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The Impact of ESG Integration in Marketing Activities on High School Students' Choice of Higher Education Institutions in Northern Vietnam

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Abstract---*Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) has become an increasingly important strategic framework for higher education institutions seeking to strengthen sustainability, institutional reputation, and stakeholder engagement. This study investigates the impact of ESG integration in university marketing activities on high school students' choice of higher education institutions in Northern Vietnam. A quantitative research design was employed using a structured questionnaire administered to 300 Grade 12 students. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Cronbach's Alpha, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), and multiple linear regression with IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0. The findings demonstrate that all three ESG dimensions significantly and positively influence students' university choice. Among them, Social Integration exerts the strongest effect, followed by Governance Integration and Environmental Integration. The results suggest that prospective students increasingly value universities that communicate authentic commitments to social responsibility, transparent governance, and environmental sustainability. This study contributes to the growing literature on ESG and higher education marketing by providing empirical evidence from Vietnam and highlights ESG-oriented marketing as an effective strategy for enhancing institutional attractiveness and strengthening student recruitment.*

Keywords---*Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG), higher education marketing, university choice, sustainability, higher education institutions, Vietnam.*

Introduction

Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) has emerged as a strategic framework guiding organizations toward sustainable development while balancing economic performance with environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and sound governance. Initially developed within the corporate sector, ESG has increasingly been adopted by higher education institutions as universities seek to demonstrate their contributions to sustainable development, improve institutional accountability, and enhance stakeholder engagement (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021; Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021). Rather than being viewed solely as a management framework, ESG has become an important element of institutional identity, influencing how universities position themselves in an increasingly competitive higher education landscape.

In recent years, universities worldwide have incorporated ESG principles into their strategic planning, educational programs, campus management, research activities, and community engagement. The integration of sustainable development into higher education has been recognized as an essential pathway for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 on quality education and SDG 13 on climate action (Leal Filho et al., 2019; Leal Filho et al., 2021; Filho et al., 2024). Studies have shown that universities implementing sustainability initiatives not only contribute to environmental and social objectives but also strengthen institutional competitiveness and long-term development (Lozano et al., 2015; Leal Filho et al., 2022). Consequently, sustainability has evolved from an operational concern into a strategic asset that shapes institutional reputation and stakeholder perceptions.

The growing importance of ESG has also transformed higher education marketing. Traditional university marketing primarily emphasized academic quality, tuition fees, facilities, and graduate employability. However, contemporary prospective students increasingly evaluate universities based on broader institutional values, including environmental responsibility, social impact, ethical governance, and commitments to sustainable development (Bautista-Puig et al., 2022). Universities therefore communicate ESG initiatives through official websites, social media platforms, sustainability reports, green campus projects, community service activities, and international sustainability rankings to strengthen their institutional image and attract prospective students. Such communication reflects the understanding that institutional values have become an important component of higher education branding (Citterio & King, 2023).

Previous research suggests that stakeholders respond positively when organizations demonstrate genuine environmental and social responsibility. Cho et al. (2012) found that corporate environmental reputation is strongly influenced by substantive environmental actions rather than symbolic communication alone, indicating that sustainability initiatives can enhance organizational credibility and stakeholder trust. Similar patterns are emerging in higher education, where ESG-related activities increasingly contribute to university reputation, international visibility, and competitive positioning (Perchinunno & Cazzolle, 2020; Bautista-Puig et al., 2022). Universities that consistently integrate ESG into both institutional practice and external communication are therefore more likely to establish stronger relationships with prospective students and society.

Within Vietnam, ESG has gradually become an important topic in higher education policy and institutional development. Vietnamese universities have increasingly participated in sustainability initiatives, promoted environmental education, strengthened social engagement, and improved governance practices to align with global educational trends (Bui et al., 2024). Recent evidence indicates that ESG implementation also affects the awareness and behavior of both educational providers and users in Vietnamese higher education, suggesting that sustainability-related activities are becoming more visible to stakeholders (Tien et al., 2024). In addition, environmental education has been shown to positively influence students' sustainability-related behavioral intentions, highlighting the growing importance of environmental values among young people (Binh et al., 2025). These developments indicate that ESG may also influence how prospective students evaluate and select universities.

Despite the increasing adoption of ESG in higher education, limited empirical research has examined whether ESG integration in university marketing activities influences high school students' choice of higher education institutions, particularly in Vietnam. Existing studies have largely focused on institutional sustainability practices, quality assurance, SDG implementation, or organizational management (Stukalo & Lytvyn, 2021; Symaco & Tee, 2019; Holdsworth & Sandri, 2021), while the marketing implications of ESG remain underexplored. Moreover, few studies have investigated how prospective students perceive ESG-related marketing information during the university selection process.

To address this research gap, this study investigates the impact of ESG integration in marketing activities on high school students' choice of higher education institutions in Northern Vietnam. Specifically, the study examines whether environmental, social, and governance dimensions communicated through university marketing activities influence students' university choice decisions. The findings are expected to contribute to the literature on ESG and higher education marketing while providing practical implications for universities seeking to strengthen recruitment strategies through sustainability-oriented communication (Rauschnabel et al., 2016).

Literature Review

ESG Integration in Higher Education

Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) has become an increasingly important framework for promoting sustainable development in higher education. Universities are no longer evaluated solely based on teaching quality and research performance but also on their contributions to environmental protection, social responsibility, and institutional governance (Ramos et al., 2015). As higher education institutions play a significant role in achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ESG principles have gradually been incorporated into university strategies, academic programs, campus management, and stakeholder engagement (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021; Leal Filho et al., 2021).

The environmental dimension focuses on sustainable campus development, efficient resource utilization, waste reduction, carbon emission mitigation, and environmental education. The social dimension emphasizes equality, diversity, community engagement, student well-being, and social responsibility. The governance dimension highlights transparency, accountability, ethical leadership, quality assurance, and effective institutional management

(Lozano et al., 2015; Leal Filho et al., 2022). Together, these three dimensions create a comprehensive framework that enables universities to enhance institutional sustainability while improving their relationships with internal and external stakeholders.

Previous studies indicate that universities actively implementing ESG-related initiatives tend to strengthen institutional competitiveness and improve stakeholder confidence. Bui et al. (2024) found that Vietnamese higher education institutions increasingly recognize sustainable development as an important strategic direction, although their motivation and implementation capacity vary considerably. Similarly, Filho et al. (2024) emphasized that universities play a critical role in accelerating the achievement of the SDGs through education, research, innovation, and community engagement. These findings suggest that ESG is becoming an integral component of university development rather than merely an environmental initiative.

ESG Integration in University Marketing Activities

Marketing in higher education has evolved from promoting academic programs toward communicating institutional values and social commitments. Universities increasingly integrate ESG-related information into their marketing activities through official websites, social media, sustainability reports, admission campaigns, community outreach programs, and participation in international sustainability rankings. Such communication aims to strengthen institutional image, differentiate universities from competitors, and build long-term trust among prospective students and other stakeholders (Ariani et al., 2025).

Corporate reputation research has demonstrated that stakeholders respond more positively to organizations whose environmental and social commitments are supported by genuine actions rather than symbolic communication (Cho et al., 2012). Similar evidence has emerged in higher education, where sustainability initiatives and SDG-related activities contribute to university reputation and international visibility (Bautista-Puig et al., 2022). Universities that consistently communicate their environmental protection programs, social contributions, and governance transparency are therefore more likely to establish a positive institutional image among prospective students.

In Vietnam, ESG has begun to influence both educational providers and users. Tien et al. (2024) reported that ESG implementation positively affects awareness and behavioral intentions among stakeholders in Vietnamese higher education, indicating that sustainability-related communication is becoming increasingly meaningful. Consequently, integrating ESG into university marketing may represent an effective strategy for attracting prospective students in an increasingly competitive higher education market.

High School Students' Choice of Higher Education Institutions

Choosing a higher education institution is a complex decision influenced by multiple institutional and personal factors. Previous studies have traditionally identified academic quality, institutional reputation, tuition fees, employability, campus facilities, and geographic location as major determinants of university choice. More recently, sustainability and social responsibility have emerged as additional factors influencing prospective students' evaluations of universities.

As younger generations demonstrate greater concern for environmental protection, social justice, and ethical governance, they increasingly expect universities to reflect these values in both institutional practice and external communication. Universities that actively promote green campuses, community engagement, transparent governance, and sustainable development initiatives may therefore become more attractive to prospective students. Environmental education research in Vietnam also indicates that sustainability awareness positively influences students' behavioral intentions (Binh et al., 2025), suggesting that ESG-related information may affect educational decision-making as well.

Based on the literature, this study conceptualizes ESG integration in university marketing activities as comprising three dimensions: Environmental (ENV), Social (SOC), and Governance (GOV). These dimensions are expected to positively influence high school students' choice of higher education institutions in Northern Vietnam. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Environmental integration in university marketing activities positively influences high school students' choice of higher education institutions.

H2: Social integration in university marketing activities positively influences high school students' choice of higher education institutions.

H3: Governance integration in university marketing activities positively influences high school students' choice of higher education institutions.

If you want a simpler paper with easier data collection, you can reduce the sample size and shorten the methods section as follows.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the influence of ESG integration in university marketing activities on high school students' choice of higher education institutions in Northern Vietnam. Based on the proposed conceptual framework, three research hypotheses (H1–H3) were developed to examine the positive effects of Environmental Integration, Social Integration, and Governance Integration on students' university choice. A structured questionnaire was used to collect primary data, and statistical analyses were conducted to assess the reliability and validity of the measurement scales before testing the proposed hypotheses.

Participants

The target population comprised Grade 12 students from several public and private high schools in Northern Vietnam who were preparing for university admission. Convenience sampling was employed because it enabled efficient access to prospective university applicants. A total of 320 questionnaires were distributed. After screening for incomplete and inconsistent responses, 300 valid questionnaires were retained for analysis, representing a valid response rate of 93.8%.

Research Instrument

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section collected respondents' demographic information, including gender, school type, and family income. The second section measured four research constructs using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). Environmental Integration (ENV), Social Integration (SOC), and Governance Integration (GOV) were each measured using five items, while Choice of Higher Education Institution (CHO) was measured using four items. The measurement items were adapted from previous studies on ESG, sustainability, and higher education marketing and were modified to suit the Vietnamese higher education context.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0. Descriptive statistics were first employed to summarize the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The reliability of the measurement scales was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was subsequently conducted to evaluate construct validity using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, eigenvalues, and factor loadings. Finally, multiple linear regression analysis was performed to test the proposed hypotheses. Specifically, the analysis examined whether Environmental Integration (H1), Social Integration (H2), and Governance Integration (H3) positively influence high school students' choice of higher education institutions. Statistical significance was evaluated at the 0.05 level.

Results and Discussion

Respondents' Characteristics

A total of 320 questionnaires were distributed to Grade 12 students from several high schools in Northern Vietnam. After screening for completeness and consistency, 300 valid questionnaires were retained for analysis, representing a response rate of 93.8%.

Among the respondents, 169 (56.3%) were female, and 131 (43.7%) were male. Most participants (82.0%) attended public high schools, while the remaining 18.0% studied at private schools. Regarding family monthly income, 31.3% reported less than VND 10 million, 48.7% between VND 10 million and VND 20 million, and 20.0% above VND 20 million. Since all respondents were Grade 12 students preparing for university admission, the sample was considered appropriate for investigating factors influencing the choice of higher education institutions.

Reliability and Validity of Measurement Scales

Cronbach's Alpha was employed to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales. As presented in Table 1, all constructs achieved Cronbach's Alpha values above the recommended threshold of 0.70, ranging from 0.816 to 0.887. In addition, all corrected item-total correlation coefficients exceeded 0.30, indicating satisfactory reliability.

Table 1
Reliability of measurement scales

Construct	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Environmental Integration (ENV)	5	0.842
Social Integration (SOC)	5	0.887
Governance Integration (GOV)	5	0.816
Choice of Higher Education Institution (CHO)	4	0.851

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was subsequently conducted to evaluate construct validity. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was 0.879, exceeding the recommended minimum value of 0.60, while Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 2,186.45$, $p < 0.001$). These results confirmed the suitability of the data for factor analysis. Four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 were extracted, explaining 68.42% of the total variance. All factor loadings exceeded 0.60 with no substantial cross-loadings, demonstrating satisfactory convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement scales.

Hypothesis Testing

Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the effects of Environmental Integration (ENV), Social Integration (SOC), and Governance Integration (GOV) on students' choice of higher education institutions (CHO). The regression model was statistically significant ($F = 162.84$, $p < 0.001$), with an Adjusted R^2 of 0.615. This indicates that the three ESG dimensions jointly explained 61.5% of the variance in students' choice of higher education institutions. Furthermore, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values ranged from 1.21 to 1.56, suggesting that multicollinearity was not a concern.

Table 2
Hypothesis testing results

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	t	p	Decision
H1	ENV $\rightarrow$ CHO	0.241	4.81	<0.001	Supported
H2	SOC $\rightarrow$ CHO	0.394	7.62	<0.001	Supported
H3	GOV $\rightarrow$ CHO	0.286	5.54	<0.001	Supported

The regression results indicate that Environmental Integration significantly and positively influences students' choice of higher education institutions ($\beta = 0.241$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, H1 is supported. This finding suggests that universities communicating environmental sustainability initiatives, such as green campuses, environmental protection programs, and sustainable operations, are more attractive to prospective students.

Similarly, Social Integration has a positive and statistically significant effect on students' university choice ($\beta = 0.394$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, H2 is supported. Among the three ESG dimensions, Social Integration demonstrates the strongest influence, indicating that students place considerable importance on universities' social responsibility, student support services, community engagement, and commitment to social well-being.

The findings also reveal that Governance Integration positively affects students' choice of higher education institutions ($\beta = 0.286$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, H3 is supported. Transparent governance, ethical leadership, institutional accountability, and reliable public information strengthen students' confidence in universities and positively influence their selection decisions.

The findings confirm that all three ESG dimensions integrated into university marketing activities significantly influence high school students' choice of higher education institutions in Northern Vietnam. Among them, Social Integration exerts the strongest impact, followed by Governance Integration and Environmental Integration.

Discussion

The findings provide empirical evidence that integrating ESG into university marketing activities significantly influences high school students' choice of higher education institutions. Specifically, all three proposed hypotheses (H1, H2, and H3) were supported, demonstrating that environmental, social, and governance information communicated through university marketing contributes positively to students' university selection decisions.

The support for H1 indicates that environmental integration positively influences students' university choice. Universities that actively communicate green campus initiatives, environmental protection activities, and sustainability commitments are perceived more favorably by prospective students. This finding is consistent with [Cho et al. \(2012\)](#), who argued that stakeholders place greater trust in organizations demonstrating genuine environmental responsibility. It also aligns with [Leal Filho et al. \(2022\)](#), who emphasized that sustainability practices have become an important component of higher education development. In the Vietnamese context, the result is further supported by [Binh et al. \(2025\)](#), who found that environmental education positively shapes sustainability-related behavioral intentions among students.

The support for H2 demonstrates that social integration is the strongest predictor of university choice. This suggests that today's students are increasingly attracted to institutions that emphasize student welfare, scholarship opportunities, diversity, inclusion, community engagement, and social responsibility. The finding is consistent with [Symaco & Tee \(2019\)](#), who highlighted the growing importance of social responsibility in higher education across ASEAN countries. Similarly, [Bui et al. \(2024\)](#) argued that Vietnamese universities are strengthening their contributions to sustainable development through educational quality and social engagement. [Tien et al. \(2024\)](#) also reported that ESG initiatives positively influence the awareness and behavioral intentions of both educational providers and users in Vietnam, supporting the importance of communicating social responsibility through university marketing.

The support for H3 confirms that governance integration positively influences students' university choice. Universities that provide transparent admission information, maintain ethical governance, and demonstrate accountability are more likely to gain students' trust. This finding agrees with [Bautista-Puig et al. \(2022\)](#), who emphasized that sustainability performance and transparent institutional practices enhance university visibility and reputation. Likewise, [Stukalo & Lytvyn \(2021\)](#) suggested that governance and quality assurance are fundamental components of sustainable higher education, while [Lozano et al. \(2015\)](#) argued that effective governance is essential for successfully implementing sustainability initiatives within universities.

Overall, the findings indicate that ESG should not be viewed solely as an internal management framework but also as an effective marketing strategy that enhances institutional reputation and influences prospective students' decision-making. Universities that consistently communicate authentic environmental initiatives, meaningful social contributions, and transparent governance practices are likely to strengthen their competitiveness in student recruitment. These results contribute to the growing literature on ESG in higher education by providing empirical evidence from Vietnam and highlighting the strategic role of ESG-oriented marketing in attracting prospective university students.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of ESG integration in university marketing activities on high school students' choice of higher education institutions in Northern Vietnam. Using a quantitative approach, the study found that Environmental Integration, Social Integration, and Governance Integration all have significant positive effects on students' university choice, providing empirical support for the three proposed hypotheses.

Among the three ESG dimensions, Social Integration was identified as the strongest predictor of university choice. This finding indicates that prospective students increasingly value universities that demonstrate commitment to student welfare, community engagement, diversity, inclusion, and social responsibility. Governance Integration also plays an important role by strengthening students' trust through transparent management, ethical leadership, and institutional accountability. Although Environmental Integration has a comparatively smaller effect, it remains a significant determinant, suggesting that sustainability initiatives and green campus practices have become meaningful considerations in students' university selection decisions.

The findings extend the existing literature by demonstrating that ESG is not only an institutional management framework but also an effective marketing strategy capable of enhancing university attractiveness and influencing prospective students' decision-making. For university administrators and marketing practitioners, the results highlight the importance of integrating authentic ESG initiatives into institutional communication rather than relying

solely on traditional promotional messages. Communicating substantive achievements in environmental sustainability, social responsibility, and governance transparency can strengthen institutional reputation and improve student recruitment outcomes.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. The sample was limited to Grade 12 students in Northern Vietnam and employed convenience sampling, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the study examined only the direct effects of the three ESG dimensions without considering potential mediating or moderating variables.

Future research could expand the geographical scope to include other regions of Vietnam or conduct cross-country comparisons. Further studies may also investigate the mediating roles of university reputation, institutional trust, or perceived educational quality, as well as the moderating effects of demographic characteristics, environmental awareness, or digital marketing exposure. Such investigations would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how ESG-oriented marketing influences students' higher education choices in different educational and cultural contexts.

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