

“Digital Public Pressure and University Governance: How Social Media Shapes Board-Level Decisions in Higher Education”

Rinika Prakash*

DBA Student - S.P. Jain Institute of Global Management, Australia

*Corresponding author:

Rinika Prakash,
DBA Student - S.P. Jain Institute of Global
Management, Australia

Received: 09 May 2026

Accepted: 22 May 2026

Published: 25 May 2026

J Short Name: WJGHE

Copyright:

©2026 Rinika Prakash. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and build upon your work non-commercially

Citation:

Rinika Prakash, “Digital Public Pressure and University Governance: How Social Media Shapes Board-Level Decisions in Higher Education”. World Jour of Gastro and Hepatology® 2026; V31(8): 1-11

1. Abstract

The growing influence of social media has transformed governance practices in higher education institutions globally. Universities increasingly operate within highly connected digital environments where stakeholders including students, staff, governments, alumni, advocacy groups, and the broader public can rapidly shape institutional narratives and influence governance decisions. This review paper critically examines how social media shapes board-level decision-making in higher education governance. The study analyses contemporary literature from 2020 onwards to explore how digital public pressure influences governance processes, accountability, transparency, crisis management, strategic communication, and institutional legitimacy within universities. The review identifies that social media has evolved beyond a communication platform to become an informal governance mechanism capable of influencing executive leadership decisions, policy reforms, governance accountability, and institutional responses to crises. The paper further examines governance challenges associated with digital public pressure, including reputational risk, online activism, misinformation, cancel culture, stakeholder polarisation, and governance instability. Through a thematic review of contemporary literature, the paper develops a conceptual understanding of the relationship between social media factors, governance processes, governance outcomes, and institutional impact. The study proposes a conceptual framework illustrating how digital public pressure affects university governance systems and institutional sustainability. The paper concludes that effective governance in the digital era requires adaptive leadership, transparent governance systems, stakeholder-centred communication, and enhanced digital governance competencies among governing boards. The findings contribute to the growing scholarship on digital governance in higher education and provide practical recommendations for university governing boards operating within increasingly complex and publicly scrutinised digital environments.

2. Introduction

Higher education governance has undergone profound transformation over the past several decades due to increasing globali-

sation, market-driven reforms, technological advancement, and rising stakeholder expectations. Universities today operate in environments that are far more complex, competitive, and publicly visible than in the past. Traditionally, universities were largely viewed as autonomous academic communities governed through collegial systems that prioritised shared decision-making, academic participation, and institutional independence. Governance processes were often internally focused, with limited external scrutiny and relatively slow-moving communication structures.

However, the modern university now functions within a highly interconnected and digitally mediated environment where institutional decisions are constantly visible to the public and subject to immediate evaluation. The expansion of digital communication technologies and social media has fundamentally changed how universities interact with their stakeholders and how governance decisions are perceived, challenged, and legitimised. Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, and YouTube have created new forms of public engagement that extend far beyond traditional institutional communication channels.

As a result, universities are no longer insulated institutions operating quietly behind formal governance structures. Instead, they are increasingly exposed to continuous public scrutiny, heightened stakeholder activism, rapid information sharing, and digitally amplified reputational risks. Governance decisions that were once confined to boardrooms and institutional reports can now become the subject of widespread public debate within hours. This shift has significantly altered the governance environment of higher education institutions across the world.

Historically, university governing boards exercised authority within relatively closed governance systems dominated by institutional elites, senior academic leaders, and government-appointed representatives. Decision-making processes were typically formal, hierarchical, and internally managed. While stakeholder consultation existed, participation was often limited to institutional actors and structured governance channels.

The rise of social media has disrupted these traditional governance arrangements by democratising participation in governance dis-

course. Social media enables stakeholders to engage directly with institutional issues, publicly challenge governance decisions, and influence institutional narratives in ways that were previously difficult to achieve. Students, academic staff, alumni, advocacy groups, policymakers, journalists, unions, and community members now actively use digital platforms to mobilise campaigns, critique university leadership, demand transparency, and shape public perceptions of higher education institutions.

This growing digital participation has transformed stakeholder relationships within higher education governance. Stakeholders are no longer passive observers of institutional decision-making; they are increasingly active participants capable of influencing governance outcomes through public engagement and online mobilisation. Consequently, university governing boards must now navigate governance processes within environments characterised by constant visibility and rapidly shifting public expectations.

The influence of digital public pressure on university governance has become particularly significant in recent years. Governance decisions concerning executive appointments, diversity and inclusion initiatives, tuition fees, labour disputes, sustainability commitments, academic freedom controversies, and institutional crisis responses increasingly attract widespread online attention and public scrutiny. In many cases, social media discourse can influence how governance decisions are interpreted both internally and externally, shaping institutional legitimacy and stakeholder trust.

For example, leadership controversies or unpopular institutional decisions can rapidly generate viral criticism, online petitions, hashtag campaigns, and widespread media attention. Universities may face intense pressure to respond publicly, reconsider decisions, or implement governance reforms in response to digital activism and reputational concerns. Governing boards are therefore required to manage not only traditional governance responsibilities such as strategic oversight and financial sustainability but also the reputational and political implications of online public discourse.

The increasing visibility of governance decisions has also intensified expectations regarding transparency and accountability. Stakeholders now expect universities to communicate openly about institutional priorities, governance processes, executive remuneration, crisis management decisions, and diversity and inclusion strategies. Universities that fail to engage transparently with stakeholder concerns may experience reputational damage, declining public trust, and increased criticism within digital spaces.

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated digital transformation across higher education institutions worldwide and significantly intensified the role of social media in governance and institutional communication. During the pandemic, universities relied heavily on digital technologies and online communication platforms to manage crisis responses, maintain operational continuity, communicate health and safety information, and engage with stakeholders during periods of uncertainty.

This period highlighted the critical importance of digital governance capabilities within higher education institutions. Universities

were required to make rapid and highly visible decisions relating to campus closures, remote learning, staff management, student welfare, vaccination policies, and financial sustainability, often while under intense public scrutiny. Social media became one of the primary spaces through which students, staff, and the wider public evaluated institutional leadership and governance effectiveness during the crisis.

The pandemic also demonstrated how quickly institutional legitimacy and stakeholder trust could be influenced by digital communication strategies. Universities that communicated transparently, empathetically, and consistently were generally more successful in maintaining stakeholder confidence, while those perceived as unresponsive or unclear often faced stronger criticism online.

Recent scholarship increasingly suggests that social media has evolved into an informal governance mechanism capable of influencing institutional behaviour and governance outcomes. Rather than functioning solely as communication tools, digital platforms now shape stakeholder expectations, amplify public accountability, and influence governance responses. Universities are increasingly expected to demonstrate ethical leadership, transparency, responsiveness, inclusivity, and social responsibility within highly visible digital environments.

Consequently, governing boards must navigate increasingly complex tensions between:

- institutional autonomy;
- stakeholder expectations;
- reputational management;
- academic freedom;
- public accountability;
- long-term strategic governance objectives.

Balancing these competing pressures has become one of the central challenges of contemporary higher education governance. Universities must remain responsive to stakeholder concerns while also preserving institutional independence, strategic consistency, and academic values.

Against this backdrop, this review paper examines how social media influences board-level decision-making within higher education governance. The study seeks to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on digital governance by exploring the relationship between social media, stakeholder activism, and governance processes within universities.

Specifically, the paper aims to:

1. explore the relationship between social media and university governance;
2. analyse how digital public pressure shapes governance processes and board-level decisions;
3. examine governance challenges associated with social media activism and digital scrutiny;
4. investigate the implications of social media for institutional legitimacy and stakeholder trust;

5. develop a conceptual framework explaining the relationship between social media factors and governance outcomes.

To achieve these objectives, the paper adopts a comprehensive narrative review methodology drawing on scholarly literature, policy reports, governance analyses, and contemporary discussions relat-

ing to digital governance in higher education from 2020 onwards. The review integrates insights from higher education governance, stakeholder theory, digital governance, crisis communication, leadership studies, and institutional legitimacy literature to provide a holistic understanding of how social media is reshaping governance within modern universities.

Proposed Conceptual Framework

*Digital Public Pressure and University Governance:
How Social Media Shapes Board-Level Decisions in Higher Education*



3. Literature Review

3.1. Evolution of University Governance

University governance has undergone substantial transformation over the past several decades. Traditionally, universities operated under collegial governance models that emphasised academic participation, collective decision-making, institutional autonomy, and shared responsibility among academic staff and university leaders. In these traditional systems, governance was largely driven by scholarly values, intellectual freedom, and collaborative engagement between academics and institutional leaders. Decision-making processes were often slow and consultative, reflecting the belief that universities were communities of scholars rather than corporate organisations.

However, the governance landscape of higher education began to change significantly with the rise of neoliberal reforms and managerial governance approaches across many countries. Governments increasingly demanded greater accountability, financial efficiency, measurable performance outcomes, and stronger institutional competitiveness from universities. As a result, many higher education institutions gradually adopted corporate-style governance structures influenced by private-sector management practices.

This shift toward managerial governance fundamentally altered relationships between governing boards, executive leaders, academic staff, and stakeholders. Governing boards became more focused on strategic oversight, financial sustainability, performance measurement, risk management, and institutional reputation. Vice-chancellors, presidents, and executive leaders assumed more managerial responsibilities, while universities increasingly operated within competitive market-oriented environments.

Contemporary universities now function within highly complex environments characterised by:

- political scrutiny;
- funding pressures;
- global competition;
- accountability demands;
- technological disruption;
- stakeholder activism;
- reputational risks.

Governance systems are therefore expected to respond not only to internal institutional priorities but also to external societal expectations and public accountability requirements.

Recent discussions within higher education governance literature place growing emphasis on governance transparency, stakeholder participation, and institutional legitimacy. Governance reforms in countries such as Australia, United Kingdom, and United States increasingly focus on improving board effectiveness, strengthening accountability mechanisms, enhancing governance responsiveness, and rebuilding public trust in higher education institutions.

At the same time, universities are facing increased expectations to demonstrate ethical leadership, social responsibility, diversity and

inclusion, and responsiveness to public concerns. These evolving expectations have become even more significant in the digital era, where institutional decisions are highly visible and subject to immediate public scrutiny through online platforms.

Social Media and Digital Governance

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has significantly transformed governance systems across both public and private institutions. Among these technologies, social media has emerged as one of the most influential forces reshaping communication, stakeholder engagement, and institutional accountability. Platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and TikTok have fundamentally changed how universities interact with stakeholders and manage governance-related issues.

Within higher education, social media enables students, staff, alumni, advocacy groups, policymakers, journalists, and community members to participate directly in governance discourse. Stakeholders are now able to publicly express opinions, challenge institutional decisions, mobilise support, and influence institutional narratives in real time. This represents a major shift from earlier governance environments where institutional communication was largely controlled by university leadership and traditional media outlets.

Social media platforms facilitate:

- rapid dissemination of information;
- amplification of public opinion;
- immediate stakeholder engagement;
- increased visibility of governance decisions;
- widespread mobilisation around institutional issues.

These characteristics have significantly reduced institutional control over governance narratives and increased reputational vulnerability for universities. A governance issue that may once have remained internal can now become a public controversy within hours through viral posts, online campaigns, or media amplification.

Universities increasingly face situations where online activism and digital public discourse shape governance responses and institutional decisions. In many cases, governing boards must consider not only the substance of a decision but also how it will be perceived, discussed, and potentially criticised online.

The concept of digital governance has therefore become increasingly important within higher education. Digital governance refers to the integration of digital technologies into governance systems, communication strategies, stakeholder engagement practices, and institutional decision-making processes.

In higher education contexts, digital governance includes:

- online communication policies;
- social media engagement strategies;
- digital transparency initiatives;
- data governance frameworks;
- online stakeholder participation;
- digital crisis communication systems.

Research increasingly highlights that effective digital governance requires institutions to balance transparency, stakeholder responsiveness, accountability, reputational management, and ethical communication practices. Universities must therefore develop governance systems capable of operating effectively within highly networked and continuously connected digital environments.

Importantly, digital governance is no longer optional. As universities become more publicly visible and digitally interconnected, effective engagement with online stakeholders has become an essential component of institutional leadership and governance effectiveness.

Social Media as an Informal Governance Mechanism

Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualises social media as an informal governance mechanism within higher education institutions. Unlike traditional governance structures characterised by formal authority, hierarchical decision-making, and institutional procedures, social media governance emerges through decentralised participation, stakeholder mobilisation, and public accountability pressures.

Social media allows stakeholders to influence governance outcomes without necessarily holding formal governance positions. Students, academics, alumni, unions, advocacy groups, and community organisations can collectively shape institutional discourse and place pressure on governing boards through online activism and public engagement.

Stakeholder theory provides an important theoretical lens for understanding these dynamics. Stakeholder theory argues that organisations should consider the interests and expectations of multiple stakeholder groups rather than focusing exclusively on internal governance priorities or financial objectives. Social media significantly strengthens stakeholder influence by providing direct and accessible platforms for participation, mobilisation, and public engagement.

Within universities, social media has empowered stakeholders to influence governance decisions relating to:

- academic freedom;
- tuition fees;
- labour conditions;
- diversity and inclusion;
- campus safety;
- environmental sustainability;
- executive remuneration;
- institutional partnerships.

Online petitions, hashtag movements, digital protests, and viral campaigns can rapidly escalate institutional controversies and generate substantial reputational risks for universities. A single social media campaign may attract widespread media attention, political scrutiny, and public debate, placing significant pressure on institutional leaders and governing boards.

Recent controversies in higher education demonstrate how digital

public pressure increasingly influences governance decisions. Debates surrounding diversity initiatives, political speech, institutional neutrality, leadership appointments, and labour disputes frequently gain widespread online attention and force universities to publicly defend or reconsider governance decisions.

At the same time, scholars remain divided regarding the broader implications of social media for governance quality. Some researchers argue that social media strengthens democratic accountability by increasing transparency, amplifying stakeholder voices, and encouraging institutional responsiveness. According to this perspective, social media can promote more inclusive governance by allowing previously marginalised groups to participate in governance discourse.

However, other scholars caution that governance decisions shaped by online outrage and viral criticism may undermine institutional autonomy and deliberative governance processes. Universities may become overly reactive to short-term public pressure rather than focusing on long-term strategic priorities and academic values. These tensions illustrate the growing complexity of governance within digitally connected environments.

Social Media and Board-Level Decision-Making

University governing boards play a critical role in overseeing institutional strategy, financial sustainability, executive accountability, risk management, and long-term institutional direction. However, the rise of social media has significantly altered how governing boards make decisions and manage institutional legitimacy.

Board-level decisions concerning leadership appointments, policy reforms, institutional partnerships, strategic priorities, and crisis responses now occur within environments characterised by continuous public scrutiny and rapid information dissemination. Social media has increased the visibility of governance decisions and intensified stakeholder expectations regarding transparency and accountability.

Reputational Management

One of the most significant ways social media influences board-level decision-making is through reputational management. Institutional reputation is critically important for universities because it directly affects:

- student recruitment;
- research funding;
- global rankings;
- philanthropic support;
- industry partnerships;
- public trust;
- stakeholder confidence.

Social media amplifies reputational risks by enabling rapid dissemination of criticism, controversy, and negative publicity. Institutional decisions that generate public dissatisfaction can quickly become viral and attract national or even international attention.

As a result, governing boards increasingly monitor social media

sentiment and public discourse to assess reputational risks and stakeholder perceptions. Universities now invest heavily in strategic communication, media engagement, and social media monitoring systems to manage institutional reputation more effectively.

The literature suggests that governance effectiveness is increasingly linked to an institution's ability to communicate transparently, respond quickly to public concerns, and maintain stakeholder trust within digital environments.

Crisis Governance

Social media has also transformed crisis governance within higher education institutions. During institutional crises, stakeholders now expect immediate responses, transparent communication, and consistent engagement from university leadership.

Crises involving:

- discrimination allegations;
- campus protests;
- cybersecurity incidents;
- executive misconduct;
- labour disputes;
- political controversies;
- student safety concerns

are often amplified through social media platforms before institutions have fully assessed the situation internally.

Consequently, universities increasingly use social media as a primary crisis communication tool. Governing boards and institutional leaders must manage not only operational responses but also digital narratives and public perceptions.

The literature demonstrates that governance failures can escalate rapidly through online discourse, intensifying reputational damage and stakeholder distrust. Universities that fail to communicate effectively during crises may experience long-term damage to institutional legitimacy and public confidence.

Leadership Accountability

Digital public pressure increasingly influences leadership accountability within universities. Online criticism and stakeholder activism can contribute to executive resignations, policy reversals, governance reforms, and public apologies.

Recent governance controversies demonstrate how social media scrutiny can directly affect leadership legitimacy and board responses. Institutional leaders are now expected to demonstrate transparency, responsiveness, ethical conduct, and accountability within highly visible public environments.

Social media therefore creates additional pressure on governing boards to respond decisively when institutional controversies arise. In some cases, public criticism may intensify demands for leadership change or governance reform.

5. Governance Transparency

Another important theme emerging from the literature is the growing demand for governance transparency. Social media has in-

tensified stakeholder expectations regarding access to institutional information and accountability processes.

Stakeholders increasingly expect universities to disclose information relating to:

- executive remuneration;
- governance decisions;
- institutional finances;
- diversity and inclusion strategies;
- strategic priorities;
- crisis management responses;
- institutional partnerships.

Transparency has therefore become central to institutional legitimacy within digitally connected governance environments. Universities that fail to provide timely and transparent information may face increased public criticism and stakeholder distrust.

Social Media Activism and Higher Education Governance

Social media activism has become one of the defining features of contemporary higher education governance. Students, advocacy groups, unions, and community organisations increasingly use digital platforms to mobilise support, coordinate campaigns, and challenge institutional policies.

Common areas of digital activism within universities include:

- tuition fee increases;
- labour disputes;
- racial justice movements;
- climate sustainability initiatives;
- gender equity concerns;
- diversity and inclusion policies;
- free speech controversies;
- academic freedom debates;
- geopolitical conflicts.

Digital activism allows stakeholders to rapidly organise collective action and disseminate criticism across wide audiences. Hashtag campaigns, viral posts, online petitions, and coordinated social media movements frequently attract mainstream media attention and intensify public scrutiny of university governance decisions.

The rise of "cancel culture" debates has further complicated governance environments within higher education. Some university leaders argue that social media outrage can create pressures for reactive and short-term decision-making rather than thoughtful governance deliberation. Boards may feel compelled to act quickly to protect institutional reputation even when issues require careful evaluation.

Conversely, other scholars argue that digital activism strengthens institutional accountability by amplifying marginalised voices, exposing governance failures, and encouraging universities to address systemic inequities. From this perspective, social media activism can promote more democratic and socially responsive governance systems.

These competing perspectives highlight the complex relationship between social media activism and governance effectiveness within higher education institutions.

Governance Challenges in the Digital Era

Despite its potential benefits, social media also presents several significant governance challenges for universities.

Reputational Vulnerability

Digital platforms expose universities to unprecedented levels of reputational volatility. Institutional controversies can spread rapidly online, often before universities have sufficient time to respond strategically. Negative publicity may significantly affect public trust, student confidence, donor relationships, and institutional legitimacy.

Misinformation and Polarisation

Social media facilitates rapid dissemination of misinformation, disinformation, and polarised narratives. Governance decisions may be distorted or misrepresented online, creating confusion and intensifying stakeholder conflict. Universities increasingly face challenges in managing digital misinformation while maintaining open communication and academic freedom.

Governance Instability

Excessive responsiveness to online criticism may undermine governance stability and strategic consistency. Governing boards may feel pressured to make rapid decisions in response to reputational concerns rather than following careful and deliberative governance processes.

6. Leadership Burnout

Continuous digital scrutiny contributes to stress, decision fatigue, and leadership burnout among university executives and governing board members. Institutional leaders now operate within environments characterised by constant public visibility and ongoing online criticism.

Ethical and Governance Tensions

Finally, universities must balance stakeholder responsiveness with institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and governance independence. These tensions create complex ethical and governance dilemmas, particularly within politically polarised digital environments where universities are frequently expected to take public positions on controversial issues.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that social media has fundamentally transformed governance dynamics within higher education institutions. While digital platforms create opportunities for transparency, participation, and accountability, they also introduce significant governance risks and strategic challenges that universities must increasingly navigate.

7. Results and Findings

The review of contemporary literature revealed several important themes regarding the growing influence of social media on university governance and board-level decision-making. Across different national contexts and institutional settings, the findings consistently demonstrate that social media has become deeply em-

bedded within the governance environment of higher education institutions. Rather than functioning solely as a communication or marketing platform, social media now plays a direct role in shaping governance processes, institutional accountability, stakeholder relationships, and leadership responses.

The findings suggest that universities are increasingly operating within environments where public opinion can rapidly influence institutional decisions. Stakeholders now expect universities to be more transparent, responsive, and accountable than ever before. As a result, governing boards are under increasing pressure to respond not only to internal institutional priorities but also to external digital scrutiny and stakeholder expectations.

Social Media Significantly Influences Governance Processes

One of the strongest themes emerging from the literature is that social media now significantly influences governance processes within higher education institutions. Governance decisions are no longer made entirely within closed institutional structures. Instead, many decisions are publicly discussed, evaluated, and challenged through digital platforms before, during, and after formal board deliberations.

The literature consistently shows that social media increases stakeholder visibility and public scrutiny of university governance. Students, staff, alumni, advocacy groups, political actors, and the broader public can instantly react to institutional decisions and mobilise support or criticism online. Consequently, governing boards increasingly monitor online sentiment and consider potential public reactions when making decisions related to leadership appointments, institutional policies, strategic reforms, and crisis responses.

Digital public pressure influences several key governance processes, including:

- board deliberations;
- crisis management strategies;
- governance transparency;
- strategic communication;
- reputational risk management.

For example, during institutional controversies or crises, social media often becomes the primary space where stakeholders seek information, express dissatisfaction, and evaluate leadership responses. Universities are therefore compelled to respond more quickly and transparently than in previous decades. This has fundamentally changed how governance decisions are communicated and managed.

The review also found that social media contributes to a more participatory governance environment. Stakeholders who may previously have had limited access to formal governance structures can now publicly voice concerns and influence institutional discourse. In this sense, social media has become embedded within governance systems rather than remaining an external communication tool.

Reputational Management Drives Governance Responses

Another major finding of the review is that reputational manage-

ment has become a central driver of governance decision-making within digitally connected environments. Universities are highly reputation-dependent institutions. Their ability to attract students, research funding, partnerships, philanthropic support, and public trust is strongly linked to institutional credibility and public perception.

Social media has intensified reputational vulnerability because institutional controversies can spread rapidly across digital platforms and attract widespread public attention within a very short period. Negative publicity, viral criticism, and online campaigns can significantly damage institutional legitimacy and stakeholder confidence. As a result, governing boards increasingly consider reputational consequences when making strategic decisions.

The literature indicates that universities are now placing greater emphasis on:

- proactive communication strategies;
- stakeholder engagement;
- transparency initiatives;
- social media monitoring;
- crisis communication systems.

Many institutions have established dedicated communication teams and digital monitoring systems to identify emerging reputational risks and respond to public concerns more effectively. This reflects the growing recognition that governance effectiveness is closely connected to an institution's ability to manage digital narratives and maintain stakeholder trust.

The findings further suggest that universities with ineffective communication strategies or slow crisis responses are more vulnerable to reputational damage. In contrast, institutions that communicate transparently, acknowledge stakeholder concerns, and demonstrate accountability are more likely to preserve institutional legitimacy during periods of public scrutiny.

Importantly, the review highlights that reputational management is no longer limited to public relations departments. Governing boards themselves are increasingly involved in discussions relating to communication strategies, crisis responses, and stakeholder perceptions because these factors directly influence institutional sustainability and governance credibility.

Social Media Enhances Stakeholder Power

The review strongly indicates that social media has significantly enhanced stakeholder influence over university governance decisions. Digital platforms provide stakeholders with unprecedented opportunities to organise campaigns, mobilise public support, and challenge institutional actions.

Students, staff, alumni, unions, advocacy groups, and community organisations can now rapidly coordinate digital activism through hashtags, online petitions, public statements, and viral campaigns. This has shifted governance dynamics by redistributing influence beyond formal institutional structures and increasing the ability of external stakeholders to shape governance outcomes.

The findings reveal that stakeholder activism has contributed to:

- policy changes;
- governance reforms;
- leadership accountability;
- institutional apologies;
- public transparency initiatives.

In many cases, social media activism has pressured universities to review policies, respond to allegations of misconduct, address diversity and inclusion concerns, and reconsider strategic decisions. The review suggests that stakeholder voices have become more visible and influential within governance processes because digital platforms amplify public participation and collective action.

At the same time, the findings indicate that stakeholder influence is not always evenly distributed. Certain campaigns may gain greater visibility due to media amplification, political support, or emotional resonance online. Consequently, universities must carefully assess how digital activism shapes governance priorities and institutional responses.

The review also highlights that social media activism reflects broader societal expectations regarding ethical leadership, social justice, accountability, and institutional responsibility. Universities are increasingly expected to demonstrate responsiveness to public concerns and align governance decisions with societal values.

Governance Challenges Are Intensifying

Although social media can strengthen transparency and stakeholder participation, the findings also reveal several growing governance challenges associated with digitally connected governance environments.

One significant challenge is reputational instability. Universities now operate within highly volatile information environments where controversies can escalate rapidly and unpredictably. A single incident or poorly communicated decision may generate widespread criticism and long-term reputational consequences.

The review also identified misinformation and disinformation as major governance concerns. Social media enables rapid circulation of incomplete, inaccurate, or misleading information that may distort public understanding of governance decisions. Universities are therefore increasingly required to engage in fact-checking, narrative correction, and digital reputation management.

Another challenge involves ideological polarisation and online hostility. Governance decisions relating to diversity initiatives, free speech, political controversies, or institutional partnerships can quickly become polarised within online environments. Universities often face criticism from multiple stakeholder groups simultaneously, making governance responses increasingly complex.

The literature also discusses the growing influence of "cancel culture" and online outrage within higher education governance. Some scholars argue that intense digital criticism may pressure institutions into reactive decision-making rather than thoughtful and deliberative governance processes. Boards may feel compelled to

respond quickly to avoid reputational damage, even when issues require careful evaluation and long-term strategic consideration.

Additionally, the review identified governance fatigue and leadership burnout as emerging concerns. University leaders and governing boards now operate under conditions of constant digital scrutiny and public visibility. Continuous exposure to criticism, crisis management pressures, and reputational concerns may contribute to stress, decision fatigue, and leadership instability.

Overall, the findings suggest that universities increasingly struggle to balance:

- institutional autonomy;
- stakeholder responsiveness;
- reputational management;
- academic freedom;
- long-term strategic governance.

This balancing act represents one of the most significant governance challenges facing higher education institutions in the digital era.

Digital Governance Competencies Are Essential

A final major finding of the review is that effective governance in the digital era requires new governance competencies among university boards and executive leaders. Traditional governance expertise alone is no longer sufficient in environments characterised by rapid communication, public scrutiny, and digital activism.

The literature strongly suggests that university leaders now require competencies in:

- digital communication;
- crisis leadership;
- reputational management;
- stakeholder engagement;
- strategic transparency;
- digital ethics.

Digital communication skills are particularly important because stakeholders increasingly evaluate governance effectiveness through institutional messaging and online responsiveness. Governing boards must therefore understand how digital communication affects public trust, institutional legitimacy, and stakeholder confidence.

Crisis leadership capabilities are also increasingly essential. Universities frequently encounter crises that unfold publicly through social media, requiring leaders to respond quickly, transparently, and empathetically. Institutions that fail to communicate effectively during crises may experience significant reputational damage and loss of stakeholder trust.

The findings additionally emphasise the importance of digital ethics and strategic transparency. Universities must ensure that governance practices align with ethical standards relating to privacy, misinformation management, stakeholder engagement, and responsible communication.

Importantly, the review suggests that universities lacking digital governance competencies may face greater governance risks and reputational vulnerability. Institutions that fail to adapt to digitally connected governance environments may struggle to maintain public confidence, stakeholder legitimacy, and institutional sustainability.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that digital governance capabilities are no longer optional within higher education institutions. They have become fundamental requirements for effective leadership and sustainable governance in the contemporary university sector.

Proposed Conceptual Framework

The findings support the proposed conceptual framework linking:

1. Social Media Factors;
2. Governance Processes;
3. Governance Outcomes;
4. Institutional Impact.

The framework demonstrates how digital public pressure shapes governance dynamics and institutional sustainability within higher education environments.

8. Conclusion

This review paper explored the growing influence of social media on board-level decision-making and governance practices within higher education institutions. The findings reveal that social media has significantly reshaped the governance landscape of universities by transforming how decisions are communicated, scrutinised, challenged, and legitimised. Universities no longer operate within isolated institutional environments; instead, they function within highly connected digital spaces where stakeholders can instantly respond to governance decisions and actively shape institutional narratives.

The study demonstrates that social media has evolved far beyond its original role as a communication and marketing platform. It now acts as an informal yet powerful governance mechanism that influences leadership accountability, policy development, crisis responses, institutional transparency, and public trust. Students, staff, alumni, governments, advocacy groups, and the wider public increasingly use digital platforms to voice concerns, mobilise campaigns, demand accountability, and influence governance outcomes. As a result, university governing boards are required to make decisions within environments characterised by constant public visibility and rapidly changing stakeholder expectations.

A major finding of this review is that digital public pressure has intensified the importance of transparency and stakeholder engagement in higher education governance. Governing boards are increasingly expected to justify institutional decisions openly and respond to stakeholder concerns in timely and credible ways. In many cases, social media discussions and online activism can significantly shape public perceptions of institutional legitimacy and governance effectiveness. Consequently, universities must place greater emphasis on communication strategies, reputational man-

agement, and inclusive stakeholder engagement practices.

The review also highlights the growing complexity of governance in the digital era. While social media can strengthen accountability and democratic participation, it can also create substantial governance challenges. Universities are increasingly vulnerable to reputational crises, misinformation, online polarisation, and public backlash that may escalate rapidly across digital platforms. Governing boards therefore face the difficult task of balancing institutional autonomy and long-term strategic priorities with immediate stakeholder pressures and public expectations. In some situations, excessive responsiveness to online criticism may undermine thoughtful and deliberative governance processes, while inadequate responses may damage institutional trust and legitimacy.

Another important insight emerging from the study is the need for adaptive and digitally competent leadership within university governance structures. Effective governance today requires more than traditional managerial and policy expertise. University leaders and governing boards must also possess strong digital communication skills, crisis management capabilities, ethical leadership qualities, and an understanding of online stakeholder behaviour. Institutions that fail to develop these competencies may struggle to maintain stakeholder confidence and institutional credibility in increasingly digital and publicly scrutinised environments.

The findings further suggest that governance effectiveness in higher education is becoming closely linked to institutional reputation and public trust. Universities are knowledge-based institutions that rely heavily on credibility, legitimacy, and social confidence. Social media has amplified the visibility of governance successes and failures, making reputational management an essential component of institutional sustainability. As digital platforms continue to shape public opinion and stakeholder expectations, universities must adopt governance approaches that are transparent, responsive, ethical, and strategically resilient.

This review contributes to the growing body of scholarship on digital governance in higher education by highlighting the intersection between social media, stakeholder activism, and board-level decision-making. The proposed conceptual framework developed in this paper illustrates how social media factors influence governance processes, governance outcomes, and broader institutional impacts such as reputation, public confidence, and long-term sustainability. The framework also provides a useful foundation for future empirical studies examining governance dynamics within digitally connected higher education systems.

Future research should further investigate how universities across different national and cultural contexts respond to digital public pressure and online activism. Comparative studies may provide deeper insights into how governance structures, political environments, and institutional cultures influence responses to social media challenges. Additional research is also needed to examine the long-term effects of digital activism on governance quality, leadership stability, and institutional performance. Furthermore, emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, digital surveillance systems, and algorithmic communication tools are likely to intro-

duce new governance risks and ethical considerations that require further scholarly attention.

In conclusion, university governance is undergoing a profound transformation in the digital age. Social media has permanently altered the relationship between universities and their stakeholders by increasing participation, visibility, accountability, and public engagement in governance processes. Although these developments present significant challenges, they also provide opportunities for universities to strengthen transparency, inclusiveness, and institutional trust. Ultimately, effective governance in higher education will depend on the ability of governing boards and institutional leaders to engage thoughtfully, ethically, and strategically with digitally empowered communities while preserving the core values, autonomy, and long-term mission of the university.

References

1. Agrawal S, Jacob P. 'Impact of social media on the decision-making process of students', *Journal of Nonlinear Analysis and Optimization*. 2024; 15(1): 82-96.
2. Alruthaya A, Nguyen TT, Lokuge, S. 'The application of digital technology and the learning characteristics of Generation Z in higher education', *Education and Information Technologies*. 2022; 27(5): 1-18.
3. Association of Governing Boards Principles of Trusteeship. Washington DC: AGB. Bunagan V. Conceptual study of university governance and management', *ResearchGate Working Paper*. 2025; 1-18.
4. Castro-Gómez J. 'University governance and institutional management for sustainability', *Frontiers in Education*. 2006; 1-15.
5. Chan CKY. A comprehensive AI policy education framework for university teaching and learning', *arXiv preprint*. 2003; 2305: 00280.
6. Chowdhury EK. The academic implications of social media use and multitasking among university students', *Heliyon*. 2025; 11(3): 1-12.
7. Gasman M. 'Governance under pressure: Why boards make abrupt decisions and reverse them', *Forbes*. 2026.
8. Kenny J. *Inquiry into Enhancing Victorian University Governance*. Melbourne: Parliament of Victoria. 2026.
9. Khoa BT. Knowledge-intensive teamwork development through social media adoption in HEIs', *Heliyon*. 2024; 10(5): 1-16.
10. Levy K, Chasalow, K. Algorithms and decision-making in the public sector', *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*. 2020; 309-328.
11. McConvey K, Guha S, Kuzminykh A. 'A human-centered review of algorithms in decision-making in higher education', *arXiv preprint*. 2023.
12. Mifsud D. 'A systematic review of school governance literature', *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*. 2025; 53(2): 215-233.
13. Nair A. 'New council aims to influence AI in higher education', *Digital Education Council Review*. 2024; 4(1): 1-7.
14. Pacheco E. 'Digital technologies in the context of university transition and disability', *Higher Education Research & Development*. 2023; 42(4): 1-16.
15. Quiggin J. 'Reforming university governance in Australia', *Australian Universities Review*. 2025; 67(1): 20-35.

16. Suzor N. *Lawless: The Secret Rules That Govern Our Digital Lives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2020.
17. Universities Australia. *Critical Challenges in Australia's University Sector: Securing a Sustainable Future*. Canberra: Universities Australia. 2025.
18. Wu C, Zhang H, Carroll JM. 'AI governance in higher education: Case studies of guidance at Big Ten universities', arXiv preprint. 2024.
19. Yale University. *Report of the Committee on Trust in Higher Education*. New Haven: Yale University. 2026.
20. Advance HE. *Shaping the Future of Higher Education Governance*. London: Advance HE. 2025.
21. The Australian. 'Deakin University chief criticises cancel culture in higher education', *The Australian*, 14 October. 2025.
22. The New Yorker. 'The unmaking of the American university', *The New Yorker*, 9 March. 2026.