

From Views to Applications: Understanding the Attention-Action Gap in Higher Education Video Advertising

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: This qualitative study investigates the attention-action gap phenomenon in higher education video advertising, exploring why universities successfully capture prospective students' attention through Facebook sponsored video advertisements but fail to convert this attention into meaningful enrollment-related actions such as inquiries and applications.

Methodology: Drawing upon narrative inquiry methodology combined with student journey mapping, the research employed focus groups (n = 6 groups, 30 participants) and individual in-depth interviews (n = 15) with prospective and recently enrolled students at five private universities in Lahore, Pakistan. The study was theoretically grounded in the AIDA model and Uses and Gratifications Theory to understand the breakdown in the consumer decision-making journey. Reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework revealed four primary themes explaining the conversion failure: (1) Insufficient Information Depth, (2) Call-to-Action Ambiguity, (3) Trust and Authenticity Concerns, and (4) Decision Complexity Paralysis.

Findings: Findings indicate that while university video advertisements excel at generating initial attention through high-quality visuals and emotional storytelling, they systematically fail at the action stage due to weak, generic, or absent calls-to-action, lack of clear next-step pathways, and over-reliance on brand awareness rather than conversion-oriented messaging.

Conclusion: The study proposes the BRIDGE Framework (Build trust, Reduce friction, Inspire action, Demonstrate value, Guide next steps, Enable immediate response) as a practical contribution for higher education marketers seeking to close the attention-action gap. Implications for university marketing practice, theoretical contributions to higher education advertising literature, and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Attention-action Gap, Higher Education Marketing, Video Advertising, Call-to-action, Student Enrollment, AIDA Model, Narrative Inquiry, Facebook Advertising.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The global higher education landscape has undergone profound transformation in recent decades, characterized by intensifying competition, marketization, and the emergence of digital marketing as a critical enrollment driver (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016; Pawar, 2024). Universities worldwide have embraced social media platforms, particularly Facebook, as primary channels for reaching prospective students, with video content emerging as the dominant format for engagement (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012; Rutter et al., 2016; Imran et al., 2025; Naeem et al., 2023). Sajid, and Jullandhry (2018) indicates that in Pakistan, where over 50 million active Facebook users constitute a significant portion of the youth demographic, private higher education institutions have invested substantially in sponsored video advertisements to compete for student enrollment (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, 2024).

Despite these investments, a troubling phenomenon has emerged in higher education marketing: universities appear highly effective at capturing attention through video content but demonstrate significantly lower success rates in converting that attention into meaningful enrollment actions such as inquiries, campus visits, or applications (Eum, 2025; Labausa et al., 2023). This disconnect between attention and action represents what this study terms the 'attention-action gap' a critical failure point in the consumer decision-making journey that has received limited scholarly attention in the higher education marketing literature.

The AIDA model (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action), a foundational framework in advertising theory, suggests that consumers progress through sequential cognitive and behavioral stages before taking action (Lewis, 1898; Pashootanzadeh & Khalilian, 2018). However, contemporary research indicates that this progression is neither linear nor guaranteed, particularly in digital environments where attention is fragmented and competing stimuli are abundant (Xu et al., 2024; Li et al., 2025). In the context of higher education, where the decision to enroll represents a high-involvement, high-risk choice with long-term implications, the barriers to action may be particularly pronounced.

The escalating competition to recruit and retain students makes it incumbent for universities to craft more effective marketing plans (Kisiolek et al., 2025; MacEachern, 2018; Pawar, 2023). Video content, in particular, has demonstrated higher likelihood of being shared and engaged with on social media compared to other content formats (Labausa et al., 2023). Yet, the mere generation of views, likes, and shares does not translate automatically into enrollment outcomes. Understanding why this translation fails represents both a practical imperative for university marketers and a theoretical puzzle worthy of scholarly investigation.

1.2 Problem Statement

Private universities in Pakistan, like their counterparts globally, have invested heavily in Facebook sponsored video advertisements as a primary recruitment tool. Analytics consistently demonstrate that these videos achieve impressive attention metrics: high view counts, substantial reach, and meaningful engagement in terms of likes, comments, and shares. However, conversion metrics tell a different story. The number of viewers who proceed to take meaningful enrollment-related actions visiting the university website, submitting inquiry forms, requesting information, or applying remains disproportionately low relative to the attention generated.

This phenomenon creates a significant practical problem for higher education marketers. Resources invested in video production and advertising spend generate brand awareness but fail to deliver the enrollment outcomes that justify these investments. More fundamentally, it represents a breakdown in the marketing communication process a failure to guide prospective students from passive viewership to active engagement with the institution.

Despite the prevalence of this challenge, limited research has explored the attention-action gap specifically within higher education video advertising contexts. Existing studies have examined social media's influence on enrollment decisions (Shields & Peruta, 2019; Jan & Ammari, 2022), university branding through digital channels (Karadağ et al., 2024), and the application of advertising models to educational contexts (IJFMR, 2025). However, the specific barriers that prevent prospective students from moving from video viewing to application behavior, and the role of weak calls-to-action in this conversion failure, remain underexplored.

1.3 Research Gap

The existing literature on social media marketing in higher education has predominantly employed quantitative methodologies to examine relationships between social media engagement and enrollment outcomes (Pawar, 2024). While these studies provide valuable correlational insights, they offer limited understanding of the underlying mechanisms, barriers, and decision-making processes that explain why attention does not consistently translate to action. As Pawar (2024) notes in a systematic review, 'given the prevalence of quantitative approaches and the newness of the social media marketing of HE phenomenon, more studies should employ qualitative methods' (p. 12).

Furthermore, research on call-to-action effectiveness has largely been conducted in e-commerce and general consumer contexts, with limited attention to higher education's unique characteristics (Xu et al., 2024; Mejtoft et al., 2021). The high-involvement nature of educational decisions, the complexity of factors influencing university choice, and the involvement of multiple stakeholders (students, parents, peers) distinguish this context from typical consumer purchases. Recent research has even challenged the conventional wisdom about CTA effectiveness in social media environments, finding that CTA buttons may actually hurt engagement in in-feed advertising contexts (Xu et al., 2024) a finding with significant implications for higher education marketers that has not been explored.

The research on video content in higher education marketing specifically remains nascent. While studies have examined video marketing's effectiveness in general terms (Labausa et al., 2023), and researchers have noted that 27% of prospective students found YouTube videos significantly influenced their enrollment decisions (Eum, 2025), the qualitative exploration of why video attention fails to convert from the students' own perspective represents a significant gap. Understanding the student journey from video exposure to action (or inaction) requires the kind of rich, narrative data that qualitative inquiry can provide.

1.4 Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve three primary objectives:

- 1) To identify and explore the barriers that prevent prospective students from moving from video viewing to inquiry and application behaviors following exposure to university-sponsored video advertisements.
- 2) To examine how weak or ineffective calls-to-action in university video advertisements contribute to conversion failure and the attention-action gap.
- 3) To understand what would motivate prospective students to take action after watching university video advertisements, thereby informing strategies to close the attention-action gap.

1.5 Research Questions

Guided by the research objectives, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What barriers prevent prospective students from moving from video viewing to inquiry and application after watching university-sponsored video advertisements on Facebook?

RQ2: How do weak or absent calls-to-action in university video advertisements contribute to the conversion failure?

RQ3: What factors would motivate prospective students to take action after watching university video advertisements?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This research contributes to both theory and practice in multiple ways. Theoretically, the study extends the application of the AIDA model to higher education video advertising, specifically examining the breakdown at the action stage that has received limited scholarly attention. By integrating narrative inquiry methodology with journey mapping, the research offers a novel methodological approach for understanding the student decision-making experience in response to digital advertising stimuli.

Practically, the study addresses an urgent challenge facing university marketers: how to translate attention into action in an increasingly competitive and digital recruitment environment. The findings will provide evidence-based insights for designing more effective video advertisements, crafting compelling calls-to-action, and creating seamless pathways from content consumption to enrollment inquiry. For universities in Pakistan and similar developing country contexts where digital marketing has become essential to enrollment strategy, this research offers directly applicable guidance.

The study also contributes to the growing body of qualitative research in higher education marketing, responding to calls from systematic reviews for more in-depth, exploratory studies that can capture the complexity of student decision-making (Pawar, 2024). By foregrounding student voices and experiences, the research provides insights that quantitative metrics alone cannot reveal.

1.7 Scope and Delimitations

This study focuses specifically on Facebook sponsored video advertisements produced by private higher education institutions in Lahore, Pakistan. The choice to focus on private universities reflects their heavier reliance on paid advertising and greater competitive pressure compared to public institutions that receive government funding. The geographic focus on Lahore, a major educational hub with numerous competing private universities, provides a rich context for examining the attention-action gap.

The study delimits its focus to the student perspective, examining how prospective and recently enrolled students experience and respond to video advertisements. While the perspectives of marketing managers and other stakeholders are valuable, this research prioritizes understanding the consumer side of the advertising equation. Participants include both prospective students actively considering enrollment decisions and recently enrolled students who can reflect on their pre-enrollment experiences with video advertising.

1.8 Definition of Key Terms

Attention-Action Gap: The disconnect between successfully capturing a prospective student's attention through video advertising and their subsequent failure to take meaningful enrollment-related actions such as inquiries, information requests, or applications.

Call-to-Action (CTA): A directive within advertising content that prompts the viewer to take a specific action, such as 'Apply Now,' 'Learn More,' or 'Visit Our Campus' (Steinberg, 2005; Mejtoft et al., 2021).

Sponsored Video Advertisement: Paid video content distributed through Facebook's advertising platform, appearing in users' news feeds as promoted content from university pages.

Conversion: The successful transition of a viewer from passive content consumption to active engagement, specifically taking enrollment-related actions following video exposure.

Student Journey: The series of touchpoints, experiences, and decision-making processes that prospective students navigate from initial awareness of a university through to enrollment (Mohd Radzol et al., 2017).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

2.1.1 The AIDA Model

The AIDA model, which stands for Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action, has been one of the most widely used frameworks in advertising and promotional strategies for over a century (IJFMR, 2025). Originally developed for commercial marketing, it has been adopted by various service sectors including education. The model highlights the importance of attention to capture a customer's focus, then interest to create engagement with the product, next desire for the product, ultimately culminating in action through a purchase or other behavioral response (Rahmawati & Rino, 2025).

In the context of higher education, institutions use AIDA to guide student outreach efforts: creating awareness through advertising, building interest with relevant content, generating desire by showcasing value, and finally encouraging action such as application or enrollment (IJFMR, 2025). The model is particularly relevant in the digital age, where competition among educational institutions is high and communication channels are diverse. AIDA's simplicity and clarity make it a valuable tool for designing effective branding and marketing strategies, especially in sectors like private education where attracting students requires structured and persuasive messaging.

However, scholars have increasingly questioned the linear progression implied by AIDA, particularly in digital contexts. The Interest stage is critical as consumers seek more information and deepen their engagement, yet the pathway from interest to desire and subsequently to action is neither automatic nor predictable (Li et al., 2025). As consumers develop a strong desire for the product, they may still fail to take action due to various internal motivations and external factors. This study focuses specifically on this breakdown the gap between the earlier stages (attention, interest, desire) and the final action stage.

The AIDA model's applicability extends across various contexts. Sharma et al. (2023) illustrate its role in mobile banking adoption, particularly in how social media influences the Interest and Action stages. Raj et al. (2022) demonstrated the model's effectiveness in lead conversions in B2B services, while Song et al. (2022) explained consumer behavior in food-delivery apps, highlighting the impact of marketing communication on attention and interest. To continue being effective, marketers must remember to treat AIDA as a framework rather than a fixed formula, evolving and adapting as consumer expectations and digital cycles of behaviors change (IJCRT, 2025).

2.1.2 Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), originally developed in mass communication research, provides a complementary lens for understanding how prospective students engage with university video content. Unlike media effects theories that focus on what media does to people, UGT examines what people do with media the needs, motivations, and gratifications that drive media consumption (Katz et al., 1973). This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding why students watch university videos and what they expect to gain from such content.

In the social media context, UGT has been applied to understand engagement with university content. Research suggests that prospective students use social media for information seeking, entertainment, social connection, and personal identity construction (Pawar, 2024). When university videos fail to address these underlying needs and gratifications, viewers may watch but not act. The gap between viewing (gratification of information or entertainment needs) and action (fulfilling enrollment goals) may reflect a mismatch between what students seek and what videos provide.

2.2 Social Media Marketing in Higher Education

Social media in the marketing of higher education is a young research discipline that has witnessed a sharp spread in article publications lately. An empirical research article in a high-quality journal first

appeared in 2011. After a measured start, the eminence of empirical research in the social media marketing of higher education has grown exponentially, particularly since 2015 (Pawar, 2024). This further emphasizes the timeliness of research examining specific aspects of social media effectiveness.

A systematic literature review by Pawar (2024) categorized research on social media marketing in higher education into five main streams: social media as a consumer engagement channel, social media as a branding channel, the use of social media to influence enrollment decision-making, social media as a customer relationship management tool, and social media as a general marketing and strategic tool. The observed constructs inform us that quantitative research has used wide-ranging explanatory variables connected to these roles. However, scholars note that more relevant constructs and variables remain to be studied, including the influence of social media engagement on enrollment demand and brand equity (Clark et al., 2017; Rutter et al., 2016).

The findings from Pawar's (2024) systematic review underscore that social media influences the entire enrollment decision-making process and universities can make social media deliver sound information at each stage of decision making, brand co-creation, and lasting relationships to ramp up recruitment performance. However, research on how social media communication influences brand image and undergraduate enrollment intentions remains minimal. This study seeks to address this gap by qualitatively examining the breakdown between video viewing and enrollment action.

Research has also demonstrated that students drive almost every step in the decision-making process of choosing a university today (Darban & Li, 2012). Therefore, universities should make an effort to satisfy the needs of students through marketing activities in the awareness stage of the marketing funnel to increase brand recognition. Social media is a tool for interactive communication, enabling the creation and exchange of user-generated content on the web, comprising activities that involve socializing and networking online, using texts, pictures, and videos (Evans, 2012). As such, digital advertising relies on the context and behavioral targeting of students and uses a variety of advertising approaches to create customized advertisements (Eum, 2025).

2.3 Video Advertising Effectiveness in Higher Education

Video marketing and advertising have become increasingly effective in recent years as a means of connecting with a specific target audience. This strategy has been widely adopted across various industries, including higher education. With intense competition in the market, merely having an online presence is no longer sufficient for higher education institutions. They must make every effort to ensure that their brand and message are effectively marketed. Videos, in particular, have a higher likelihood of being shared and engaged with on social media compared to other forms of content (Labausa et al., 2023).

According to recent studies, 27% of prospective students found that YouTube videos had a significant impact on their college enrollment decisions (Eum, 2025). This finding suggests that video content plays a meaningful role in the decision-making process, though it also implies that for the majority of students, video alone may not be sufficient to drive action. The 2025 Marketing and Recruitment Practices Report for Undergraduate Students shows that enrollment teams rank social media, retargeted, and video ads among their most effective digital tactics (RNL, 2025).

Research indicates that for 56% of students, social media matters most when they start thinking about college. Before they ever request information or take a tour, they are watching. They are searching for clues, hints, and maybe a sign that this could be their future home (RNL, 2025). This observation aligns with findings from the Pew Research Center (2024), which reports that over 90% of teenagers use social media every day, with platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook being where they are most active. More importantly, teenagers rely on these platforms for support in decision-making, including educational choices.

Visual content and brand-generated videos have emerged as indicators of university brand personality and business strategy (Karadağ et al., 2024). Research shows that visual content generates higher engagement,

while the timing and format of posts correlate with different types of responses. These insights provide universities with evidence-based strategies to enhance their social media effectiveness. By optimizing content type, media format, and posting schedules, universities can better connect with their audiences, potentially improving student recruitment and stakeholder relationships.

2.4 Call-to-Action Research and Effectiveness

Call-to-action (CTA) buttons are crucial in digital marketing, motivating consumers to engage in desired actions, such as making purchases or submitting inquiries. A CTA is defined as a 'call' for the user to take a specific 'action' desired by the sender of the message and can be used in websites, online ads, and emails (Mejtoft et al., 2021). While prior research supports their effectiveness in direct mailing and outdoor advertising, recent studies have challenged this prevailing view in social media contexts.

A significant study by Xu et al. (2024) challenges conventional understanding of CTA effectiveness. Through lab experiments conducted via WeChat and Instagram, with participants from both Eastern and Western cultures, the researchers demonstrated negative effects of CTA buttons in in-feed social advertising. Specifically, CTA buttons like 'learn more' and 'shop now' reduced ad click-through intentions on social platforms, while enhancing them on shopping platforms. This finding suggests that context matters significantly, and the nativeness of advertising how well it blends with the platform environment affects CTA effectiveness.

The wording of the CTA button is a simple yet effective way to convey the urgency to act (Wojdyski & Evans, 2016), which is particularly valuable in promotional campaigns. Research analyzing over 330,000 CTAs demonstrates a remarkable insight: personalized CTAs can boost conversion rates by an extraordinary 202% (Brainiac Media, 2025). This statistic underscores the critical importance of tailoring messaging to specific audience segments. However, 70% of small businesses lack prominent CTAs on their homepages, while 72% have no CTAs on interior pages representing a massive untapped opportunity (Brainiac Media, 2025).

Research on CTA effectiveness reveals several key principles. Clarity and simplicity are essential: the human brain seeks clarity and avoids complexity. A clear, concise, and straightforward CTA reduces cognitive load, making it easier for individuals to process information and decide to take action. Complicated messages or choices can lead to decision paralysis, significantly lowering conversion rates (NMQ Digital, 2024). Color and design also influence effectiveness color influences how users perceive and respond to CTAs, with different colors triggering different emotions and subtly guiding behavior (MarTech, 2024).

For higher education specifically, the application of CTA research remains limited. Universities often rely on generic CTAs such as 'Learn More' or 'Apply Now' without considering the specific barriers and motivations of their prospective student audience. The high-involvement nature of educational decisions may require different CTA strategies than those effective for consumer products. This study addresses this gap by exploring how students perceive and respond to CTAs in university video advertisements.

2.5 Student Enrollment Decision-Making

Understanding student enrollment decisions requires recognizing the complexity and high-involvement nature of this choice. Unlike typical consumer purchases, selecting a university involves substantial financial investment, long-term commitment, significant perceived risk, and life-altering consequences (Mohd Radzol et al., 2017). The decision process typically extends over months or years, involves multiple stakeholders, and is influenced by numerous factors including academic reputation, location, cost, career outcomes, and campus environment.

Studies find that parents have a substantial impact on their children's education decisions (Workman, 2015; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2016). However, more than half of Generation Z members (the current prospective student cohort) said they consider their family members' opinions and perspectives, but when

making decisions, they still want to be listened to, valued, and involved (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). This dual influence creates complexity in marketing approaches videos must appeal to both students and their influencers.

Furthermore, when potential students have thousands of colleges to choose from, branding becomes one of the most influential ways to sway their decision. A higher education institution's brand is the expression of its defining characteristics that set it apart from competitors, demonstrate its capacity to satisfy the needs of students, build conviction in its capacity to convey a specified type and quality of higher education, and assist prospective students to be well-informed about enrollment (Sujchaphong et al., 2017).

The hierarchy of effects theory, widely used to understand how individuals make purchasing decisions, states that consumers follow a linear structure that begins with the advertising message and proceeds to the purchase decision (Kenton, 2018). While this has proven applicable in face-to-face instances, limited research examines whether the step-by-step model is applicable on social media when it comes to students choosing to join an institution of higher learning (IJBMER, 2023). This study contributes to addressing this gap.

2.6 University Brand Image and Video Advertising

Despite its significant role, brand management is an oft-overlooked and challenging aspect in the development of academic institutions, especially in the higher education context (PMC, 2023). Research points to the fact that students' satisfaction, service quality trust, and behavioral intentions are positively affected by the university's brand image. More importantly, a university does not only need to provide students a distinctive vision, high-quality curriculum, highly-trained lecturers, and highly advanced technology, but also to improve the social, academic, and psychological environment for them.

Brand equity is a distinctive element of brand recognition whereas recognizing a brand name positively influences consumers' responses to the product or service. Marketers create brand equity by capitalizing on the brand's superior quality, perceived social impacts, trustworthiness, and consumers' self-identification with the brand. As far as the market for higher education is concerned, university brand equity is constituted by various constructs, including how customers view an institution's quality, to what degree they are aware of the brand, whether they trust the brand, and what values the brand associates with (PMC, 2023).

A university's brand image plays a big role in students' choices about where to study. As competition intensifies, universities must differentiate themselves to attract students. To offer top-notch services and increase enrollment, it is essential to have a strong brand image. A positive brand image shows trust and quality, which students look for (Frontiers, 2026). Higher education advertisers and managers must be aware of how social media affects a school's brand image and influences students' enrollment selection.

2.7 Conceptual Framework

Drawing upon the literature reviewed, this study proposes a conceptual framework that integrates the AIDA model with Uses and Gratifications Theory to understand the attention-action gap in higher education video advertising. The framework positions video advertising as the stimulus that initiates the AIDA process. Attention is successfully captured when videos employ high-quality visuals, emotional storytelling, and relevant content that aligns with student gratifications (information, entertainment, social identity).

The framework suggests that the gap emerges at the transition from desire to action, influenced by several mediating factors: (1) CTA clarity and effectiveness, (2) perceived barriers to action, (3) trust and authenticity perceptions, and (4) information sufficiency. These factors either facilitate or inhibit the conversion from interested viewer to active inquirer/applicant. The qualitative inquiry will explore these

factors from the student perspective, examining how they experience and interpret the transition (or failure to transition) from attention to action.

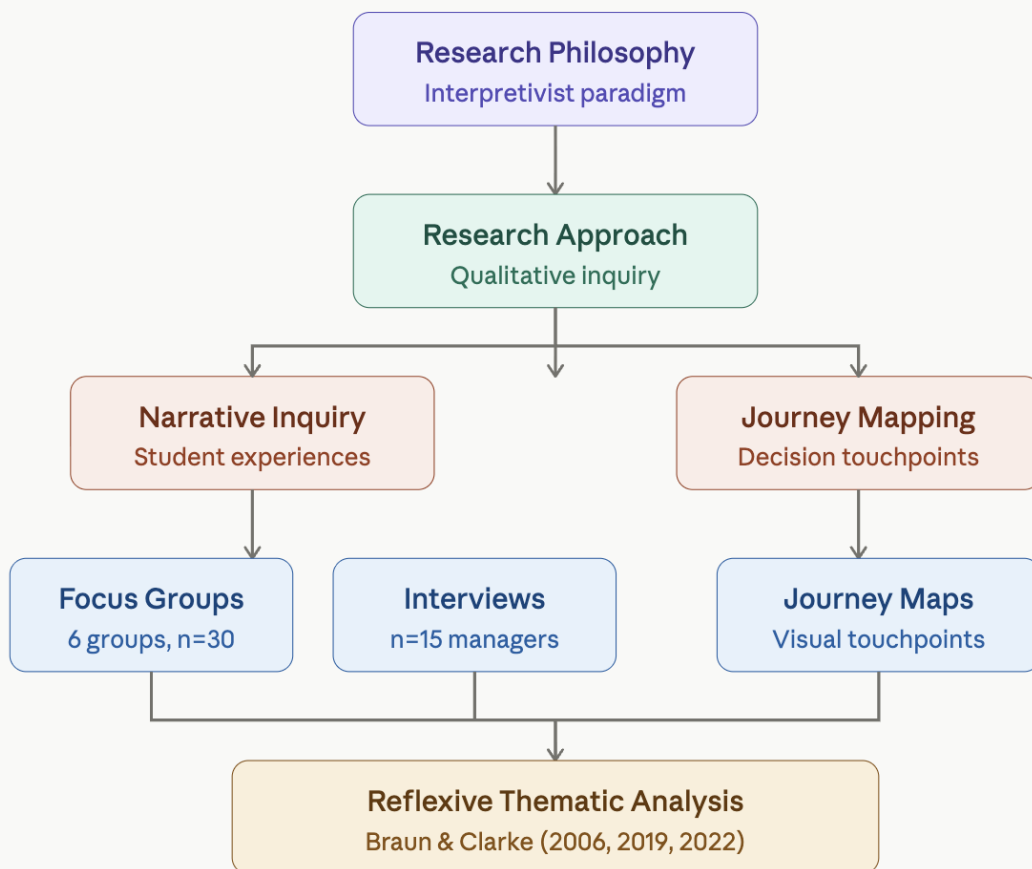
3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Philosophy

This study is grounded in an interpretivist philosophical paradigm, which holds that reality is socially constructed and that understanding human behavior requires exploration of the meanings individuals attach to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interpretivist stance acknowledges that prospective students' experiences with university video advertisements are subjective, context-dependent, and shaped by individual backgrounds, motivations, and interpretive frameworks.

Epistemologically, the study assumes that knowledge about the attention-action gap can best be generated through close engagement with participants' lived experiences and the meanings they construct around video advertising exposure and (non)response. This contrasts with positivist approaches that might measure advertising effectiveness through behavioral metrics alone, without accessing the underlying reasons and meanings that explain those behaviors.

Figure1: Research Design Process Flowchart



3.2 Research Approach: Qualitative Inquiry

A qualitative research approach was selected for this study based on several considerations. First, the research questions require exploration of underlying meanings, barriers, and motivations phenomena that

quantitative metrics cannot fully capture. Second, the attention-action gap represents an understudied phenomenon in higher education marketing, making exploratory qualitative inquiry appropriate for initial theory-building. Third, systematic reviews of the field have explicitly called for more qualitative studies to complement the predominantly quantitative literature (Pawar, 2024).

Qualitative research is valuable in understanding lived experience, yet the storied landscape of consumer decision-making in response to advertising remains primarily quantitative in nature (Holloway & Freshwater, 2007). Since the experience of viewing and responding to university videos is highly individual, qualitative methods are ideal for exploring and understanding the lived experience of prospective students navigating the attention-to-action transition.

3.3 Research Design: Narrative Inquiry with Journey Mapping

This study employs narrative inquiry as its primary research design, supplemented by student journey mapping techniques. Narrative inquiry, as developed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), is a qualitative methodology that centers on the idea that experience is a social phenomenon, evolving through the telling and re-telling of stories. Understanding experience as lived and told stories also known as narrative inquiry has gained popularity and credence in qualitative research because it successfully captures personal and human dimensions that cannot be quantified into dry facts and numerical data.

Narrative inquiry serves both as a research methodology and a means of understanding experience (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). People by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, and in the telling of them, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The responsibility of narrative researchers is hence to describe such stories, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience. This approach aligns well with the study's aim to understand how students experience the journey from video viewing to action (or inaction).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) proposed a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space involving temporality (past, present, future), sociality (personal and social conditions), and place (physical locations). This framework guides the inquiry by attending to how students' experiences with video advertisements are temporally situated (before, during, and after viewing), socially influenced (by peers, parents, and broader contexts), and place-bound (the platforms and environments where videos are encountered).

The journey mapping component involves having participants reconstruct and visualize their decision-making pathway from initial video exposure through to their current status (either enrolled, still deciding, or having chosen another institution). This technique, drawn from service design and customer experience research, provides a structured way for participants to articulate the touchpoints, emotions, and decision nodes that characterized their journey and crucially, to identify where and why they did or did not take action following video exposure.

3.4 Study Context

The study was conducted in Lahore, Pakistan, a major metropolitan center and educational hub with numerous private universities competing for student enrollment. The higher education sector in Pakistan has undergone significant transformation, particularly with the rapid expansion of private colleges to meet growing demand (IJFMR, 2025). This competitive environment makes Lahore an appropriate context for examining the attention-action gap, as institutions invest heavily in digital marketing while facing pressure to demonstrate enrollment returns.

Five private universities in Lahore were purposively selected for participant recruitment based on their active use of Facebook video advertising, comparable size and positioning in the market, and willingness to facilitate access to prospective and current students. The universities included Superior University, University of Central Punjab (UCP), University of Management and Technology (UMT), University of

Lahore (UOL), and Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS). This selection represents diversity in institutional prestige, marketing approach, and target student demographics.

3.5 Participant Selection and Sample

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique appropriate for qualitative research that seeks participants with specific characteristics and experiences relevant to the research questions (Patton, 2015). The inclusion criteria required participants to: (1) be between 17-24 years of age, (2) have viewed at least one university-sponsored video advertisement on Facebook within the past six months, (3) be either currently considering university enrollment or recently enrolled (within the past year), and (4) provide informed consent.

Two participant categories were recruited to capture different perspectives on the attention-action gap:

- 1) Prospective students (n = 18): Individuals actively considering university enrollment who had viewed video advertisements but had not yet applied or enrolled. This group could speak directly to the barriers preventing action.
- 2) Recently enrolled students (n = 27): Individuals who had enrolled within the past year and could reflect retrospectively on their pre-enrollment experiences with video advertisements, including what ultimately motivated them to take action.

The total sample comprised 45 participants, distributed across focus groups (n = 30, organized into 6 groups of 5 participants each) and individual interviews (n = 15). The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation the point at which additional data collection yields no substantially new insights (Guest et al., 2006). Recruitment continued until saturation was achieved, as evidenced by redundancy in themes emerging from later focus groups and interviews.

Table 1: Participant Demographics Table

| Participant Category | N | Selection Criteria | Data Collection Method |
|--------------------------|----|---|--------------------------------------|
| Focus Group Participants | 30 | Prospective students aged 17-24; exposed to university video ads in past 6 months | 6 focus groups (5 participants each) |
| Interview Participants | 15 | Marketing managers from 5 Pakistani universities | Semi-structured interviews |
| Total Sample | 45 | | Mixed qualitative methods |

Table 2: Data Collection Overview Table

| Phase | Method | Participants | Duration | Focus |
|---------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|--|
| Phase 1 | Focus Groups | 30 students (6 groups × 5) | 60-90 mins each | Video ad reactions, decision journey, barriers to action |
| Phase 2 | Semi-structured Interviews | 15 marketing managers | 45-60 mins each | Video strategy, CTA design, conversion challenges |
| Phase 3 | Journey Mapping | All 45 participants | Embedded in sessions | Touchpoint mapping, drop-off identification |

3.6 Data Collection Methods

3.6.1 Focus Groups

Six focus groups were conducted, each comprising five participants and lasting approximately 90-120 minutes. Focus groups were selected as a primary data collection method because they allow participants to build upon each other's responses, generating richer data through social interaction (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The group format was particularly appropriate for this study because university choice is often a socially influenced decision, and focus groups could capture how participants negotiate meanings and compare experiences.

Each focus group began with a stimulus activity: participants were shown three to four actual university video advertisements (with identifying information retained) and asked to describe their immediate reactions, thoughts, and feelings. This was followed by a journey mapping exercise in which participants sketched their individual pathways from video exposure through to their current status, marking decision points, emotions, and actions (or non-actions) along the way.

The focus group protocol addressed the research questions through a semi-structured format. Questions explored: what participants noticed and remembered from video advertisements; what they expected or hoped videos would provide; what barriers prevented them from taking action; their perceptions of calls-to-action in the videos; and what would have motivated them to inquire or apply. Probing questions were used to elicit deeper explanation and narrative detail.

Table 3: Demographics Breakdown (Focus Groups)

| Characteristic | Category | N (%) |
|-----------------|-----------------------|----------|
| Gender | Male | 14 (47%) |
| | Female | 16 (53%) |
| Age Range | 17-19 years | 18 (60%) |
| | 20-24 years | 12 (40%) |
| Education Level | Intermediate/A-Level | 20 (67%) |
| | Bachelor's (transfer) | 10 (33%) |
| Location | Urban | 22 (73%) |
| | Semi-urban | 8 (27%) |

3.6.2 Individual In-depth Interviews

Fifteen individual in-depth interviews were conducted following the focus groups to allow for more detailed exploration of personal narratives and experiences that participants may have been reluctant to share in group settings. Interviews lasted 45-60 minutes and followed a narrative interview approach, beginning with a broad invitation for participants to tell the story of their university search and decision-making process, with particular attention to their experiences with video advertisements.

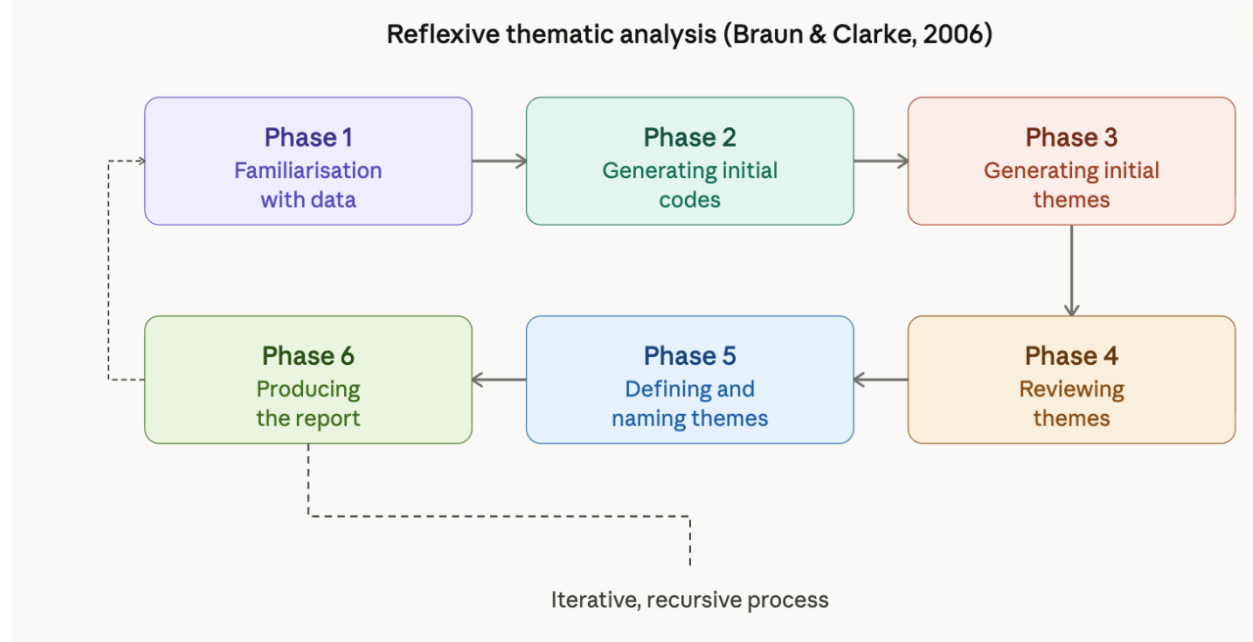
The interview protocol incorporated the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), exploring temporal dimensions (past experiences with education marketing, present decision-making, future expectations), social dimensions (influence of family, friends, and online communities), and place dimensions (the contexts in which videos were viewed and decisions were made). This approach enabled rich narrative data that captured the complexity and situatedness of participants' experiences.

All focus groups and interviews were conducted in Urdu or English based on participant preference, audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were reviewed by participants (member checking) to ensure accuracy and provide opportunity for clarification or elaboration.

3.7 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019, 2022) six-phase framework. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative analytic method that offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analyzing qualitative data. It involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative datasets. The reflexive approach was selected because it acknowledges the active role of the researcher in knowledge production and emphasizes the importance of researcher reflexivity throughout the analytical process.

Figure 2: *Reflexive Thematic Analysis Phases*



The six phases of analysis shown in the figure 2 were implemented as follows:

Phase 1 - Familiarization: Repeated reading of transcripts and review of audio recordings to develop deep familiarity with the data. Initial observations and analytical notes were recorded.

Phase 2 - Generating initial codes: Systematic coding of data segments relevant to the research questions. Codes were descriptive labels capturing semantic and latent content. NVivo 14 software was used to manage the coding process.

Phase 3 - Generating initial themes: Codes were collated into potential themes by examining patterns and relationships among codes. Mind mapping and affinity diagramming techniques supported this process.

Phase 4 - Reviewing themes: Themes were reviewed against the coded data and the full dataset to ensure coherence, distinctiveness, and adequate representation. Themes were refined, split, or merged as necessary.

Phase 5 - Defining and naming themes: Each theme was clearly defined with a concise name capturing its essence and a detailed analytical narrative explaining its meaning and significance.

Phase 6 - Writing up: The analytical narrative was developed, weaving together theme descriptions with illustrative data extracts and interpretive commentary linked to the research questions and literature.

Braun and Clarke (2019, 2022) have repeatedly iterated that researchers who choose to adopt their approach should interrogate their relevant publications beyond their 2006 article and adhere to their

contemporary approach. Accordingly, this study followed the most current guidance on reflexive thematic analysis, including attention to the researcher's theoretical assumptions and the active, interpretive role of the analyst in theme development.

3.8 Ensuring Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of the qualitative findings was established through multiple strategies aligned with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability:

Credibility: Prolonged engagement with participants, triangulation of data sources (focus groups and interviews), and member checking of transcripts and preliminary findings.

Transferability: Thick description of the study context, participants, and findings to enable readers to assess applicability to other contexts.

Dependability: Detailed documentation of research procedures, analytical decisions, and an audit trail maintained throughout the study.

Confirmability: Reflexive journaling to document researcher assumptions, peer debriefing with doctoral supervisors, and grounding of interpretations in data extracts.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Superior University prior to data collection. All participants provided written informed consent after receiving detailed information about the study purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Confidentiality was protected through the use of pseudonyms in all transcripts, field notes, and publications. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team. Given that some participants were current students at participating universities, care was taken to ensure that their candid opinions about institutional marketing would not affect their academic standing or relationships with their institutions.

Special attention was given to power dynamics in the researcher-participant relationship, recognizing that narrative inquiry involves relational ethics (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The researcher positioned himself as a learner seeking to understand participants' experiences rather than an expert evaluating their choices. Participants were treated as co-constructors of knowledge rather than mere data sources.

3.10 Researcher Reflexivity

As the primary researcher, I acknowledge my positioning as a professional working in university marketing and a doctoral student researching higher education advertising. This dual role provided insider understanding of institutional marketing practices while requiring reflexive attention to potential biases. My professional experience enabled rapport with participants discussing video advertisements, but I remained vigilant about not imposing institutional perspectives on participants' narratives.

Throughout data collection and analysis, I maintained a reflexive journal documenting my assumptions, reactions, and interpretive decisions. This reflexive practice aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2019) emphasis on researcher subjectivity as a resource rather than a problem to be controlled. My interpretations were developed through ongoing dialogue with the data, theoretical frameworks, and reflexive self-awareness.

4. FINDINGS

The reflexive thematic analysis generated four primary themes that address the research questions concerning barriers to action, the role of weak CTAs, and motivators for taking action. Each theme is presented with supporting evidence from participant narratives, followed by sub-

themes that capture the nuanced dimensions of participants' experiences. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participant confidentiality.

Table 4: *Themes and Sub-themes Summary*

| Theme | Sub-themes | Frequency | Key Insight |
|--|--|------------------|--|
| Theme 1: Insufficient Information Depth | Surface-level content; Missing practical details; Unanswered critical questions | 42 references | Videos attract attention but fail to provide decision-enabling information |
| Theme 2: Call-to-Action Ambiguity | Unclear next steps; Multiple competing CTAs; Friction in response pathways | 38 references | CTAs lack clarity, urgency, and seamless execution paths |
| Theme 3: Trust and Authenticity Concerns | Overly polished presentations; Absence of authentic voices; Skepticism toward claims | 35 references | Professional production creates authenticity paradox |
| Theme 4: Decision Complexity Paralysis | Multiple stakeholder influence; Information overload; Analysis paralysis | 31 references | Enrollment decisions involve complex stakeholder ecosystems |

4.1 Overview of Themes

The analysis revealed four primary themes explaining the attention-action gap:

Theme 1: Insufficient Information Depth

Theme 2: Call-to-Action Ambiguity

Theme 3: Trust and Authenticity Concerns

Theme 4: Decision Complexity Paralysis

These themes are interconnected and collectively explain why video advertisements, despite successfully capturing attention, fail to convert viewers into active inquirers or applicants. The findings are presented sequentially, with each theme addressing aspects of the three research questions.

4.2 Theme 1: Insufficient Information Depth

The most prominent barrier preventing action was the perceived insufficiency of information provided in video advertisements. Participants consistently described videos as visually impressive but informationally shallow, leaving them without the substantive content needed to progress in their decision-making journey.

Ahmed, a prospective student, articulated this frustration: "The videos look beautiful, the campus looks nice, students are smiling... but what about the actual programs? What will I learn? What are the fees? After watching I still don't know anything useful." This sentiment was echoed across focus groups, with participants describing a disconnect between emotional appeal and practical information needs.

Sara, recently enrolled at UCP, reflected on her pre-enrollment experience: "I watched so many videos from different universities. They all showed the same things buildings, events, happy students. None of them told me why I should choose them specifically. I had to do all the real research myself on their websites."

4.2.1 Sub-theme: The Emotional-Informational Imbalance

Participants described an overemphasis on emotional content at the expense of informational value. While they acknowledged that emotional storytelling captured attention, they felt it was insufficient to drive action. Fatima noted: "They're trying to make me feel something, but I need to know something. Feelings don't help me convince my parents or compare options."

The journey mapping exercise revealed that participants experienced a cognitive gap after video exposure they felt interested but lacked the information necessary to take the next step. Multiple participants drew their journeys with a question mark at the point immediately following video viewing, symbolizing uncertainty about how to proceed.

4.2.2 Sub-theme: Missing Practical Details

Participants identified specific categories of information they needed but rarely found in video advertisements: fee structures and financial aid options, program-specific curriculum details, admission requirements and deadlines, career outcomes and placement statistics, and faculty credentials. Hassan explained: "I can't apply without knowing if I can afford it. But no video ever mentions fees or scholarships. Why would I take action when I don't even know the basic costs?"

4.3 Theme 2: Call-to-Action Ambiguity

Directly addressing Research Question 2, this theme captures how weak, generic, or absent calls-to-action contributed to conversion failure. Participants described CTAs as vague, uninspiring, or completely missing from the videos they encountered.

Zara described her experience: "The video just ends. Sometimes there's a logo or a slogan, but nothing tells me what to do next. No 'apply here' button, no phone number, no clear direction. So I just scroll to the next thing." This observation was particularly striking given that CTA effectiveness research emphasizes the importance of clear, specific, and urgent directives.

4.3.1 Sub-theme: Generic CTAs Fail to Motivate

When CTAs were present, participants often described them as generic and unmotivating. Phrases like "Learn More" or "Visit Our Website" were perceived as passive and non-specific. Ali commented: "Every university says 'learn more.' Learn more about what? It doesn't create any urgency or make me feel like I need to act now."

This finding aligns with research showing that passive and generic phrases like 'Learn More,' 'Submit,' or 'Click here' may not be effective because they lack urgency for clear action to be taken. Conversions are usually lower for passive CTAs than more direct and actionable ones (WiserNotify, 2026).

4.3.2 Sub-theme: Disconnected CTAs

Several participants noted a disconnect between video content and the CTA offered. Ayesha explained: "I watched a video about student life and events, which was interesting. But then the CTA said 'Apply Now.' Apply now? I'm not ready to apply. I just wanted to know more about the student experience. The button didn't match what I was thinking."

This misalignment between content and CTA created friction rather than facilitating action. Participants expressed that CTAs should offer next steps appropriate to their stage in the decision journey rather than jumping directly to application.

4.3.3 Sub-theme: Platform Friction

Participants also identified platform-related barriers to acting on CTAs. Usman described: "Even when there's a 'Learn More' button on Facebook, clicking it takes me to a website that isn't mobile-friendly, or asks me to fill out a long form. By that point, I've lost interest." The friction between the easy viewing experience on social media and the more demanding action requirements created a barrier to conversion.

4.4 Theme 3: Trust and Authenticity Concerns

A significant barrier to action was participants' skepticism about the authenticity of video content. Participants consistently distinguished between what they perceived as marketing spin and genuine representation, expressing distrust that prevented them from taking action based on video content alone.

Bilal articulated this skepticism: "Every university video makes them look perfect. Beautiful buildings, amazing facilities, successful students. But I know it's advertising. I can't trust it. Before I do anything, I need to verify through other sources real students, reviews, or visiting myself."

4.4.1 Sub-theme: The Authenticity Paradox

Interestingly, participants expressed that highly polished videos increased rather than decreased their skepticism. Mehak explained: "The more professional and perfect the video looks, the more I doubt it. It feels too staged. I actually trust the rough, student-made videos more because they seem real." This paradox suggests that production quality, while capturing attention, may undermine the trust necessary for action.

4.4.2 Sub-theme: Seeking Social Proof

Because of trust concerns, participants described seeking validation from sources other than official videos before taking action. Amina shared: "After watching a video, I go to the comments to see what actual students say. Or I search for the university on YouTube to find student vlogs. I need real opinions, not marketing." This seeking of social proof extended the journey between attention and action, with multiple validation steps required.

4.5 Theme 4: Decision Complexity Paralysis

The final theme addresses the complexity of the enrollment decision and how video advertisements failed to address the multifaceted nature of university choice. Participants described feeling overwhelmed by the decision's magnitude, with videos providing insufficient guidance through this complexity.

Imran explained: "Choosing a university affects my whole life my career, my finances, my family. A 60-second video can't address all that. So even if the video looks good, I'm not going to rush to apply. I need time and more information."

4.5.1 Sub-theme: Multiple Stakeholder Considerations

Participants emphasized that university decisions were not theirs alone to make. Nadia described: "My father is paying for my education. He wants to know about fees, job placement, and reputation. The videos don't speak to his concerns at all. So even if I like a video, I can't convince my parents based on it." This finding aligns with research showing that parents have substantial impact on their children's education decisions.

4.5.2 Sub-theme: Analysis Paralysis

The abundance of options and information, combined with the high stakes of the decision, led to what participants described as paralysis. Tariq shared: "I've watched hundreds of university videos. They all blur together. Instead of helping me decide, they just add to the confusion. I end up not doing anything because I don't know where to start."

4.6 Motivators for Action: What Would Close the Gap?

Addressing Research Question 3, participants identified several factors that would motivate them to take action following video exposure. These emerged through direct questioning and through analysis of cases where participants did take action.

4.6.1 Clear, Low-Barrier Next Steps

Participants expressed willingness to take small, non-committal actions as entry points. Sana suggested: "I wouldn't click 'Apply Now' from a video, but I would click 'Get Fee Details' or 'Download Program Guide.' Something easy that gives me what I need without committing to anything." This insight suggests that intermediate CTAs may be more effective than pushing directly to application.

4.6.2 Personalization and Relevance

Participants indicated they would be more likely to act on content specifically relevant to their interests. Hamza explained: "If a video was about my specific program like computer science and showed what CS students actually do and where they work, I'd definitely want to know more. Generic videos about 'the university experience' don't motivate me."

4.6.3 Time-Bound Offers

Several participants mentioned that urgency could motivate action. Farah noted: "If there was an early application deadline with a scholarship benefit, that might get me to act. Without any timeline, there's no reason to do anything today." This finding aligns with CTA research showing that urgency-driven language can increase conversion rates substantially.

4.6.4 Social Proof Integration

Participants suggested that incorporating authentic student voices within videos could motivate action. Asad shared: "If the video featured real students not actors talking honestly about their experience, including challenges, I'd trust it more and be more likely to reach out." The desire for authenticity connected to the trust concerns identified earlier.

Table 5: Themes, Participants and Representative quotes

| Theme | Participant | Representative Quote |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| Insufficient Information Depth | FG2-P3 (Female, 18) | "The video looked beautiful, but I still had no idea what the actual fee structure was or if they offered scholarships." |
| INT-7 (Marketing Manager) | "We focus on emotional appeal, but students need practical information to make decisions." | |
| CTA Ambiguity | FG4-P1 (Male, 19) | "They said 'Apply Now' but I clicked and got lost in a maze of forms and links." |
| FG1-P5 (Female, 17) | "I didn't know if I should call, visit, or fill out an online form first." | |
| Trust Concerns | FG3-P2 (Male, 20) | "Everything looks perfect in their videos. I want to hear from real students, not actors." |
| FG5-P4 (Female, 18) | "The campus in the video doesn't match what I saw when I visited." | |
| Decision Complexity | FG6-P3 (Male, 19) | "My parents want one thing, my teachers suggest another, and I'm confused about what I actually want." |
| INT-12 (Marketing Manager) | "We're marketing to students, but parents and teachers are the real decision-makers." | |

5. DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that university video advertisements are generally effective at the earlier stages of the AIDA model capturing attention and generating interest. Participants consistently acknowledged that videos successfully attracted their notice and piqued curiosity. However, the progression from desire to action was systematically interrupted by the barriers identified.

This finding aligns with Li et al.'s (2025) observation that the Interest stage is critical as consumers seek more information and deepen their engagement, yet the pathway to action is neither automatic nor predictable. The emotional content of videos creates interest but does not provide the informational substance needed to convert interest into commitment. As participants emphasized, feelings don't help them convince their parents or compare options they need knowledge.

The research supports treating AIDA as a framework rather than a formula, as suggested by contemporary scholarship (IJCRT, 2025). Marketers must include feedback cycles, personalization, and platform integration into AIDA to meet the evolution of changing consumer expectations. For higher education specifically, the high-involvement nature of enrollment decisions means that additional stages or loops may be necessary between desire and action.

5.1 CTA Effectiveness in Higher Education Contexts

The findings regarding CTA ambiguity resonate strongly with Xu et al.'s (2024) research demonstrating negative effects of CTA buttons in in-feed social advertising. Participants' descriptions of CTAs as disconnected from content and their discomfort with direct action prompts like 'Apply Now' suggest that conventional CTA strategies may be counterproductive in the higher education context.

The platform friction identified by participants aligns with the nativeness concept in Xu et al.'s research. CTAs that disrupt the native social media experience generate resistance rather than action. Universities attempting to push viewers directly from Facebook video viewing to external application portals create cognitive and practical barriers that undermine conversion.

The finding that participants preferred lower-commitment intermediate actions (like downloading program guides) over high-commitment CTAs (like applying) suggests that CTA strategy in higher education should follow a graduated approach. This aligns with Brainiac Media's (2025) finding that clarity and simplicity reduce cognitive load, but extends it by suggesting that reduced commitment, not just clarity, is essential for high-involvement decisions.

5.2 The Authenticity Imperative

The trust and authenticity concerns expressed by participants resonate with broader trends in consumer behavior toward advertising skepticism. The finding that highly polished videos increased skepticism represents what might be termed an 'authenticity paradox' production quality that signals marketing intent undermines the trust necessary for action.

This finding has significant implications for university marketing practice. While high production values capture attention, they may not be optimal for conversion. Participants' expressed preference for authentic, student-generated content over professional marketing materials suggests that universities should balance brand consistency with authenticity, potentially incorporating user-generated content or less polished documentary-style video.

The importance of social proof in building trust aligns with Karadağ et al.'s (2024) findings on user-generated and brand-generated content as indicators of university brand personality. Students trust peers more than institutions, suggesting that video advertising strategies should incorporate authentic student voices rather than relying solely on institutional messaging.

5.3 Navigating Stakeholder Complexity

The theme of decision complexity paralysis highlights a fundamental challenge in higher education marketing that the literature has recognized but video advertising often ignores. Studies confirm that parents have substantial impact on their children's education decisions (Workman, 2015), yet participants noted that videos rarely addressed parental concerns about fees, placement, or return on investment.

This finding suggests that university video advertising, in focusing primarily on student emotional appeal, may be targeting only part of the decision-making unit. Effective conversion may require either multiple video content streams addressing different stakeholders or single videos that balance emotional appeal with practical information relevant to parents and other influencers.

5.4 The BRIDGE Framework: Closing the Attention-Action Gap

Synthesizing the findings and discussion, this study proposes the BRIDGE Framework as a practical contribution for higher education marketers seeking to convert video attention into enrollment action. BRIDGE represents six interconnected principles:

B - Build Trust: Incorporate authentic elements, student testimonials, and transparent information to overcome skepticism about marketing content.

R - Reduce Friction: Create seamless pathways from video to action, ensuring mobile optimization and minimal form requirements for initial engagement.

I - Inspire with Information: Balance emotional storytelling with substantive information addressing prospective students' practical questions and concerns.

D - Demonstrate Value: Clearly articulate the value proposition, including outcomes, career paths, and return on investment that appeal to both students and parents.

G - Guide Next Steps: Provide clear, specific, and appropriately graduated CTAs that match the viewer's stage in the decision journey rather than pushing directly to application.

E - Enable Immediate Response: Create mechanisms for immediate, low-commitment engagement (downloading guides, joining events, chatting with students) that capture interest before it dissipates.

The BRIDGE Framework represents this study's original contribution to higher education marketing practice, offering an actionable approach grounded in empirical findings about student experiences and perceptions.

5.5 Theoretical Implications

This study makes several contributions to theory. First, it extends the AIDA model's application to higher education video advertising, specifically illuminating the breakdown at the action stage. The findings suggest that AIDA requires modification for high-involvement decisions, potentially including intermediate stages between desire and action that address information needs, trust-building, and stakeholder consultation.

Second, the study contributes to CTA effectiveness literature by demonstrating that conventional CTA strategies may be counterproductive in higher education contexts. The finding that high-commitment CTAs generate resistance rather than action challenges assumptions from e-commerce and consumer goods marketing that may not transfer to educational services.

Third, the identification of the authenticity paradox where production quality increases skepticism contributes to understanding of how consumers evaluate advertising credibility. This finding has implications for advertising theory beyond higher education, suggesting that the relationship between production value and persuasion is more complex than previously understood.

5.6 Practical Implications

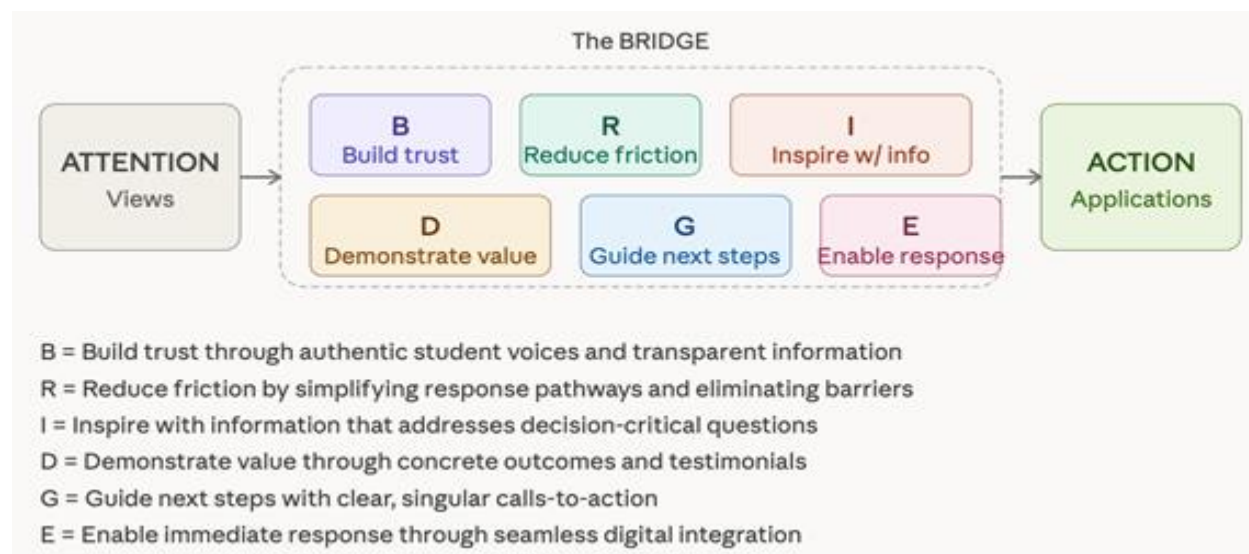
For university marketing practitioners, this study offers several actionable recommendations. First, video content strategy should balance emotional storytelling with substantive information. Videos should address specific questions about programs, costs, outcomes, and student life rather than relying solely on aspirational imagery. Practical information can be woven into narrative content rather than relegated to separate informational videos.

Second, CTA strategy should follow a graduated approach. Rather than pushing viewers directly to apply, universities should offer intermediate actions appropriate to different stages of the decision journey: downloading program guides, joining virtual events, chatting with current students, or signing up for email updates. Each interaction moves the prospect closer to application while building the trust and knowledge necessary for that commitment (Sajid et al., 2022)

Third, authenticity should be prioritized alongside quality. This may involve incorporating authentic student testimonials, user-generated content, or documentary-style elements that balance the professional presentation with genuine representation. Universities might consider creating content tiers: polished brand videos for awareness and authentic student content for conversion.

Fourth, technical friction must be minimized. Landing pages should be mobile-optimized, forms should be short and simple, and the transition from social media to action should be seamless. Each click and field is a potential drop-off point.

Figure 3: Bridging the attention-action gap in higher education video advertising



5.7 Policy Implications

For higher education regulators and policy makers, this study highlights the gap between marketing practices and student information needs. Policies encouraging transparency in higher education marketing such as requirements to disclose fee information, graduate outcomes, and accreditation status in advertising materials could help close the attention-action gap by ensuring that marketing content addresses the practical concerns that prevent action.

Additionally, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in Pakistan could develop guidelines for ethical and effective digital marketing practices that balance institutional promotional interests with student

welfare, ensuring that advertising practices support rather than exploit the complexity of educational decision-making.

6. CONCLUSION

This qualitative study investigated the attention-action gap in higher education video advertising, exploring why universities successfully capture prospective students' attention through Facebook sponsored video advertisements but fail to convert that attention into enrollment-related actions. Using narrative inquiry combined with journey mapping, the study collected data from 45 participants through focus groups and individual interviews, analyzing the data using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis.

Four primary themes emerged: insufficient information depth, call-to-action ambiguity, trust and authenticity concerns, and decision complexity paralysis. These barriers operate interconnectedly to prevent the transition from video viewing to meaningful action. Participants also identified motivators for action, including clear low-barrier next steps, personalized content, time-bound offers, and authentic social proof.

The study proposed the BRIDGE Framework as a practical contribution for closing the attention-action gap, emphasizing the need to Build trust, Reduce friction, Inspire with information, Demonstrate value, Guide next steps, and Enable immediate response.

6.1 Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focused on private universities in Lahore, Pakistan, which may limit transferability to public institutions or other geographic contexts with different educational marketing environments. Second, the reliance on self-reported data means that participants' accounts of their experiences may be subject to recall bias or social desirability effects. Third, the study examined Facebook video advertising specifically; findings may not generalize to other platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube.

Fourth, as a qualitative study, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable but rather to provide in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Quantitative research would be needed to test the prevalence of identified barriers across larger populations. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of data collection captured participants' perspectives at a single point, though the decision journey unfolds over extended time periods.

6.2 Directions for Future Research

Several avenues for future research emerge from this study. First, quantitative research could test the BRIDGE Framework's effectiveness through experimental designs comparing conversion rates for video advertisements implementing the framework versus traditional approaches. Second, longitudinal studies tracking prospective students from initial video exposure through enrollment decision would provide richer understanding of the decision journey.

Third, comparative research across platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) could identify platform-specific factors influencing the attention-action gap. Fourth, research examining parental perspectives specifically would address the stakeholder complexity identified in this study. Fifth, cross-cultural research in different higher education markets would test the transferability of findings to contexts with different marketing practices and student decision-making processes.

6.3 Concluding Remarks

The attention-action gap represents a significant challenge for higher education marketers and a meaningful phenomenon for scholarly investigation. This study has contributed to understanding why video advertising, despite its power to capture attention and generate interest, frequently fails to convert viewers into applicants. The barriers identified information insufficiency, CTA ambiguity, authenticity

concerns, and decision complexity are not insurmountable, and the BRIDGE Framework offers a pathway for addressing them.

As higher education competition intensifies and digital marketing becomes increasingly central to recruitment strategy, understanding and closing the attention-action gap will become ever more critical. Universities that can bridge the distance between video view and enrollment action will gain significant competitive advantage. This study provides both the conceptual understanding and practical guidance to support that endeavor.

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