

Social Media Communication and Student Trust in University Information: A Qualitative Study in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT: Social media has become an important communication channel between universities and students. Universities increasingly use Facebook, Zalo, TikTok, websites, email, and online student communities to deliver academic announcements, student support information, event updates, and institutional messages. However, students may not always trust or respond effectively to university information when messages are unclear, delayed, inconsistent, or spread through unofficial channels. This study explores how social media communication shapes student trust in university information in Vietnam. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 university students who regularly use social media and receive information from both official and informal university-related channels. Thematic analysis reveals five key themes: clarity and timeliness of official messages, consistency across communication channels, peer discussion and informal student groups, credibility of university representatives, and visual and interactive communication. The study contributes to the literature on higher education communication by showing that student trust is formed through both official and informal communication processes. Practical implications are offered for universities seeking to improve digital communication, reduce information uncertainty, and strengthen student engagement.

KEYWORDS: social media communication; university communication; student trust; higher education; Vietnam; qualitative research.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication has become a strategic function in contemporary higher education. Universities do not only provide teaching and learning services; they also communicate academic policies, administrative procedures, student support services, institutional values, extracurricular activities, scholarship opportunities, and career-related information. Institutional communication is increasingly viewed as an important mechanism for strengthening student engagement, inclusion, and relationship quality in higher education (Galio et al., 2025; Maring & Gmür, 2025). Effective communication helps students understand university policies, access relevant services, participate in academic and social activities, and develop a stronger sense of connection with the institution. In contrast, ineffective communication may lead to confusion, missed deadlines, low participation, distrust, and negative student experiences (Zachos et al., 2018).

The rapid development of social media has significantly changed how universities communicate with students. Platforms such as Facebook, Zalo, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, university websites, email systems, and online student communities allow universities to deliver information more quickly and interact with students more directly. Social media has become an important tool in higher education because it supports communication, interaction, learning engagement, and information exchange between institutions and students (Al-Rahmi et al., 2022; Sivakumar et al., 2023). Compared with traditional communication channels, social media provides greater speed, visibility, interactivity, and flexibility. Students can receive announcements, comment on posts, ask questions, share information with classmates, and discuss university-related issues in real time.

However, social media communication in universities is not always effective. Students often receive the same information from multiple sources, including official university pages, faculty pages, class groups, student union pages, lecturers, academic advisors, friends, and unofficial online communities. As a result, university information may be interpreted, questioned, modified, or reshaped through peer discussion. Prior research indicates that the effectiveness of social media in higher education depends not only on the availability of communication channels but also on interaction quality, perceived credibility, and trust in institutional communication (Galio et al., 2025; Zachos et al., 2018). In some cases, students may trust class groups or friends more than official announcements, especially when official messages are too long, too formal, delayed, or inconsistent across channels.

Prior research has shown that social media can strongly influence consumer and public behaviour by enabling information sharing, discussion, social pressure, message diffusion, and influencer effects. The model article on social media and panic buying in Vietnam

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demonstrates that social media does not simply transmit information; it also shapes how people interpret uncertainty, respond to messages, and act collectively (Luc & Hoang, 2024). Although that study focused on consumer behaviour during a crisis, its communication logic is useful for understanding university communication because students also interpret information through social interaction, group discussion, and perceived source credibility. This view is consistent with broader social media research showing that online interaction can influence attitudes, behavioural responses, and collective interpretation of messages (Alalwan et al., 2017).

In the context of higher education, student trust in university information is particularly important. Students rely on university messages to make decisions about course registration, examination schedules, tuition payment, scholarship applications, internships, academic regulations, events, and student services. If students do not trust the information source or if information across channels is inconsistent, they may delay action, seek confirmation from peers, or misunderstand institutional instructions. Therefore, understanding how social media communication shapes student trust is important for improving university communication effectiveness. Although previous studies have discussed social media marketing, university branding, and student engagement, less attention has been paid to how students interpret and trust university information through social media, especially in emerging higher education contexts such as Vietnam (Maring & Gmür, 2025; Luc & Hoang, 2024). Most studies tend to focus on institutional promotion or student recruitment rather than the everyday communication processes through which students receive, evaluate, and respond to university information. Against this background, this study explores how social media communication shapes student trust in university information in Vietnam. The study focuses on students' perceptions of official and informal communication channels, message clarity, information consistency, peer discussion, source credibility, and interactive communication.

The study addresses the following research question: **How does social media communication shape student trust in university information in Vietnam?**

This study makes several contributions. First, it extends the literature on social media communication by applying it to the higher education context. Second, it highlights student trust as an important outcome of university communication. Third, it provides qualitative evidence from Vietnam, where social media has become a central communication space for students. Finally, the study offers practical implications for universities seeking to improve communication clarity, consistency, credibility, and student engagement.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature. Section 3 describes the population, sampling, and data analysis procedure. Section 4 presents the results. Section 5 discusses the findings and implications. Section 6 concludes the study and suggests future research directions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media communication refers to the process through which information, messages, opinions, and experiences are created, shared, discussed, and circulated through digital platforms. In higher education, social media communication includes official announcements from universities, faculty-level updates, class group messages, student union posts, lecturer communication, peer discussion, and informal student-generated content. Unlike traditional one-way communication, social media allows students to comment, ask questions, share posts, and reinterpret institutional messages through interaction with others. This interactive nature is consistent with prior research showing that social media enables user participation, electronic word-of-mouth, content sharing, and relationship-oriented communication (Alalwan et al., 2017; Zachos et al., 2018).

Previous studies suggest that social media can strongly influence perceptions and behaviour through online reviews, electronic word-of-mouth, user-generated content, social interaction, and influencer communication (Nash, 2019; Alalwan et al., 2017). The model article also shows that social media communication can shape behaviour through uncertainty, discussion, message diffusion, social influence, government communication, and expert or influencer opinions. This implies that social media is not only a technical communication tool but also a social environment where meaning and trust are formed. In consumer and organizational contexts, social media has been shown to influence decision-making by allowing users to exchange information, compare interpretations, and respond to persuasive content in interactive online environments (Nash, 2019).

University communication refers to the process through which higher education institutions deliver academic, administrative, service-related, and institutional messages to students and other stakeholders. Effective university communication helps students understand academic rules, access support services, participate in activities, and make timely decisions. In contrast, unclear or delayed communication may create confusion and reduce trust. In the digital era, universities increasingly use online platforms to deliver information, but the presence of multiple channels may also make communication fragmented. Prior research on social media in higher education suggests that universities use digital platforms not only to distribute information but also to support interaction, participation, and student engagement (Zachos et al., 2018; Sivakumar et al., 2023).

Student trust in university information refers to students' confidence that university messages are accurate, timely, transparent, useful, and issued by credible sources. Trust is important because students depend on university information for academic and administrative decisions. If students believe that official information is reliable, they are more likely to follow institutional

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instructions. If they perceive information as unclear or inconsistent, they may rely on informal sources such as classmates, group chats, or unofficial online communities. This is consistent with studies showing that perceived credibility, interaction quality, and trust are important in university social media communication and student engagement (Galioto et al., 2025; Maring & Gmür, 2025). Several theoretical perspectives can help explain this issue. From the perspective of the global information society, digital platforms accelerate information exchange and create new forms of connection among individuals and communities. Media theory also suggests that communication systems shape how information is produced, circulated, and interpreted within social contexts (Kittler, 1990). In the university context, this means that students can receive and circulate information rapidly across official and informal networks. Social influence theory also suggests that individuals may be influenced by the opinions, interpretations, and behaviours of others in their social environment. Thus, student trust may be shaped not only by official communication but also by peer discussion, comments, and group interpretation (Kelman, 1958; Venkatesh et al., 2003).

However, existing research has not fully explained how students evaluate university information on social media. Many studies focus on university branding, student engagement, or digital marketing, while less attention has been given to everyday communication between universities and students. In particular, there is limited qualitative evidence on why students trust some university messages but doubt others, how informal student groups affect information interpretation, and how communication style influences student trust. Therefore, this study adopts a qualitative approach to explore how social media communication shapes student trust in university information in Vietnam.

3. POPULATION, SAMPLING AND DATA ANALYSIS

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how social media communication shapes student trust in university information in Vietnam. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study aims to understand students' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations rather than test statistical relationships. Following the methodological orientation of the model article, which used semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to understand social media-related behaviour, this study also relies on interview data to identify major themes related to student trust in university communication.

Participants in this study are university students in Vietnam who regularly use social media and receive university-related information through digital channels. To be selected, participants must satisfy four criteria: first, they must be currently enrolled at a university in Vietnam; second, they must use at least one social media platform such as Facebook, Zalo, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, or university online platforms; third, they must have received information from official university or faculty channels; and fourth, they must participate in at least one informal online student group, such as a class group, student community, or peer discussion group. These criteria ensure that participants have relevant experience with both official and informal university communication.

A convenience sampling method is used to recruit participants. Students are approached through university networks, class groups, student associations, and personal contacts. Before the formal interview, screening questions are used to confirm that each participant meets the selection criteria. A total of 30 students are invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. This sample size is suitable for a qualitative study because it allows the researcher to collect rich descriptions while maintaining depth in data interpretation.

Data are collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide focuses on students' experiences with university communication on social media, the channels they use most frequently, the sources they trust, their reactions to unclear or inconsistent information, the influence of peer discussion, and their expectations for more effective university communication. Sample interview questions include: Which channels do you usually use to receive university information? Which channels do you trust most and why? Have you ever received inconsistent information from different university-related channels? How do comments, classmates, or informal groups affect your understanding of official announcements? What makes university information more trustworthy?

Each interview lasts approximately 20 to 30 minutes. With participants' consent, interviews are recorded and transcribed for analysis. Participants are informed that there are no right or wrong answers and are encouraged to share their experiences freely. Their identities are kept confidential, and the data are used only for academic purposes. Participants are also informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time.

Thematic analysis is used to analyse the interview data. Similar to the analytical procedure used in the model article, the process includes familiarising with the data, identifying initial codes, developing themes, reviewing themes, and interpreting the results. First, the researcher reads the interview transcripts several times to become familiar with the data. Second, meaningful statements related to university communication and student trust are coded. Third, similar codes are grouped into broader themes. Fourth, the themes are reviewed to ensure that they accurately reflect participants' responses. Finally, the themes are interpreted in relation to the research question and existing literature.

4. RESULTS

The thematic analysis reveals five major themes explaining how social media communication shapes student trust in university information in Vietnam. These themes include: clarity and timeliness of official messages, consistency across communication channels, peer discussion and informal student groups, credibility of university representatives, and visual and interactive communication.

Theme 1: Clarity and Timeliness of Official Messages

The first theme shows that students are more likely to trust university information when official messages are clear, concise, and delivered on time. Participants stated that they often receive announcements related to course registration, examination schedules, tuition payment, scholarships, events, and administrative procedures. However, they do not always read or trust these messages if they are too long, too formal, or posted too close to the deadline.

Many participants indicated that official university messages sometimes use administrative language that is difficult for students to understand. When messages contain too many details without clear instructions, students often ask classmates or class representatives to explain them. In contrast, short messages with clear deadlines, simple wording, and step-by-step instructions are more trusted and more likely to be followed.

One participant stated:

“I usually trust official announcements, but sometimes they are too long and difficult to understand. I have to ask my classmates what the message actually means.”

Another participant shared:

“If the university posts information early and explains clearly what students need to do, I feel more confident. But if the announcement is too late, many students become confused.”

This theme suggests that message clarity and timeliness are basic conditions for building student trust. Even if information comes from an official source, students may still experience uncertainty when messages are unclear or delayed.

Theme 2: Consistency Across Communication Channels

The second theme relates to the consistency of information across communication channels. Students often receive university information from several sources, such as the university website, official fanpage, faculty fanpage, email, Zalo groups, class groups, lecturers, academic advisors, and student union pages. Participants indicated that they trust university information more when these channels deliver the same message.

However, when different channels provide different versions of the same information, students become confused and uncertain. For example, a deadline may appear on the university website, while a different deadline is circulated in a class group. In such cases, students usually seek confirmation from lecturers, academic advisors, or classmates.

One participant explained:

“Sometimes the information on the faculty page is different from what is shared in the class group. When that happens, I do not know which one is correct.”

Another participant said:

“I trust information more when the website, fanpage, and class group all say the same thing. If each place says something different, students get worried.”

This theme shows that consistency across channels is essential for student trust. In a multi-channel communication environment, trust depends not only on the content of one message but also on whether information is synchronized across official and informal channels.

Theme 3: Peer Discussion and Informal Student Groups

The third theme highlights the role of peer discussion and informal student groups. Participants reported that class groups, Zalo groups, Facebook groups, and student communities are among the most frequently used channels for receiving and interpreting university information. Although official channels provide formal announcements, students often rely on peer groups to clarify meaning, confirm deadlines, and discuss what actions need to be taken.

Peer discussion can strengthen trust when students help each other understand official messages. Class representatives or active students often summarize long announcements and remind others about important deadlines. However, informal groups can also spread incorrect interpretations or incomplete information. When students share unverified messages, confusion may increase.

One participant noted:

“I usually see the announcement on the university page, but I understand it better after someone in the class group explains it.”

Another participant shared:

“Class groups are very fast, but not always accurate. Sometimes students share information before checking the official source.”

This theme indicates that student trust is formed through both official communication and peer interpretation. Informal groups play a useful role in making information more accessible, but they may also create misunderstanding if information is not verified.

Theme 4: Credibility of University Representatives

The fourth theme concerns the credibility of university representatives. Participants stated that they trust information more when it is confirmed by people or units with clear responsibility, such as academic advisors, lecturers, faculty offices, student affairs offices, or training departments. When messages are posted without clear source identification, students may question their reliability.

Students also indicated that lecturers and academic advisors often serve as trusted intermediaries between the university and students. Even when information is posted on official channels, students may still want confirmation from a person they know and trust. This is especially true for important information related to exams, tuition, graduation requirements, or academic regulations.

One participant said:

“If my academic advisor confirms the information, I feel much more certain. Sometimes official posts are not enough because students still have specific questions.”

Another participant explained:

“I trust messages from the faculty office or lecturers more than information shared by unknown accounts in student groups.”

This theme suggests that source credibility is central to student trust. Students do not only evaluate the message itself; they also evaluate who provides, confirms, or explains the information.

Theme 5: Visual and Interactive Communication

The final theme shows that visual and interactive communication affects how students receive and trust university information. Participants reported that they prefer posts with clear images, infographics, short videos, tables, or bullet-point summaries. Long text-only announcements are often ignored or misunderstood, especially when students receive too many messages every day. Students also value interactive communication. They trust university channels more when administrators respond to comments, answer questions quickly, and provide clarification. When students ask questions but receive no response, they may turn to informal groups, which can increase the risk of misinformation.

One participant stated:

“I prefer announcements with infographics or short summaries. They are easier to remember than long documents.”

Another participant shared:

“If the university replies to student comments quickly, I feel the information is more reliable. If nobody answers, students start asking each other and sometimes the information becomes confusing.”

This theme suggests that university communication should not only be accurate but also accessible, visual, and interactive. In the social media era, students expect communication that is clear, responsive, and easy to process.

5. DISCUSSION

This study explores how social media communication shapes student trust in university information in Vietnam. The findings reveal five key themes: clarity and timeliness of official messages, consistency across communication channels, peer discussion and informal student groups, credibility of university representatives, and visual and interactive communication. These themes suggest that students' trust in university information is not based solely on whether the information is official. Rather, trust is formed through the interaction between message quality, source credibility, channel consistency, and peer interpretation. Prior research suggests that students' engagement with institutional social media is shaped by how they perceive the quality of communication and the credibility of the university's online presence (Perera et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2026). First, clarity and timeliness emerged as fundamental conditions for trust. Students are more likely to trust and follow university information when messages are easy to understand, concise, and delivered early enough for them to take action. This finding suggests that universities should avoid overly formal or administrative language when communicating with students. Even official information may lose effectiveness if students cannot understand what they need to do. In higher education, digital communication is effective when it helps students access and process relevant information in ways that support learning, decision-making, and institutional engagement (Bruguera et al., 2022; Li et al., 2024). Second, consistency across channels is essential in a multi-channel communication environment. Students receive information from websites, fanpages, emails, Zalo groups, faculty pages, lecturers, and class groups. When these channels are not aligned, trust decreases. This finding indicates that universities need a coordinated communication system to ensure that information is updated consistently across official and semi-official channels. Prior studies indicate that university social media communication can influence how students evaluate institutions and interact with academic information, particularly when multiple online touchpoints shape students' perceptions (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Peruta & Shields, 2018). Third, peer discussion plays a dual role. On the one hand, informal groups help students interpret and remember official announcements. On the other hand, they may spread incomplete or incorrect information. This finding is consistent with the communication logic of the model article, which shows that social media can shape behaviour through discussion, message diffusion, and group thinking. In the university context, student groups can support communication, but they should not replace official information systems. Social influence theory suggests that individuals' attitudes and actions may be shaped by the interpretations, expectations, and behaviours of others within their social environment (Ajzen, 1991; Venkatesh et al., 2012). Fourth, the credibility of university representatives strongly

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influences trust. Students are more confident when information is confirmed by lecturers, academic advisors, faculty offices, or responsible departments. This suggests that universities should clearly identify the source of information and assign responsible persons or units to respond to student questions. Source credibility theory argues that information is more persuasive when the source is perceived as expert, trustworthy, and reliable (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Metzger et al., 2003). Fifth, visual and interactive communication improves students' ability to receive and trust information. Students are more likely to pay attention to messages that use infographics, short videos, images, or clear summaries. They also expect quick responses to comments and questions. Therefore, universities should design communication not only for accuracy but also for accessibility and engagement. Research on social media and higher education suggests that visual, interactive, and participatory communication can increase student attention and engagement with institutional messages (Selwyn, 2012; Manca, 2020).

6. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it extends social media communication research to the higher education context. While previous studies often examine social media in marketing or consumer behaviour, this study shows how social media shapes trust in university information. Second, the study contributes to higher education communication literature by identifying student trust as an important outcome of communication effectiveness. Trust is not only related to institutional reputation but also to everyday communication practices, such as message clarity, timeliness, consistency, and responsiveness. Third, the study provides qualitative evidence on the role of informal student groups in university communication. It shows that students do not passively receive official information. They actively discuss, interpret, verify, and sometimes reshape university messages through peer networks. Finally, the study adapts the thematic logic of prior social media research to a new context. Similar to the model article, which identified themes explaining how social media shaped consumer behaviour, this study identifies themes explaining how social media shapes student trust in university information .

7. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings provide several practical implications for universities. First, universities should improve the clarity of official messages. Announcements should use simple language, short paragraphs, clear deadlines, and step-by-step instructions. Important information should be summarized at the beginning of the message. Second, universities should ensure consistency across communication channels. Information on websites, fanpages, emails, faculty pages, and class groups should be synchronized. A central communication guideline may help reduce conflicting messages. Third, universities should recognize the role of informal student groups. Instead of ignoring these groups, universities can work with class representatives, student unions, and academic advisors to ensure that official information is accurately shared and explained. Fourth, universities should strengthen source credibility. Every important message should clearly indicate the responsible unit, contact person, and official confirmation channel. This helps students verify information more easily. Fifth, universities should use more visual and interactive communication. Infographics, short videos, livestreams, question-and-answer posts, and pinned announcements can help students receive information more effectively. Universities should also respond to student questions in a timely and respectful manner.

8. CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study explored how social media communication shapes student trust in university information in Vietnam. Using a qualitative approach, the study identified five major themes: clarity and timeliness of official messages, consistency across communication channels, peer discussion and informal student groups, credibility of university representatives, and visual and interactive communication. The findings show that student trust is shaped by both official and informal communication processes. Students trust university information more when messages are clear, timely, consistent, credible, and easy to interact with. At the same time, peer groups and informal online communities play an important role in interpreting and circulating university information. Therefore, university communication on social media should be understood as an interactive process rather than a one-way announcement system.

The study contributes to the literature by highlighting the role of social media communication in building student trust in higher education. It also provides practical implications for universities seeking to improve digital communication and student engagement. In the social media era, universities need to communicate not only accurately but also clearly, consistently, visually, and responsively. This study has several limitations. First, it is based on qualitative interviews with a limited number of students. Therefore, the findings provide exploratory insights but cannot be generalized to all university students in Vietnam. Future studies may use quantitative methods with larger samples to test the relationships among university social media communication, student trust, and student engagement. Second, the study focuses on students in general and does not compare different groups, such as first-year students, final-year students, postgraduate students, or international students. Future research could examine whether different student groups have different communication needs and trust patterns. Third, the study does not compare specific platforms. Future studies may investigate how Facebook, Zalo, TikTok, university websites, and email differ in their influence on student trust. Such

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platform-specific analysis could help universities design more effective communication strategies. Fourth, future research may extend the model by examining other outcomes, such as student engagement, satisfaction, institutional attachment, intention to recommend the university, or student loyalty. In conclusion, effective social media communication is essential for building student trust in university information. Universities that communicate clearly, consistently, credibly, and interactively are more likely to reduce student uncertainty, improve information acceptance, and strengthen student engagement.

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