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Ethical and Privacy Challenges in Using AI and Social Media for Educational Marketing

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Abstract

The integration of artificial intelligence and social media into educational marketing has transformed student recruitment strategies by enabling highly personalized outreach and data-driven decision-making. These advancements have introduced significant ethical and privacy concerns, particularly regarding algorithmic bias, surveillance capitalism, and the potential marginalization of underrepresented groups. This chapter critically examines the ethical implications of AI-powered recruitment algorithms and the extent of socio-demographic bias embedded in targeted advertising. It explores the inherent trade-offs between efficiency and fairness in algorithmic performance, while highlighting the need for inclusive data practices and transparent system design. Through a multi-dimensional analysis, the chapter provides actionable policy recommendations that emphasize responsible data governance, algorithmic accountability, and equitable student engagement. By advocating for ethically aligned AI in educational marketing, the chapter contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable, inclusive, and privacy-conscious digital transformation in higher education.

Keywords: algorithmic bias, educational marketing, student recruitment, data ethics, targeted advertising, AI governance

Introduction

The landscape of higher education marketing has undergone a fundamental transformation with the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and social media technologies [1]. Institutions now leverage complex algorithms to identify, engage, and attract prospective students, optimizing campaigns through predictive analytics and real-time data processing [2]. AI-powered systems assess behavioral patterns, academic records, geolocation data, and online interactions to tailor messages that resonate with individual preferences and aspirations [3]. Simultaneously, social media platforms offer granular targeting tools that enable institutions to disseminate marketing content to highly specific demographic segments. While these technological advancements enhance the reach and efficiency of recruitment strategies, they also raise critical ethical concerns about consent, transparency, and the commodification of student data [4]. The reliance on automated systems introduces the risk of dehumanizing recruitment practices, where students are treated as data points rather than individuals with diverse educational needs and backgrounds [5].

Algorithmic decision-making in educational marketing presents new challenges related to bias and fairness [6]. Recruitment algorithms trained on historical data are susceptible to reproducing existing social inequalities by favoring profiles that align with previous enrollment trends [7]. This results in a self-reinforcing cycle that can marginalize underrepresented groups, including students from low-income communities, rural regions, or minority ethnic backgrounds [8]. Many AI systems operate as "black boxes," with limited transparency into how decisions are made or what factors are weighted most heavily [9]. The opacity of these systems makes it difficult for institutions to detect or correct discriminatory patterns, and it deprives students of the opportunity to understand how their data is used to influence their educational opportunities. In the absence of ethical oversight, these technologies risk undermining the core values of access, equity, and inclusion in higher education [10].

Social media platforms add another layer of complexity to the ethical landscape of student marketing [11]. The business model of these platforms is predicated on extensive data collection and behavioral surveillance, enabling highly personalized advertising but also raising significant privacy concerns [12]. Institutions that utilize social media for recruitment may unwittingly participate in surveillance capitalism, leveraging student data without fully understanding the implications or the consent framework under which it was collected [13]. The aggregation of data across platforms can reveal sensitive information about prospective students, including their financial status, mental health, or political beliefs [14]. Such insights, when used for targeted advertising, may lead to invasive or exploitative practices that compromise student autonomy. Students often remain unaware of how their digital footprints contribute to the marketing messages they receive, highlighting a critical need for transparency and ethical accountability in data use [15].

The tension between technological efficiency and ethical responsibility is at the heart of the current discourse on AI and social media in education [16]. While institutions seek to optimize enrollment numbers and resource allocation through data-driven strategies, they must also contend with the societal and regulatory expectations surrounding ethical data practices [17]. Striking a balance between personalization and privacy, or between performance and fairness, is a complex undertaking that requires intentional design and continuous evaluation [18]. Institutions must move beyond compliance-based approaches and adopt frameworks that embed ethical principles into every stage of AI and marketing system development [19]. This includes careful scrutiny of training datasets, bias mitigation strategies, stakeholder engagement, and robust governance mechanisms to ensure that these systems serve all students equitably [20].