



# Reception Analysis of the 'Achieve Your Dreams with Us' Campaign Among Second-Semester Students of Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya

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DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.47134/interaction.v2i2.4667>

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Received: 03-07-2025

Accepted: 21-07-2025

Published: 31-08-2025



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**Abstract:** Intense competition among private higher education institutions (PHEIs) requires them to implement effective promotional campaigns to attract prospective students. This study examines the reception of second-semester students at Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 (UNTAG) Surabaya regarding the aspirational promise in the "Achieve Your Dreams with Us" promotional campaign. Employing a qualitative approach with reception analysis and Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding framework, data were collected through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The findings indicate that the most dominant reception position is the negotiated position. Students critically separated the slogan, which they perceived as "marketing language," and focused more on tangible evidence such as accreditation and tuition fees. They also reconstructed the meaning of "dreams" to align with their pragmatic goals (career, hobbies, self-development), while asserting that ultimate success depends on individual agency, with the university serving as a facilitator. A dominant position was found to emerge post-hoc following validation through positive real-world experiences on campus, whereas an oppositional position was absent. This study concludes that the reception of marketing messages by a young audience is not a passive process,

but rather a complex act of pragmatic validation. In this process, the credibility of each message element (verbal, visual, symbolic) is actively negotiated based on the audience's frames of reference and experiences, in which concrete proof is valued over aspirational promises.

**Keywords:** Humor, Digital Advertising, Generation Z, Consumer Attitudes, Social Media

## Introduction

The increasing number of private higher education institutions (PTS) in Indonesia has led to tighter competition in attracting prospective students. More than 500 PTS in East Java were recorded competing for almost two million school-aged residents in 2023 (Rouf et al., 2023). This figure describes a battlefield where universities compete for the same demographic group. In this hypercompetitive situation, the promotional campaign strategy of each private university becomes a crucial key to capitalizing on the large demographic opportunity.

Promotional campaigns in the context of higher education function not only to convey information about institutional advantages but also to build emotional connections with prospective students. According to Meilasari & Wahid (2020) an effective promotional

campaign depends on the accuracy of the message content, whether in terms of sentences, images, or sounds, which can fully convey excellence and be packaged according to the message intended to be captured by the communicant. In practice, many private universities use promotional campaigns with specific slogans or taglines to strengthen their institutional identity. These campaigns are designed to convey key messages that are expected to attract prospective students and build a positive public perception of the institution.

One private higher education institution that actively conducts new student admission campaigns is Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya (Untag Surabaya). This institution consistently uses the campaign "Achieve Your Dreams with Us" in various promotional materials, such as social media, posters, brochures, and banners. This campaign, initiated by the Public Relations & Protocol Unit of the Rectorate Bureau, is intended to signal to prospective students that Untag Surabaya is an institution capable of supporting students in achieving their aspirations and life goals. According to Anas in (Endang Woro Kasih et al., 2022), one of the motivations for someone to pursue education is to obtain a better life in the future, for instance, by working or becoming an entrepreneur.

Visually, this campaign often features several students who are considered to represent the campus's diversity. The message creators highlight general characteristics that society considers representations of diversity, such as talents wearing hijabs, differences in skin color among the talents, and other physical characteristics that can be seen and perceived by the audience. This is because Untag Surabaya wants to be known by the public through branding as a campus open to all backgrounds, not exclusively for certain groups or demographics. This information can be verified as the researcher is also part of the Public Relations & Protocol Unit. The researcher holds a job description position as a graphic designer, but nevertheless, upholds integrity.

From a procedural perspective, the "Achieve Your Dreams with Us" campaign was not developed based on formal discussions or special meetings involving leaders and staff. The phrase purely originated from the idea of one graphic design staff member without instruction or direction from superiors. It was then spontaneously followed by other graphic design staff. According to the originator of the idea, Mr. Abdullah, the campaign began to be intensively written on various promotional materials since the start of the 2024/2025 New Student Admission period, which was October 2023.

In promotional campaigns, the message conveyed by the institution is not always received uniformly by the audience. Each prospective student has a social, cultural, and personal background that influences how they understand and interpret the campaign message. Stuart Hall (1980), in his encoding-decoding theory, states that the message sent by the sender is not always fully interpreted by the receiver. The audience has an active role in interpreting the message based on their context and personal experiences.

According to McQuail in Andhika (2023), the encoding-decoding model introduced by Stuart Hall has become one of the most influential theoretical frameworks in understanding the relationship between media and its audience.

According to Ariya in Latifatunnisa (2023), the encoding stage refers to the message source's activity in processing ideas or notions into a message form that can be understood through various code systems. Conversely, decoding refers to the audience's ability to interpret the received message by comparing it against past experiences, the construction of meaning, and previously formed thought patterns.

In this decoding process, Hall (1980) identifies three audience positions in interpreting messages: dominant-hegemonic (full acceptance of the message), negotiated (partial acceptance of the message with some criticism or adaptation), and oppositional (rejecting or interpreting the message contrary to the sender's original intent). This highlights the importance of understanding how audiences actually interpret promotional campaigns of higher education institutions.

Unfortunately, previous research on promotional campaigns in higher education has more often focused on the effectiveness of promotional media or the relationship between promotion and an increase in the number of new students. Such studies, while important, tend to overlook the qualitative dimension of how campaign messages themselves are received, interpreted, and subjectively negotiated by the audience. The study conducted by Kurniawati (2014) for example, only examined the influence of social media use on interest in entering higher education, but did not deeply explore how institutional campaign messages are subjectively received and interpreted by students.

This gap indicates the need for more in-depth research on audience reception of institutional messages. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how 2nd-semester students of UNTAG Surabaya, who have directly experienced the new student admission process, interpret the "Achieve Your Dreams with Us" campaign they received. The selection of 2nd-semester students as informants is considered strategic. They are in a unique position: on one hand, they have just passed the phase as the target audience of the PMB campaign; on the other hand, they already have initial experience as active students. This position allows them to reflect and compare between the promises offered by the campaign and the reality they experience in the campus environment, thus making their reception richer and more profound.

## Methodology

This research primarily employs a qualitative approach. This research approach was chosen because it is relevant to the study's objective, which is to deeply understand the meaning of a campaign, rather than to measure or quantify it. Qualitative research is a method that collects data in the form of narratives, behaviors, and utterances from observed subjects. The main goal of this approach is to explore media content from the perspective of audiences from diverse backgrounds. The focus of qualitative research is on the meaning, experiences, and perspectives of individuals in their natural context, which in this case is how students interpret promotional campaign messages. This aligns with Basri's statement in Dewanto (2024) that the focus of a qualitative approach is on the process and the meaning of the results obtained.

Methodology Reception analysis explores how audiences interpret media texts, whether from electronic, internet, or print media, by emphasizing personal experiences and the audience's own perspectives (Ghassani & Nugroho in Jessica, 2023). Reception analysis falls within the interpretive-constructivist paradigm, focusing on understanding how individuals form their life realities and give meaning to those experiences (Hadi in Vio S, 2024).

According to (Widyanggari, 2021), individual interpretations of content presented through media are subjective and tend to vary among people. This variation in meaning is generally influenced by the frame of reference formed from each individual's background life experience or field of experience. Both of these aspects form a distinct mindset and also determine how a person understands, responds to, and gives meaning to the message received

The aspect of the field of experience will change along with the experiences individuals undergo, so their interpretation process of the same message becomes very dynamic and cannot be precisely predicted. Therefore, the researcher chose active 2nd-semester students of Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya as the subjects in this study, who were exposed to the "Achieve Your Dreams with Us" campaign during their registration process

The selection of 2nd-semester students is considered highly strategic because they are in a unique position. On one hand, they have just passed the phase as the campaign's target audience, and on the other hand, they already have initial experience as active students at UNTAG Surabaya. This position allows them to reflect on and compare between the "promises" offered by the campaign and the "reality" they experienced, so that the meaning given can be richer and more profound.

The primary technique in this research is focus group discussion. This method relies on data or information generated through interaction among informants, obtained from group discussions on a specific topic. The focus group discussion method offers more in-

depth data and has distinct advantages compared to other data collection methods, especially in the context of qualitative research (Prasetia, 2024). In addition, the FGD method facilitates freedom of expression for the individuals involved and allows researchers to increase their research sample size (Afiyanti, 2008).

It needs to be emphasized that this research does not aim to measure initial reception or merely test the accuracy of recall regarding campaign details. Instead, the main focus of the research is to analyze how the meaning of a promotional message is negotiated and re-validated over time after the audience directly interacts with the reality offered. Therefore, 2nd-semester students are the only ideal subject group to study.

## Results and Discussion

### Skepticism and Disregard of Verbal Slogans

When first exposed to campaign materials, the initial reaction of the majority of informants showed a high level of skepticism and a tendency to disregard the main slogan text. This indicates that as young audiences who are exposed to thousands of promotional messages daily, they have developed a mental "filter" against advertising language considered cliché. The slogan "Achieve Your Dreams with Us" was not immediately accepted as a unique or impactful message but was categorized as "just a regular promotion".

*R3: "Yeah, it's just promotion"*

*R4: "Just looked at it then scrolled again."*

These two brief statements, accompanied by laughter and agreed upon by other informants, are rich in meaning. R3's statement, "cuman sebatas promosi" (just a promotion), shows that the informant consciously places this campaign into a specific communication genre whose credibility is often doubted. This is a reflection of critical media literacy. Meanwhile, R4's statement, "dilihat habis itu di-scroll lagi" (looked at it then scrolled again), clearly illustrates audience behavior in the digital age. The message failed to "stop their fingers," indicating that its verbal message was not strong enough to attract attention amidst the sea of information on social media.

### The Power of Graphic Elements (Credibility Symbols and Inclusivity)

Although the verbal slogan was disregarded, the analysis shows that informants were highly sensitive to other elements beyond the main text (paratextual elements). Two elements that proved to be the most powerful were credibility symbols (accreditation logos) and visual messages demonstrating inclusivity. This indicates that audiences actively seek "proof" and "a sense of security" in a promotional message, which they often find not in words, but in symbols and images.

R2: " I didn't really pay attention to the words 'Achieve your dreams', instead it was 'oh, this campus is superior, you can see it from the accreditation logo.' It didn't really affect me."

This quote from R2 is a golden finding that shows a hierarchy of credibility in the audience's mind. They explicitly disregarded the aspirational message ("Achieve your dreams") and immediately shifted to what they considered "hard facts" (the "Unggul" accreditation logo). For pragmatic audiences, an accreditation logo has a much higher informative and trust value than a slogan. This indicates that encoding strategies including such credibility symbols are very effective

On the other hand, the power of visual messages proved capable of working on an emotional and identity level, even breaking down existing prejudices. The message of inclusivity encoded through the selection of diverse models was dominantly received and became one of the important considerations for the audience

R5: " Honestly, there's a bit of a story, I thought Untag was a campus specifically for non-Muslims before I saw the poster. I thought there wouldn't be anyone wearing a hijab, but it turns out there were."

Researcher: " Oh, so the choice of models has an impact?"

R5: " Yes, exactly."

This spontaneous admission from R5 is the strongest evidence of the success of visual communication in this campaign. If the verbal slogan failed to penetrate the filter of skepticism, the visual message about diversity successfully changed perceptions and broke down stereotypes. For audiences who might feel part of a minority group or have concerns about acceptance, this inclusive visual message functions as a strong personal invitation, affirming that "there is a place for you here" (as concluded by R3: "Yes, who can accept us like that").

### **Pragmatism of "Plan B" as a Framework**

The analysis shows that the dominant framework brought by the majority of informants is pragmatism. Untag Surabaya's position in their minds was not as a dreamed-of first choice from the beginning, but rather as a "Plan B" or the best alternative after they failed to get into a Public University (PTN). This background as "PTN fighters" fundamentally shaped how they searched for and evaluated information, where rational considerations were prioritized over emotional persuasion.

R9: " Yes, actually Untag was my Plan B if I got rejected from SNBT or SNBP."

This brief but concise statement from R9 represents the collective sentiment of most informants (R2, R4, R5, R8, R10, R11). This "Plan B" status is crucial because it places the informants in the position of consumers looking for solutions, not as an audience looking for inspiration. As a result, they came with a higher "shield" of skepticism and a need for

concrete evidence, which would greatly affect how they received or negotiated the campaign's "aspirational promises".

### **Rational Calculation (Benefit Comparison between Cost and Quality)**

As a consequence of the pragmatic framework, the informants actively performed careful rational calculations. They were not just looking for an alternative campus, but looking for a campus that offered the best value. Two main variables that consistently appeared in their calculations were affordability and guaranteed quality, often represented by accreditation status and study program reputation

*R5: " Sir, I also said that the accreditation is already good, it's excellent, so I chose Untag. But on the other hand, at that time my parents also told me to enroll in psychology at UTM (Universitas Trunojoyo Madura), I compared it, UTM's accreditation was C but the entry fee was 30 million, so I thought about it again..."*

This quote from R5 is a perfect example of the multi-attribute evaluation process performed by the informants. They consciously weighed several variables: UNTAG's accreditation ("unggul" - excellent) versus UTM's accreditation ("C"), as well as UNTAG's entry fee (perceived as lower) versus UTM's entry fee ("30 million"). This process shows that informants were not passive recipients of information. They were rational actors actively searching, comparing, and analyzing concrete data to maximize the "utility" of their decisions. This focus on measurable attributes explains why they were less influenced by abstract slogans later on

### **Construction of Conditional Success Meaning**

This is the core finding that defines their overall negotiation position. After validating that the campaign promises were "reasonable" and "not exaggerated," the informants collectively added one important condition or clause: ultimate success is not guaranteed by the university, but rather depends on individual effort. They accepted UNTAG as a facilitator but refused to surrender their personal responsibility to the institution.

*R3: "(Besides that) If I won't say it's definitely possible (realistic) because it depends on each individual, but I will say that at Untag you will be helped..."*

*R2: " It also depends on the person, but the campus has already facilitated it, it's just up to us whether we go through it well or not."*

This dialogue between R3 and R2 is the culmination of the reception analysis. It is a moment of synthesis in the dialectic between promise and reality. They are neither in a Dominant position ("Definitely can succeed at UNTAG!") nor an Oppositional position ("It's impossible to succeed at UNTAG!"). Instead, they created a more complex third position: "UNTAG provides the path and the tools, but I have to walk and build it myself". This shows

a mature interpretation, where they acknowledge the institution's role without denying their personal responsibility. This is the essence of the negotiation position.

## Conclusion

The students' interpretation of the "Achieve Your Dreams with Us" campaign is multi-layered and not singular. Firstly, on a superficial level, the verbal slogan "Achieve Your Dreams with Us" is perceived as common "marketing language" and does not have a strong direct impact. The informants showed initial skepticism and tended to disregard the slogan as cliché. Secondly, even though the verbal slogan was overlooked, paratextual elements were strongly interpreted. The "Unggul" (Excellent) accreditation logo was understood as a symbol of credibility and concrete proof, while the diverse visual representation of students was interpreted as a message of inclusivity and a sense of security. Thirdly, when prompted for deeper meaning, the abstract concept of "Dreams" was actively reconstructed into pragmatic and personal goals. The meaning of "dreams" was translated into hopes for career prospects, internship opportunities, self-development through Student Activity Units (UKM), and the achievement of personal targets. The phrase "with Us" was interpreted as a promise of facilitation from the campus through a structured curriculum, quality teaching, and a supportive environment.

Addressing the second research question, among Stuart Hall's three decoding positions, it was found that the negotiated position was the most dominant among the informants. This negotiation occurred in three main ways: (a) they accepted information on campus while setting aside the persuasive language of the slogan; they adapted the meaning of "dreams" to fit their personal context and expectations; and (c) they added the crucial condition that ultimate success depends on individual agency and effort, where the campus only acts as a facilitator.

Additionally, a dominant position was also found, but its appearance was post-hoc. This means that full acceptance of the campaign's promise only occurred after students validated that promise with positive real-world experiences during two semesters on campus. Meanwhile, an oppositional position was not found at all, indicating that, in general, there was no fundamental rejection or negative experience that completely negated the campaign's promises.

Addressing the third research question, the diversity of meanings and the dominance of the negotiated position are underpinned by several key factors. The most fundamental factor is the informants' pragmatic context as "PTN fighters," which makes them rational consumers of education. Further analysis shows that these pragmatic considerations, especially regarding cost, are universal and not tied to a single economic class carefully calculate costs and benefits.

The interesting finding regarding the universality of pragmatic considerations among informants, which is not tied to their economic background, can be theoretically explained through the framework of High-Involvement Decision-Making Theory. This theory states that when an individual is faced with a decision that carries high risk and significant personal importance—such as choosing a university—they will naturally enter a mode of information processing that is more careful, in-depth, and rational.

The decision to choose a university is a classic example of a high-involvement decision; informants will undertake in-depth risk calculations because it involves significant financial investment, time, and future expectations for all families, regardless of their economic class. Therefore, it is not surprising that informants from both upper-middle and lower-middle economic backgrounds exhibited similar patterns of cost-benefit calculation. This universality of pragmatic attitude is not an anomaly, but rather a logical response predicted by consumer behavior theory when audiences are confronted with highly important and long-term impactful decisions.

However, family social background (as a proxy for cultural capital) proved to influence how they navigated choices and built trust. Students who are not first-generation tend to rely on 'inherited trust' from their families (like R3, whose father is an alumni), while first-generation students (like R5) have to build their own trust through more complex multi-attribute research. These factors, coupled with critical media literacy and unique personal experiences (such as a gap year or family pressure), collectively form a frame of reference that makes them very active audiences in interpreting the university's campaign promises.

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