



To cite this article: Simran Ratnani (2026). INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ENHANCING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITY, International Journal of Research in Commerce and Management Studies (IJRCMS) 8 (1): 355-364 Article No. 602 Sub Id 1048

## INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ENHANCING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITY

Simran Ratnani

Assistant Director, Marketing University of North Texas  
Dallas, USA

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38193/IJRCMS.2026.8131>

### ABSTRACT

This article analyses integrated communication strategies in higher education that strengthen student engagement and institutional identity in an environment shaped by short-form video, meme circulation, and AI-generated media. Relevance follows from algorithmic distribution, fragmented attention, and synthetic disinformation that can erode trust in official university messaging. Novelty is achieved through a unified framework that connects branding and integrated marketing communication with transparency instruments for synthetic content and evidence-based creative design. The study describes how institutional narratives can be translated into platform-native formats (micro-video, memes, interactive stories) while preserving message coherence across admission, academic, and community channels. Sources on university branding, social media marketing, student engagement and trust, short-form video behavior, advertising engagement drivers, neuromarketing measurement, and synthetic-media governance are synthesized. The conclusion outlines actionable design principles, including channel orchestration, emotion-aware message testing, and layered integrity safeguards (labeling, provenance, moderation, and media-literacy prompts). The article targets researchers and communication managers in higher education.

**KEYWORDS:** higher education communication, integrated marketing communication, institutional identity, student engagement.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Integrated communication in universities is no longer limited to aligning promotional messages with enrollment goals. Platform logics encourage the rapid circulation of compressed audiovisual formats, while audiences increasingly evaluate institutions through informal signals, such as peer reposts, meme narratives, influencer framings, and perceived authenticity of content. In parallel, generative systems reduce production costs and increase volume, creating a credibility dilemma: efficiency gains in content production coexist with higher exposure to synthetic manipulation, impersonation, and persuasive disinformation. Under these conditions, institutional identity becomes a fragile



communicative achievement that depends on coherence across channels and on verifiable integrity of messages.

The article aims to develop an analytical model of integrated communication strategies for higher education that simultaneously (i) intensifies student engagement and (ii) consolidates institutional identity under contemporary digital risks. Research objectives:

- 1) To systematize the instruments of brand and integrated marketing communication for universities and connect them to engagement pathways across digital channels.
- 2) to analyse how short-form video and meme-mediated communication shape attention, emotional response, and participatory engagement, including risks of misinformation;
- 3) to formulate a governance toolkit for synthetic and AI-assisted communication that protects public trust while retaining platform-native expressiveness.

Novelty resides in combining three lines of evidence—higher education branding and integrated communication, engagement dynamics of short-form video ecosystems, and trust safeguards for synthetic media—into a single operational strategy suitable for institutional implementation.

## **2. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **2.1 Materials**

The analysis draws on a targeted body of recent scholarship and policy-oriented evidence. M. Coriasco, A. C. Brittain, A. Thacker, and co-authors conceptualize memes as a form of health communication, supporting their treatment as compact, remixable carriers of meaning that can circulate with mixed informational quality [1]. The Digital Regulation Cooperation Forum outlines risks and regulatory considerations associated with synthetic media and deepfakes, including disinformation and consumer manipulation, which are relevant to the university communication environment [2]. M. Galioto and colleagues examine university social media communication through the lens of trust and inclusion, anchoring the link between engagement and credibility in institutional messaging [3]. G. González-Mena, C. Del-Valle-Soto, V. Corona, and J. Rodríguez provide an applied neuromarketing approach that connects facial-expression metrics with digital design features, supporting emotion-sensitive evaluation of message delivery [4]. H. O’Sullivan, M. Polkinghorne, C. Chapleo, and F. Cownie synthesize contemporary university branding strategies, clarifying how identity claims are built and maintained through communication choices [5]. P. Pietrzak, A. Kucharska, M. Cieciora, and W. Bołkunow review social media use in higher education marketing, supporting the integration of platform practices into institutional marketing logic [6]. Y. Qin, B. Omar, and A. Musetti analyse short-form video platform engagement through information and system quality, flow experience, and concentration, offering mechanisms that explain high engagement intensity [7]. S. Roy and S. Misra empirically examine how integrated marketing communication strategies influence students' choices of higher education institutions, supporting the strategic



alignment of channels and messages [8]. B. Rijsbosch, G. van Dijck, and K. Kollnig study the adoption of watermarking and labeling in generative AI systems and discuss implications for transparency obligations, providing concrete parameters for integrity-by-design in AI-assisted communication [9]. L. Xiao, X. Li, and Y. Zhang investigate the drivers of consumer engagement in short-form video advertising from a big-data perspective, supporting the translation of engagement drivers into educational communication design [10].

## 2.2 Methods

The article applies analytical synthesis of sources, comparative reasoning across communication domains (education marketing, platform studies, and trust governance), and conceptual modeling to derive an integrated strategy. Interpretive content analysis is used to map engagement mechanisms (attention capture, affect elicitation, participatory remix) onto institutional identity functions (coherence, differentiation, credibility). The resulting framework is validated through triangulation across empirical findings reported in the reviewed studies.

## 3. RESULTS

Evidence from higher education branding research positions institutional identity as a communicative construct that is reproduced through repeated, recognizable signals: narrative themes, tone, visual systems, and consistent claims about educational value and social mission [5]. Within this view, identity cannot be separated from channel practice: each platform imposes constraints on length, format, interaction, and algorithmic distribution, forcing universities to translate identity into multiple “micro-genres” without losing coherence. A key implication follows: integration is not limited to stylistic uniformity; it requires governance of message meaning across admission communication, learning support communication, student life communication, and reputation communication.

Integrated marketing communication studies reinforce this logic by demonstrating that coordinated exposure across channels is associated with students’ institution-choice formation, indicating that communication integration functions as an influence mechanism rather than a purely aesthetic principle [8]. For universities, the practical reading is that engagement instruments (short video series, social media storytelling, community management) and identity instruments (brand architecture, consistent positioning) must be designed as a single system, because prospective and current students experience the institution through a continuous stream of mediated encounters rather than through isolated campaigns.

Social media marketing literature in higher education supports the integration imperative by documenting the breadth of social media use in marketing activities and by framing platform selection and content tactics as part of the institutional marketing toolkit [6]. Yet, a channel-first strategy



becomes insufficient when trust becomes a binding constraint. Research on university communication and trust suggests that expectations of credibility influence engagement on social platforms; participatory interaction fosters inclusion only when audiences perceive the communication as honest, responsive, and institutionally accountable [3]. Hence, engagement metrics that overlook trust (views, likes, shares) risk inflating short-term reach while weakening institutional identity through perceived manipulation or opportunistic trend chasing.

Short-form video environments intensify this tension. Research on TikTok-like ecosystems indicates that system quality and information quality influence flow-related states—enjoyment, concentration, and time distortion—and that concentration is a significant pathway associated with intensive engagement patterns [7]. For universities, the relevance lies in the mechanism: platforms optimize for sustained attention through personalization and rapid content turnover. Educational communication can leverage this mechanism for learning support and community building; however, the exact mechanism can also facilitate compulsive consumption, shallow processing, and the rapid diffusion of unverified claims. Therefore, integrated strategies require ethical constraints and pacing rules: communication must pursue engagement that is compatible with learning and well-being, rather than engagement at any cost.

A complementary advertising-focused perspective indicates that short-form video engagement is shaped by identifiable drivers that can be measured at scale in platform data [10]. Translating such drivers into higher education communication suggests a design logic based on: immediate relevance cues, rapid narrative progression, and interactive prompts that invite lightweight participation. In institutional practice, these drivers correspond to micro-formats such as: “one concept—one minute” academic explainers, laboratory day-in-the-life clips, peer-to-peer student guidance, and short Q&A sequences. The integration requirement is that each micro-format must encode institutional identity markers—values, academic standards, and community norms—so that high-frequency content does not drift into generic entertainment.

Meme-mediated communication adds a second layer of platform-native expressiveness. Conceptual analysis treating memes as communication artifacts supports their use as compressed cultural messages that travel through remix and social referencing [1]. For higher education, memes can serve legitimate institutional goals: lowering entry barriers to institutional information, increasing psychological proximity, and enabling peer-led interpretation of university life. Simultaneously, meme circulation can disseminate misinformation through humor, ambiguity, and plausible deniability, complicating institutional correction because audiences may dismiss meme content as “just jokes” while still updating their beliefs. An integrated strategy, therefore, requires a dual-use classification of meme practices: (i) sanctioned meme templates aligned with institutional values (e.g.,

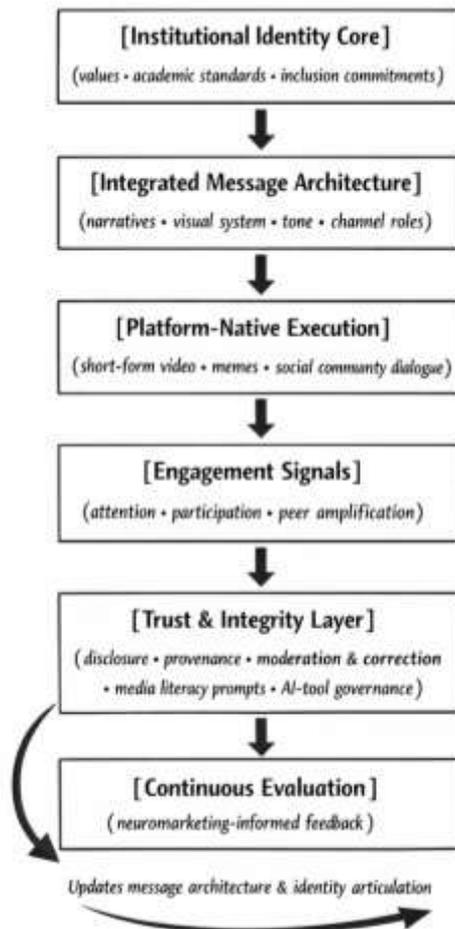


study skills, academic integrity reminders), and (ii) monitoring and response protocols for meme-driven misinformation affecting safety, admissions, or reputation.

The expansion of AI-generated media shifts these design choices into a higher-risk domain. Regulatory-oriented horizon scanning identifies synthetic media risks that map directly onto university communication: disinformation, misleading advertising-like persuasion, and erosion of trust in media environments [2]. Universities face additional exposure because they hold reputational capital, process personal data, and operate in crisis-prone contexts (admissions decisions, campus security incidents, geopolitical tensions affecting student communities). Under these conditions, integrated communication must incorporate verifiability as a design constraint: audiences require reliable cues that institutional content is authentic and that the institution has controls in place to prevent impersonation and manipulation.

Empirical evidence on watermarking and disclosure practices in generative AI systems indicates that transparency mechanisms are not uniformly adopted. One study reports that only a minority of analyzed AI image generators implemented adequate watermarking, and that deepfake labeling practices were even less frequent, providing concrete parameters for the “trust gap” in synthetic content ecosystems [9]. For universities using AI tools for design, translation, or video generation, the implication is operational: communication integration must extend to production governance. Without explicit internal rules—such as tool selection, disclosure standards, provenance documentation, and review procedures—institutions risk unintentionally distributing content that audiences interpret as deceptive or that adversaries can re-edit into disinformation.

**Figure 1 operationalizes the derived integration logic by connecting identity, engagement mechanics, and trust safeguards into a continuous governance loop.**



**Figure 1:** Integrated communication governance loop for universities (adapted from synthetic-media risk framing and transparency measures [2, 9] and applied to higher education branding and engagement logic [3, 5, 8])

Neuromarketing-oriented evidence provides a method for aligning creative design with ethical persuasion. Research connecting facial expression measures with website design elements supports the feasibility of emotion-sensitive testing for digital communication [4]. While universities differ from commercial advertisers in their mission and ethical constraints, the methodological insight remains applicable: affective responses can be measured and used to refine clarity, reduce anxiety, and improve the perceived helpfulness of information. In integrated communication, such measurement becomes a quality-control layer: content intended to support student engagement

(orientation, well-being resources, learning guidance) can be tested to avoid inadvertently triggering stress or distrust through tone, pacing, or ambiguous visuals.

**4. DISCUSSION**

The results indicate that integration in higher education communication is better interpreted as an institutional capability with three coupled layers: (1) identity consistency, (2) engagement engineering adapted to platform mechanics, and (3) trust governance under synthetic media conditions. In practice, universities often optimize one layer at the expense of the others: brand teams prioritize coherence yet underutilize platform-native forms; social teams prioritize reach yet drift toward generic entertainment; crisis teams prioritize accuracy yet communicate in formats that underperform algorithmically. The synthesized evidence supports a design principle: a university communication system remains stable only when identity markers are embedded inside high-frequency micro-formats and when authenticity cues are engineered into the production pipeline rather than appended after publication [3, 5, 8].

Table 1 summarizes how the reviewed sources can be translated into a channel-level integration matrix, excluding unsupported empirical claims.

**Table 1:** Evidence-based alignment of communication formats with engagement mechanisms and identity functions [1–10]

<i>Format/Channel</i>	<i>Engagement mechanism supported in sources</i>	<i>Identity function supported in sources</i>
Short-form video series (TikTok/Reels-type)	Flow-related engagement via enjoyment and concentration; high-intensity attention dynamics	Identity translation into repetitive, recognizable micro-narratives
Social community dialogue (official social accounts, comments, live Q&A)	Credibility expectations condition participation and inclusion	Trust as a prerequisite for durable engagement and inclusion
Meme-based institutional micro-content (sanctioned templates)	Rapid cultural diffusion via remix; low barrier to entry	Informal identity signaling: student proximity when aligned with values
Integrated marketing communication across touchpoints (admissions + digital + peer influence)	Coordinated exposure shaping institution-choice formation	Positioning consistency across decision stages
Website and portal design	Affective response measurable via	Credibility anchoring through stable,



(official “source of truth”)	facial-expression metrics; clarity and usability effects	official information architecture
Synthetic-media transparency controls (labels, provenance, disclosure)	Reduction of deception risk; support for audience verification	Protection of institutional credibility under AI-generated media

The table implies a managerial interpretation: “integration” is achieved by assigning each channel a stable function while sharing the same identity core and measurement regime. Short-form video prioritizes attention capture and repeated identity cues; social dialogue prioritizes trust-maintaining responsiveness; official websites prioritize verification and formal accuracy; meme content prioritizes culturally fluent translation of institutional values. A single campaign can span all formats, but governance rules must define which layer dominates each format to avoid identity dilution.

Synthetic media introduces an additional requirement: institutions must treat transparency as part of communication effectiveness, not as a compliance afterthought. The DRCF risk framing explicitly includes disinformation and misleading persuasion as societal harms, and empirical evidence indicates that watermarking and disclosure practices are inconsistently implemented in AI image generation systems [2,9]. Universities that deploy AI-assisted design without disclosure rules risk damaging public trust precisely when they attempt to appear innovative. Conversely, explicit labeling and provenance cues can reinforce identity by signaling accountability, especially during crises or when content is emotionally charged.

Table 2 translates this into an integrity-by-design checklist grounded in the reviewed sources, using qualitative categories rather than invented quantitative estimates.

**Table 2:** Trust risks in university communication and source-grounded safeguards [1; 2; 4–9]

<i>Risk type</i>	<i>How it manifests in higher education communication</i>	<i>Safeguard is compatible with the integrated strategy</i>
Synthetic disinformation/deepfake narratives	Impersonation of leaders; fabricated incidents; manipulated visuals	Provenance records; visible disclosure for AI-assisted media; rapid correction workflows
Misleading persuasive content (quasi-advertising effects)	Overpromising outcomes; emotionally optimized content without accountability	IMC governance linking claims to verifiable information; ethics review for high-stakes messages
Meme-driven misinformation	Humor-based distortion of policy,	Dual-use meme policy: sanctioned



	safety, or admissions information	templates + monitoring and corrective micro-content
Engagement optimization that undermines well-being	Excessive attention capture; compulsive consumption dynamics in student audiences	Pacing rules; learning-support framing; avoidance of manipulative triggers
Trust erosion through tone/design mismatches	Visual ambiguity or aggressive framing triggering negative affect	Emotion-sensitive testing of digital assets; clarity-centered redesign
Platform tactic drifts from institutional identity	Trend chasing; inconsistent voice across teams	Brand architecture translated into micro-format guidelines; cross-team editorial governance.

The discussion supports a further theoretical point relevant to the заказчик’s specialization: meme and AI-generated content are not peripheral “youth formats”; they constitute a trust-sensitive layer of institutional identity work. In my view, universities that ignore these formats will still be judged through them, because third parties (students, competitors, political actors) will fill the communication space. The more productive stance is controlled adoption: develop institution-authored memes and short-form video repertoires that are explicitly tied to identity and safeguarded by synthetic-media transparency rules.

**5. CONCLUSION**

The study achieved the stated objectives. First, evidence from branding and integrated marketing communication suggests that treating student engagement and institutional identity as a single communication system, rather than parallel tasks, is beneficial. This approach is supported by the fact that coordinated exposure influences institution-choice processes and identity perception. Second, short-form video research clarifies the engagement mechanism—flow-related concentration and platform-driven attention dynamics—requiring universities to design micro-formats that strengthen engagement without normalizing compulsive consumption patterns. Third, the evidence of synthetic media risk framings and watermarking adoption justifies embedding integrity safeguards into content production and distribution, as disinformation and misleading persuasion risks intensify when AI-generated media becomes ubiquitous, and transparency remains inconsistently implemented. Operationally, an integrated strategy follows the governance loop outlined in Figure 1: identity core → message architecture → platform-native execution → trust layer → continuous evaluation with emotion-sensitive testing, enabling engagement growth while reinforcing institutional credibility.

**REFERENCES**



- [1] Coriasco, M., Brittain, A. C., Thacker, A., et al. (2025). Memes as health communication through the lens of COVID-19: A concept analysis. *Discover Public Health*, 22, Article 231. doi:10.1186/s12982-025-00630-6.
- [2] Digital Regulation Cooperation Forum. (2024). The future of synthetic media. Digital Regulation Cooperation Forum. <https://www.drcof.org.uk/siteassets/drcof/pdf-files/the-future-of-synthetic-media.pdf>
- [3] Galioto, M., et al. (2025). University, social media, and student engagement: The challenge of “trust” in organizational communication. *Frontiers in Communication*. doi:10.3389/fcomm.2025.1546333.
- [4] González-Mena, G., Del-Valle-Soto, C., Corona, V., & Rodríguez, J. (2022). Neuromarketing in the digital age: The direct relation between facial expressions and website design. *Applied Sciences*, 12(16), 8186. doi:10.3390/app12168186.
- [5] O’Sullivan, H., Polkinghorne, M., Chapleo, C., & Cownie, F. (2024). Contemporary branding strategies for higher education. *Encyclopedia*, 4(3), 1292–1311. doi:10.3390/encyclopedia4030085.
- [6] Pietrzak, P., Kucharska, A., Cieciora, M., & Bołkunow, W. (2025). The use of social media in higher education marketing activities: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Management and Financial Sciences*, (55), 59–76. doi:10.33119/JMFS.2025.55.3.
- [7] Qin, Y., Omar, B., & Musetti, A. (2022). The addiction behavior of short-form video app TikTok: The information quality and system quality perspective. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 932805. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2022.932805.
- [8] Roy, S., & Misra, S. (2024). Impact of integrated marketing communication strategies on choice of higher education institutions. *Innovative Marketing*, 20(4), 74–84. doi:10.21511/im.20(4).2024.07.
- [9] Rijsbosch, B., van Dijck, G., & Kollnig, K. (2025). Missing the mark: Adoption of watermarking for generative AI systems in practice and implications under the new EU AI Act. *arXiv* (arXiv:2503.18156v3).
- [10] Xiao, L., Li, X., & Zhang, Y. (2023). Exploring the factors influencing consumer engagement behavior regarding short-form video advertising: A big data perspective. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 70. doi:10.1016/j.jretconser.2022.103170.