

Marketing a Paid Bachelor Program at Onaizah Colleges: A Comprehensive Case Study on Strategic Success

Dr. Ahmed Medjedel

Department of Business Management, College of Humanities and Administrative Studies, Onaizah Colleges, Onaizah, KSA

Contact: amedjedel@oc.edu.sa; medjedela@yahoo.com

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Abstract:

The higher education sector is navigating a period of profound transformation, with private institutions facing unprecedented competition for student enrollment. This paper presents a compelling case study of Onaizah Colleges' remarkably successful marketing campaign for its paid bachelor programs. By embracing a multi-faceted strategy that skillfully blends digital marketing, authentic community engagement, strategic partnerships, and data-driven decision-making, Onaizah Colleges achieved a 150% increase in enrollment inquiries and an 80% improvement in conversion rates over a two-year period. This study employs mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative analysis of digital marketing metrics with rich qualitative insights from stakeholder interviews. The key findings reveal that an integrated marketing communications (IMC) strategy, when thoughtfully tailored to local cultural contexts and underpinned by robust analytics, can empower mid-sized institutions to overcome budgetary constraints and thrive in a competitive market. The paper concludes with a practical and replicable framework for higher education marketing in emerging markets, supported by an extensive review of over 60 academic references, including the latest research in education marketing, digital transformation, and Middle Eastern higher education trends.

Keywords: Higher education marketing, student recruitment strategies, digital marketing in education, Saudi Vision 2030, enrollment growth, integrated marketing communications, AI in education.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Context

The global higher education market has arrived at a critical juncture, as private institutions grapple with a confluence of challenges that are reshaping the educational landscape. These challenges include:

- **Demographic Shifts:** Many traditional markets are experiencing declining populations of college-aged students (Bok, 2020).
- **Digital Disruption:** The proliferation of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and other online learning platforms has captured a significant share of the postgraduate market, with some estimates as high as 30% (ICEF Monitor, 2022).
- **Funding Pressures:** A significant majority (68%) of private institutions in Saudi Arabia report a heavy reliance on tuition-dependent revenue models, making them particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in enrollment (Saudi MOE, 2023).

Within Saudi Arabia's dynamic and evolving education landscape, the ambitious **Vision 2030** initiative has acted as a powerful catalyst for change, accelerating the privatization of the higher education sector while simultaneously raising the bar for quality and innovation (Alhabeeb & Rowley, 2018; Colliers, 2024). In this increasingly competitive environment, Onaizah Colleges, established in 2017, faced the formidable challenge of carving out a niche for itself as a mid-sized provider competing against both well-established public universities and heavily funded private rivals. This case study fills a critical research gap by examining how a mid-sized institution can leverage a sophisticated and culturally resonant marketing strategy to achieve remarkable growth in a highly competitive emerging market.

1.2. Research Objectives

This study aims to provide a comprehensive examination of the following:

- ✓ The effectiveness of a blended digital-traditional marketing approach within the unique cultural context of Saudi Arabia.
- ✓ The strategies for optimizing cost-per-acquisition (CPA) for tuition-driven institutions.
- ✓ The pivotal role of local community engagement in building institutional trust and brand loyalty.
- ✓ The impact of emerging technologies, such as AI, on student recruitment and marketing effectiveness.
- ✓ The alignment of higher education marketing strategies with the national objectives of Saudi Vision 2030.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

The analysis is grounded in Kotler's (2016) seminal higher education marketing mix, which has been adapted for the digital era by Pereda (2020) and further enhanced by the **Digital Engagement Framework**. This study also incorporates principles from **Service-Dominant Logic** (Vargo & Lusch, 2016) to explore how universities can co-create value with their students. Particular attention is paid to the following dimensions:

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- ✓ **Product:** Strategies for differentiating academic programs and highlighting their unique value propositions.
- ✓ **Place:** The creation of seamless, omnichannel student journeys that integrate digital and physical touchpoints.
- ✓ **Promotion:** The implementation of an integrated marketing communications (IMC) strategy that leverages a diverse range of channels.
- ✓ **Process:** The optimization of the enrollment funnel to improve conversion rates and the overall student experience.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Evolution of Higher Education Marketing

The field of higher education marketing has undergone a significant evolution, progressing through three distinct phases (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2020):

- ✓ **The Reputational Era (Pre-1990s):** During this period, marketing was largely passive, with institutions relying heavily on word-of-mouth and established academic reputations (Bourke, 2000).
- ✓ **The Branding Era (1990-2010):** This era saw the rise of institutional branding, as universities began to actively manage their public image and differentiate themselves from competitors (Chapleo, 2015).
- ✓ **The Digital Engagement Era (2010-Present):** The current era is characterized by the dominance of digital channels and algorithm-driven recruitment strategies (Mogaji, 2021). Recent studies underscore the transformative impact of this shift, with as many as 73% of student decision journeys now commencing in the digital realm (Eduventures, 2023).

2.2. Digital Marketing in the Education Sector

The latest research in digital marketing for education highlights the importance of a multi-pronged, data-driven approach:

- ✓ **Social Media Effectiveness:** Different platforms serve distinct purposes. Instagram, for instance, has been shown to generate 4.2 times higher engagement for visual storytelling (Li & Liu, 2022), while LinkedIn is indispensable for marketing professional programs (Gupta, 2021). Emerging platforms like TikTok are also gaining traction, with 18% of its content now being education-related (Statista, 2023; Profile Tree, 2024).
- ✓ **Data-Driven Recruitment:** The use of predictive analytics has become increasingly sophisticated, with some models achieving up to 85% accuracy in identifying prospective applicants (Baker et al., 2022). The strategic implementation of tools like Google Analytics 4 and Meta's conversion API, as demonstrated in this case study, allows for real-time campaign optimization and a more granular understanding of the student journey (Education Dynamics, 2024).
- ✓ **Omnichannel Marketing:** A seamless and integrated student experience across all channels—from social media to in-person campus visits—is now a critical success factor (Unibuddy, 2024; OHO Interactive, 2025).

2.3. The Impact of AI on Higher Education Marketing

The advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is poised to revolutionize higher education marketing, with the global AI in the education market projected to reach USD 112.30 billion by 2034 (Precedence Research, 2024). Key applications of AI in this context include:

- ✓ **Hyper-Personalization:** AI algorithms can analyze vast amounts of data to deliver highly personalized messages and content to prospective students, significantly enhancing engagement and conversion rates (Higher Education Marketing, 2025).
- ✓ **AI-Powered Chatbots:** Chatbots are increasingly being deployed to provide 24/7 support to students, answer their questions in real-time, and qualify leads for the admissions team (OHO Interactive, 2025).
- ✓ **Predictive Analytics:** AI-powered predictive models can identify students who are most likely to enroll, allowing for more targeted and efficient marketing efforts (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).
- ✓ **Ethical Considerations:** As with any powerful technology, the use of AI in marketing raises important ethical considerations regarding data privacy, algorithmic bias, and transparency. Institutions must be mindful of these issues and ensure that their use of AI is both responsible and ethical (ResearchGate, 2023).

2.4. Aligning Marketing Strategies with Saudi Vision 2030

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is a transformative roadmap for the nation's future, with profound implications for the higher education sector. Key aspects of the vision that intersect with higher education marketing include:

1. **A Knowledge-Based Economy:** Vision 2030 seeks to transition the Saudi economy away from its reliance on oil and towards a knowledge-based economy. This creates a powerful incentive for higher education institutions to develop and market programs that are closely aligned with the needs of the job market (Vision 2030; Gulf Migration).
2. **Privatization and Competition:** The vision actively encourages private sector investment in education, leading to a more competitive and dynamic market (Colliers, 2024; PSU-ETD). This necessitates more sophisticated and strategic marketing approaches from private institutions.
3. **Internationalization:** Vision 2030 aims to attract international students and faculty to Saudi Arabia, creating new opportunities for institutions to market themselves on a global stage (Global Business Outlook).

2.5. Cultural Considerations in MENA Marketing

Marketing in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region requires a deep understanding of the local culture. Three critical factors emerge from regional studies:

- ✓ **Family Influence:** A significant majority (68%) of Saudi students involve their parents in their university selection process (Alharbi, 2021). This underscores the importance of marketing campaigns that resonate with both students and their families.
- ✓ **Mobile Dominance:** With 92% of internet access in the region occurring via smartphones (GSMA, 2023), a mobile-first approach to digital marketing is essential.

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- ✓ **Trust Indicators:** Institutional accreditation is a primary decision-making factor for students and their families (Alamri, 2020). Therefore, highlighting accreditation and other trust signals is a crucial component of any marketing campaign.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, which allowed for a rich and comprehensive analysis of the Onaizah Colleges marketing campaign. The quantitative and qualitative components of the research are outlined below:

1. **Quantitative Components:**
 - ✓ Digital funnel analysis of 15,372 touchpoints.
 - ✓ Enrollment correlation studies for the 2019-2023 cohorts.
2. **Qualitative Components:**
 - ✓ Semi-structured interviews with 12 administrators.
 - ✓ Focus groups with 4 student cohorts.

3.2. Data Collection Matrix:

Table 1: Data Collection Matrix

Data Type	Source	Collection Method	Analysis Tool
Web Traffic	Google Analytics 4	Event tracking	Looker Studio
Social Metrics	Meta Business Suite	API integration	Hootsuite Analytics
Enrollment Data	SIS	SQL queries	Tableau
Perceptual Data	Interviews	NVivo coding	Thematic analysis

Source: by the Author

3.3. Analytical Approach

The study employed a range of analytical techniques to provide a multi-faceted view of the campaign's effectiveness:

- ✓ **Conjoint Analysis:** To measure the relative importance of different program attributes in the student selection process.
- ✓ **Sentiment Analysis:** To evaluate 2,387 social media comments and gain insights into public perception of the campaign.
- ✓ **Geospatial Mapping:** To identify the geographic catchment areas from which the college was drawing students.

3.4. AI-Driven Analytics and Ethical Considerations

While this study primarily relied on traditional analytical methods, future research could be significantly enhanced by the application of AI-driven analytics. For example, predictive models could be developed to identify at-risk students or to forecast enrollment trends with even greater accuracy. However, the use of such powerful tools also necessitates careful consideration of the ethical implications. Institutions must

ensure that they are using student data responsibly and transparently, and that their algorithms are free from bias.

4. Campaign Implementation

The marketing campaign was implemented in three distinct phases over a 12-month period.

4.1. Phase 1: Foundation (Months 1-3)

Market Research:

- ✓ Comprehensive competitor benchmarking using tools like SimilarWeb.
- ✓ Mystery shopping at six rival institutions to assess their student experience.

Brand Positioning:

Development of unique value propositions, including “Industry-Aligned Curriculum” (which resulted in 83% employer satisfaction) and a “90% Graduate Employment Rate.”

4.2. Phase 2: Digital Activation (Months 4-9)

Performance Marketing:

- ✓ A SR12,000 investment in Google Ads generated 320 leads, resulting in a highly efficient CPA of SR37.50.
- ✓ Meta Ads featuring carousel images outperformed single-image ads by 22%.

Content Strategy:

- ✓ The creation of blog posts with schema markup led to a 65% increase in organic traffic.
- ✓ A student-led vlog series generated over 42,000 views, demonstrating the power of authentic student voices.

4.3. Phase 3: Community Integration (Months 10-12)

Local Partnerships:

- ✓ Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) were signed with eight local high schools.
- ✓ The college co-sponsored events with the local Chamber of Commerce, increasing its visibility within the business community.

Alumni Activation:

- ✓ An alumni referral program was launched, which drove 18% of new enrollments.
- ✓ A “I studied at Onaizah Colleges” video series featuring successful alumni was created to inspire prospective students.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Key Performance Indicators

The campaign’s success is evident in the dramatic improvement of key performance indicators:

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Table 2: Campaign's KPIs

Metric	Baseline	Post-Campaign	Δ	Benchmark
Inquiries/Month	210	527	+151%	Sector: +25%
Application Rate	31%	49%	+58%	National Avg: 35%
Cost per Enrollment	SR1,200	SR680	-43%	Peer Avg: SR950
Social Engagement	4.2%	11.7%	+179%	HEI Median: 6.8%

Source: by the Author

5.2. Qualitative Insights

The qualitative data provided further evidence of the campaign's effectiveness, with three key themes emerging from the interviews and focus groups:

- ✓ **Cultural Resonance:** The use of localized imagery and messaging significantly improved response rates.
- ✓ **Mobile Optimization:** A staggering 94% of conversions were completed via mobile devices, highlighting the importance of a mobile-first strategy.
- ✓ **Trust Signals:** The prominent display of accreditation badges on the college's website and marketing materials increased click-through rates by 19%.

5.3. ROI Analysis

The campaign's return on investment was nothing short of remarkable. The initial investment of SR185,000 generated:

- ✓ **SR2.7 million in incremental tuition revenue.**
- ✓ **A 14:1 return on ad spend (ROAS).**
- ✓ **A 28% improvement in brand recall.**

5.4. Discussion and Future Outlook

The exceptional results of the Onaizah Colleges marketing campaign can be attributed to a number of factors. First, the campaign's **integrated approach**, which seamlessly blended digital and traditional marketing channels, was instrumental in creating a holistic and engaging student experience. Second, the campaign's **cultural resonance** and deep understanding of the local context allowed it to connect with students and their families on a personal level. Third, the campaign's **data-driven nature** enabled the college to optimize its spending and maximize its return on investment.

Looking to the future, Onaizah Colleges is well-positioned to build on this success. By continuing to embrace emerging technologies like AI, the college can further personalize its marketing efforts, improve the efficiency of its recruitment process, and gain an even deeper understanding of the student journey. Furthermore, by continuing to align its marketing strategies with the goals of Saudi Vision 2030, the college can position itself as a key contributor to the nation's future success.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several important contributions to the literature on higher education marketing:

1. It validates the **Digital Engagement Framework** in the context of an emerging market.
2. It quantifies the **return on investment of cultural adaptation** in GCC education marketing.
3. It demonstrates that **smaller institutions can compete effectively** with larger and better-funded rivals through strategic targeting and a focus on the student experience.

6.2. Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer a number of practical recommendations for higher education institutions in the MENA region and beyond:

For Institutions:

1. Implement an “always-on” digital nurturing strategy to engage with prospective students throughout their decision-making process.
2. Develop strategic partnerships with local influencers and community organizations.
3. Invest in marketing analytics capabilities to track performance and optimize campaigns.

For Policy Makers:

1. Support training programs for private college marketing professionals.
2. Facilitate data sharing between industry and educational institutions to better align academic programs with the needs of the job market.

6.3. Future Research Directions

This study opens up several avenues for future research, including:

1. Longitudinal studies of enrollment quality to assess the long-term impact of the marketing campaign.
2. Comparative studies of marketing effectiveness across different types of institutions in the MENA region.
3. Further research into the ethical implications of using AI and other emerging technologies in higher education marketing.

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