Digital Marketing, Social media, and Public Trust: A Mediation Model of Prospective Cadet Enrollment Intention in Maritime Higher Education

Retno Sawitri Wulandari[1], Isra Ferdinand[1]*, Natanael Suranta[1], B. B. Harianto[2]

[1]Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Pelayaran, Marunda Makmur St., Special Capital Region of Jakarta, 14150, Indonesia

[2]Politeknik Penerbangan Surabaya, Jemur Andayani I St. No. 73, Surabaya, East Java, 60236 Indonesia

*Corresponding author, email: israa.ferdinan@gmail.com

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Abstract
The rapid expansion of digital marketing and social media has transformed student recruitment strategies in higher education, particularly in competitive and specialized institutions. However, the mechanisms through which digital strategies translate into actual enrollment intention remain theoretically and empirically contested. This study examines how Digital Marketing and Social media influence Prospective Cadet Interest through the mediating role of Public Trust in a maritime higher education institution. Using a quantitative explanatory design, data were collected from 97 respondents drawn proportionally from a population of 2,836 applicants (2020–2023). The model was tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to evaluate both direct and indirect relationships among constructs. Results indicate that Digital Marketing and social media significantly enhance Public Trust and directly influence Prospective Cadet Interest. Public Trust also exerts a significant positive effect on enrollment intention and partially mediates the relation between digital strategies and interest. Measurement and structural models satisfied reliability and validity criteria, confirming the robustness of the proposed mediation framework. These findings highlight the strategic importance of trust-based digital communication, demonstrating that credible signaling and engagement quality are essential for converting digital visibility into enrollment growth in specialized higher education contexts.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, digital marketing has reshaped higher education recruitment, shifting institutions from static, one-directional promotion toward integrated, data-driven, and multimodal campaigns built on branding, targeted communication, and platform-specific ecosystems (Balaji, 2025; Prasetya et al., 2025). To reach digitally native cohorts such as Generation Z, institutions now combine social media marketing, content personalization, user-generated and influencer content, search engine marketing, and website optimization into a single recruitment architecture (Sarder & Mustaqeem, 2024; Gupta, 2025).

Despite heavy investment in these channels, the mechanisms through which digital strategies are converted into actual enrollment decisions remain poorly understood and empirically contested. Expanded visibility does not reliably translate into applications, and institutions increasingly struggle to explain why comparable digital exposure produces markedly different enrollment outcomes (Thomas & Verma, 2023; Saksono et al., 2025). This conversion problem is especially acute for specialized vocational institutions, where generic promotional cues rarely communicate program-specific value, making it unclear what actually turns digital attention into prospective-cadet interest (Sarder & Mustaqeem, 2024; Febriansah et al., 2023).

A focused reading of the literature points to public trust as the decisive link between digital effort and enrollment behavior. Social media engagement shapes how prospective students perceive institutional credibility, and credible, interactive content strengthens perceived value and trust, which in turn drives enrollment intention (Shneikat et al., 2024; Sriyanto et al., 2024). Across online settings, trust frequently mediates, fully or partially, the relationship between engagement and enrollment intention, particularly where information asymmetry is high (Juhaidi et al., 2024).

The literature also distinguishes engagement quality from mere visibility: follower counts and impressions expand reach but, without credible content, produce weak behavioral effects, whereas message credibility,

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interactivity, and platform reputation more strongly predict enrollment behavior (Thomas & Verma, 2023; Kim & Yoon, 2023). Trust itself is multidimensional, encompassing cognitive, affective, intention-based, and experience-based components, and is sustained by transparency and consistency between institutional promises and observable outcomes (Lawal, 2025).

At the market level, rising internet penetration intensifies competition and amplifies informational noise, pushing institutions to compete on trust and personalized signaling rather than reach alone (Ruziyeva, 2025; Balaji, 2025). Emerging formats such as livestreaming and influencer-based promotion further heighten the salience of credibility and authenticity in shaping prospective students' behavioral intentions (Panya, 2025; Magano et al., 2022).

Against this backdrop, three gaps stand out and motivate the present study. First, although many studies associate digital marketing and social media with behavioral intention, few model public trust explicitly as a mediating construct, leaving the causal pathway from digital signals to enrollment largely untested. Second, the evidence base is dominated by general universities, so sector-specific and maritime vocational institutions, where professional credibility is decisive, remain underexplored. Third, engagement quality and visibility are rarely integrated within a single structural model capable of separating direct from indirect effects, which limits understanding of how, and how strongly, trust transmits digital influence into enrollment intention.

Accordingly, this study examines the direct effects of digital marketing and social media on public trust and prospective cadet interest, together with the mediating role of trust, in a maritime higher education institution, using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling to disentangle direct and indirect effects. Its novelty lies in integrating digital marketing strategy, social media engagement, and multidimensional public trust into a single explanatory model of enrollment intention, thereby extending educational-marketing theory toward a trust-centered, analytics-informed recruitment paradigm for specialized vocational contexts.

Empirically, prior studies converge on three points that frame this study. First, structured digital-marketing implementation strengthens brand awareness, institutional visibility, and promotional effectiveness, whereas weak planning and monitoring erode these gains (Jubaidi et al., 2022; Balaji, 2025; Prasetya et al., 2025). Second, social-media promotion through responsive communication, active content updates, and service-oriented interaction builds perceived credibility and shapes prospective students' information search and program-selection decisions (Sriyanto et al., 2024; Sarder & Mustaqeem, 2024). Third, across contexts social media operates not merely as a promotional outlet but as an interactive environment that guides evaluation and, ultimately, enrollment intention (Thomas & Verma, 2023; Saksono et al., 2025).

Within this evidence base, public trust emerges as the pivotal link between digital effort and enrollment behavior: credible, interactive content strengthens perceived value and institutional trust, which in turn drives enrollment intention, and trust frequently mediates fully or partially the engagement–intention relationship where information asymmetry is high (Shneikat et al., 2024; Juhaidi et al., 2024; Sriyanto et al., 2024). This mediating logic positions public trust as the mechanism this study models explicitly..

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, explanatory design to examine the structural relationships among Digital Marketing (X1), Social media (X2), Public Trust (Y), and Prospective Cadet Interest (Z) within a maritime higher education context. The research model, derived from the conceptual framework (see Figure 2.1), specifies both direct and mediated effects, positioning Public Trust as a mediating construct between digital strategies and enrollment intention.

To test these relationships, the study utilized Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). PLS-SEM is appropriate for mediation testing in digital marketing research because it enables the simultaneous estimation of multiple direct and indirect relationships within a single structural model (Juhaidi et al., 2024; Kalijaga Journal of Communication; Asian Journal of Research in Business and Management; Behavioral Science). The method is particularly suitable for models that include latent constructs, mediation pathways, and relatively small sample sizes, as it does not require multivariate normality and emphasizes a prediction-oriented analysis.

PLS-SEM further supports bootstrapping procedures for assessing the significance of indirect (mediated) effects, which are essential for evaluating hypotheses such as Digital Marketing → Public Trust → Prospective Cadet Interest and social media → Public Trust → Prospective Cadet Interest. The technique can accommodate parallel mediators and complex structural paths involving content, brand, and platform credibility within dynamic digital ecosystems (Nurture; Asian Journal of Research in Business and Management; Behavioral Science).

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The research model specifies four constructs: Digital Marketing (X1) and Social Media (X2) as exogenous variables, Public Trust (Y) as a mediating variable, and Prospective Cadet Interest (Z) as the dependent variable. Digital Marketing and Social Media are modelled as direct antecedents of both Public Trust and Prospective Cadet Interest, while Public Trust transmits their influence to Prospective Cadet Interest. The model therefore integrates direct paths (X1→Z; X2→Z) with indirect, trust-mediated paths (X1→Y→Z; X2→Y→Z), as depicted in Figure 1.

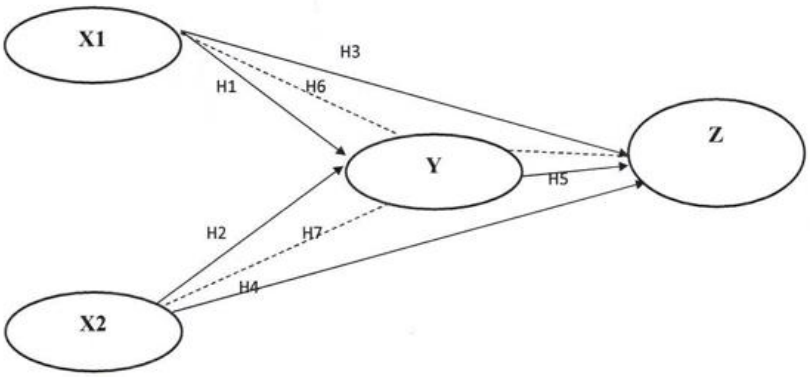


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Model

Accordingly, five direct hypotheses are tested: Digital Marketing positively influences Public Trust (H1) and Prospective Cadet Interest (H3); Social Media positively influences Public Trust (H2) and Prospective Cadet Interest (H4); and Public Trust positively influences Prospective Cadet Interest (H5). Two mediated hypotheses complete the model: Public Trust mediates the effect of Digital Marketing (H6) and of Social Media (H7) on Prospective Cadet Interest.

2.2. Data and Sampling

2.2.1. Population

The population consisted of all applicants to the institution from 2020 to 2023, totaling 2,836 individuals. The annual distribution is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of Applicants by Year (2020–2023)

Year	Number of Applicants
2020	431
2021	355
2022	953
2023	1,097
Total	2,836

Applicants were distributed across three departments: Nautical (1,439), Engineering (555), and Port and Shipping Management (842), for a total of 2,836.

2.2.2. Sampling Technique and Sample Size

The study employed non-probability sampling with proportional allocation. Non-probability approaches such as convenience and purposive sampling are commonly used in higher education marketing research, particularly in exploratory or theory-testing contexts (Ambarwati & Sari, 2023). While probability-based sampling enhances generalizability, non-probability methods remain methodologically acceptable when research focuses on a defined institutional population and acknowledges contextual limitations.

Sample size was determined using the Slovin formula:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2} \quad (1)$$

$$n = \frac{2836}{1+2836(0.1)^2}$$

$$n = 96.594$$

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With N = 2,836, the calculated minimum sample size was 96.594, rounded to 97 respondents. The proportional sample distribution is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Sample Distribution (n = 97)

Department	Calculation	Sample
Nautical	1439/2836 × 97	49
Engineering	555/2836 × 97	19
Port and Shipping Management	842/2836 × 97	29
Total		97

A pretest involving 30 respondents was conducted prior to full data collection to evaluate instrument clarity and preliminary reliability. The pretest allocation is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Pretest Distribution (n = 30)

Department	Calculation	Pretest
Nautical	1439/2836 × 30	15
Engineering	555/2836 × 30	6
Port and Shipping Management	842/2836 × 30	9
Total		**30**

2.3. Measurement of Constructs

All constructs were measured using multi-item instruments adapted from validated scales in prior research. Survey-based measurement with multi-item constructs is common in digital marketing and trust research to reliably capture latent variables (Nurture; Kalijaga Journal of Communication; Asian Journal of Research in Business and Management). Digital Marketing (X1) was defined through items assessing integrated online channels, personalization, content relevance, and analytics-driven communication. Social media (X2) was measured using items capturing perceived social media marketing activities, interaction quality, customization, and engagement levels. Public Trust (Y) was measured through items reflecting institutional credibility, integrity, reliability, and signaling trustworthiness, aligning with the theoretical distinctions between trustworthiness and trust (IEEE Engineering Management Review; Annual Review of Public Health). Prospective Cadet Interest (Z) was assessed using standardized intention scales that captured the likelihood of enrollment, willingness to seek additional information, and positive perception of institutional programs (Behavioral Science).

All items employed a five-point Likert scale. The scale structure is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Likert Scale Weighting

No	Response Category	Score
1	Strongly Agree	5
2	Agree	4
3	Neutral	3
4	Disagree	2
5	Strongly Disagree	1

2.4. Data Collection Procedures

Primary data were gathered through structured questionnaires given to selected respondents. Quantitative Survey methods are suitable for testing predefined hypotheses and allowing statistical generalization (Creswell, 2014). The questionnaire was administered after pilot testing to ensure clarity and measurement reliability. Secondary data, such as applicant statistics and institutional records, were used to provide context for the research setting but were not included in hypothesis testing.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SmartPLS software with a two-stage approach: evaluating the measurement model (outer model) and the structural model (inner model). Assessment of the measurement model included internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability), convergent validity (outer loadings and Average Variance Extracted), and discriminant validity (cross-loading and Fornell–Larcker criteria). Indicators with loadings above 0.70 were retained to ensure adequate construct validity. Structural model evaluation involved estimating path coefficients, R^2 values, and testing mediation effects using bootstrapping procedures. A relationship was considered statistically significant when the t-statistic > 1.96 and $p < 0.05$. The relationships tested correspond to hypotheses H1–H7 specified in the conceptual framework. PLS-SEM's ability to model both direct and mediated pathways within a single framework supports theory testing and predictive

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analysis in digital marketing ecosystems characterized by multiple signaling mechanisms and relational constructs (Juhaidi et al., 2024; Behavioral Science).

2.6. Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

Construct reliability was confirmed through internal consistency, and convergent and discriminant validity were validated within the measurement model. Cross-loadings above 0.70 and higher loadings on the intended constructs demonstrated discriminant validity. Ethically, participation was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were informed of the study's academic purpose and assured that their responses would remain confidential. No personally identifiable information was disclosed. Data were analyzed collectively, in accordance with the principles of transparency, responsible research conduct, and institutional accountability. Overall, the quantitative survey design combined with PLS-SEM analysis offers a strong methodological framework for examining how digital marketing and social media strategies influence prospective cadet interest through the mediating role of public trust in a specialized higher education setting context.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Respondent and Data Overview

Table 1 reports the applicant population for 2020–2023 (N = 2,836), which rose from 431 in 2020 to 1,097 in 2023. This upward trend establishes the recruitment landscape within which the structural relationships among Digital Marketing, Social Media, Public Trust, and Prospective Cadet Interest are analyzed, drawing on the 97 proportionally allocated respondents described in the Method section.

Convergent validity was evaluated using outer loadings obtained with SmartPLS. Indicators are deemed acceptable when loadings are above 0.70. Most indicators met this criterion, with loadings ranging from 0.572 to 0.928 (see Table 5). The highest observed loading was 0.928, demonstrating strong convergence on its intended construct. Although one indicator had a loading of 0.572, it still fell within an acceptable exploratory range.

Table 5. Outer Model

Variable	Dimension	Dimension Loading Factor	Indicator	Indicator Loading Factor	Note
Digital Marketing (X1)	Content Marketing	0.946	X1_1	0.833	Valid
			X1_2	0.868	Valid
			X1_3	0.841	Valid
	Social Media Marketing	0.970	X1_4	0.919	Valid
			X1_5	0.780	Valid
			X1_6	0.866	Valid
	SEO	0.974	X1_7	0.857	Valid
			X1_8	0.736	Valid
			X1_9	0.810	Valid
Social Media (X2)	Interaction Volume	0.968	X2_1	0.788	Valid
			X2_2	0.827	Valid
			X2_3	0.917	Valid
			X2_4	0.936	Valid
	Velocity and Interconnectedness	0.878	X2_5	0.916	Valid
			X2_6	0.902	Valid
Public Trust (Y)	Cognitive Trust	0.946	Y_1	0.894	Valid
			Y_2	0.871	Valid
	Affective Trust	0.884	Y_3	0.931	Valid
			Y_4	0.925	Valid
	Intention-based Trust	0.931	Y_5	0.922	Valid
			Y_6	0.893	Valid
	Experience-based Trust	0.927	Y_7	0.923	Valid
			Y_8	0.932	Valid
Prospective Cadet Interest (Z)	Awareness and Information	0.848	Z_1	0.889	Valid
			Z_2	0.913	Valid
	Interest and Visits	0.958	Z_3	0.959	Valid
			Z_4	0.839	Valid
			Z_5	0.968	Valid
	Peer and Family Influence	0.955	Z_6	0.855	Valid
			Z_7	0.951	Valid

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3.1.1. Discriminant Validity (Cross-Loading Analysis)

Discriminant validity was evaluated using cross-loading analysis. Each indicator was required to load higher on its assigned construct than on any other construct, with a recommended threshold of 0.70 or higher.

Table 6 displays the cross-loadings for selected indicators in the measurement model. Cross-loading analysis in PLS-SEM assesses discriminant validity by examining whether each indicator loads more strongly on its intended construct than on any other construct. The table shows that indicator Z_4 loads 0.815 on its primary construct, which is higher than its loadings on the other constructs (0.743, 0.732, and 0.716). Similarly, Z_5 shows the highest loading of 0.928 on its designated construct compared to 0.745, 0.907, and 0.713 on other constructs. Indicator Z_6 displays its strongest loading at 0.756 relative to lower cross-loadings (0.617, 0.572, and 0.603). Indicator Z_7 also exhibits the highest loading of 0.911 on its primary construct compared to 0.718, 0.873, and 0.691 on the remaining constructs. Although some cross-loadings, like 0.907 and 0.873, are relatively high, each indicator consistently shows the strongest loading on its intended construct. This pattern confirms adequate discriminant validity, indicating that the constructs of Digital Marketing, social media, Public Trust, and Prospective Cadet Interest are empirically distinct. In the context of the study, Digital Marketing, social media, and Public Trust: A Mediation Model of Prospective Cadet Enrollment Intention in Maritime Higher Education, these results strengthen the measurement model's validity. By confirming that each indicator reliably represents its respective latent variable, Table 7 supports the robustness of subsequent structural (inner model) analysis and mediation testing involving Public Trust as an intervening construct.

Table 6. Cross-Loading Values

Indicator	Construct 1	Construct 2	Construct 3	Construct 4
Z_4	0.743	0.732	0.716	0.815
Z_5	0.745	0.907	0.713	0.928
Z_6	0.617	0.572	0.603	0.756
Z_7	0.718	0.873	0.691	0.911

3.1.2. Reliability Assessment

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha. All constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, supporting internal consistency. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.50, confirming convergent validity in accordance with PLS-SEM standards (Behavioral Science).

3.2. Structural Model Evaluation

Table 7 shows the results of the direct effect analysis using PLS-SEM for the study titled "Digital Marketing, Social Media, and Public Trust: A Mediation Model of Prospective Cadet Enrollment Intention in Maritime Higher Education." The table displays the path coefficients (Original Sample), T-statistics, P-values, and significance decisions for hypotheses H1-H5. The results reveal that all hypothesized direct relationships are positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Digital Marketing (X1) has a strong and significant impact on Public Trust (Y), with a path coefficient of 0.748, a T-statistic of 8.488, and a P-value of 0.000. This indicates that digital marketing activities significantly contribute to increasing institutional trust among prospective cadets. Social media (X2) also significantly affects Public Trust (Y) ($\beta = 0.185$; $T = 2.015$; $p = 0.022$), suggesting that engagement and presence on social media platforms help build trust, although the effect size is smaller compared to Digital Marketing.

Table 7. Direct Influence Analysis

Hypothesis	Path Relationship	Original Sample (O)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values	Result
H1	Digital Marketing (X1) → Public Trust (Y)	0.748	8.488	0.000	Positive and Significant
H2	Social media (X2) → Public Trust (Y)	0.185	2.015	0.022	Positive and Significant
H3	Digital Marketing (X1) → Prospective Cadet Interest (Z)	0.245	2.400	0.017	Positive and Significant
H4	Social media (X2) → Prospective Cadet Interest (Z)	0.645	4.115	0.000	Positive and Significant
H5	Public Trust (Y) → Prospective Cadet Interest (Z)	0.371	2.872	0.004	Positive and Significant

Regarding enrollment intention, Digital Marketing (X1) significantly impacts Prospective Cadet Interest (Z) (Œ≤ = 0.245; T = 2.400; p = 0.017), while social media (X2) shows a stronger direct effect (Œ≤ = 0.645; T = 4.115; p = 0.000). This emphasizes the importance of social media engagement in directly boosting prospective cadets' interest. Finally, Public Trust (Y) significantly affects Prospective Cadet Interest (Z) (Œ≤ = 0.371; T =

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2.872; p = 0.004), confirming that trust is a key factor in enrollment intention. Overall, Table 8 confirms that Digital Marketing and social media significantly influence Prospective Cadet Enrollment Intention, both directly and through the development of Public Trust, thereby supporting the structural relationships proposed in the conceptual framework.

3.2.1. Direct Effects

The analysis showed that all proposed direct hypotheses were supported by the data. Digital Marketing had a significant positive impact on Public Trust (H1), Social media had a significant positive impact on Public Trust (H2), Digital Marketing had a significant positive impact on Prospective Cadet Interest (H3), Social media had a significant positive impact on Prospective Cadet Interest (H4), and Public Trust had a significant positive impact on Prospective Cadet Interest (H5). These results suggest that both Digital Marketing and social media independently improve Public Trust and directly influence Prospective Cadet Interest.

3.2.2. Indirect (Mediated) Effects

Mediation analysis tested H6 (Digital Marketing → Public Trust → Prospective Cadet Interest) and H7 (social media → Public Trust → Prospective Cadet Interest). Bootstrapped indirect effects were statistically significant (t > 1.96), confirming that Public Trust mediates the relationship between digital strategies and enrollment intention. The mediation pattern indicates partial mediation, as direct paths from X1 and X2 to Z remained significant.

These results align with empirical evidence showing that trust frequently transmits the effect of digital marketing activities to enrollment intentions, sometimes fully and sometimes partially depending on context (Juhaidi et al., 2024).

3.3. Model Explanatory Power

The R¬≤ value for Public Trust shows that Digital Marketing and social media together explain a significant portion of variance in trust perceptions. The R¬≤ value for Prospective Cadet Interest indicates that Digital Marketing, social media, and Public Trust collectively account for important variance in enrollment intention. An effect size (f¬²) analysis reveals that Public Trust makes a substantial contribution to Prospective Cadet Interest, reinforcing its mediating role. Predictive relevance (Q¬²) values are positive, suggesting the model has adequate predictive power capability.

3.4. Interpretation of Empirical Findings in Relation to the Literature Questions

This study was guided by key literature questions about whether digital marketing boosts institutional trust, whether social media engagement influences enrollment intentions, and to what extent public trust mediates these relationships. The empirical findings clearly answer these questions. First, regarding whether digital marketing directly enhances public trust, the results confirm that Digital Marketing (X1) has a significant positive effect on Public Trust (Y). This supports previous research suggesting that structured digital communication, trustworthy online content, and consistent branding signals improve institutional credibility and decrease uncertainty among prospective students.

Second, regarding whether social media engagement impacts prospective student interest, the results show that social media (X2) significantly influences both Public Trust (Y) and Prospective Cadet Interest (Z). This addresses the debate in the literature over engagement versus visibility by demonstrating that interactive and credible social media practices meaningfully affect behavioral intentions. Third, the findings explore the central mediation question: Does public trust mediate the effect of digital strategies on enrollment intentions? The structural model confirms significant indirect effects (H6 and H7), establishing Public Trust as a mediator that links Digital Marketing and social media to Prospective Cadet Interest. Trust thus functions as the pathway through which digital signals translate into enrollment-related action decisions.

3.5. Alignment with and Challenges to Prior Literature

The findings align with relationship marketing theory, which holds that marketing effectiveness depends on building trust rather than on exposure alone. Specifically, the results support the idea that digital marketing signals, when credible and strategically managed, boost institutional trust, which, in turn, influences behavioral intentions. The study also addresses the debate in the literature about engagement quality versus reach. Consistent with earlier research, the results show that trust-building engagement strategies are more impactful than just increasing visibility metrics. This challenges the oversimplified belief that a higher follower count automatically leads to more enrollments. Additionally, the mediation results support multidimensional trust theory, which views trust as cognitive (perception of competence), affective (confidence), and experiential (based on consistency). By empirically confirming the mediating role of Public Trust, the study improves on

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previous models that either treated trust as a minor factor or as a direct predictor without formally testing its mediation.

3.6. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although the findings clearly answer the proposed literature questions, several limitations remain. The use of non-probability sampling with 97 respondents from a population of 2,836 applicants may limit generalizability. Future studies should use probability-based sampling or compare multiple institutions to enhance external validity. Additionally, the cross-sectional design restricts conclusions about long-term trust development. Future research should explore longitudinal approaches, include additional moderators such as institutional reputation or service quality, and incorporate behavioral data to better understand how digital trust develops over time and its impact on continued enrollment intention.

4. Conclusion

This study confirms that digital marketing and social media serve as significant predictors of prospective cadet interest, both directly and indirectly through public trust. By modeling trust as a mediating variable, the research shows that digital visibility alone is not enough to increase enrollment intent; instead, digital strategies must produce credible, transparent, and relational signals that reduce uncertainty and build institutional confidence. The findings bolster relationship marketing and trust formation theories by empirically supporting a structured mediation pathway within a specialized maritime higher education setting. Public trust acts as a key mechanism that translates digital communication efforts into behavioral intentions. Using PLS-SEM enables the simultaneous analysis of direct and indirect effects, thereby enhancing causal interpretation within a complex digital recruitment ecosystem. In practice, institutions should focus on engagement quality, content credibility, and outcome-based signals, such as industry partnerships and alumni success, to maintain a competitive edge. Trust-centered digital strategies can improve conversion rates from inquiry to enrollment and support long-term institutional sustainability. Although the study is limited to one institution and employs a cross-sectional design, it provides a theoretically integrated and empirically validated framework for understanding digital recruitment effectiveness. Future research should expand this model across other institutions, settings, and longitudinal studies to further refine trust-based digital enrollment strategies.

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All authors contributed equally to this paper. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/ or publication of this article.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/ or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declaration on AI Use

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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