**Tạp chí Lý Luận Chính Trị Và Truyên Thông**

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## 1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital platforms and new media has fundamentally changed the way universities in Vietnam approach prospective students. In the past, parents and students used to follow enrollment information through printed newspapers, online news outlets, and university admissions handbooks. Nowadays, they can easily access an institution's own digital channels such as websites and social media alongside mainstream media. According to the "Digital 2026" report by DataReportal, Vietnam had 85.6 million internet users as of October 2025, equal to roughly 85% of the population. The report's platform figures are derived from the platforms' own self-service advertising tools and therefore express potential advertising reach, not counts of monthly active users: in late 2025, this potential advertising reach was 62.1 million for YouTube and 79.0 million for Facebook, while for TikTok it was 76.1 million among users aged 18 and above [1]. According to Similarweb's Top Websites ranking for the News & Media Publishers category in Vietnam, which orders sites by overall website traffic, VnExpress is the leading online newspaper by traffic, followed by Tuoi Tre, 24h, VietnamNet, and Dan Tri [37].

Vietnam currently has 237 universities which is an average of roughly one university per 410,000 people, including 172 public and 65 non-public institutions [2]. In an increasingly competitive market, admissions communication is no longer a matter of simply transferring information one way, it has become a strategic marketing communication activity in which institutions compete for the attention, trust, and commitment of a young, tech-savvy audience.
Generation Z (Gen Z) are digital natives who have grown up in connected technologies. They no longer receive admissions information through a single, linear channel but through various digital platforms and frequently switching between them to cross-check and certify what they see. Understanding how they actually receive, process, and act upon admissions information is thus a prerequisite for communicating with them effectively. However, much of the existing literature focuses on describing the communication strategy from institutions' perspective, leaving the students' journey comparatively underexplored.

To address this gap, this article adopts the RACE model (Reach–Act–Convert–Engage) as its framework. Rather than evaluating individual institutions, it examines how Generation Z receives information and makes admissions decisions across the four stages of the model, using international and Vietnamese literature as well as national digital usage data. The article's objectives are to review the theoretical foundations of digital admissions communication and Generation Z's information behavior, apply the RACE model to the enrollment journey, and discuss implications for university admissions communication. The scope of this article is limited to admissions communication by Vietnamese higher education institutions targeting domestic applicants. It does not address study-abroad recruitment or the communication practices of foreign-invested campuses that operate in Vietnam, which adhere to distinct regulatory and market.

## 2. University admissions communication in the digital environment and the RACE Model

### 2.1. University admissions communication on digital platforms

Communication, in the broadest sense, is the exchange of information and the expression of feelings that can lead to mutual understanding [3]. Following Rogers (1983), the author perceived communication not as the one-way delivery of a message from a sender to a receiver, but as a convergent process in which those involved jointly generate and exchange information until they arrive at shared understanding [4].

University admissions, or enrollment, is the process by which educational institutions select learners for specific fields of study on the basis of regulations issued and approved by the competent authorities. For full-time undergraduate programs in particular, admission refers to the process of selecting students undergraduate programs; the primary candidates are usually 12th-grade students wishing to pursue university education, as well as individuals who have completed high school but previously lacked the opportunity for higher education and now seek to enhance their professional expertise in their chosen fields [5].

Therefore, university admissions communication could be understood as the process of designing, publishing, and managing messages in order to attract, persuade potential applicants toward a specific higher-education institution. It conveys information about achievements, facilities, lecturers, curricula, training quality, and is directed at individuals with a demand for study, helping them select the field and institution that fit their abilities, interests, and career orientation[6]. In a competitive environment, this is not merely a one-way communication activity but a strategic form of educational marketing. Kotler and Fox (1995) characterized marketing in education as the analysis, planning, execution, and management of carefully designed programs

meant to result in voluntary exchanges of value with target markets in order to achieve organizational objectives [7]. From this perspective, admissions communication carries the nature of marketing communication in that it uses communication tools and channels to influence applicants' awareness, attitudes, and choice, persuading them to understand and trust an institution and its services and to register for admission [8].

Social networks, websites, mobile applications, e-mail, search engines, and online video platforms are used for communication in the digital environment. Following the classification of Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019), digital marketing channels can be grouped into three main categories: Owned media, earned media and paid media [9]. Owned media are all the channels that the organization controls such as website, Facebook fanpage and group, YouTube channel, and TikTok account. Earned media originally referred to publicity generated through PR, targeting influencers and journalists to raise brand awareness, and nowadays worth of mouth is also included in. Paid media covers budget invested to increase traffic, reach, or conversions through search advertising, display ad networks, or affiliate marketing. For instance, advertisements such as Facebook Ads, Google Ads, and TikTok Ads allow precise targeting by age, location, and behavior but require a dedicated budget. The way a digital audience interacts with an institution is largely dependent on how these three channel types interact.

### 2.2. Generation Z and information-reception behavior

Generation Z (Gen Z) is commonly defined as the cohort born between approximately 1997 and 2012 [10],[11]. Generation Z is widely perceived as a generation of digital natives. Those people were born in the 1990s and raised in the 2000s, growing up in a world characterized by the web, the Internet, mobile devices, freely available networks, and digital media [12]. Gen Z is also called "C Generation" which are: connected, computerized, communicating, content-centric, community-oriented, and changing [13].

Several characteristics of Generation Z are particularly relevant to university admissions communication. A study of news-consumption behavior among Gen Z in Vietnam found that a great majority of young people access news primarily through social media, with Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube[14]. As a mobile-first and video-first generation, Gen Z prefers short-form video platforms as information sources and visually appealing material like TikTok video rather than searching on websites or applications [15]. At the same time, Khoi Le, Country Director of Meta Vietnam, stated that Threads is growing rapidly and becoming increasingly popular among young people [16]. Additionally, this generation expects interaction and participation rather than one-way communication. They set a high value on dialogue and tends to see change as something accomplished through conversation rather than confrontation. Their information

environment is also fundamentally shaped by online communities. Described as "communaholic," Gen Z have no distinction between online friends and those known in the physical world, and value on online communities because these spaces allow people from different contexts to connect and mobilize around common issues and interests [17].

Closely linked to these participatory traits is Gen Z's demand for authenticity. Peer-generated and candid content is generally seen by Gen Z as more reliable than highly polished advertising messages. This reliance on peer opinion also applies to the Vietnamese context, where eWOM on social media has been shown to significantly shape Gen Z's online purchase intentions, with information quality exerting the strongest influence [18]. For admissions communication, this implies that student reviews, and online community discussions often matter more than official promotional materials. However, this peer orientation is culturally qualified: in Vietnam, parents remain the most influential information source for prospective students [19]. This behavior reflects a broader generational trait: Gen Z is at ease gathering and cross-referencing information from multiple sources, as a result, trust in an institution is built through cross-validation rather than from any single message.

University selection is a high-risk decision that requires students to consider a range of factors and rely on multiple information sources, from institutional official channels to consultation from parents, friends, and acquaintances, worth of mouth. Taken together, these traits suggest that Gen Z's reception of admissions information is best understood as a multi-touchpoint journey rather than a single act of exposure, making a stage-based framework like RACE particularly suited to its analysis.

### 2.3. The RACE model

The RACE model was developed in 2010 by Dave Chaffey, co-founder of Smart Insight – an online publisher and consultancy in digital marketing, as a practical planning framework applicable to both businesses and non-profit organizations. The RACE model combines 4 phases: Reach, Act, Convert, Act [20], [36].

The first phase in RACE model is Reach. Reach is the stage of building brand awareness and attracting traffic across all kinds of channels. Its results can be measured through reach and website visits [20], [36]. The strategic goal in this phase might be considered "going viral," referring both to the size of the audience that encounters the message and to how widely it spreads through sharing. Act - short for "Interact", encourages the target audience to take initial interactions. Act happens when customers begin to respond, this stage focuses on driving small interactions like filling out forms, commenting and sharing. It is a time to cultivate emotions and

establish an initial connection, paving the way for future conversions. Act could be measured by click-through rate, time on page, and registration volume, with strong focus on user experience and content quality [20], [36]. Notably, Chaffey deliberately defined Act as a stage separate from conversion because fostering initial actions is among the greatest challenges in today's busy and fragmented media landscape.

Convert turns interested viewers into people who actually complete the desired action. The convert stage marks the point at which interest is transformed into action, such as making a purchase or signing up for a service. The effectiveness is measured through conversion rate, completed transactions, and revenue [20], [36]. The convert stage covers both online and offline conversion, reflecting the reality that key results in different sectors. Engage is the final stage in RACE model. Instead of ending at the decision stage, RACE continues toward building long-term relationships with customers by conducting loyalty programs, and brand communities or sending newsletter. This stage is measured through retention rate, ongoing interaction, as well as the percentage of active customers, customer satisfaction, recommendation, and ultimately customer lifetime value [20], [36].

Four phases make RACE well suited to interpreting an information-reception journey of students when selecting universities. It provides a strategic planning framework that organizes digital activity into a clear sequence rather than disconnected initiatives.

### 3. Generation Z's admissions information journey through the RACE model

In this study, the RACE model is used to understand the applicant's journey rather than to evaluate communication campaigns. From this perspective, the four stages represent the continuous phases through which prospective students receive information, make admission decisions, and eventually engage with the institution.

#### 3.1. Reach - The information-access stage

The Reach stage begins when prospective students first encounter information about a university. At this time, it is rarely the moment of deliberate searching alone. Most of the time, it occurs through algorithm-driven recommendations on digital platforms. For example, the student can come across a video on a TikTok about a university, a sponsored post on Facebook, or university-related content recommended on YouTube can introduce an institution or career-orientation before students actively look for further information. Relying on a single communication platform is no longer sufficient as information is typically validated across various channels, thus visibility must be distributed across the owned, earned, and paid touchpoints where the applicant is already moving [21].

In Vietnam, the awareness stage is predominantly shaped by platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube, where short-form videos have become a crucial means of introducing universities to prospective students. In addition, KOLs and KOCs interested in education and career orientation often act as trusted intermediaries, helping young audiences discover and learn about different universities.

The Reach stage has been a major focus of university admissions communication. Research suggests that universities have increased their investment in marketing communication across traditional and digital channels to reach prospective students and their parents through websites, social media pages, television, and admissions counseling events [22]. At the same time, institutions are increasingly adopting storytelling approaches by showcasing authentic campus and student experiences through short-form video to better connect with Gen Z [23]. Survey evidence from Vietnam highlights the importance of social media at this stage: in a 2024 survey at Duy Tan University, 47% of respondents first learned about the institution through social media[24]. Noticeably, youth-oriented news sites such as Kenh14 and Sinh viên Việt Nam, together with online newspapers such as Dân trí and VnExpress, remain important vehicles for publishing admissions information at scale [25].

From the applicant's viewpoint, however, the Reach stage is often fragmented. Studies note that many Vietnamese institutions still approach admissions communication on a seasonal, event-driven basis rather than through a long-term strategy, leading to inconsistent messaging across channels and a less coherent institutional image [26], [27]. For Gen Z, who tends to disregard generic or inauthentic content, fragmented communication could likely reduce both organization recognition and message recall. The importance of the Reach stage involves more than simply increasing visibility. Research suggests that electronic word of mouth (eWOM) encountered during this stage shapes students' perceptions of a university, which subsequently influence their intention to apply or enroll [28]. Therefore, early impressions created through peer-generated content contribute significantly in shaping an institution's image.

### 3.2. Act - The exploration and interaction stage

Once a university image has entered an applicant's awareness, the Act stage would make the transition from passive recognition to active searching. Students will visit the institution website, attend universities' open day and interact with their content, attend counselling livestream, send questions through Facebook Messenger, search for previous benchmark scores and major, submit a form to receive consultation. For instance, after exposing The Academy of Journalism and Communication at counselling fairs, students watch the livestreams of all majors to ask and

receive further information about the admission plan.

What distinguishes the search of this generation is their craving for real, peer-generated content. In fact, they tend to trust other users' reviews on social media rather than traditional advertising [29]. Notably, this active exploration varies across applicant segments. A survey of more than 1,500 students conducted by the Ho Chi Minh University of Banking in 2025 found that search behavior at this stage has become clearly different: high-achieving students tend to investigate alternative admission routes such as competency assessment examinations and direct admission, while average-performing students tend to rely on transcript-based admission [30].

While searching for the university information, students can see admissions landing pages with a clear call to action, online-registration guidance, and benchmark-score lookup tools allow applicants to act and to assess their prospects. Online consultation through Facebook Messenger, increasingly supported by chatbots, together with livestream counselling sessions provide timely and interactive support. In addition, faculty Facebook pages also actively respond to students if they leave messages to the specific to the faculty. Lead forms on websites and fanpages provide the input data which become later stages' testament. There's also an increasing number of institutions using AI-powered chatbots on their websites and fanpages to provide automated, 24/7 support on admissions questions, including benchmark scores, tuition fees, and student life [31], while livestreams, minigames, giveaways, and experience-sharing posts boost the two-way dialogue with the students.

### 3.3. Convert - The consideration and decision stage

At the Convert stage the applicant will evaluate their options and make the final decisions. For Gen Z this is also a multi-source process: candidates compare details across universities' websites, search results, social platforms, and communities, while also seeking reviews and validation from others, with family opinions remaining influential. This stage usually begins after the release of high school graduation exam results and other admission methods, when students are required to rank their preferences. Survey evidence from the Vietnam National University of Agriculture indicates that employment prospects, the field of study, and tuition fees are among the key factors shaping applicants' decisions [32]. These findings suggest that communication should be properly tailored to different applicant segments.

In Vietnam, the application is supported by the Ministry of Education and Training via the national admissions portal, which enables students to register their preferences and confirm enrollment online. The system makes it easier for participating institutions to move from information seeking to official application by offering a single digital platform for the admissions process. Digital communication initiatives including email and SMS notifications of registration procedures, and

admissions deadlines probably enhance this process at the institutional level. To attract potential students to finish their enrollment, several universities also offer scholarships and other enrollment incentives online.

At the same time, the gap between applicants' expectations and universities' communication practices becomes most evident. According to research, many institutions do not conduct regular per-channel evaluations despite assessing communication outcomes through aggregate enrollment numbers and benchmark scores. This is due to the fact that applicant data is not digitized systematically by channel and tool, and assessment is often carried out only at the end of the communication cycle, which is too late for planners to make adjustments [33].

The 2026 admissions provides an example of this communication gap. At Hanoi University, 147 applicants who used the combined admissions method thought they could use an IELTS certificate instead of English score from the national high school graduation examination, reflecting the exemption policy used for graduation. However, the university's admissions regulations required an exam score, which lead to the rejection of these applications [34]. The case indicates that making information available is not always sufficient, the way information is delivered must also help applicants clearly understand the differences between what the institution requires and the rules of the national exams.

### 3.4. Engage -the post - decision stage

For the RACE model, the journey does not end at enrollment. During the Engage stage, the new student participates in the universities' community and joining incoming-student groups on Facebook or Zalo, contributing user-generated content about campus life on TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, attending the new student enrolling meeting, greet with faculty teachers and senior students, and participate in welcome events for new students. Subsequently, notifications and responses regarding students' academic and other activities are exchanged through channels prescribed by each respective institution. For example, they can receive notifications to students via student portal or Zalo groups. This engagement is sustained through an continuous exchange of value among the institution, its alumni, its current students, and the candid experiences shared by enrolled students influence strongly on prospective students.

Engagement therefore completes the RACE cycle by turning current students and alumni into sources of earned media that reach the next cohort's first exposure with the university at the Reach stage. Communication is often focused on only during the peak admissions season, with limited effort to build long-term relationship. However, as peer opinions are more trusted than official ones, negative user-generated content which typically comes from current students can

significantly influence the decisions of future applicants. This matters because eWOM outweighs institutional messaging in university choice, ranking above both peer influence and institutional reputation as a determinant of applicants' decisions [35]. Since the Engage stage provides trusted content for future applicants while also posing reputational risks, neglecting its importance would undermine the long-term value of authentic engagement. There may be a discrepancy between students' satisfaction levels before and after enrollment; consequently, the reviews they provide during their studies - whether based on objective facts or subjective impressions - can influence future cohorts.

## 4. Discussion and implications

This article contributes to the RACE literature in two ways. First, it reconceptualizes the model from the applicant's perspective, treating the four stages as successive phases of the admissions journey rather than as an institutional planning framework. RACE was developed as a planning instrument for organizing an institution's own activity, this article instead treats the four stages as successive phases of the applicant's experience. This shifts the focus from what universities communicate to how applicants access, interpret, and act on information. The second way lies in its emphasis on the periodic character of the model in this sector. The experiences and content shared by current students and alumni become trusted information sources for subsequent cohorts during the Reach stage, creating a continuous feedback loop between Engage and Reach. As a result, engagement should be regarded as a strategic component of future admissions communication rather than merely a post-enrollment activity.

The stage-by-stage research also highlights a number of issues in digital admissions communication along with recommendations for improving long-term relationship with Gen Z.

First, many institutions still lack an integrated and journey-based approach to their communication activities. Communication activities are often carried out through separate digital channels and evaluated using general metrics instead of specific measure for each stage. As a result, institutions may attract a lot of attention but then find it hard to guide applicants consistently toward enrollment and long-term engagement.

Second, communication efforts are usually focused on the Reach stage. Universities invest significantly in visibility through advertising and social media, while comparatively less attention is paid to supporting applicants during decision-making or maintaining relationships after they become official students. Since drawing attention by itself does not always result in successful enrollment or long-lasting relationships with students, this imbalance may decrease the overall effectiveness of admissions communication.

Third, the digital information environment creates increasing challenges for information consistency and credibility. User-generated content, online communities, and education KOLs have become important information sources for students, but they may also diffuse incorrect information, either inadvertently or intentionally.

These findings suggest that universities should communicate in a more methodical and data-driven approach. The RACE model offers a useful framework for managing communication as an integrated applicant journey rather than isolated activities. Institutions could use digital tools such as CRM (Customer Relationship Management) systems to deliver personalized communication, adjust content to suit Generation Z's media consumption habits through various platforms and short-form content, and encourage authentic participation from current students and alumni to strengthen universities' credibility. At the organizational level, greater investment in analytics, professional development, and deep insight evaluation is needed to improve their experience of the full journey.

## 5. Conclusion

This article has examined how Generation Z's receive university admissions information, using the RACE model as an analytical lens on the applicant's journey rather than as a planning tool for institutions. The review shows that digital platforms, peer-generated reviews, and algorithm recommendation systems influence each phase. More specifically, initial exposure is increasingly incidental and video-first; information searching is craving for authenticity; decisions rely on cross-validation across multiple sources, in which family remains influential in the Vietnamese context and enrolled students, in turn, generate the peer content that reaches the following cohort in the next admissions seasons.

The findings also highlight several challenges in current admissions communication activities, including fragmented communication strategies, imbalanced investment for each stage, misinformation, and even limited digital communication capacity. These issues suggest that universities should adopt more integrated, student-centric, and data-driven communication approaches. The study also demonstrates that the RACE model can be extended beyond its original marketing function to provide a useful framework for understanding applicant behavior in higher education.

Future research could validate the proposed framework through empirical studies and examine how different digital platforms influence applicants' decisions across the stages of the admissions journey.

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