The Effectiveness of Visual Communication Design in Universitas Terbuka's Social Media Promotion for Attracting Gen Z

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effectiveness of visual communication design in Universitas Terbuka's (UT) social media promotion strategy to attract Gen Z prospective students. This study stems from the increasing role of social media as the primary communication channel for educational institutions in the context of digital visual culture. Using a mixed methods approach, the study combines quantitative analysis of Gen Z preferences and perceptions through online surveys and qualitative analysis through interviews with UT's central and regional marketing teams. The results show that visual design elements such as the dominant blue-yellow color scheme, modern sans-serif typography, and short video content format (reels) significantly influence the engagement level of young audiences. However, a gap was also found between the visual imagery developed by UT and Gen Z's digital aesthetic expectations, particularly regarding color variation, typographic consistency, and the response speed of UT's social media administrators. This study emphasizes the importance of implementing a visual communication strategy based on the visual culture of the digital generation and the continuity of visual messages across platforms. These findings are expected to serve as a reference for higher education institutions in designing digital promotions that are effective, engaging, and relevant to Gen Z's characteristics.

Keywords: design visual communication, social media, Gen Z, promoting education, Universitas Terbuka

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menganalisis efektivitas desain komunikasi visual dalam strategi promosi media sosial Universitas Terbuka (UT) untuk menarik minat Gen Z sebagai calon mahasiswa. Kajian ini berangkat dari fenomena meningkatnya peran media sosial sebagai kanal utama komunikasi institusi pendidikan dalam konteks budaya visual digital. Dengan pendekatan *mixed methods*, penelitian menggabungkan analisis kuantitatif terhadap preferensi dan persepsi Gen Z melalui survei daring, serta analisis kualitatif melalui wawancara dengan tim pemasaran UT pusat dan daerah. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa elemen desain visual seperti warna dominan biru-kuning, tipografi sans-serif modern, dan format konten video pendek (*reels*) berpengaruh signifikan terhadap tingkat keterlibatan audiens muda. Namun, ditemukan pula kesenjangan antara citra visual yang dibangun UT dan ekspektasi estetika digital Gen Z, khususnya terkait variasi warna, konsistensi tipografi, dan kecepatan respons admin media sosial UT. Studi ini menegaskan pentingnya penerapan strategi komunikasi visual berbasis budaya visual generasi digital serta kontinuitas pesan visual lintas platform. Temuan ini

diharapkan menjadi acuan bagi institusi pendidikan tinggi dalam merancang promosi digital yang efektif, menarik, dan relevan dengan karakteristik Gen Z.

Kata-kata kunci: desain komunikasi visual, media sosial, Gen Z, promosi pendidikan, Universitas Terbuka

Introduction

The growth of social media has changed the way people in many fields, including higher education, communicate visually. Social media serves not only as a means for people to communicate with each other, but also as a platform for institutions to showcase their brand and visual identity. Colicev, Kumar, and O'Connor (2019) contend that social media transforms organizational interactions with the public, creating novel opportunities for promotion, engagement, and brand image enhancement. In 2024, 68.9% of people in Indonesia used social media (Statistics, 2024). Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok were the most popular among people aged 16 to 24 (We Are Social, 2024). These numbers indicate that social media is an effective means for young people to communicate visually.

Gen Z, which includes people born between 1995 and 2010 (Seemiller & Grace, 2017), is one of the groups that social media visual culture has had the most significant effect on. This group grew up in a fully connected digital world, resulting in proficiency in reading and writing and tends to like content that is interactive, real, and short (Erwin, Saununu, & Rukmana, 2023). In the promotion of education, visually driven methods are therefore essential for engaging this demographic. Kalpakian and Marzouk (2023) argue that Gen Z approaches information differently, necessitating visual communication design that conveys institutional messages quickly, beautifully, and emotionally.

In this context, Universitas Terbuka (UT), Indonesia's sole state university providing Open and Distance Higher Education, must develop visual communication strategies that resonate with Gen Z. UT's objective is to expand access to higher education nationwide through online learning (Sari et al., 2022). Given Indonesia's vast size and diverse landscapes, social media plays a crucial role in connecting with potential students and making them feel close to you. UT leverages its institutional identity, featuring blue and yellow colors, modern sans serif typography, and engaging content formats such as reels, infographics, and student testimonials, to demonstrate the credibility and flexibility of distance learning on social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.

However, there are some limitations to the effectiveness of the UT visual communication strategy. Budiman et al. (2023) found that specific social media promotions in higher education fail to resonate with target markets, primarily due to a lack of understanding of youth characteristics and the mismatch between visual styles and audience expectations.

Additionally, Krishnan and Sajilan (2014) discovered in Malaysia that the success of private higher-education advertising depends on the visual content, social norms, and how people feel about social media messages. In the case of UT, there are still gaps between the promotional messages and the public's understanding of the benefits of distance learning, tuition costs, and flexible study schedules.

This study uses Primaretha's (2012) 3 Layers of Social Media Analysis framework to measure effectiveness. This framework looks at performance in three areas: reach, engagement, and virality. This method helps determine how color, typography, layout, and video formats influence people's interactions with and perceptions of content. The study employs a mixed-methods design, incorporating a quantitative survey of 150 Indonesian Gen Z respondents and comprehensive interviews with five UT marketing staff from both the central office and regional offices. It elucidates perceptions, challenges, and the efficacy of visuals in UT social media promotion.

This research synthesizes viewpoints on visual communication design, digital visual culture, and educational promotion strategy, offering empirical insights into the enhancement of institutional image and visual messaging to increase Gen Z interest in UT. The findings aim to enhance scholarly dialogue in visual communication, providing pragmatic guidance for higher education institutions seeking effective, coherent, and culturally sensitive visual strategies in the digital realm.

Research Methods

This study utilized a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques, to achieve a thorough comprehension of the efficacy of visual communication design in UT social media marketing aimed at engaging Gen Z. This method enables the integration of quantitative data regarding audience perceptions with comprehensive analyses of visual strategies and limitations provided by UT social media managers.

Philosophically, the study is based on a pragmatist framework that values the usefulness of the results and the adaptability of the methods used to collect data (Shah et al., 2018). This lens enables a comprehensive examination of UT digital promotion, incorporating both user perspectives (Gen Z) and content creators' viewpoints (UT marketing staff).

Data Collection Design and Techniques

An online survey with a closed-ended questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from 150 Gen Z respondents in Indonesia's western, central, and eastern regions. The respondents were between the ages of 18 and 27. The respondents comprised high school students,

secondary school graduates, and university students, encompassing both employed and unemployed individuals. The questionnaire had three parts: (1) information about the respondents, (2) their knowledge of Universitas Terbuka, and (3) their thoughts on UT's visual communication design on social media sites like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.

The qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five UT marketing staff members from the central office in Jakarta and four regional offices: Bandung, Ambon, Bengkulu, and Gorontalo. Interviews were conducted online, recorded, and subsequently transcribed. Questions were about how to promote things digitally, how to design content, how to use UT's visual identity, and the technical and human resource problems that come up when managing social media.

Analysis of Data

The percentages and frequency distributions were used to describe Gen Z trends and visual preferences for UT content, thereby analyzing the quantitative data. Thematic analysis was employed to examine qualitative data, categorizing interview responses into key areas such as content design, audience engagement, and implementation challenges. To evaluate effectiveness, we utilized Primaretha (2012), 3 Layers of Social Media Analysis theory:

1. Media Analysis, figuring out how far the content reaches, how many people interact with it, and how viral it is.
2. Conversation Analysis looks at how people feel and what they think about things by looking at comments and discussions.
3. Network Analysis, looking at how UT, influencers, and online communities work together digitally.

Subsequently, the results of the survey and interviews were compared to find links between Gen Z visual preferences and UT visual communication strategies. Methodological triangulation, which combined quantitative and qualitative findings to give a complete picture, made the validity stronger.
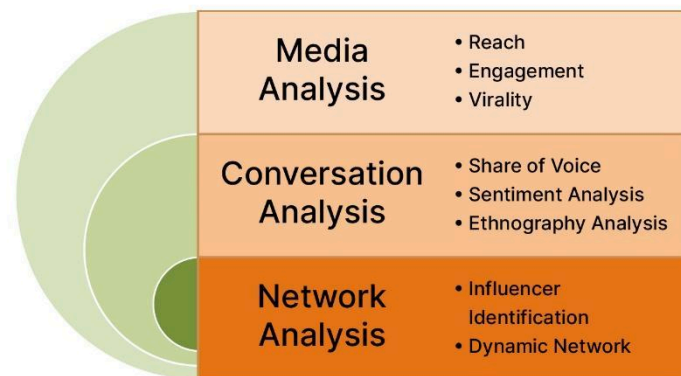
Image 1. 3 Layers of Social Media Analysis
Source: Primaretha (2012)

Results and Study

Gen Z Thoughts and Visual Preferences About UT Promotion

A survey of 150 Gen Z participants in Indonesia found that 86% of them know UT is a state university. However, many participants lack a comprehensive understanding of Open and Distance Higher Education, including its operational mechanics, costs, and study schedules. This indicates a gap between UT's visual messages and the audience's understanding of them.

Instagram is the most popular way to find out about UT, with 68% of people saying they use it. TikTok (12.7%) and Twitter/X (10%) are next. This suggests that younger people are increasingly shifting away from traditional print and audio media, and toward visual and audiovisual media. Not everyone who follows the UT official Instagram account (@univterbuka) engages with it (likes, comments, shares). Although the message reaches a lot of people, it does not work as well as it could because it only gets people to see it, rather than truly engaging them.

Gen Z likes short videos or reels, with a perfect length of 15 to 20 seconds (39.3%). People find this type of content more appealing, interactive, and easy to understand because it combines short text, popular music, and moving graphics. On the other hand, static infographics or single images are less engaging and can easily be overlooked in busy feeds. This is in line with Gen Z's tendency to be very visual, process information quickly, and have shorter attention spans (Kalpakian & Marzouk, 2023).

Further, 66.7% of participants think UT content looks modern, bright, and pleasant. The blue and yellow core identity shows that the company is professional and friendly. However, 16% want more color variety to avoid boredom and better reflect current digital visual trends. Another standard input concerns the consistency of the typeface. Some respondents believe

that using multiple typefaces in a single post can make it appear busy and unfocused. They suggest using one to two main, mobile-friendly fonts to show how important readability and visual hierarchy are in digital visual communication (Hillner, 2009).

Subsequently, the three most important types of information that people want are: (1) program availability at the Diploma, Bachelor, and Master levels (56.7%); (2) UT learning methods (48.7%); and (3) accreditation status (43.4%). This highlights the importance of having content that is both useful and meets people's needs. However, many respondents report difficulty accessing this information quickly because UT social media does not always clearly present topics. This necessitates that information structures be more hierarchical and navigable, enabling individuals to comprehend the principal aspects swiftly.

These points are supported by how easy it is to find and understand information: 36% say it is easy to find the information they need about UT on UT's social media, and 26.7% say it is very easy. However, only 36.7% find the content easy to understand overall, while 4% find it hard. Therefore, for visual communication to be effective, it must be visually appealing, and the design elements must support both informational and perceptual functions.

Non-visual factors also impact how well something works. About 58.7% of respondents indicated that the admin response speed needs improvement. In digital marketing, responding quickly to public questions is just as important as the visuals themselves when designing a brand experience. Improving response times and combining visual messaging with user interaction should be seen as a single communication system.

Qualitative Insights:
Visual Strategy, Content Creation, and Implementation Difficulties

Interviews with five UT marketing staff members from the central office and four regional offices show that they are making systematic efforts to promote the school on social media. However, they still have problems with staffing, equipment, and infrastructure. At the headquarters, a team of four people, three content creators and one graphic designer, takes care of designing, editing, and posting content. There are no specialized digital marketing teams in regional offices. The people in charge of marketing often have to do other things, like administrative work, student services, or finance, which makes it hard for them to focus on digital activities.

Because of this, the frequency and quality of posts vary from region to region. UT Bandung and UT Ambon are more active than UT Bengkulu and UT Gorontalo, posting daily and offering a wider range of content. UT Bengkulu and UT Gorontalo mostly post during admissions periods. This has an impact on the flow of communication and the interest of the audience. Local visual cultures also affect how well people follow institutional rules. For

example, UT Ambon incorporates red accents to highlight its local character, whereas UT Gorontalo limits its use of blue and yellow due to regional political sensitivities. These cases demonstrate the challenge of maintaining a national brand identity while allowing for local adaptations that are culturally relevant.

Infrastructure problems, particularly with internet access, create difficulties in certain areas. This is why some units use both online and offline methods to reach prospective students, such as school visits and community events. Therefore, the effectiveness of digital visual communication still depends on the social and technological conditions around it.

There are three main types of content on UT central and regional accounts: informational (admissions schedules, fees, procedures), inspirational (student/alumni testimonials), and educational (study tips, distance learning orientation). Staff shared that testimonials are most effective in attracting new students because they offer authentic experiences. On the other hand, formal announcements are less effective unless paired with engaging visuals.

Implementing 3 Layers of Social Media Analysis to Be More Effective

During the admissions season from April to August 2024, media analysis showed that UT's main Instagram account performed significantly better. Follower growth, content views, and profile visits all increased, accompanied by a rise in call to action (CTA). Reels, or short-form videos on Instagram and TikTok, got the most engagement compared to still images. This indicates that Gen Z has a strong preference for moving pictures and sounds.

Conversation analysis reveals that people frequently discuss similar topics, including tuition, application processes, and the advantages of distance learning. Most of the answers are neutral to positive, but some people complain about how slow the social media admin responds or the academic challenges that current students face. Both the visual design of an institution's social media pages and the digital service experiences of its users shape its image.

Network analysis shows how UT works with influencers and educational groups. Partnering with popular influencers or individuals who have a large following among young people can increase visibility and audience reach. However, these partnerships remain random and are not part of a long-term visual communication strategy. In digital culture, collaborating with public figures who share your values can help strengthen emotional resonance and brand credibility.

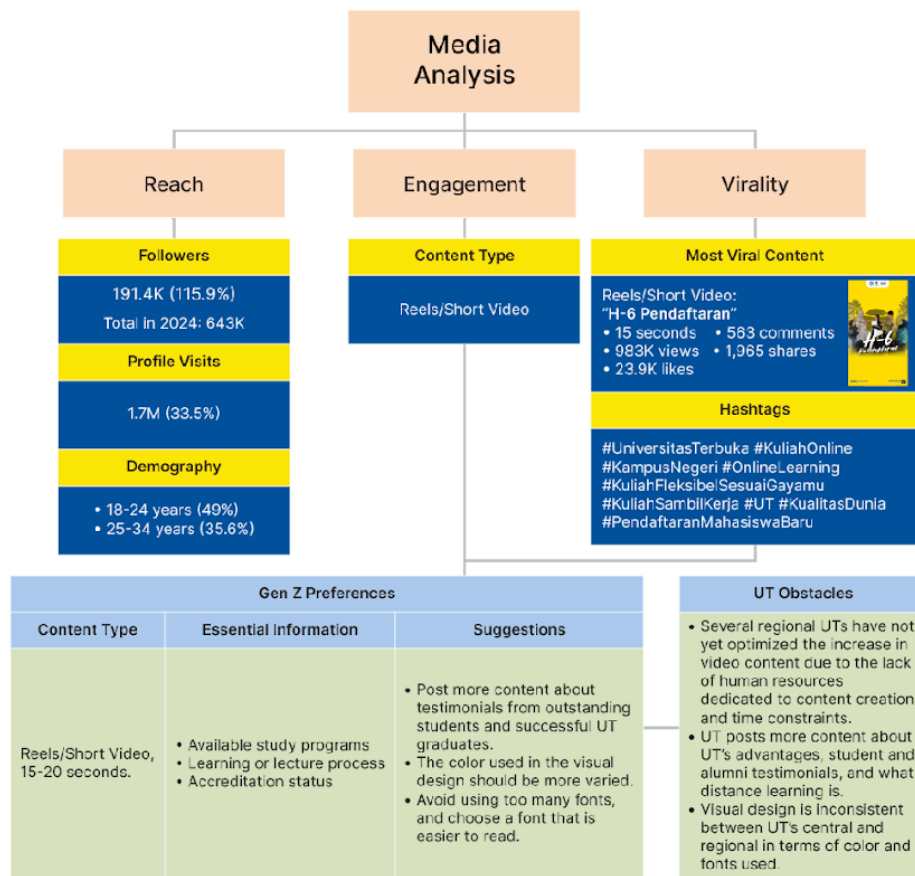Discussion: Consistency of Identity, Visual Culture, and Audience Experience

All things considered, UT's visual communication design successfully captivates Gen Z through its clean, bright visuals and concise videos. Nevertheless, there are a few areas that need to be improved. First, ensure that the visual messages align with the principles of open education. Visual elements highlighting flexible schedules, unlimited access, and UT's diverse student body can effectively convey the university's main messages.

Second, the results highlight the importance of maintaining a consistent identity while adapting to local conditions. Using different colors and fonts in other regions could hurt the brand image. UT should establish a visual guideline system that enables cultures to adapt while preserving their unique identity. This is in line with cross-cultural visual communication principles, which say that a global identity should be flexible enough to fit local contexts while still keeping brand equity (Serdyukov, 2017).

Third, UT cannot separate visual communication from the experience of interacting with digital media. Brand strategy should incorporate elements such as fast response times, easy access to information, and formats that align with Gen Z's media usage patterns. Effectiveness is determined not solely by aesthetic appeal but also by how design promotes engagement and enhances user experiences.

These results conceptually endorse the perspective that visual communication via social media constitutes experience design rather than mere information presentation. Good visuals help people form opinions, feelings, and connections with them. For UT, showcasing the benefits of distance education through an interactive visual story that is aspirational, easy to understand, and appealing to digital-native students would be effective.

Media Analysis

Reach

Followers

191.4K (115.9%)
Total in 2024: 643K

Profile Visits

1.7M (33.5%)

Demography

- 18-24 years (49%)
- 25-34 years (35.6%)

Engagement

Content Type

Reels/Short Video

Virality

Most Viral Content

Reels/Short Video:
"H-6 Pendaftaran"
- 15 seconds
- 563 comments
- 983K views
- 1,965 shares
- 23.9K likes

Hashtags

#UniversitasTerbuka #KuliahOnline
#KampusNegeri #OnlineLearning
#KuliahFleksibelSesuaiGayamu
#KuliahSambilKerja #UT #KualitasDunia
#PendaftaranMahasiswaBaru

Gen Z Preferences

Content Type	Essential Information	Suggestions
Reels/Short Video, 15-20 seconds.	- Available study programs - Learning or lecture process - Accreditation status	- Post more content about testimonials from outstanding students and successful UT graduates. - The color used in the visual design should be more varied. - Avoid using too many fonts, and choose a font that is easier to read.

UT Obstacles

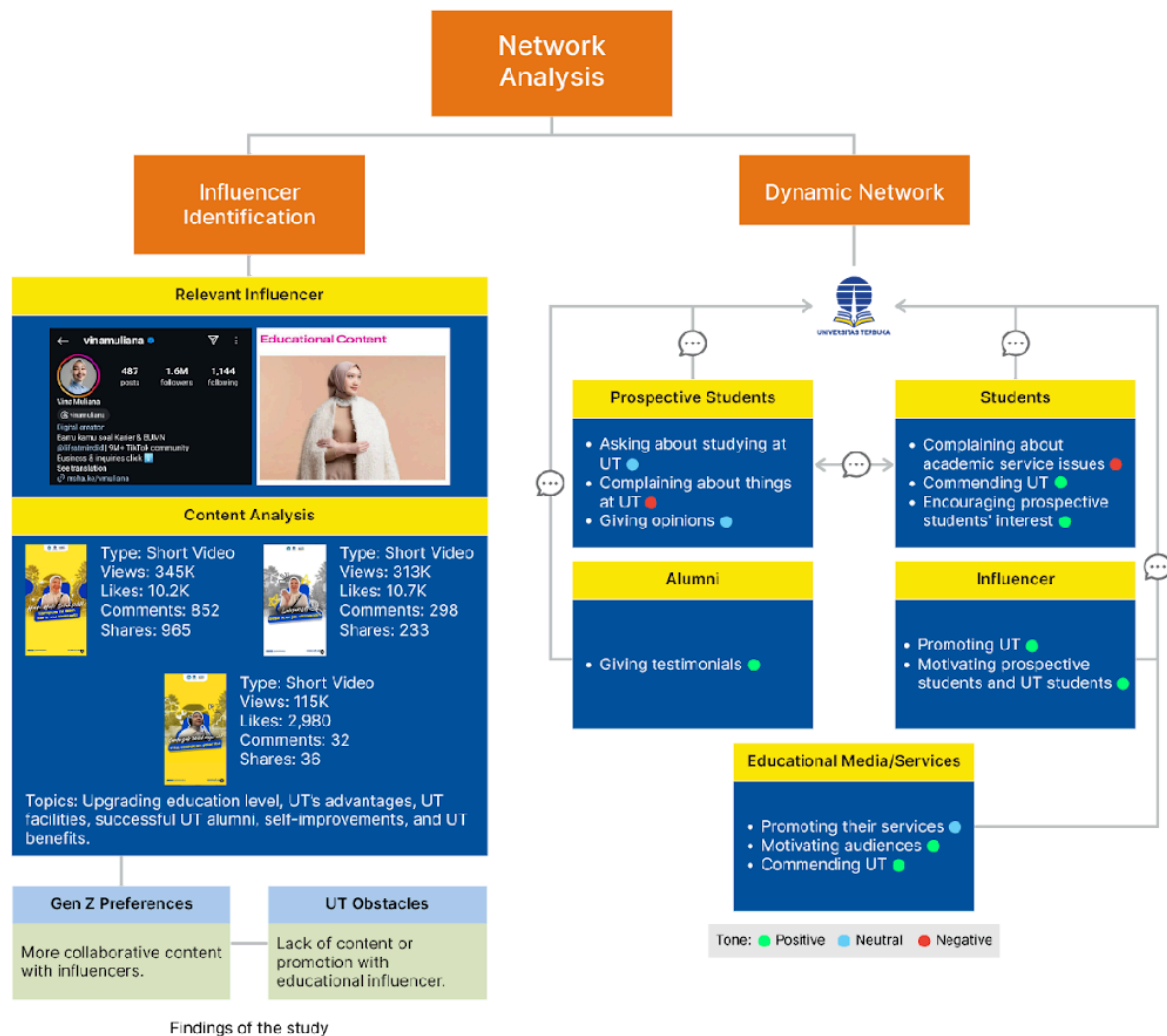- Several regional UTs have not yet optimized the increase in video content due to the lack of human resources dedicated to content creation and time constraints.
- UT posts more content about UT's advantages, student and alumni testimonials, and what distance learning is.
- Visual design is inconsistent between UT's central and regional in terms of color and fonts used.

Findings of the study

Conversation Analysis

Share of Voice

Most Spoken Words/Issues

- Registration
- Availability of study programs
- Tuition fees
- Social media admin response
- Registration steps
- Document validation

Sentiment Analysis

Tone

Neutral

Etnography Analysis

Topic/Perception

Responses from prospective students to UT's social media promotional posts frequently encompass inquiries related to lectures on registration, study programs, learning processes, and payment procedures. Often, the audience's perception appears positive as they comment or make statements commending UT, encouraging others to enroll in UT. Nonetheless, certain negative perceptions exist, including the lack of responses from social media admins to inquiries and an excessively lengthy file validation process for prospective students, which leads to confusion.

Gen Z Preferences

Social media admin response time in responding to questions.

UT Obstacles

Numerous UT student inquiries stemming from frequent academic service issues contribute to social media admins' delayed response times as they address questions from current and prospective students. This influences how prospective students view UT and potentially hindered prospective students' registration.

Findings of the study

Image 2. 3 Layers of Social Media Analysis of UT Central Instagram
Source: Rahadian Kamandaru

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study finds that visual communication design is key to how well Universitas Terbuka's social media ads work to attract Gen Z prospective students. Using the blue-yellow color scheme, modern sans serif fonts, and short-form video that are part of the institution's visual identity makes messages more visible and easier to find. There are still gaps between the constructed visual image and how people understand open and distance education; the current visuals do not fully explain the benefits of UT's flexible learning model.

Gen Z is more drawn to short, dynamic videos that give helpful information, mainly student or alumni testimonials that seem real and emotionally relevant. Non-visual factors, such as the UT social media admin response time, also influence how people perceive UT as a credible

source. In the digital era, effective visual communication requires a combination of design, user experience, and interactivity.

Challenges in implementation remain in ensuring identity consistency and managing human resource constraints at UT regional offices. Different regional design styles and cultural needs show that UT needs visual guidelines that are both standard and flexible. Additionally, collaborating with educational influencers and young alumni can help UT reach and engage Gen Z prospective students more effectively over time.

Based on these results, the suggestions are:

1. Creating a unified visual communication guideline that covers color, typeface, and content formats that work on multiple platforms.
2. Increasing the number of short videos that tell stories about UT's unique benefits.
3. Increasing the skills of UT regional staff in digital design and production.
4. Speeding up online response times to build a brand for Gen Z prospective students that is professional and friendly.

These steps can help UT create visual communication that is more effective, consistent, and culturally relevant, aligning with how people communicate visually today.

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