# S.M.A.R.T Strategies:
# A Quick Peek into Prospective Open University Marketing Strategies in a Disrupted Era

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## Abstract

*The significance of an open university cannot be overstated for individuals seeking equitable and accessible education. Rapid technological advancements have played a pivotal role in making open education feasible, albeit posing challenges to the sustainability of such institutions. In response to this disrupted landscape, universities must adapt, particularly by harnessing the potential of social media. Examining the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, historically a prominent segment with a dominant presence of student teachers, reveals a notable transformation. This research addresses this imperative, focusing on the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education at Universitas Terbuka, where the number of students has gradually decreased. Meanwhile, the significance of a distance university is often measured in terms of whether its enrolment is high. The study delves into two primary research questions: "What are the most effective media forms for digital marketing?" and "How can strategies and digital marketing programmes be formulated to enhance branding and promote Faculty of Teacher Training and Education-Universitas Terbuka programmes?". To address these questions, 131 lecturers, 43 students, and two experts in education and marketing were engaged in a qualitative study, utilising questionnaires and Focus Group Discussions for data collection. The findings recommend Instagram as the preferable platform for promotion and reveal the integration of the Supervising, Making, Affiliation, Rematching, and Timing (S.M.A.R.T) strategy to meet the evolving demands of the digital era.*

*Keywords: Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, marketing, open university, SMART, social media, strategy.*

## 1.   Introduction

Long-distance learning stands as a viable alternative, championed by open universities and motivated by governmental efforts to ensure equal educational opportunities for all citizens. As Nyaruwata (2011) outlines, this approach focuses on breaking down barriers of time and place, liberating learners, and providing flexible learning options for individual and group learners. However, over time, Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia's primary long-distance learning institution, has dealt with disruption and faced difficulty in maintaining its existence. Prior to the technological disruption, the institution confidently became the first choice of people; yet at present, a competitive effort is needed to sustain the organisation's contribution to society. Due to this urgent need, some researchers have been prompted to

synthesize as well as formulate a new marketing strategy designed to assist UT workers in promoting their study programmes, particularly at the Faculty of Education and Teacher Training.

Long-distance learning has had a long history across the world. Delving into the historical roots, the inception of long-distance learning can be traced back to an initiative by the United Kingdom's Labour Party under Prime Minister Harold Wilson. The urgency for an Open University (OU) unfolded through dynamic discussions among citizens of the United Kingdom. Reflecting on this in a 1977 lecture to the OU Students' Association, Harold Wilson revealed that he had conceptualized the idea of the OU even before assuming leadership of the Labour Party in February 1963. Recounting a pivotal moment during his holiday in the Isles of Scilly on Easter Sunday that same year, Wilson drafted the outline for a "University of the Air," marking the seminal birth of the open university concept (Degang, 2021).

Amid the digital revolution, Harold Wilson discerned an opportunity to leverage the positive impact of digital technology to establish a potentially affordable educational channel accessible to lower-income individuals. Utilising radio and television, the OU orchestrated its teaching-learning process, with specially crafted correspondence materials bearing the heaviness of the teaching load, as highlighted by Collings (1971). This pioneering phenomenon garnered global attention, inspiring the establishment of open universities in various nations. Notably, Indonesia's Open University, or Universitas Terbuka (UT) in Bahasa Indonesia, was established on 4 September 1984 under the protection of Presidential Instruction No. 41. Considering the vast geographical area of Indonesia, UT, without a doubt, has become the saviour of education. Being an archipelago nation of more than 17,000 islands, Indonesia is a state with a sizable territory stretching from Aceh to the island of Papua. Given its geographic dimensions, which span 1,904,569 km², Indonesia is the largest country entirely of islands (nationsonline.org). Considering this, educating Indonesian people in Indonesia is extremely difficult. Universitas Terbuka (UT), rooted in Indonesian soil, epitomizes the commitment to open higher education for all. As encapsulated in its slogan "making higher education for all", the university's commitment was demonstrated in the establishment of 39 regional offices in an effort to reach potential students in every location (Unit Program Belajar Jarak Jauh). Each of the offices represents a specific region.

With 39 regional offices and one international bureau, UT's tagline was more than a mere aspiration, becoming a tangible reality. However, the present-day context diverges significantly from the landscape 1963, when the Open University was first introduced. UT currently faces new challenges in the disrupted era, signalling a paradigm shift over time. The advent of the disrupted era has significantly impacted the landscape of open universities, including UT. Compounding this shift is the realisation that digital learning is no longer the exclusive domain of open universities, with numerous alternative platforms such as edX, Future Learn, and other distance learning avenues catering to individuals from diverse backgrounds. Thus, the traditional centralised model of open universities is gradually facing disruption.

Examining the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education (FKIP), historically a prominent segment with a dominant presence of student teachers, reveals a notable transformation. It was once the preferred faculty and the biggest in terms of student number yet recently, the faculty has experienced a gradual decrease in enrolment. In 2015, student teachers constituted a solid 71.83% of the faculty, but by 2021, this proportion had decreased. This phenomenon is not only faced by UT; similar challenges are faced by other open universities. For example, the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), despite experiencing positive perceptions and high enrolment levels, has encountered turbulence (Tawanda et al., 2013). This scenario has prompted a pressing need for research in Zimbabwe to unravel the mysteries surrounding the current situation and evaluate the effectiveness of the university's adopted marketing strategies (Tawanda et al., 2013).

Besides, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a pivotal moment for open universities, presenting them with dual trajectories. Firstly, open universities, for example, Universitas Terbuka, gained prominence, especially in countries like Indonesia, where traditional universities often lack infrastructure for long-distance learning. With its established expertise in this area, UT served as a role model for institutions grappling with the sudden shift to remote education. Secondly, the widespread recognition of the potential and necessity for distance learning has led conventional universities to explore and adopt aspects of the open university model, blurring the distinctive features of open and offline education. This can be

a challenge for UT since it needs to restate its existence as the one and only open and distance educational university in Indonesia.

Notably, Circular Letter Number 2 of 2022 from the Ministry of Education in Indonesia outlines the flexibility of implementing distance learning at either the subject level or throughout the curriculum of a study programme. While open universities were once the primary providers of distance learning, this letter indicates a broader scope, allowing other universities to conduct remote classes. Notably, this provision is subject to certain conditions and permissions, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. While no specific research confirms the impact of COVID-19 on enrollment in open universities like Universitas Terbuka, the changing landscape is evident. The Open University, which once held exclusive authority in managing and providing distance learning, now faces the prospect of competing in the open market of distance education. Consequently, there is an urgent need to assess and adapt marketing strategies to navigate the uncertainties of this disrupted era. Preparing for potential challenges is paramount, as the once-guaranteed privileges of open universities are gradually evolving in response to the evolving educational landscape. However, it is not an easy task for a large and senior institution such as UT to devise a new marketing strategy. This will demand considerable experimentation and time, yet the teaching-learning process must continue to be run without disruption. Therefore, as a first step, it is useful to ascertain UT's marketing practices up to this point. This will be useful to map where it stands and what changes are needed to address upcoming challenges.

Having a close look at Universitas Terbuka's marketing strategy, particularly related to FKIP programmes and all the challenges that UT currently faces, this research was designed to assess the university's efforts to generate sustainable student enrolment. The study was guided by two core questions. Firstly, an exploration into the forms of media employed for effective digital marketing for FKIP was undertaken. This encompassed an analysis of the channels and platforms utilised to reach and engage with the target audience. Secondly, the research delves into the strategies and digital marketing programmes that FKIP has employed and might apply to fortify its branding and effectively market its programmes. This includes assessing the methods employed to enhance the visibility, reputation, and appeal of the faculty's offerings. Through these inquiries, the research seeks to shed light on the dynamic landscape of digital marketing within the context of open education, aiming to provide insights that contribute to the sustained success of FKIP amidst the challenges of evolving educational paradigms. The present educational scenario is very different from that of the past. Therefore, UT needs to adjust, especially regarding its marketing strategy, to ensure it can continue to provide accessible education for all. Finally, since this study mostly analyses how UT, particularly the Faculty of Education and Teacher Training (FKPI), is running its marketing and the expectations of its stakeholders for a better marketing strategy, the study will reformulate all the insights gained into a more comprehensible pattern or theory.

## 2.    Literature Review

To ensure its continued presence, any university needs to promote itself and its programmes from time to time. This process is necessary to ensure the sustainability of enrolment numbers, which is an important measure of a university's role in a society. If the number of students plummets or no students enrol, this indicates that a university is no longer needed. This assumption derives from economic theory, related to the role of supply and demand in the market. Mill (as cited in Inoua, 2020) stated that the utility of a thing in the estimation of the purchaser, is the extreme limit of its exchange value. This means that the value of a product or service depends on whether it is valuable for the buyer. In the case of an open university, its existence is important since people see distance learning as a solution, which makes it valuable. Yet, when the number of students is decreasing, it indicates that people may be failing to see the instrumentality of the programmes offered by the university. However, an alternative explanation on the decreasing enrolment in the open university can also be caused by the existence of many competitors, which is expected in this era of technological development. This is further compounded by the use of less effective marketing strategies.

The significance of a distance university is influenced by whether the demand, or the level of enrolment, is high. However, enrolment is not solely affected by the image of the university. There are various

influences that can affect student enrolment in a particular university. As stated by Nuseir and El Refae (2022), several factors, such as academic reputation, grants and funding, location and proximity, facilities and services, and promotional and marketing channels, drive students' choices for studying at universities in the UAE. This means marketing matters. However, there are few up-to-date studies elaborating on social media and marketing strategy, particularly in the case of open universities. This gap has prompted the present investigation.

While there are numerous studies on marketing strategy, relatively few focus on university marketing or specifically open university marketing in a disrupted era. It can be understood that many universities are still implementing traditional types of advertisements. Yet, they need to realise that times have changed, and the rapid spread of social media has led to new forms of promotion channels which should be utilised. A study by Tokarski and Kowalik (2020) discusses marketing initiatives on social media performed by universities, indicating that Facebook, as the most highly viewed platform for students, needs to be maintained or expanded. Moreover, Tokarski and Kowalik (2020) showed that the role of social media undeniably affects promotion, where their survey results indicate that more frequent content posts on social media can foster enduring connections with the nearby community. A study by Samlaw et al. (2023) also indicates the significant role of social media on marketing strategy, where the researchers found that TikTok is a very successful promotional platform. TikTok not only provides a wealth of information about Muhammadiyah Buton University to prospective students illustrates theaccomplishment of the marketing plan, but also it effectively draws prospective students into material created by Communication Science students, which offers a distinctive perspective on the advantages of Muhammadiyah Buton University (Samlaw et al., 2023).

Similarly, Rawat et al. (2022) also emphasised the important role of social media in university marketing, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The constraint that prevents the university from reaching potential students can be overcome by using social media, which shows social media as the new playground for promoting and marketing. Even though prior studies have revealed much insightful information, their results cannot be solely applied to open universities since they have a different learning environment compared to conventional universities. Therefore, this study aims to fill this urgent gap by focusing on open university marketing.

It is undeniable that social media is instrumental in promotion, yet a specific role in open university marketing has not yet been identified. One notable study is that Kidulani (2014) conducted on the marketing strategy of the open university in Tanzania. The researcher attempted to assess the effectiveness of 4ps (pricing, product, people, place) marketing strategies, and it turned out that determining the how, when, where, and what 4ps are needed to be effectively and efficiently applied is not an easy task for management (Kidulani, 2014). However, his study did not specifically mention the role of media, which is the focus of the current research. For instance, the 4PS theory generally explains several points that need to be given the highest consideration when one wants to elevate marketing outcomes. For instance, the quality of the product, its reasonable price and the place where customers can access it need to be taken seriously, along with the people who will deliver or serve the product. Although the theory gives good insight into informed marketing strategy, the present research moves beyond the theoretical elements to synthesise the best practices that suit UT's marketing culture with a strong emphasis on the fact on the ground.

Research from Mohd Nazri et al. (2021) also did not discuss the use of social media for marketing purposes despite their findings about the perspectives of prospective open university students in Malaysia. Prospective students' perceptions are useful for revealing effective market segmentation for open universities, yet the role of social media is not included in the research by Mohd Nazri et al. (2021). Another relevant study by Budiman et al. (2023), which was conducted in an open university and specifically talks about marketing segmentation in an open university, clustered according to approaches such as demographic, geographic, psychographic, and behavioural. This is useful as a stepping stone to target potential students, and Budiman et al.'s (2023) study emphasises the importance of social media as an instrumental tool for promotion and goes deeper into what forms of media are used for effective digital marketing. While comparing social media and other conventional promotions, the researchers did not identify which social media works best. Budiman et al. (2023) also did not tell us what forms of

education and digital marketing programmes can be utilised to strengthen branding and market the programmes offered to the public to attract prospective students, which is covered in the present study. However, since research that meets both criteria, specifically about open universities and discussing social media as the tool of promotion, is rarely found, the research from Budiman et al. (2023) is the most relevant resource we can refer to, and the current study aims to extend their area of study.

Finally, this research is made as an ethnographical note. The researchers are not imposing a new method or experimenting with a recent university strategy. It is a work that genuinely captures how marketing strategy has happened within the Faculty of Education and Teacher Training in UT. According to the information provided, the objective of this research is to give insights on how marketing strategy has been implicitly implemented from time to time in UT, yet it has not been formalised. In this research, formalisation of those activities will be done, and hopefully, this paper can serve as a guide on how open university in Indonesia promote their study programme.

## 3.    Research Method

This study follows a qualitative research design. This was deemed suitable due to the intention to go deeper in understanding and describing the types of media used for effective digital marketing to convey education related to FKIP and the study programmes offered, and forms of education and digital marketing programmes that can be utilised by FKIP-UT to strengthen branding as well as to market the programmes offered to the public, in order to attract prospective students. Considering the linear research questions we aimed to answer, we decided to utilise a qualitative approach. According to Creswell (2013:44), "…qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem".

The researchers applied two questionnaires and a focus group discussion for the data-collection technique. Approaching the data using two types of techniques is useful as not only can this help  find more variative results, but it can also be important for triangulating the findings since each dataset can confirm and strengthen the others. Early on, social scientists borrowed the concept of triangulation to argue for its use in the validation process in assessing the veracity of social science research results (Mertens & Hesse-Biber, 2012). This means that triangulation is necessary to ensure the trustworthiness of our research findings. According to Creswell (2012), there are at least three alternative ways to conduct triangulation,. First is corroborating evidence from different individuals (e.g., a principal and a student), types of data (e.g., field notes and interviews), or methods of data collection (e.g., documents and interviews).

The data was extracted from selected participants. All the participants are stakeholders of FKIP, consisting of lecturers and staff as well as students from the faculty, with a total number of 131 participants. Of the lecturers, around 54.3% are assistant professors, 81.7 % have a social science/humanities background, and the rest are in science and technology. Meanwhile, at least 43 students were also included in the research. The researchers also invited experts in educational marketing to participate. All participants were provided with a questionnaire to fill out. After that, we visited the selected regional offices since there are 38 regional offices. The researchers then administered a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) to get more information to answer the research questions.

## 4.    Findings and Discussion

After collecting and analysing the data, we identified two results addressing the research question. As previously mentioned, we employed two distinct data collection methods: a questionnaire and Focus Group Discussions (FGD). Both methods yielded pertinent information relevant to answering the research questions, constituting our findings. The initial finding pertains to exploring media forms employed for efficient digital marketing in disseminating information related to FKIP and its study programmes. The results indicate that social media is the most recommended medium for promotional

and marketing activities. Notably, some experts involved in the study advocate for Instagram as the optimal platform for these purposes.

The response is diverse in the context of the second inquiry into the strategies and digital marketing programmes that FKIP can employ to enhance branding and promote its programmes to attract potential students. To facilitate easy recall and practical application, the findings can be considered into the abbreviation S.M.A.R.T., represented in the following figure:



**Figure 1.** SMART

The initial strategy involves "Supervising," entailing the assignment of media supervisors actively engaging with potential students. The next aspect is "Making," which emphasises the creation of unique and personalised promotional videos for each study programme. Crafting such videos proves beneficial in ensuring clarity for prospective students regarding their specific programme needs. Another key strategy is "Affiliating," which suggests the inclusion of influential alumni or notable figures, either local or national, in digital content promotions for added impact. The fourth strategy is termed "Rematching," which emphasises the importance of understanding the types of digital media and their users to target potential students in the digital market effectively. Lastly, "Timing" is crucial, considering the optimal timing for video uploads or launching digital content promotions to enhance the effectiveness of marketing efforts.

The researchers successfully addressed two research questions by scrutinising data derived from two sources. The initial inquiry focused on determining the media forms utilised for efficient digital marketing to communicate education related to FKIP and its offered study programmes. The questionnaire results revealed that social media emerged as a recognised and effective channel for digital promotion (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Questionnaire Results

| Statement | StD | D | SD | SA | A | StA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Online marketing mode by utilising the media social is seen as an effective strategy. | 0.8% | 0.8% | 1.5% | 6.9% | 55.7% | 34.4% |

Description: StD=Strongly Disagree), D=Disagree, SD=Slightly Disagree, SA= Slightly Agree, A=Agree, StA=Strongly Agree

As is evident from the data, approximately 90.1% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement on the effectiveness of social media for the digital promotion of FKIP and its study programmes. Despite recognising the significant role of social media, the specific forms were not fully disclosed. Subsequent analysis revealed that the UT website also played a crucial role, with over 80% of participants acknowledging its effectiveness, although it may not strictly qualify as social media. Moreover, participants unanimously agreed on optimising various social media platforms, including YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. While these findings contributed valuable insights, the initial research question remained partially unanswered.

Notably, open-ended questionnaire responses mentioned WhatsApp (WAG) and Telegram as potentially useful social media platforms for the faculty, even though they have not been established as such. However, a conclusive response to the first research question emerged during the FGD with educational marketing experts, where the consensus pointed towards Instagram as the preferred platform for marketing FKIP. This finding aligns with results obtained from one of the FGDs. It is stated that the involvement of local influencers through IG is another effective way to approach prospective students.

This is a reasonable consideration because it is the second largest social media used by young people in Indonesia (Nurhayati-Wolff, 2024), as illustrated in the following figure.
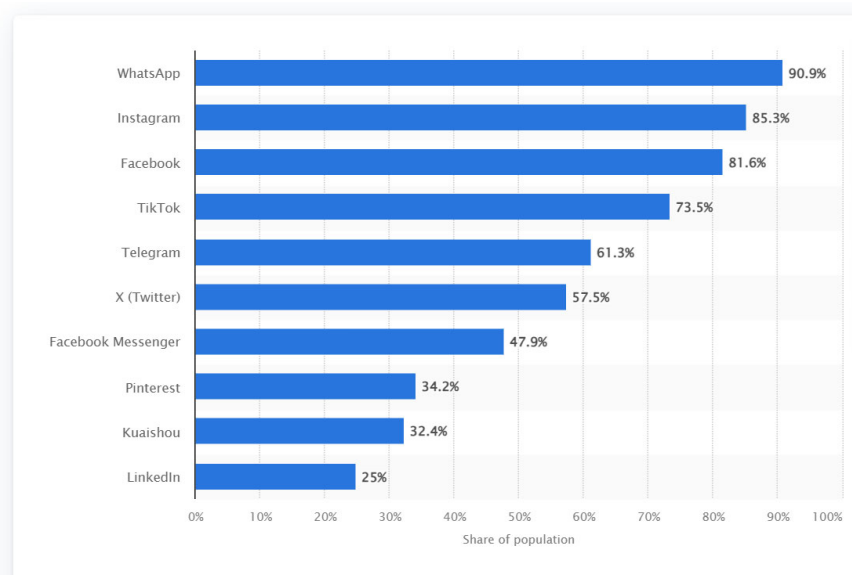


**Figure 2.** Penetration of leading social networks in Indonesia in 2023 (Nurhayati-Wolff, 2024)

Shifting our focus to the second research question, implementing the S.M.A.R.T. strategy was considered a sequential and comprehensive approach in marketing processes. Starting with "S" for supervising, both close- and open-ended questionnaire responses, along with FGD insights, emphasized the high demand for supervision or a supervisor managing digital tools for promotion.

Commencing with the first element of the S.M.A.R.T. strategy, "Supervision (S)," the questionnaire outcomes reveal a resounding agreement, with 95.4% of participants expressing agreement or strong agreement that FKIP should formulate an effective marketing strategy, including appointing an individual responsible for the FKIP official social media. This aligns with expert recommendations advocating the necessity of assigning individuals specifically for managing social media, with a suggested minimum of five personnel.

Moving on to the second aspect, "Making (M)," creating representative videos for each study program is considered essential. However, the task remains incomplete. Participants emphasised the importance of generating videos or content marketing for each study programme, with 95.5% agreeing that every programme should propose engaging content tailored to the characteristics of the platform in use. Furthermore, there is strong support, around 95.4%, for the incorporation of influential alumni, and 94.6% favour collaboration with public figures in the content creation process. These findings are corroborated by insights from the FGD.

The next strategy is termed "Rematching," which highlights the significance of comprehending the many forms of digital media and the people who use them in order to reach prospective students in the digital market successfully. Transitioning to the "Affiliation (A)" component, connecting with influential figures is deemed valuable. Around 95.4% of participants believe that affiliating with influential alumni and public figures serves as a significant campaign strategy, acting as social magnets to attract potential students to the university. This substantiates the importance of strategic affiliations highlighted during the FGD.

Lastly, the "Timing (T)" element underscores the significance of choosing the right moments for implementing the marketing strategy. A substantial 96.9% of participants recognise the importance of timing, concurring that certain occasions, such as National Education Day and Teacher's Day, serve as special moments for uploading UT FKIP digital materials. This consensus emphasises the strategic

importance of synchronising marketing efforts with significant events, contributing to the overall effectiveness of the promotional campaign.

## 5.    Conclusion

The trajectory of open universities has taken an unexpected turn. As an open university, UT is not exempt from the trend, and FKIP, which once held a dominant position in student numbers, now faces the imperative to devise an enhanced marketing strategy to address this challenge. This situation has resulted, presumably, due to one dominant reason: the shifting position of UT, particularly after the pandemic. The university is not the only provider in Indonesia, providing online and distance learning. Moreover, a massive technological disruption that has changed the landscape of distance learning, where new competitors have emerged gradually, has affected the institution where it was once the only credible educational service provider. In the contemporary landscape, digital marketing and promotion, particularly through social media, have gained significant momentum owing to their extensive and valuable user base. In response to this trend, the faculty is compelled to seize the opportunity and strategise accordingly. This research extends previous studies with a similar focus, identifying the most effective social media platform for marketing and formulating strategies. The analysis underscores Instagram as the top recommendation and the S.M.A.R.T. strategy emerges as a synthesised approach derived from participants' concerns, perceptions, and demands. S.M.A.R.T. stands for "Supervision," which focuses on appointing an individual responsible for the official social media of FKIP, "Making", which recommends the creation of representative videos for each study programme, and "Affiliation", which shows that connecting with influential figures is deemed valuable. The final two letters in the acronym stand for "Rematching", which emphasizes how important it is to understand the various digital media platforms and their users to reach potential students in the digital market effectively, and finally, "Timing" which highlights how important it is to pick the ideal times to put the marketing plan into action. Distance learning, social media, and university marketing are popular areas within education services, making this research interesting. However, due to limitations of manpower as well as time, this study has only covered a small area. In terms of participants, the study focused only on one faculty in an organisation. Including participants from other faculties and universities could produce more comprehensive findings about the marketing strategy that UT has utilised. Furthermore, this research utilises a qualitative approach, which enables the deep exploration of an area yet lacks credibility for wider generalisation of its findings in different contexts. However, the research has a sufficient theoretical basis and provides information on a similar field of interest and study area.

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