MARKETING COMMUNICATION TOOLS AND STUDENTS' DECISION TO ENROLL AT JIANGSU NANTONG TECHNICIAN COLLEGE IN CHINA*

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Abstract

This research aimed (1) to test the level of marketing communication tools and students' decision to enroll at Jiangsu Nantong Technician College in China, and (2) to examine the impact of marketing communication tools on students' decision to enroll. A quantitative research design was employed with a sample of 375 students selected through stratified random sampling across 15 fields of study. Data were collected via a structured questionnaire on a five-point Likert scale. Descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis were applied.

Results revealed that (1) all seven marketing communication tools and students' decision to enroll were perceived at a very high level ($\overline{X}$ = 4.22–4.29). (2) All seven hypotheses were supported. Advertising was the strongest predictor (β = 3.14, $p < 0.001$), followed by sales promotion (β = 2.40), direct marketing (β = 1.97), and digital media (β = 1.84). The model explained 61.3 % of the variance in enrollment decisions (R^2 = 0.613).

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Introduction

Marketing communication tools are strategic mechanisms through which educational institutions transmit messages to prospective students, build institutional reputations, and guide enrollment decisions (Kamkankaew & Meesubthong, 2026). Institutions today deploy an integrated portfolio comprising advertising, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing, personal selling, brand image, and digital media to attract students and differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive landscape (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012; Belch & Belch, 2015; Kamkankaew et.al., 2025). Shankar et al. (2022) emphasise that digital communication enables personalised student engagement, while Kim et al. (2019) demonstrate that consistent, clear messaging strengthens institutional confidence and enrollment intention. Young audiences, in particular, expect short, honest, and visually engaging communications delivered across digital platforms (Munsch, 2021).

In China, technical and vocational colleges face intensifying competition for a shrinking demographic pool. Jiangsu Nantong Technician College, a leading public vocational institution founded in 1956, serves approximately 4,000 full-time students across fifteen technical programmes and maintains strong industry partnerships. Despite its established reputation, the college lacks empirical evidence on which marketing communication tools most effectively influence enrollment decisions. Existing studies have largely examined single communication tools in isolation or focused on Western university contexts (Ortega & Hollerbach, 2022; Shehzadi et al., 2020). This study addresses that gap by empirically testing the level and impact of seven integrated marketing communication tools on students' decision to enroll.

Objectives

1. To test the level of marketing communication tools and students' decision to enroll at Jiangsu Nantong Technician College in China.

2. To examine the impact of marketing communication tools on students' decision to enroll at Jiangsu Nantong Technician College in China.

Literature Review

Decision-Making

Decision-making is a process of selecting among options, comparing alternatives, and evaluating choices based on expected results (Noorale, 2012). Skalski and Romero (2011) describe data-based decision-making as an ongoing cycle of information collection and analysis to support informed choices. Croskerry and Nimmo (2011) identify both intuitive (Type 1) and analytical (Type 2) decision modes, suggesting prospective students use both emotional and rational processes when selecting a college. When institutions communicate clearly and consistently, they facilitate better-informed enrollment decisions (Mengash, 2020; Kamkankaew, 2026).

Marketing Communication Tools

Integrated marketing communication (IMC) coordinates multiple promotional channels to deliver consistent, persuasive messages (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012; Belch & Belch, 2015). Advertising is a paid non-personal message that builds awareness and brand recall (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett, 2012; Kotler & Keller, 2016). Sales promotion encompasses short-term incentives—scholarships, discounts, special offers—designed to stimulate prompt action (Peattie & Peattie, 2003; Lamb et al., 2012). Public relations builds goodwill, trust, and a positive institutional image through planned communication activities (Kowalski, 2011; Smith, 2021). Direct marketing transmits targeted, personalised information to specific prospective students to elicit measurable responses (Tapp et al., 2004;

Abraham & Joseph, 2019). Personal selling uses face-to-face communication to provide programme details, reduce uncertainty, and build individual trust (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013; Firmansyah et al., 2019). Brand image reflects the overall institutional perception held in students' minds, shaped by accumulated experiences and communications (Keller, 2003; Snadrou & Haoucha, 2024). Digital media encompasses online platforms—social media, websites, and mobile applications—enabling interactive, real-time communication (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework. Seven marketing communication tools (independent variables) are hypothesised to predict students' decision to enroll (dependent variable), integrating IMC theory with student decision-making frameworks.

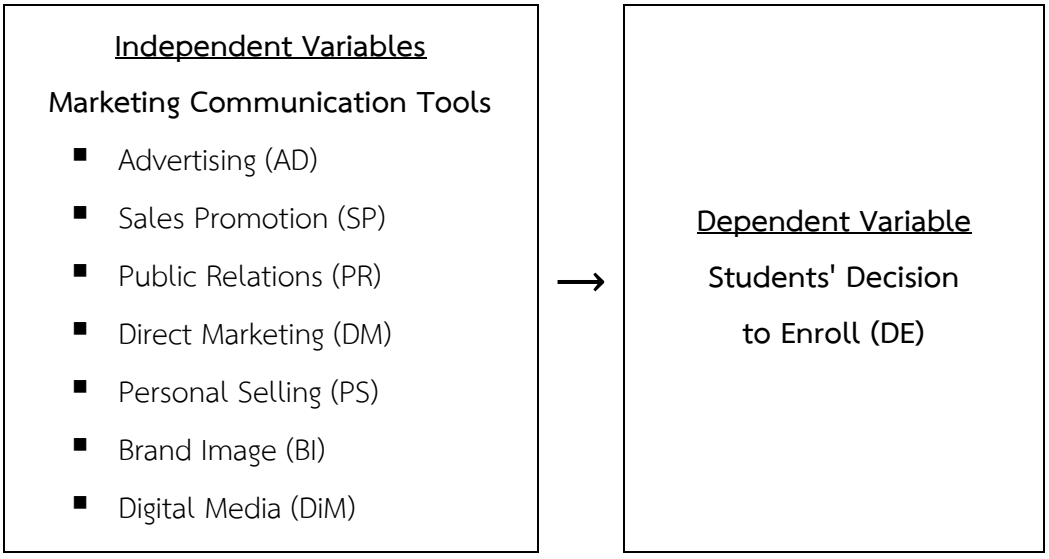

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative research design. The target population comprised 5,000 potential enrolling students at Jiangsu Nantong Technician College. Using Yamane's formula at 95 % confidence and 5 % margin of error, a sample of n = 375 was determined. Stratified random sampling was applied across 15 fields of study (25 students per major), ensuring equal representation of all vocational programmes including CNC Technology, Mechatronics, Industrial Robotics, Electrical Automation, Digital Design, Automotive Repair, E-commerce, Health and Social Care, and six additional technical disciplines.

A structured questionnaire served as the primary instrument, comprising items measuring each of the seven marketing communication tools and students' decision to enroll. All items were adapted from validated scales: advertising from Wells, Moriarty & Burnett (2012) and Kotler and Keller (2016); sales promotion from Peattie and Peattie (2003); public relations from Kowalski (2011); direct marketing from Tapp et al. (2004); personal selling from Firmansyah et al. (2019); brand image from Keller (2003); digital media from Bennett and Segerberg (2012); and decision-making from Noorale (2012). A five-point Likert scale ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Cronbach's Alpha exceeded 0.70 for all constructs, confirming reliability. Data analysis employed mean, standard deviation, Pearson correlation, multicollinearity testing (VIF, tolerance), and multiple regression.

Results

Objective 1: Level of Marketing Communication Tools and Students' Decision to Enroll

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics. All seven marketing communication tools and students' decision to enroll were rated at a very high level (Mean = 4.22–4.29). Personal selling achieved the highest score (Mean

= 4.29, SD = 0.887), followed by sales promotion, public relations, and direct marketing (all Mean = 4.28). Digital media scored Mean = 4.27, brand image Mean = 4.26, and advertising Mean = 4.22. Students' decision to enroll also reached a very high level (Mean = 4.26, SD = 0.902), indicating students follow a thoughtful, information-based enrollment process.

Table 1 Mean and Standard Deviation of All Variables (n = 375)

Variables	Mean	SD	Level
Advertising (AD)	4.22	0.957	Very High
Sales Promotion (SP)	4.28	0.924	Very High
Public Relations (PR)	4.28	0.896	Very High
Direct Marketing (DM)	4.28	0.888	Very High
Personal Selling (PS)	4.29	0.887	Very High
Brand Image (BI)	4.26	0.894	Very High
Digital Media (DiM)	4.27	0.922	Very High
Students' Decision to Enroll (DE)	4.26	0.902	Very High

Note: Scale: 4.21–5.00 = Very High; 3.41–4.20 = High; 2.61–3.40 = Moderate; 1.81–2.60 = Low; 1.00–1.80 = Very Low

Objective 2 Impact of Marketing Communication Tools on Students' Decision to Enroll

Normality was confirmed with skewness values of −0.692 to −0.144 and kurtosis of −0.724 to −0.125. Table 2 presents correlation and multicollinearity statistics. All predictors are significantly correlated with the dependent variable at $p < 0.01$ ($r = 0.554–0.708$). Advertising yields the highest correlation ($r = 0.708$).

VIF values (2.155–2.781) and tolerance values (0.360–0.464) confirm no multicollinearity problem.

Table 2 Correlation Analysis and Multicollinearity Testing

Variables	r	VIF	Tolerance	Result
Advertising (AD)	0.708**	2.568	0.389	Pass
Sales Promotion (SP)	0.673**	2.264	0.442	Pass
Public Relations (PR)	0.681**	2.781	0.360	Pass
Direct Marketing (DM)	0.597**	2.292	0.464	Pass
Personal Selling (PS)	0.554**	2.155	0.436	Pass
Brand Image (BI)	0.645**	2.325	0.381	Pass
Digital Media (DiM)	0.601**	2.771	0.361	Pass

Note: ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed); r = Pearson correlation with dependent variable. Pass = VIF < 5 and Tolerance > 0.10, confirming no multicollinearity problem.

Table 3 presents multiple regression results. The model is highly significant with $R = 0.783$, $R^2 = 0.613$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.595$, $F = 5.459$ ($p < 0.001$), and Durbin–Watson = 1.05, indicating that 61.3 % of the variance in enrollment decisions is explained by the seven marketing communication tools. All seven predictors are significant at $p < 0.05$.

Table 3 Multiple Regression Analysis Results (Dependent Variable: Students' Decision to Enroll)

Variables	b	SE	β	t	Sig.
Constant	0.468	0.245	–	1.914	0.047

Advertising (AD)	3.99	0.276	3.14	1.949	0.000*
Sales Promotion (SP)	3.32	0.272	2.40	1.205	0.002*
Public Relations (PR)	2.79	0.183	1.79	1.161	0.032*
Direct Marketing (DM)	2.94	0.171	1.97	1.133	0.014*
Personal Selling (PS)	2.68	0.170	1.73	1.866	0.035*
Brand Image (BI)	2.71	0.178	1.74	1.922	0.038*
Digital Media (DiM)	2.79	0.108	1.84	1.015	0.012*

Note: * $p < 0.05$; $R = 0.783$, $R^2 = 0.613$, Adj. $R^2 = 0.595$, $F = 5.459$, Sig. $F < 0.001$, Durbin–Watson = 1.05

Table 4 summarises hypothesis testing outcomes. All seven hypotheses are supported. Advertising is the strongest predictor ($\beta = 3.14$), followed by sales promotion ($\beta = 2.40$), direct marketing ($\beta = 1.97$), digital media ($\beta = 1.84$), public relations ($\beta = 1.79$), brand image ($\beta = 1.74$), and personal selling ($\beta = 1.73$).

Table 4 Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis Statement		β	Result
H1	Advertising has a significant positive impact on students' decision to enroll	3.14*	Supported
H2	Sales Promotion has a significant positive impact on students' decision to enroll	2.40*	Supported

H3	Public Relations has a significant positive impact on students' decision to enroll	1.79*	Supported
H4	Direct Marketing has a significant positive impact on students' decision to enroll	1.97*	Supported
H5	Personal Selling has a significant positive impact on students' decision to enroll	1.73*	Supported
H6	Brand Image has a significant positive impact on students' decision to enroll	1.74*	Supported
H7	Digital Media has a significant positive impact on students' decision to enroll	1.84*	Supported

Note: * $p < 0.05$. β = standardised regression coefficient.

Discussion

Regarding Objective 1, the very high perceived level of all marketing communication tools confirms that the college's communication environment is broadly effective. The highest score for personal selling (Mean = 4.29) aligns with Kotler and Armstrong (2013) and Firmansyah et al. (2019), who emphasise that direct interaction reduces uncertainty and builds trust—critical when students face high-stakes educational decisions. The equally high ratings for sales promotion and public relations (Mean = 4.28) support Peattie and Peattie (2003) and Smith (2021), confirming that incentive-based programmes and trust-building activities are potent drivers of enrollment interest. The very high rating for digital media (Mean = 4.27) corroborates Shankar et al. (2022) and Bennett and Segerberg (2012), reflecting the centrality of online channels in the information-seeking behaviour of contemporary young adults. Brand image at a very high level (Mean = 4.26) supports Keller (2003) and Snadrou and Haoucha (2024),

establishing that positive institutional associations are fundamental antecedents of enrollment intention.

Regarding Objective 2, advertising emerges as the dominant predictor (β = 3.14, $p < 0.001$), consistent with Tien et al. (2020), who demonstrate that social media advertising substantially raises institutional awareness among young audiences. Ortega and Hollerbach (2022) similarly show that persuasive advertising campaigns reshape educational perceptions. Sales promotion ranked second (β = 2.40), supported by Rong-Da Liang et al. (2017), confirming that financial incentives meaningfully accelerate enrollment decisions. Direct marketing (β = 1.97) and digital media (β = 1.84) also register strong effects, consistent with Tapp et al. (2004) and Fadhillah et al. (2024). Public relations (β = 1.79), brand image (β = 1.74), and personal selling (β = 1.73) each contribute significantly, reinforcing that an integrated communication strategy is more effective than any single tool deployed in isolation (Bosch et al., 2006).

Recommendation

Recommendations for the College

1) Invest in online advertising on social media and video platforms with clear, authentic content showcasing programme quality, facilities, and career outcomes.

2) Develop structured sales promotion programmes including competitive scholarships, merit-based awards, and early-enrollment incentives, communicated prominently across all channels.

3) Expand public relations activities through open house events, school visits, and community engagement, supplemented by actively managed digital channels providing timely and accurate information.

4) Train staff in programme knowledge and student-centered communication to maximise the quality of direct marketing and personal selling interactions with prospective students and families.

5) Cultivate a consistent brand identity across all channels emphasising high-quality training, industry partnerships, and career readiness to build long-term institutional trust.

Recommendations for Future Research

1) Future studies should investigate mediating variables such as parental influence, peer recommendations, and financial background to develop more comprehensive enrollment decision models.

2) Comparative and longitudinal research across multiple Chinese vocational colleges and international higher education contexts would strengthen generalizability and cross-cultural theoretical contribution.

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