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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21137832) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21137832)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21137832)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21137832>**The NIEM Framework: Netnographic Intelligence and Institutional Branding in Pakistani Higher Education****Hamza Rashid**

Lecturer, Institute of Business Studies

Kohat University of Science &amp; Technology (KUST)

Kohat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

Email: [hamzarashid@kust.edu.pk](mailto:hamzarashid@kust.edu.pk)

ORCID: 0009-0008-6667-8312

**Aamir Shahzad**

Lecturer, Institute of Business Studies

Kohat University of Science &amp; Technology (KUST)

Kohat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

Email: [amrktk1988@gmail.com](mailto:amrktk1988@gmail.com)**Maleeha Yousaf**

Lecturer, Institute of Business Studies

Kohat University of Science &amp; Technology (KUST)

Kohat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

Email: [yousafmaleeha@gmail.com](mailto:yousafmaleeha@gmail.com)**ABSTRACT**

*This conceptual paper develops the Netnographic Intelligence for Engagement and Marketing (NIEM) framework, explaining how higher education institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan can convert student-generated social media content (SGC) into strategic marketing intelligence that strengthens student engagement and institutional brand equity. Drawing on Consumer Engagement Theory, Service-Dominant Logic, and Digital Branding Theory, and synthesizing literature published between 2010 and 2026, the paper positions netnography not merely as a research method but as an organizational capability (netnographic intelligence capacity) that mediates the relationship between SGC quality and two downstream outcomes: student engagement and HEI brand equity. Platform characteristics and institutional responsiveness are proposed as boundary-condition moderators. Six propositions (P1–P6) are formally stated to anchor a future empirical research agenda combining survey-based path modeling with institutional case studies. The paper's principal contribution is to reframe netnographic intelligence as a distinct organizational capability within higher education marketing theory, and to ground that reframing in the Pakistani higher education sector, a competitive, rapidly expanding, and thinly regulated market that remains underrepresented in higher education marketing scholarship.*

**Keywords:** *Netnography; student-generated content; higher education marketing; consumer engagement; institutional branding; digital co-creation*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The landscape of higher education has undergone a substantial transformation in the past few decades. Public universities have been transformed into competitive players in quasi-market environments through the marketization of higher education (Marginson, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017). Today, students have access to an unprecedented amount of information at their fingertips. Students can easily access peer reviews, compare rankings of universities, and participate in experiential narratives before enrollment decisions (Guilbault, 2016; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). At the same time, the proliferation of social media has created a digital environment where students can not only consume but also create and critique institutional brand stories (Gensler et al., 2013; Zarouali et al., 2022).

The higher education sector has seen a rapid expansion in Pakistan as well, much faster than the institutions that govern it. The number of recognized universities increased from 59 in 2002 to more than 240 in 2022, and the total enrolment of students increased from 1.8 million to 5.6 million (HEC Annual Report, 2022). Competition for recruiting students from the private sector has become so acute that conventional marketing methods are not effective enough to tackle it (Haris et al., 2026). In this regard, there is currently relatively little research on how Pakistani HEIs could make use of the dense streams of student-generated digital content. This conceptual study aims to address this gap.

Netnography is well-positioned to fill it. A qualitative social media research methodology was systematized by Kozinets (2002, 2020). It also provides an opportunity for institutions to experience genuine student conversation, not the sanitized version, but the authentic version, to glean the intelligence needed to understand student preferences, frustrations, and perceptions of brands that surveys often fail to capture (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018). There is good evidence for this in consumer marketing (Bartl et al., 2016). The results of preliminary studies have prompted higher education institutions to implement this approach to international student recruitment (Gai et al., 2016). However, these early use cases are primarily designed to focus on a single aspect of recruitment (e.g. sentiment analysis) and not on the bigger picture of netnography as a strategic intelligence tool that can be incorporated into the existing institutional branding process. What remains to be explored is the more difficult theoretical puzzle: how netnography can be used as a research tool, and as an embedded organizational intelligence within HE marketing strategy.

In order to investigate this, three research questions were put forward. Because this is a conceptual paper, these questions are proposed as an agenda for future empirical testing rather than as hypotheses tested here. RQ1 investigates how the quality of student-generated social media content shapes an institution's netnographic intelligence capacity. RQ2 asks how netnographic intelligence mediates the relationship between content and institutional brand equity. RQ3 asks what contextual conditions, specifically platform characteristics and institutional responsiveness, determine whether netnographic intelligence works in the Pakistani HE context.

To answer these questions, we developed the Netnographic Intelligence for Engagement and Marketing (NIEM) framework, a theoretically integrated model drawing on Consumer Engagement Theory (Dessart et al., 2023), Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), and Digital Branding theory (Gensler et al., 2013).

## **2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

### **2.1 The Marketization of Higher Education and Student-as-Consumer**

Treating students as consumers is one of the most widely discussed and radical policies and practices in HE over the past 30 years (Guilbault, 2016; Molesworth et al., 2009). The student-as-consumer paradigm was introduced and embraced by Anglo-American and, more recently, South Asian HE systems, starting with the Dearing Report (1997), and accelerated by the UK's tuition reforms of the 2000s (Tomlinson, 2017; Woodall et al., 2014). Under this framework, students are seen as rational actors who make rational choices based on a cost-benefit calculus (Bunce et al., 2016).

However, contemporary scholarship has significantly complicated this view. Guilbault (2016) states that the student-as-consumer metaphor is a systematic misrepresentation of the nature of HE and obscures the difference between the student as a learner-stakeholder and a transactional consumer. Similarly, Koris and Nokelainen (2015) empirically demonstrated that students' self-identification as consumers is context-dependent, being strongest during institutional selection but diminishing during active learning engagement. These results are important for HE marketing because engaging with students as consumers can lead to shallow and transactional engagement or even disengagement when expectations are not met.

The growth of the private sector and the information gap between public and private HE institutions in Pakistan further fuel students' consumerism (Shahnaz, 2022; Raza, 2021). Thus, digital marketing is not merely a secondary use of institutional intelligence but a primary one, increasingly adopted by students to face these asymmetries in the form of peer networks, social network discussions, or user-generated content.

### **2.2 Social Media, User-Generated Content, and Brand Co-Creation**

Brand communication in higher education no longer flows in one direction. The shift from broadcast marketing to participatory, student-driven content has been well documented (Gensler et al., 2013; Zarouali et al., 2022), however, the institutional implications remain underappreciated. Student-generated content, including reviews, testimonials, and informal discourse, serves as a persistent and highly credible form of brand intelligence. This content exists beyond the scope of institutional control; however, its significant impact on student decision-making with respect to the admission process is well documented. Therefore, it is extremely important to treat it as a core institutional asset, which requires proactive, strategic netnographic engagement rather than passive observation (Costello et al., 2017; Kozinets, 2015).

Likewise, a recent empirical study by Malthouse et al. (2016) discovered that engagement with user-generated content predicts purchase decisions, which is directly applicable to the context of HE recruitment. This is further elaborated by Habibi et al. (2022), who show that brand communities on social media can be more effective in inducing brand loyalty than conventional advertising messages. For universities, authenticity comes from students, not communication offices. Therefore, netnographic monitoring of student-generated content is not a peripheral research interest but a high-value intelligence activity with direct strategic consequences.

Furthermore, the theory of Vargo and Lusch 2004, Service Dominant Logic, is also useful in this regard. It repositions value as something created jointly by the provider and beneficiary rather than transferred unilaterally. Applied to HE, institutional brand equity is not communicated to students; it is produced

with them through the accumulated texture of their experiences, interactions, and public expression (Alves et al., 2023). In this sense, student social media activity is both value co-creation and live feedback.

### **2.3 Consumer Engagement Theory in Digital Contexts**

Consumer engagement has come into prominence as an important concept in marketing research from the mid-2000s onward and has been supported by increasing amounts of empirical research (Brodie et al., 2011; Dessart et al., 2023). In digital environments, engagement typically is defined as a complex psychological response, composed of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components. In other words, it arises from people's experiential interactions with a brand, organization, or online community (Calder et al., 2016; Dessart et al., 2023).

One issue that needs to be taken into account here is reciprocity. Digital engagement is not about more content; it's about making it more relevant, meaningful, and engaging. It emerges in a continuous process of interaction between the qualities students bring to the interaction (such as the quality of content they create, their user behavior, or the way they perceive themselves) and the activities the institutions carry out (such as producing quality content, responding to users, or personalizing communication) (Dessart et al., 2023). Netnography works well here because it allows for the observation of these interactions as they occur naturally in online communities—without having to design and implement surveys.

Muntinga et al. (2011) broke online brand engagement into the following three behaviors: consuming, contributing, and creating. Consuming is watching or listening without actively engaging with others, contributing is reacting, commenting, or sharing, and creating is creating new content. For higher education (HE), these differences are significant because they call for different approaches. While posting lots of content can lead to a passive consumption of the brand, it is quite another institutional context to get students to engage in active brand creation. Meanwhile, social media posts written by students can be the most insightful brand information.

### **2.4 Netnography as Organizational Methodology**

The methodology of netnography has grown significantly since developed formally by Kozinets (2002), especially in the 2020 version which focused issues related to platform growth and algorithmic-driven digital environments. Netnography is not just a content analysis as it also examines the social, emotional, and cultural significance of users' interactions online, which quantitative approaches tend to ignore (Kozinets, 2020; Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). It has been used in various research fields such as brand communities (Bartl et al., 2016), service experience analysis (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018), and research on international student decision-making (Gai et al., 2016). Typically, this consists of five steps: finding online communities to be involved in, gathering and structuring digital data, analyzing the data with coding and thematic analyses, establishing trustworthiness through triangulation and reflexivity, and dealing with ethical issues such as consent, anonymity, and security of the data (Kozinets, 2020).

Netnography has a strong case in Pakistan's higher education sector for several intertwined reasons. The proportion of people using social media has risen from 35% of the population in 2019 to more than 46% in 2023, with those aged 18-24 being the most active social media users (Kemp, 2023). The digital communities of Pakistani students are also quite limited in number, particularly Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, making it easier to identify them for research. However, one of the main concerns is the lack of formal quality assurance information in the HE sector in Pakistan. As official sources of information are often perceived as weak or unclear, students are more likely to rely on peer-generated

signals and word-of-mouth communication when making institutional choices (Krezel & Krezel, 2017; Brooks, 2008). In practice, the resulting information gap is often filled by informal student discussion that institutions do not themselves provide.

Also, another unexploited condition, not addressed in earlier netnography-for-HE studies, is that of algorithmic visibility. The one thing that an institution can capture in the act of “netnographic monitoring” is not necessarily “student discourse” per se, but rather the portion of that discourse that gets recommended, ranked, or suppressed by a platform's recommender and moderation systems (Zarouali et al., 2022). This matters for the NIEM framework specifically, because it means that Platform Characteristics (Section 3.3, Proposition 4) should be read as shaping not only the volume and richness of the SGC an institution generates, but the very sample of that SGC an institution is able to see in the first place. Any future empirical test of the framework should therefore treat platform algorithmic opacity as a measurement concern for Netnographic Intelligence Capacity, not only as a contextual variable that moderates outcomes downstream of it.

### **2.5 Netnographic Intelligence as an Organizational Capability**

Positioning netnographic intelligence as a capability, rather than only a research method, requires situating it against the established organizational capabilities literature, not solely against Teece's (2007) general formulation of dynamic capabilities. Day's (1994) foundational account of market-driven organizations identified market sensing and customer linking as the two capabilities that most reliably distinguish firms able to translate external information into competitive action from those that merely collect it — a distinction directly analogous to the technical, human, and strategic-integration layers proposed for Netnographic Intelligence Capacity in Section 3.2. More recent empirical work on dynamic marketing capabilities reinforces this point: Wilden and Gudergan (2015) find that a firm's capacity to sense and reconfigure around environmental signals shapes downstream marketing capability, but that the strength of this relationship is itself contingent on the turbulence of the operating environment — a finding that maps closely onto why Platform Characteristics and Institutional Responsiveness are proposed here as moderators rather than as direct effects.

Read against this literature, netnographic intelligence capacity is best understood as a specific, digitally native instance of the sensing capability long recognized in the market-driven-organization tradition, rather than as an entirely new construct. This does not diminish the paper's contribution: HE marketing has not yet articulated a sensing capability specific to student social discourse. But it does anchor the claim more precisely, and it reduces the risk that the capability framing is read as free-standing rather than as a theoretically grounded extension of an established stream of work.

## **3. THE NIEM CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **3.1 Framework Architecture**

The Netnographic Intelligence for Engagement and Marketing (NIEM) framework is grounded in one concept: that the value of a higher education institution's capacity to convert student-generated social media content into meaningful marketing intelligence — which we call netnographic intelligence — is the bridge between the digital information environment and institutional brand outcomes. The suggested framework is shown in Figure 1.

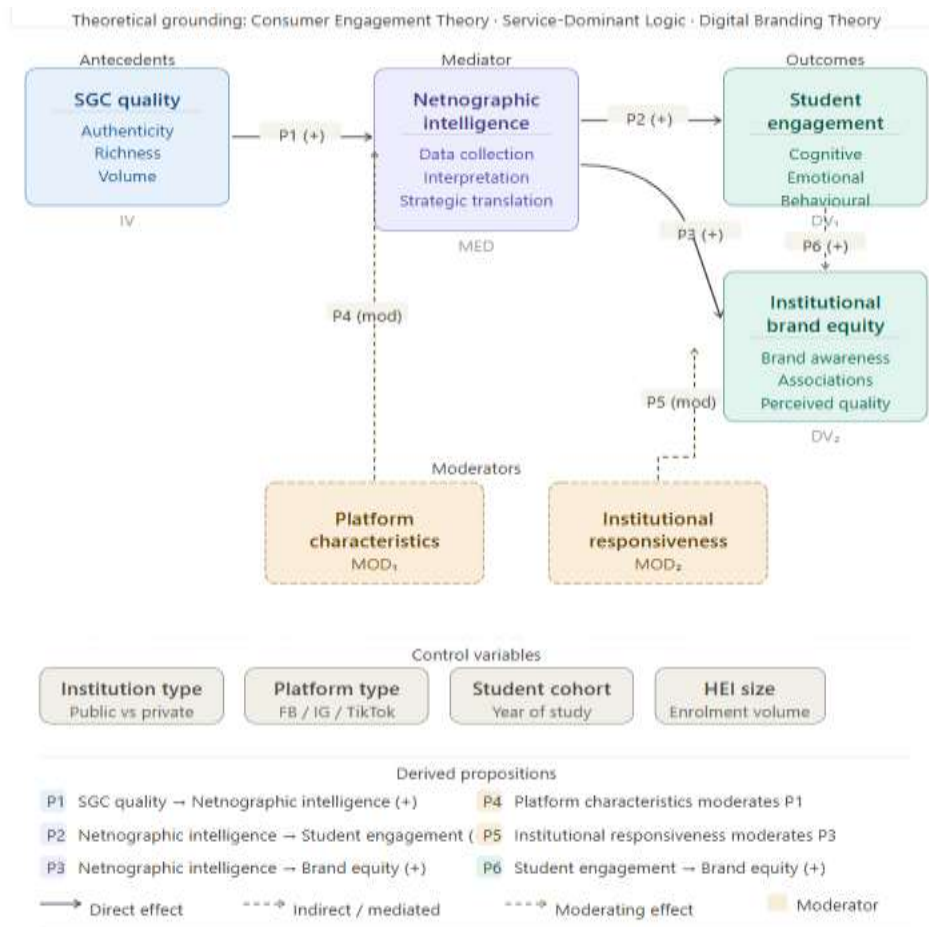


Figure 1. The NIEM Framework — Netnographic Intelligence for Engagement and Marketing  
Adapted from: Kozinets (2020); Dessart et al. (2023); Osei-Frimpong et al. (2022); Gensler et al. (2013)

**FIGURE 1: The NIEM Framework** — A path model with SGC Quality (authenticity, richness, volume) on the left, Netnographic Intelligence Capacity (data collection, interpretation, strategic translation) in the middle, and Student Engagement (cognitive, emotional, behavioral) and Brand Equity (awareness, association, perceived quality, loyalty) on the right. Platform Characteristics moderate the relationship between SGC Quality and Netnographic Intelligence Capacity, and Institutional Responsiveness moderates the relationship between Netnographic Intelligence and Brand Equity. The arrows show the relationships in a positive direction

### 3.2 Construct Operationalization

In marketing and information systems literature, there are three dimensions that are commonly discussed to measure the quality of SGC: authenticity, richness, and volume. Authenticity is the extent to which the content seems real and uninfluenced by institutions. Richness is the amount of detail, depth, and elaboration in the content, and volume is the amount of student discussion on a platform. All these dimensions together define the usefulness of the wider student-generated content environment to netnographic analysis (Habibi et al., 2022; Malthouse et al., 2016).

Netnographic Intelligence Capacity (NIC) is the capacity of an HEI to systematically collect, analyze and utilize lessons learned from the conversations of students online. This ability is a three-level operation. The first is technical capacity, such as tools available to capture data, sentiment analysis software like NVivo and network analysis systems. Human capacity—the second one—is having employees who can grasp netnographic methods and how to interpret digital interactions. The third is strategic integration capacity, that is, when these insights are translated into actual marketing decisions, instead of being lost in report writing that no one reads (Kozinets, 2020; Heinonen & Medberg, 2018).

Student Engagement (SE) is based on the three-part model proposed by Dessart et al. (2023). Cognitive engagement involves attention, absorption, and mental involvement with HEI content. Emotional engagement is a feeling of enthusiasm, enjoyment, or identification with the institution. Behavioral engagement is more about what someone can be seen doing, such as commenting, sharing, leaving reviews, or creating content, and is closely related to COBRA's contributing and creating categories. The framework of the concept of Brand Equity (BE) is adapted from Keller (2013) Customer-Based Brand Equity model, which was later adapted in the field of higher education by Osei-Frimpong et al. (2022). The model has four dimensions: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. The four components are brand awareness (student familiarity with and salience of the institution), brand associations (quality and valence of cognitive links to it), perceived quality (comparative quality perceptions), and brand loyalty (retention, recommendation, and alumni engagement intentions).

the relationship between SGC quality and student engagement, such that higher intelligence capacity translates content quality into stronger cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement.

**P3:** Netnographic intelligence capacity mediates the relationship between SGC quality and HEI brand equity, such that higher intelligence capacity

### **3.3 Propositions and Theoretical Rationale**

**P1:** SGC quality (authenticity, richness, and volume) is positively associated with an HEI's netnographic intelligence capacity.

**P2:** Netnographic intelligence capacity mediates and translates content quality into stronger brand awareness, associations, perceived quality, and loyalty.

**P4:** Platform characteristics moderate the relationship between SGC quality and netnographic intelligence capacity, such that platforms with higher interactivity and virality strengthen this relationship.

**P5:** Institutional responsiveness moderates the relationship between netnographic intelligence capacity and its downstream outcomes (student engagement and brand equity), such that institutions with greater dynamic capability to detect and act on digital signals realize stronger outcomes from a given level of intelligence capacity.

**P6:** The relationships specified in P1–P5 differ by HEI sector, with private-sector HEIs, which typically have greater marketing resource flexibility, exhibiting stronger relationships than public-sector HEIs.

The six propositions are developed directly from the theoretical discussion presented earlier. Proposition 1 (SGC Quality) is based on Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) and information-processing theory, which implies that the more valuable the informational inputs, the better the intelligence outputs.

Propositions 2 and 3 not only place Netnographic Intelligence Capacity as a vital link between content quality and institutional outcomes, but they also demonstrate that these linkages can be better understood when viewed in terms of student engagement and brand equity. Having intelligence capacity does not suffice; it matters only if it is put into action. This distinction is borne out by consistent research on organizational capabilities.

Proposition 4, which considers Platform Characteristics as a moderating variable, is grounded in media richness theory and platform affordance theory (Zarouali et al., 2022). Increased interaction and virality on platforms is associated with increased quality of student-generated content and intelligence creation. Proposition 5 mainly addresses Institutional Responsiveness as a moderator and is based on the dynamic capability theory (Teece, 2007). In simple terms, institutions which are able to detect and react to environmental cues sooner will be more inclined to translate intelligence into a competitive advantage, and not merely an administrative chore. Finally, Proposition 6 differentiates between public and private HEIs in Pakistan, recognizing the differentials in the marketing resources and structural flexibility of the two sectors.

#### **4. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN NETNOGRAPHIC INTELLIGENCE**

As with anything else, ethics in netnographic research is not something that can be checked in a research protocol. Ethical issues shift from individual researcher judgement to institutional issues when HEIs use netnography for marketing. Consent and privacy are among the major concerns. Public and private online spaces are often not distinguishable (Kozinets, 2020). While a private Reddit community, closed Facebook group, or temporary Instagram story might be technically available, it doesn't necessarily mean that it's ethically suitable for research purposes. This means that there must be a policy in place outlining appropriate data collection practices and the difference between witnessing conversations in their natural context and purposefully collecting data for institutional use (Addeo et al., 2019).

This need is sharpened, not lessened, by the current state of Pakistani data protection law. As of mid-2026, Pakistan has no enacted, comprehensive personal data protection statute; the Personal Data Protection Bill has circulated in draft form since 2023 without passing both houses of Parliament (Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication, 2023). In the absence of a binding external framework, HEIs collecting and analyzing student social media content for marketing purposes are, in effect, self-regulating — which raises the stakes for the institutional-level ethical policy called for above. Anonymisation is also very important. Student-created content can have concrete repercussions on the reputation of the institution, particularly if a student's criticism is directed against an institutional figure or policy on the internet. Thus, ethical treatment of these data demands that careful anonymisation be used when results of netnographic research are presented in internal communications or marketing communications. There is no doubt that positive student stories should not be used for promotion without explicit permission from the person or persons involved (Udenze, 2019; Kozinets, 2020).

#### **5. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

##### **5.1 Theoretical Contributions**

Three contributions are noteworthy. First, we introduce netnographic intelligence as a formal organizational capability construct — a mediating mechanism linking the informational affordances of student social media ecosystems to strategic brand outcomes. This moves netnography from a research

methodology (Kozinets, 2020; Heinonen & Medberg, 2018) to a managerial capability concept, opening a new avenue for capability-based research in HE management.

Second, the NIEM framework integrates Consumer Engagement Theory, Service-Dominant Logic, and Digital Branding theory into a single model. These streams have largely developed in parallel in HE marketing literature, despite addressing closely related phenomena. Therefore, their integration is necessary.

Third, this study is explicitly grounded in the Pakistani context — not as a regional curiosity but as a theoretically productive site. Most empirical HE marketing research has been conducted in Western and Anglo-American institutional environments (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). Pakistan's particular combination of rapid growth, competitive intensity, high platform concentration, and thin formal quality assurance data creates conditions that may generalize well to comparable HE systems across South and Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the MENA region.

## 5.2 Practical Implications

For HEI administrators and marketing practitioners in Pakistan, NIEM provides a roadmap for operation, with a series of steps. Investment logic includes first investments in technical netnographic infrastructure (social listening tools, sentiment analysis tools, network visualization software); second, investments in trained human analysts who have a qualitative research background; third, investment in integration logic (regular briefings in the form of netnographic intelligence based on real marketing planning cycles). All of these investments are meaningless without institutional responsiveness, which is the agility of the institution to make use of digital intelligence and transform the strategy to fit the competitive time frame (Siddiqui & Singh, 2023).

For Pakistan's Higher Education Commission, the framework points to regulatory gaps. Currently, there is no sector-level guidance on the ethical use of student data in institutional marketing within HEC's framework. Its absence is a problem — not because institutions are necessarily acting badly, but because they lack the regulatory clarity to act confidently and at scale while protecting student privacy and pedagogical integrity.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This paper's central claim is that a key capability that has been neglected by HE marketing literature is the ability of an HEI to systematically extract, interpret, and respond to student digital discourse, which we term netnographic intelligence. In this paper, the NIEM framework provides the first integrated theorizing that links the quality of the content created by students to the capacity of netnographic intelligence, student engagement, and institutional brand equity, while the characteristics of the platform and institutional responsiveness are the key boundary conditions that determine whether the links hold. The model leads to six testable propositions which form a research program for empirical research. The next step in the natural progression is a quantitative path modeling approach that includes the test of hypothesized mediation and moderation relationships with the data obtained from the HEIs' marketing teams and the student panels from the major social media platforms in Pakistan. Specific institutional case studies that incorporate qualitative netnographic analysis would deepen the understanding of the context to test the propositions and clarify conditions not captured by the framework.

However, the technical architecture matters less than the institutional orientation behind it. Netnography is only valuable when the institution uses it for real, and real for them means learning, learning better about the students to serve them better, not just as a way to get useful marketing copy. This is not only an ethical point but also a strategic one. In today's fast-paced, dynamic world, where students can quickly detect manufactured authenticity but also publicly critique these manufactured brand narrative, therefore, the intelligence value of netnography lies precisely in its discipline: listening before speaking and meaning it.

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