption has been fulfilled.

3.4. Multiple Regression, T-Test, and Sobel Test

Table 6. Multiple Regression and T-Test

Variable	Standardised Coef.	Sig.	Description
DCQ → CA	.284	.001	Hypothesis Accepted
SME → CA	.251	.003	Hypothesis Accepted
WU → CA	.092	.214	Hypothesis Rejected
OBR → CA	.301	.000	Hypothesis Accepted
SEV → CA	.198	.018	Hypothesis Accepted
CA → BIA	.672	.000	Hypothesis Accepted

Source: SPSS, 2026

The results of the t-test significance presented in Table 6 indicate that most of the proposed hypotheses are supported. Digital Content Quality has a positive and significant effect on Campus Attractiveness, with a significance value of 0.001, supporting H1. Social Media Engagement also has a positive and significant effect on Campus Attractiveness, with a significance value of 0.003, supporting H2. Online Brand Reputation shows the strongest positive effect on Campus Attractiveness, with a standardized coefficient of 0.301 and a significance value of 0.000, supporting H4. Search Engine Visibility also has a positive and significant effect on Campus Attractiveness, with a significance value of 0.018, supporting H5.

However, Website Usability does not significantly affect Campus Attractiveness, as its significance value is 0.214, which is greater than the 0.05 threshold. Therefore, H3 is rejected. This finding indicates that although Website Usability has a positive coefficient, its influence is not statistically strong enough to explain Campus Attractiveness in this study. Furthermore, Campus Attractiveness has a positive and significant effect on Behavioral Intention to Apply, with a standardized coefficient of 0.672 and a significance value of 0.000, supporting H6. This result confirms that Campus Attractiveness is an important predictor of prospective students' intention to apply.

To examine the mediating role of Campus Attractiveness, the Sobel test was conducted. The Sobel test was used to determine whether Campus Attractiveness significantly mediates the relationship between each digital marketing dimension and Behavioral Intention to Apply. The results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Sobel Test for Mediation Effect

Hypothesis	Mediation Path	Sobel Test Statistic	Sig.	Description
H7	DCQ → CA → BIA	3.214	.001	Hypothesis Accepted
H8	SME → CA → BIA	2.897	.004	Hypothesis Accepted
H9	WU → CA → BIA	1.211	.226	Hypothesis Rejected
H10	OBR → CA → BIA	3.486	.000	Hypothesis Accepted
H11	SEV → CA → BIA	2.356	.018	Hypothesis Accepted

Source: SPSS, 2026

Based on Table 7, the Sobel test results show that Campus Attractiveness significantly mediates the relationship between Digital Content Quality and Behavioral Intention to Apply, with a Sobel test statistic of 3.214 and a significance value of 0.001. Therefore, H7 is accepted. This result indicates that high-quality digital content increases students' perception of campus attractiveness, which subsequently strengthens their intention to apply.

Campus Attractiveness also significantly mediates the relationship between Social Media Engagement and Behavioral Intention to Apply, with a Sobel test statistic of 2.897 and a significance value of 0.004. Thus, H8 is accepted. This finding suggests that active and engaging social media communication can enhance campus attractiveness and indirectly increase students' intention to apply.

However, Campus Attractiveness does not significantly mediate the relationship between Website Usability and Behavioral Intention to Apply. The Sobel test statistic is 1.211 with a significance value of 0.226, which is greater than 0.05. Therefore, H9 is rejected. This result is consistent with the direct effect analysis, which shows that Website Usability does not significantly influence Campus Attractiveness.

Furthermore, Campus Attractiveness significantly mediates the relationship between Online Brand Reputation and Behavioral Intention to Apply, with a Sobel test statistic of 3.486 and a significance value of 0.000. Therefore, H10 is accepted. This indicates that a strong online brand reputation enhances students' perception of campus attractiveness, which in turn increases their intention to apply.

Finally, Campus Attractiveness significantly mediates the relationship between Search Engine Visibility and Behavioral Intention to Apply, with a Sobel test statistic of 2.356 and a significance value of 0.018. Therefore, H11 is accepted. This finding suggests that when a university is easily found through search engines, prospective students are more likely to perceive the campus as attractive, which subsequently strengthens their behavioral intention to apply.

Overall, the results indicate that Campus Attractiveness plays an important mediating role in transforming digital engagement into Behavioral Intention to Apply. Digital Content Quality, Social Media Engagement, Online Brand Reputation, and Search Engine Visibility significantly influence students' intention to apply through Campus Attractiveness. However, Website Usability does not show a significant direct or indirect effect in this model. This finding implies that prospective students may place greater importance on persuasive digital content, social interaction, online reputation, and search visibility than on technical website usability when forming perceptions of campus attractiveness.

3.5. F-Test

Table 8. F-Test

Variable	Sig.	Standard	Hypothesis
DCQ, SME, WU, OBR, SEV → CA	0.000	0.05	Hypothesis Accepted
CA → BIA	0.000	0.05	Hypothesis Accepted

Source: SPSS, 2026

Based on the F-test results presented in Table 8, it can be concluded that Digital Content Quality, Social Media Engagement, Website Usability, Online Brand Reputation, and Search Engine Visibility collectively have a statistically significant effect on Campus Attractiveness. This is shown by the significance value of 0.000, which is below the 0.05 threshold. Therefore, the regression model explaining Campus Attractiveness is accepted and considered statistically feasible.

In addition, the second regression model shows that Campus Attractiveness has a statistically significant effect on Behavioral Intention to Apply, as indicated by a significance value of 0.000, which is also below 0.05. This result confirms that Campus Attractiveness is an important predictor of prospective students' Behavioral Intention to Apply.

Overall, the F-test results indicate that the proposed regression models are statistically significant. However, the F-test only confirms the simultaneous effect of the independent variables on the dependent variable. The individual influence of each variable should still be interpreted based on the t-test results presented in the previous section. Thus, although the overall model is significant, Website Usability may still be insignificant individually, as shown in the multiple regression and t-test results.

4. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how digital marketing dimensions influence prospective students' Behavioral Intention to Apply through Campus Attractiveness. The study focused on five key digital engagement variables, namely Digital Content Quality, Social Media Engagement, Website Usability, Online Brand Reputation, and Search Engine Visibility. The findings show that most of the proposed hypotheses were supported. Digital Content Quality, Social Media Engagement, Online Brand Reputation, and Search Engine Visibility were found to have positive and significant effects on Campus Attractiveness. Furthermore, Campus Attractiveness had a strong and significant

influence on Behavioral Intention to Apply. However, Website Usability did not significantly influence Campus Attractiveness, leading to the rejection of H3.

The significant effect of Digital Content Quality on Campus Attractiveness indicates that prospective students are strongly influenced by the quality, relevance, clarity, and attractiveness of digital information provided by universities. This finding suggests that students do not merely seek basic information about study programs, tuition fees, or admission procedures; they also evaluate how well a university communicates its academic identity, student life, achievements, facilities, and future value. This result is consistent with Benchekroun et al. (2024), who found that digital marketing practices, especially content marketing, contribute to student experience in higher education. Therefore, high-quality digital content can function as an institutional signal that strengthens students' perception of a campus as credible, modern, and attractive.

Social Media Engagement was also found to have a positive and significant effect on Campus Attractiveness. This result confirms that social media is not only a promotional channel but also a relational platform that allows universities to build interaction, responsiveness, authenticity, and emotional connection with prospective students. Through social media, students can observe campus activities, student testimonials, achievements, events, and informal aspects of university life. Li et al. (2025) found that social media communication and brand image influence international students' enrollment intentions, particularly when the communication is interactive, transparent, and authentic. Thus, universities that actively engage prospective students through social media are more likely to be perceived as attractive and student-centered.

The findings further reveal that Online Brand Reputation has the strongest effect on Campus Attractiveness among the digital marketing dimensions. This result indicates that prospective students place considerable importance on the credibility, trustworthiness, and public image of a university. Since choosing a university involves long-term academic, financial, and career implications, students tend to rely on reputation signals to reduce uncertainty. A strong online brand reputation can make a university appear more prestigious, reliable, and desirable. This finding is consistent with recent research showing that brand image plays an important role in shaping enrollment intention in higher education. Li et al. (2025) emphasized that brand image functions as a key mechanism through which digital communication influences students' enrollment-related preferences.

Search Engine Visibility was also found to significantly influence Campus Attractiveness. This result suggests that universities that are easily found through search engines have a greater opportunity to enter students' awareness and consideration set. For Grade 12 students who are actively searching for university information, search engine visibility may create an impression that the institution is accessible, credible, and professionally managed. This finding supports the view that search visibility is part of the broader digital marketing infrastructure in higher education. However, the effect of SEO should not be interpreted merely as technical ranking performance. Rather, it reflects how easily prospective students can discover relevant, credible, and useful university information during the early stages of their decision-making process.

In contrast, Website Usability did not significantly affect Campus Attractiveness. Although the coefficient was positive, the significance value was above the 0.05 threshold, indicating that H3 was rejected. This finding suggests that website usability may no longer be a strong differentiating factor for Grade 12 students in this context. One possible explanation is that students may perceive website usability as a basic requirement rather than a distinctive source of campus attractiveness. In other words, a usable website is expected, but it may not be sufficient to make a university appear more attractive. Another possible explanation is that prospective students rely more heavily on social media, online reputation, and search results than on official websites when forming early perceptions of a university. This result differs from Kaur et al. (2026), who found that university website usability influences application intention through university attractiveness, suggesting that the role of website usability may vary depending on context, student behavior, and the quality of alternative digital channels.

Campus Attractiveness was found to have a strong and significant effect on Behavioral Intention to Apply, with a standardized coefficient of 0.672. This result confirms that students are more likely to apply when they perceive a university as attractive, credible, suitable, and aligned with their aspirations. Campus Attractiveness therefore acts as an important psychological mechanism in the student decision-making process. This finding is consistent with the Stimulus-Organism-Response perspective, in which digital marketing dimensions serve as external stimuli, Campus Attractiveness functions as the internal evaluative response, and Behavioral Intention to Apply represents the behavioral outcome. Kaur et al. (2026) similarly emphasized that university attractiveness functions as a mediating mechanism between digital and brand-related stimuli and application intention.

The Sobel test results further confirm the mediating role of Campus Attractiveness. Campus Attractiveness significantly mediated the effects of Digital Content Quality, Social Media Engagement, Online Brand Reputation, and

Search Engine Visibility on Behavioral Intention to Apply. These results indicate that digital engagement does not directly create enrollment intention in a mechanical way. Instead, digital marketing becomes effective when it first strengthens students' perception that the campus is attractive and worth considering. However, Campus Attractiveness did not significantly mediate the effect of Website Usability on Behavioral Intention to Apply. This result is consistent with the rejected direct effect of Website Usability on Campus Attractiveness, suggesting that website usability did not provide a strong enough perceptual stimulus to influence students' intention through attractiveness.

The demographic characteristics of the respondents also provide important context for interpreting the findings. The respondents consisted of 120 Grade 12 high school students in Surabaya, with the majority being 17 years old. This age group is highly relevant because students at this stage are actively considering university options and are highly exposed to digital information. The sample also included students from both public and private senior high schools, providing a broader perspective on how prospective students from different school backgrounds evaluate university digital engagement. Since these students belong to a digitally familiar generation, it is reasonable that they respond more strongly to content quality, social media interaction, online reputation, and search visibility than to basic website usability.

Overall, the findings indicate that Campus Attractiveness plays a crucial role in transforming digital engagement into Behavioral Intention to Apply. Universities should not treat digital marketing as fragmented promotional activity. Instead, digital content, social media engagement, online reputation, search visibility, and website experience should be managed as an integrated digital ecosystem that builds institutional attractiveness. The insignificant effect of Website Usability should not be interpreted as meaning that university websites are unimportant. Rather, it suggests that usability alone may be insufficient unless it is combined with persuasive content, strong branding, interactive communication, and credible digital visibility. For higher education institutions, the strategic implication is clear: digital marketing should be designed not only to inform prospective students, but to make the university meaningfully attractive in their decision-making process.

5. CONCLUSION

This research provides valuable insights into how digital engagement influences prospective students' Behavioral Intention to Apply through Campus Attractiveness. The study confirms the important role of Digital Content Quality, Social Media Engagement, Online Brand Reputation, and Search Engine Visibility in shaping students' perceptions of Campus Attractiveness. Furthermore, Campus Attractiveness was found to have a significant positive effect on Behavioral Intention to Apply, indicating that students are more likely to apply to a university when they perceive the campus as attractive, credible, and relevant to their academic aspirations.

For higher education institutions aiming to increase student enrollment intention, strengthening digital marketing strategies is essential. Universities should not treat digital platforms merely as information channels, but as strategic tools for building campus attractiveness. High-quality digital content should present academic programs, student achievements, campus life, facilities, career prospects, scholarships, and institutional strengths in a clear, attractive, and persuasive manner. When prospective students perceive digital content as informative, relevant, and credible, they are more likely to develop a positive impression of the university.

The study also highlights the importance of Social Media Engagement in increasing Campus Attractiveness. Universities should actively manage their social media platforms by creating interactive, authentic, and student-centered communication. Content such as student testimonials, campus activities, lecturer profiles, alumni success stories, live sessions, and admission-related updates can help prospective students feel more connected to the institution. Since Grade 12 students are highly familiar with social media, universities need to use these platforms not only for promotion, but also for relationship-building and trust formation.

Online Brand Reputation was also found to be a significant factor influencing Campus Attractiveness. This finding suggests that prospective students consider the credibility, image, and public perception of a university before forming their intention to apply. Therefore, universities should strengthen their online reputation by consistently communicating institutional achievements, accreditation status, graduate employability, alumni success, academic excellence, and positive student experiences. A strong online reputation can reduce uncertainty and increase students' confidence in choosing a university.

Search Engine Visibility also plays an important role in shaping Campus Attractiveness. Universities that are easily found through search engines have a greater opportunity to enter prospective students' awareness and consideration set. Therefore, higher education institutions should improve their search engine optimization strategies by ensuring that their websites contain relevant keywords, updated admission information, clear program descriptions, and accessible digital

content. Strong search visibility helps universities become more discoverable, credible, and competitive in the digital recruitment landscape.

An unexpected finding of this research was the rejection of Website Usability as a significant predictor of Campus Attractiveness. Although Website Usability showed a positive relationship, its effect was not statistically significant. This suggests that prospective students may consider website usability as a basic expectation rather than a distinctive factor that makes a campus attractive. In other words, a user-friendly website is necessary, but it may not be sufficient to influence students' perceptions unless it is supported by strong content, appealing visuals, credible information, engaging social media, and a positive online reputation.

The Sobel test results further confirm the mediating role of Campus Attractiveness. Campus Attractiveness significantly mediated the influence of Digital Content Quality, Social Media Engagement, Online Brand Reputation, and Search Engine Visibility on Behavioral Intention to Apply. This indicates that digital marketing dimensions influence students' application intention primarily by first strengthening their perception of the university as attractive. However, Campus Attractiveness did not mediate the relationship between Website Usability and Behavioral Intention to Apply, which is consistent with the insignificant direct effect of Website Usability on Campus Attractiveness.

Overall, this study concludes that Campus Attractiveness is a key psychological mechanism that connects digital engagement with enrollment intention. Universities should focus not only on increasing digital presence, but also on ensuring that every digital touchpoint contributes to a stronger perception of institutional attractiveness. For universities competing for prospective students, the strategic priority should be to integrate digital content quality, social media engagement, online brand reputation, search visibility, and website experience into a coherent digital marketing strategy. By doing so, higher education institutions can enhance campus attractiveness, strengthen prospective students' intention to apply, and improve their competitiveness in the increasingly digitalized higher education market.

Finally, this study is limited by its focus on 120 Grade 12 high school students in Surabaya, Indonesia, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader prospective student populations in other cities, provinces, or countries. Future research should examine digital engagement and enrollment intention in different higher education contexts by involving larger and more diverse samples, including students from various socioeconomic backgrounds, school types, academic tracks, and geographic regions. Further studies may also compare public and private universities or investigate whether digital marketing dimensions have different effects across institutional types. In addition, future research should consider using longitudinal data to examine how prospective students' perceptions of campus attractiveness and intention to apply change over time during the university selection process. Future studies could also incorporate additional variables such as parental influence, peer recommendation, perceived tuition value, institutional trust, scholarship attractiveness, and perceived career prospects to provide a more comprehensive understanding of enrollment intention in higher education.

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