



## SOCIAL MEDIA AND STUDENTS' CHOICE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

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### Abstract:

Over the past decade, online social networks (OSN) have become ingrained in our daily lives. They have changed the way young people live and become one of the most important means of communication and entertainment. The use of social media by teens and young adults is on the rise. Higher education institutions recognise the value of social media as a tool of communication to provide information to target students and use its platforms to advertise their programmes to prospective students. Students also use Social Media and Facebook to access and analyse information to make informed study decisions. The current study examines how social media in general, and Facebook in particular, influences students' choice of study programme and Higher Education Institute (HEI). Quantitative research methods were employed as being most appropriate for this particular study. A total of 170 students from Oxford Business College (OBC), U.K., participated voluntarily in the survey; sixty-three (63) male and one hundred and seven (107) female students. All students completed a survey questionnaire based on four sections (A, B, C and D) comprising fifteen questions primarily based on the Likert scale. Simple descriptive statistics and SPSS were used to identify and analyse the factors students considered most important (influential) in their (the students') choice of programme of study and HEI. The most popular social media site was Facebook, followed by Instagram. In regards to influence, Facebook seems to be more influential than other social media sites. It is also obvious that Facebook has been used as a marketing tool by the majority of HEIs. We do not make any claims regarding the generalisability of our study's findings because of the small sample size and convenience sampling used in the study. However, the results generally support what is already

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known about the most popular social media site - Facebook - as having a positive influence on students' choice of programme and Higher Education Institute.

**Keywords:** social media, Facebook, students' choice, higher education institutions

## 1. Introduction

Online social networks (OSN) have pervaded our daily lives during the last decade and changed how young people live. They have also become one of the most essential forms of communication and entertainment. The popularity of social media is skyrocketing among teenagers and young adults. Furthermore, it has proven to be a powerful tool that can significantly impact an individual's decision. With the arrival of social media, people's lives took a completely different turn. Not only does it function as a means of communication, it has also now evolved into a significant source of knowledge. Higher education institutions (HEIs) that take advantage of the potential provided by social media might use its platforms to promote themselves to prospective students. Therefore, an inquiry is needed to determine how social media influences students' choices and, more specifically, how it influences their decision-making when choosing an appropriate higher education institution.

Higher education marketing is a field that continues to expand, evolve and adapt. Higher education marketing specialists are still unsure as to exactly how social media marketing influences 18-year-old high school students' college selection decisions. Therefore, HEIs must understand new students' life experiences to market to them effectively. To sell to higher education consumers successfully, institutions must first understand their demands.

Millions of individuals, particularly young people, use social media sites, such as Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, and Instagram, among others, on a regular basis. Facebook remains the most widely-used social media platform in the USA: seven out of ten (69%) adult Americans use Facebook daily (Gramlich, 2021). According to another study performed in the United States, approximately 71 per cent of higher education students use Facebook (Duggan and Brenner, 2013). For personal and educational use, Facebook is probably the most popular social network platform. Furthermore, students spend an average of 10 to 60 minutes per day on online social networking (OSN) platforms, even when they are studying (Sánchez et al., 2014).

**Table 1:** Top Five Social Media Sites and Brief Description

Top 5 Social Media Sites	Brief Description
<b>1. Facebook</b> 2.853 billion monthly active users	Launched in 2004, became popular in the late 2000s, most popular and widely and actively used for social media marketing; most organisations have Facebook accounts.
<b>2. YouTube</b> 2.291 billion monthly active users	Launched in 2005, a video sharing platform to upload video and share with other users.
<b>3. Instagram</b>	Launched in 2010 as a free online photo-sharing application.

1.386 billion monthly active users	
<b>4. Pinterest</b> 478 million monthly active users	Launched in 2010, a web and mobile-based visual discovery engine to find ideas, fashion tips, recipes, etc.
<b>5. Twitter</b> 387 million monthly active users	Launched in 2006, a microblogging and social networking service. Users post, respond and interact with brief messages (e.g. breaking news stories) known as 'tweets'.

**Source:** Data Reportal, July 2021.

## 2. Literature Review

The academic community remains divided over a universally accepted definition of social media. However, one of the first definitions was offered by Bryer and Zavatarro: *"Social media are technologies that facilitate social interaction, make possible collaboration, and enable deliberation across stakeholders"* (2001, p. 327). A similar definition is *"any technology that facilitates the dissemination and sharing of information over the Internet"* (Robbins and Singer, 2014, p. 387). Marketing and communication experts have also described social media as *"a wide range of new generation internet applications"* (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012, p. 44) or, more specifically, *"a web-based service that allows the member to construct a profile and connect with other members"* (Chaffey et al., 2009, p. 11). It is a type of electronic communication that allows users to create online communities to share ideas, information and opinions with fellow members with whom they share common interests (Jobber & Ellis-Chadwick, 2012, Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson, & Seymour, 2011). Therefore, it acts as conversational media (Safko and Brake, 2009). This definition best explains the idea of conversation and interaction between people online (Strauss & Frost, 2011). It includes creating and exchanging user-generated content based on any number of technological systems related to collaboration and community (Joosten, 2012).

Social media usage has increased at a surprising rate over the past decade, and Facebook has dominated the social media market: almost all organisations now use the platform for marketing and communication purposes. In addition, nearly three billion individuals worldwide have an active Facebook account (Statista, 2021).

According to Rowan-Kenyon and Alemán (2016), society has become entrenched in social media use; the researchers explain the universality of social media use as a result of people constantly communicating via the Internet on different platforms. This constant connection via a range of modalities, such as social media, messaging and online applications, allows individuals to absorb news, talk and make decisions without seeing one other (Rowan-Kenyon and Alemán, 2016). According to McCorkle and Payan (2017), social media marketing is one of the most successful strategies to reach target audiences in today's marketing communications.

Because of the amount of time students spend on social media, they are an ideal target for social media marketing. They come across many types of content on social media, which influence their opinions and choices. According to several academics,

international students use social media to help them decide about the university (Reddy, 2014). Several studies have examined the use of social media in higher education institutions as well as its impact on student choice (Krezel and Krezel, 2017; Zachos et al., 2018). Although most of these studies yielded useful results, new research is required as technology advances and social media influence shifts (Wang et al., 2011).

The main contribution of our study lies in defining the basis on which social media in general, and Facebook in particular, influences students' choice of higher education institution and understanding the role of social media in motivating these decisions.

As a platform for users to produce, share or exchange information and interact with others globally, social media is developing as a critical marketing component of the HEI admissions process. Thanks to social media, HEIs are now able to communicate more effectively with so-called 'millennials' or 'Generation 'Y' - those born after 1998 who grew up with the Internet and Information Technology and who perceive themselves as living in a "global village" (Qureshi et al., 2020). As a result, they can understand social media platforms and the use of the internet. For example, according to the data, 92% of respondents use Facebook at least once a day, and 78.9% of students have joined at least one social media site. The findings contribute to a better understanding of how higher education institutions may effectively employ technology to impact college selection (DiAna, 2014).

Young people, both boys and girls, exchange their feelings, ideas, pictures, personal information, videos and any other data type using social media (Khan et al., 2014). In the United States, 73% of teens now use social media apps and websites. Owing to its potential to build relationships, social media provides a virtual place for young people to explore their interests or issues with like-minded individuals as well as academic assistance. Because of their technical skills and expertise in internet communication, those students who fear speaking openly in the classroom can now participate in discussions about books and blogs on social media. Web-based tools for learning purposes are also being developed by institutes all the time (Brydolf, 2007).

According to McCorkle and Payan (2017), social media marketing uses internet communication to connect with audiences through social media platforms (e.g. Twitter, Facebook and Instagram). Social media has become a vital component of human interaction and communication and significantly influences people's behaviour and decision-making processes (Cheung & Lee, 2010). It has fundamentally changed the nature of communication, collaboration and consumption (Aral, Dellarocas and Godes, 2013). Currently, social media is recognised as an essential part of the decision-making process (Weinberg, 2009; Zarrella, 2010). Decision-making is a complex process in which consumers go through different stages before making their final purchase decision (Belch and Belch, 2003). Consumers make two types of decisions: "low-involvement decisions", made with no planning or previous thought, and "high-involvement complex decisions" that go through the stages of the decision-making process (Kotler & Armstrong, 2011). High involvement decisions involve a five-stage process: (1) recognition of the problem that requires a solution; (2) the search for information; (3) an evaluation of alternatives; (4) making the purchase decision and, finally, (5) evaluation of the purchase decision (Kotler,

2003). The impact of social media within each step (except the fifth one) is explained in Table 2 below.

**Table 2:** Decision making stages and impact of Social Media

Stage of process	Impact of social media
<b>1. Problem recognition</b>	Needs can be triggered by advertisements displayed on a Facebook page or through the 'Like' button, which is a powerful tool to make consumers recognise a need (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). If students see advertisements popping up on their social media feed, this may trigger their study needs.
<b>2. Information search</b>	An external search is critical – it includes word-of-mouth and online social networking (Castronovo & Huang, 2012). The internal search involves the consumer's memory about the products/ services they used. This means that students seeking information about universities can use social media platforms or ask their 'friends' for information
<b>3. Evaluation of alternatives</b>	Blogs and forums are ideal places to obtain valuable information
<b>4. Purchase decision</b>	Students choose among the alternatives and, before coming to a final decision, consult Facebook or read reviews on social media (e.g. which educational institution to choose)

**Source:** Authors' own conceptualisation based on secondary research.

In the initial stages of the decision-making process, sources of information available to prospective students were traditionally brochures, prospectuses, newspaper advertisements, educational exhibitions (e.g. graduate fairs), websites, parents, friends and peers. Since the advent of social media, they can find even more relevant information and make informed choices based on collaboration, communication and community interaction. According to Peruta and Shields (2017), social media has become an emerging and prominent marketing and advertising strategy for higher education institutions to exploit. However, they argue that there is variation in how higher education institutions (HEIs) employ social media marketing (SMM) to stimulate enrolment and connect with potential students. The authors also suggest that further research is required into online marketing strategies for higher education institutions using SSM (social media marketing) so that HEIs can use SSM more effectively to increase enrolment. The digital native generation is known as 'Generation Z' according to Rothman (2016) and includes 18-year-olds. He argues that technology is second nature to this generation. They rely on digital technologies, such as the internet and social media, as their primary sources of information, which greatly impacts their decision making.

Chang et al. (2018) argue that, in this era when social media is so prevalent in society, it is very common for people to be influenced by others. Social media has become extremely common these days and is now an important part of everyone's life. According to Chang et al., social media has become a rich source of information for many people in today's world, and some use it to influence others. The study's major goal was to find out how high school students use social media marketing to inform their college selection decisions (Chang et al., 2018).

University websites can provide basic information and offer an engaging environment for the user. As social media is highly interactive and collaborative in nature, it provides an ideal platform for the university to promote their activities (Weiss, 2008). Colleges in the United States are moving towards the use of social media platforms in their marketing strategies (Barnes and Mattson, 2009). In their case study, Hayes et al. (2009) examined the use of social networks by a university for marketing purposes. They discovered a strong correlation between the students who used these social networks and those who applied to that same institution.

According to research, a rising number of businesses are already using social media as part of their marketing strategy (Barnes and Mattson, 2009). Higher education institutions embracing the use of social media must keep in mind how it affects students' decision-making. HEIs therefore, have the potential to influence students' decisions by introducing new elements on their websites and/or social media apps (Constantinides et al., 2010).

The importance of the internet and social media as a commercial platform has been widely acknowledged, and firms are increasingly opting for online marketing channels over more traditional ones. In addition, Second-generation internet services, including user engagement, interaction, communication with other users and content generation, are all now possible thanks to social media. As a result, higher education institutions are becoming more interested in adding social media to their marketing arsenal. However, further research is needed to understand the usefulness of these platforms for marketing purposes in higher education (Constantinides and Stagno, 2012).

Marketing used to be a phrase that could only be mentioned in the most hushed tones in academia, and thoughts concerning the marketing of educational institutions have frequently sparked concerns and controversy. According to Anderson (2008), one of the main arguments against higher education marketing techniques would jeopardise the academic quality and excellence (Anderson, 2008). However, to build and maintain valuable exchanges between HEIs and the three primary consumer groups - current students, alumni and potential students – is exactly what is implied by relationship marketing in higher education: customers' long-term loyalty is positively related to the quality of these ties (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001).

Several studies (Teng and Lin, 2013, Tuncay et al., 2011) have examined the efficiency of educational programmes in Facebook-like environments, while others (Ellison et al., 2007, Yu et al., 2010) reported that the transition to university culture went well. According to Gray et al. (2013), social contacts provided by social networks *“help students feel more connected to the college, which may enhance the probability that they will persevere beyond their first year.”* According to the authors, Facebook is the most beneficial social network for assisting students in their scholastic pursuits. According to a survey, several colleges in Israel (Forkosh-Baruch and Hershkovitz, 2012) have developed more than 70 Facebook and Twitter profiles to assist instructional procedures. Consequently, a supportive network for informal learning has been established, with promising outcomes in terms of knowledge dissemination.

According to Hobson's (2017) survey on international higher education, more than 80% of students depend on social media platforms to find information about an education institution (Galan et al., 2015, Rowe, 2014). Choosing a university is a one-of-a-kind decision-making process in which candidates go through various stages of a lengthy evaluation process (Maringe, 2006, Moogan et al., 1999, Stephenson et al., 2016). Advertisements and promotional events, university websites, reports, friends and instructors are all sources of information for prospective university students (Simões and Soares, 2010) and they may consult different sources depending on the type of information they are looking for (Bonnema and Van der Waladt, 2008). For example, university websites can provide information about tuition fees and scholarships, while social media or professional reports can provide information about job opportunities. Social media helps to make everything clear to prospective students so they can make informed choices about which college or university would be most suitable for them (Le et al., 2019).

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 How does social media in general, and Facebook in particular, affect students' choice of higher education institution?**

To answer this question, we used quantitative research methods to examine the impact of social media on students' choice of higher education institutions. The study used a survey approach in which students from Oxford Business College (OBC) participated in a series of questions regarding the influence of social media sites and Facebook on their choice of institution and particular programme of study. Surveys and questionnaires were a clear strategy widely employed by researchers due to their simplicity in delivering the desired results. Therefore, the data were gathered, processed and analysed to determine the results.

A total sample of 170 students from OBC participated in the research investigating the relationship between social media and students' choice of HEI. Sixty-three males and 107 females were asked to complete the survey. The majority of the respondents (70.56%) were in the 26-35 age bracket and were currently enrolled or had completed their Foundation Programme (64.71%). The research was conducted in accordance with British Educational Research Association (BERA) and OBC protocols.

### **4. Result and Discussion**

#### **4.1 The relationship between social media and students' choice of HEI**

A Pearson correlation was conducted to determine the possible presence of a significant relationship between social media and students' choice of HEI. The analysis demonstrated that there was a significant relationship between social media and students' choice of HEI ( $r = 0.975$ ,  $p \text{ value} = 0.000$ ). The value of the Pearson correlations indicates a very strong, positive relationship between the two factors.

## 4.2 Social media influences students' choice of HEI

Simple regression analysis was used to determine whether following social media can significantly influence students' choice of HEI. In combination, social media accounted for 95.0% of the variability in students' choice of HEI ( $R^2 = 0.950$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .950$ ,  $F(1) = 3179.697$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with social media recording a positive and stronger beta value (beta = 0.975,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that, if the number following social media increases by 1 unit, the likelihood of the students' choice of HEI will increase by 0.975 units. Thus, the analysis showed that social media has a strong, positive impact on students' choice of HEI.

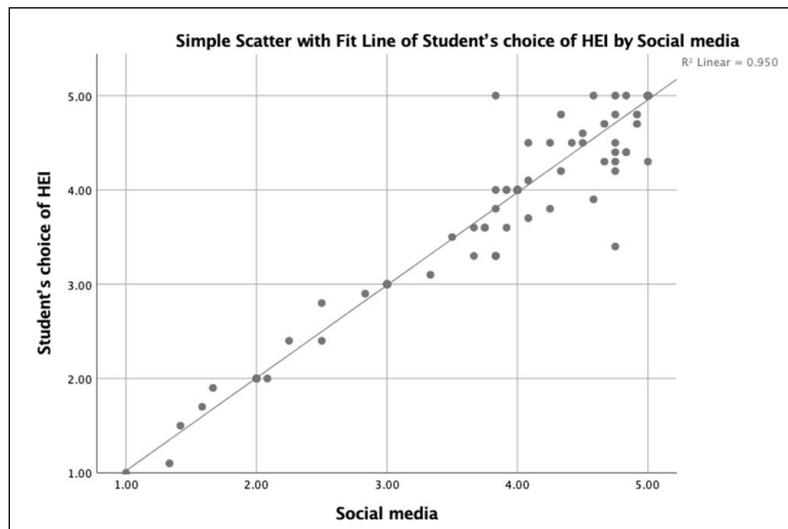
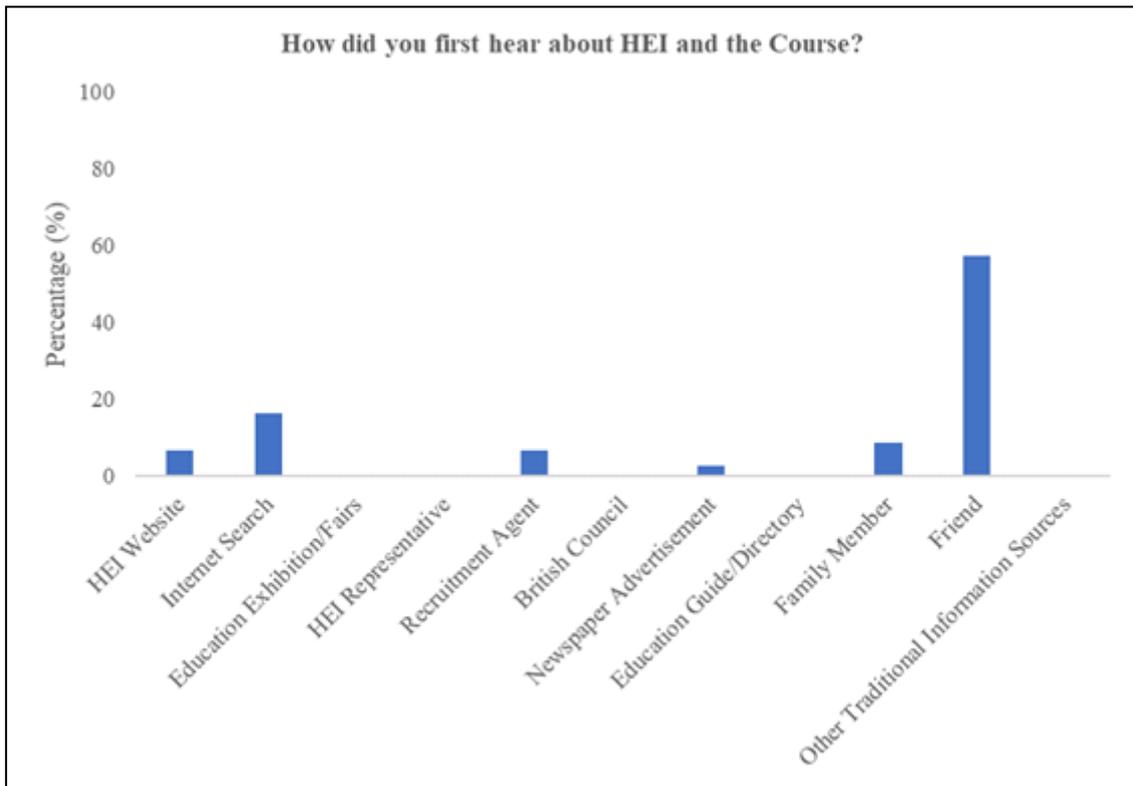


Figure 1: Regression summary

## 4.3 How did you first hear about your HEI (College/University) and course?

A chi-square test for goodness of fit with  $\alpha = .05$  was used to assess whether there is a difference in the number of students who chose a particular answer regarding how they first heard about the HEI. The chi-square test was statistically significant ( $\chi^2(7) = 392.474$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), indicating a significant difference in the number of people in the sample who chose a particular answer. Thus, the analysis showed that the likelihood of first hearing about the HEI from friends is significantly higher than any of the other options.

Respondents mostly first heard about their chosen HEI and course through their friends (57.44 %), followed by an internet search (16.41%), family member (8.72%), HEI website (6.67%), recruitment agent (6.67%) and newspaper advertisement (2.56%).



**Figure 2:** Means of first hearing about the HEI and course

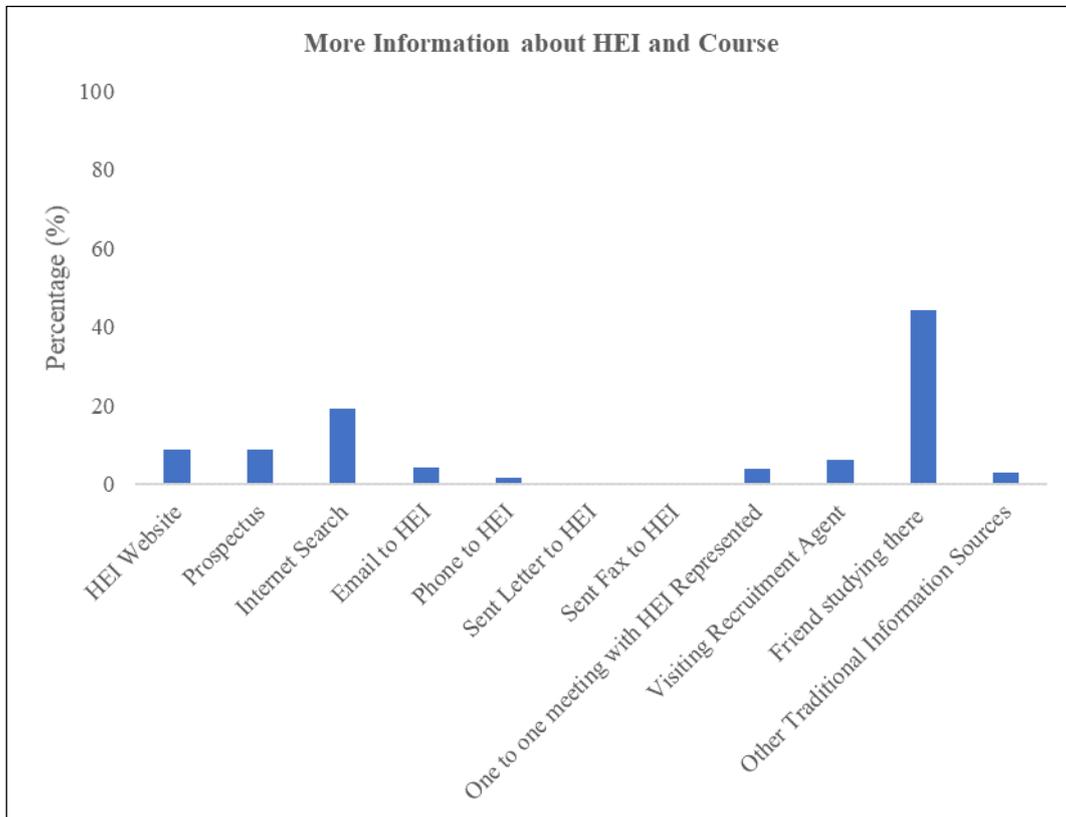
**Table 3:** Summary of the findings

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Education Guide/Directory	1	24.3	-23.3
Family member	17	24.3	-7.3
Friend	112	24.3	87.8
HEI Representative	1	24.3	-23.3
HEI Website	13	24.3	-11.3
Internet Search	32	24.3	7.8
Newspaper Advertisement	5	24.3	-19.3
Recruitment Agent	13	24.3	-11.3
<b>Test statistics</b>			
Chi-Square	392.474 <sup>a</sup>		
df	7		
Asymp. Sig.	.000		

#### 4.4 How did you obtain more information about your HEI and course?

A chi-square test for goodness of fit with  $\alpha = .05$  was used to assess whether there is a difference in the number of people in the sample who chose a particular answer regarding obtaining more information about the HEI. The chi-square test was statistically significant ( $\chi^2(8) = 362.982, p = 0.000$ ), indicating that there was a significant difference in the number of people who chose a particular answer. Thus, the analysis showed that the likelihood of someone obtaining more information about the HEI from friends who are already studying at the HEI is significantly higher than any of the other options.

Respondents mostly obtained information about their HEI and course from friends already studying there (44.21%). Other options included internet search (19.01%), HEI website (8.68%), prospectus (8.68%) and visiting a recruitment agency (6.20%).



**Figure 3:** Means of acquiring more information about HEI and course

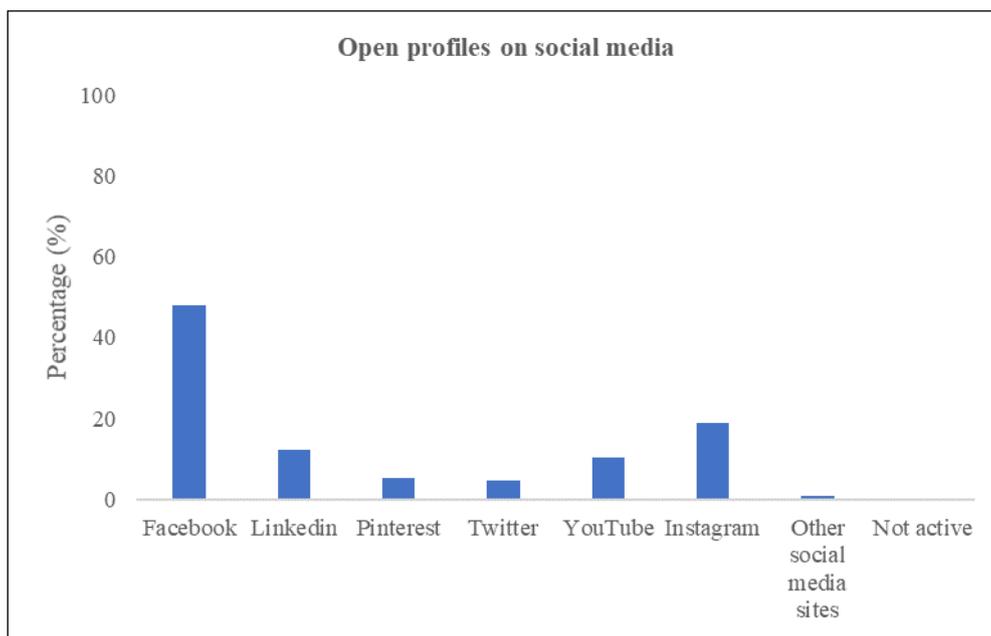
**Table 4:** Summary of the findings

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Email to HEI	10	25.1	-15.1
Friend studying there	107	25.1	81.9
HEI Website	21	25.1	-4.1
Internet Search	46	25.1	20.9
Phone to HEI	4	25.1	-21.1
Prospectus	21	25.1	-4.1
Sent Fax to HEI	1	25.1	-24.1
Sent Letter to HEI (Snail Mail)	1	25.1	-24.1
Visiting Recruitment Agent	15	25.1	-10.1
<b>Test statistics</b>			
Chi-Square	362.982 <sup>a</sup>		
df	8		
Asymp. Sig.	.000		

#### 4.5 On which social media sites did you have a profile?

A chi-square test for goodness of fit with  $\alpha = .05$  was used to assess whether there is a difference in the number of people in the sample who chose a particular answer regarding their active profiles on social media. The chi-square test was statistically significant ( $\chi^2(6) = 269.897, p = 0.000$ ), indicating that there was a significant difference in the number of people in the sample who chose a particular answer regarding their social media accounts. Thus, the analysis showed that the likelihood of having a profile on Facebook is significantly higher than any of the other options.

The majority of the respondents had profiles on Facebook (47.83%), followed by Instagram (18.97%), (12.25%) and YouTube (10.28%). A relatively small number of respondents had Pinterest (5.14%) and Twitter (4.74%).



**Figure 4:** Open profiles on social media sites

**Table 5:** Summary of the findings

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Facebook	121	36.1	84.9
Instagram	48	36.1	11.9
	31	36.1	-5.1
Other social media sites	2	36.1	-34.1
Pinterest	13	36.1	-23.1
Twitter	12	36.1	-24.1
Youtube	26	36.1	-10.1
<b>Test statistics</b>			
Chi-Square	269.897 <sup>a</sup>		
Df	6		
Asymp. Sig.	.000		

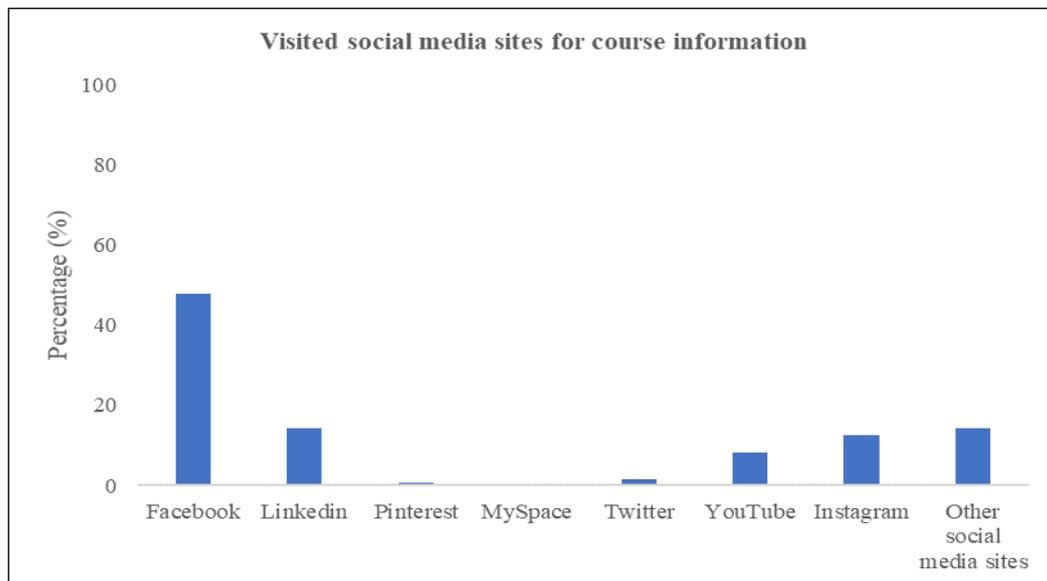
#### 4.6 Which social media sites did you visit for course information?

A chi-square test for goodness of fit with  $\alpha = .05$  was used to assess whether there is a difference in the number of people in the sample who chose a particular answer regarding visiting certain social media sites for course information. The chi-square test was statistically significant ( $\chi^2(7) = 396.721, p = 0.000$ ), indicating a significant difference in the number of people who chose particular answers. Thus, the analysis showed that the likelihood of visiting Facebook for course information is significantly higher than any of the other options.

When it comes to searching for course information, the majority of respondents visited Facebook (47.96%), followed by other social media sites (14.29%), (14.29%), Instagram (12.58%) and YouTube (8.16%).

**Table 5.1:** Which social media sites did you visit for course information?

Facebook		Instagram	YouTube	Other
47.96%	14.29%	12.58%	8.16%	14.29%



**Figure 5:** Visited social media sites for course information

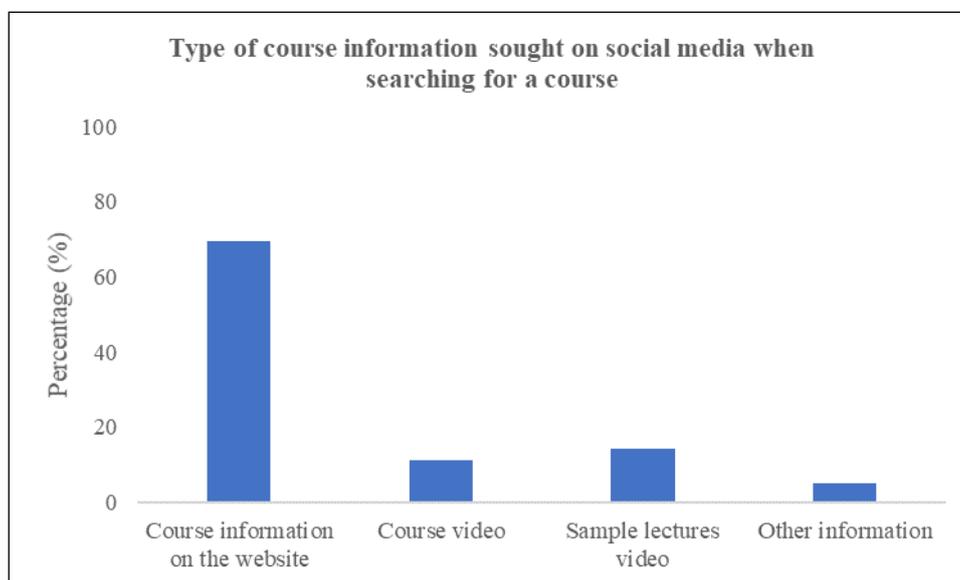
**Table 6:** Summary of the findings

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Facebook	141	36.8	104.3
Instagram	37	36.8	.3
	42	36.8	5.3
MySpace	1	36.8	-35.8
Other social media sites	42	36.8	5.3
Pinterest	2	36.8	-34.8
Twitter	5	36.8	-31.8
YouTube	24	36.8	-12.8
<b>Test statistics</b>			
Chi-Square	396.721 <sup>a</sup>		
df	7		
Asymp. Sig.	.000		

#### 4.7 What kind of course information did you seek on social media site(s) when searching for a course?

A chi-square test for goodness of fit with  $\alpha = .05$  was used to assess whether there is a difference in the number of people who chose a particular answer regarding the type of course information they sought on social media. The chi-square test was statistically significant ( $\chi^2(3) = 231.370$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), indicating a significant difference in the number of people in the sample who chose particular answers. Thus, the analysis showed that the likelihood of seeking course information on the website is significantly higher than any of the other options.

When searching for a course on social media, the majority of respondents sought course information on the website (69.44%), while some of the respondents were interested in course videos (11.11%), sample lectures videos (14.35%) and other information (5.09%).



**Figure 6:** Course information sought on social media sites when searching for a course

**Table 7:** Summary of the findings

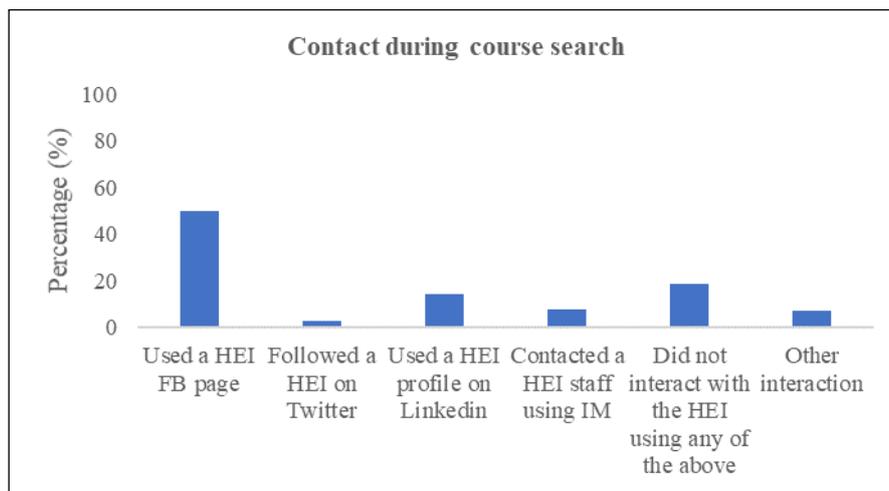
	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Course information on the website	150	54.0	96.0
Course Video	24	54.0	-30.0
Other Information	11	54.0	-43.0
Sample lectures video	31	54.0	-23.0
<b>Test statistics</b>			
Chi-Square	231.370 <sup>a</sup>		
df	3		
Asymp. Sig.	.000		

#### 4.8 During your course search, how did you contact the HEI?

A chi-square test for goodness of fit with  $\alpha = .05$  was used to assess whether there is a difference in the number of people in the sample who chose a particular answer regarding how they contacted the HEI during their search. The chi-square test was

statistically significant ( $\chi^2(5) = 177.758, p = 0.000$ ), indicating a significant difference in the number of people who chose a particular answer to this question. Thus, the analysis showed that the likelihood of using an HEI Facebook page is significantly higher than any of the other options.

During the course search, the majority of respondents used an HEI Facebook page to get in touch with the institution (50%), 18.69% of respondents did not interact with the HEI using any of the listed methods, 14.14% used an HEI profile on, 7.58% contacted HEI staff using IM, 7.07% used other forms of interaction, while a few (2.53%) followed an HEI on Twitter.



**Figure 7:** Contact with HEI during course search

**Table 8:** Summary of the findings

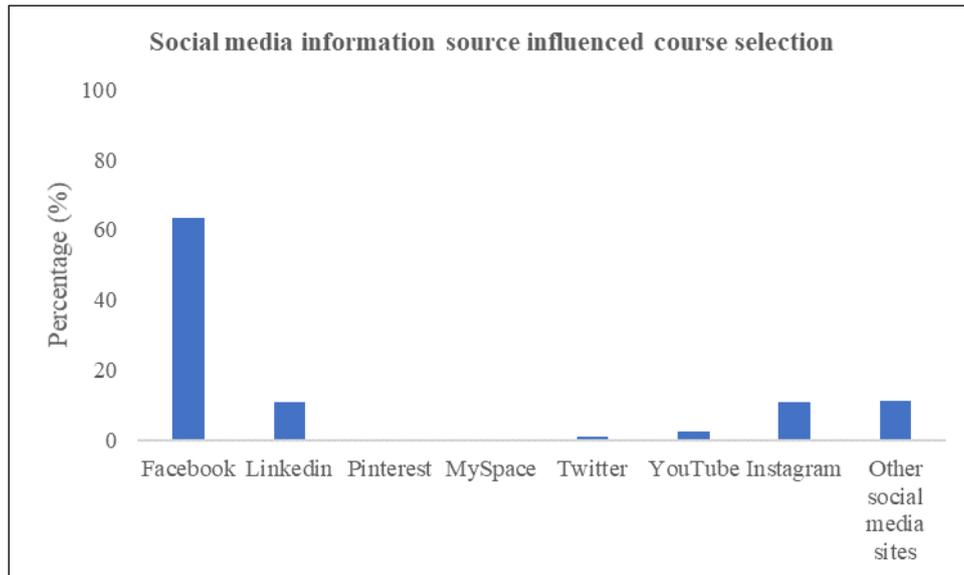
	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
I contacted a member of HEI staff using Instant Messaging (IM)	15	33.0	-18.0
I did not interact with the HEI using any of the above methods	37	33.0	4.0
I followed an HEI on Twitter	5	33.0	-28.0
I used an HEI Facebook page	99	33.0	66.0
I used an HEI profile on	28	33.0	-5.0
Other interaction	14	33.0	-19.0
<b>Test statistics</b>			
Chi-Square	177.758 <sup>a</sup>		
df	5		
Asymp. Sig.	.000		

#### 4.9 Which of the following social media information sources influenced you most in your course selection?

A chi-square test for goodness of fit with  $\alpha = .05$  was used to assess whether there is a difference in the number of people in the sample who chose a particular answer regarding the social media site that influenced them most when choosing a course. The chi-square test was statistically significant ( $\chi^2(5) = 273.073, p = 0.000$ ), indicating a significant difference in the number of people in the sample who chose a particular

answer. Thus, the analysis showed that the likelihood of someone being influenced by the information on Facebook is significantly higher than any of the other options.

Information presented on Facebook influenced course selection for the majority of respondents (63.25%). However, some respondents were also influenced by information on other social media sites (11.45%), (10.84%), Instagram (10.84%), YouTube (2.41%) and Twitter (1.20%).



**Figure 8:** Social media information sources influencing the most course selection

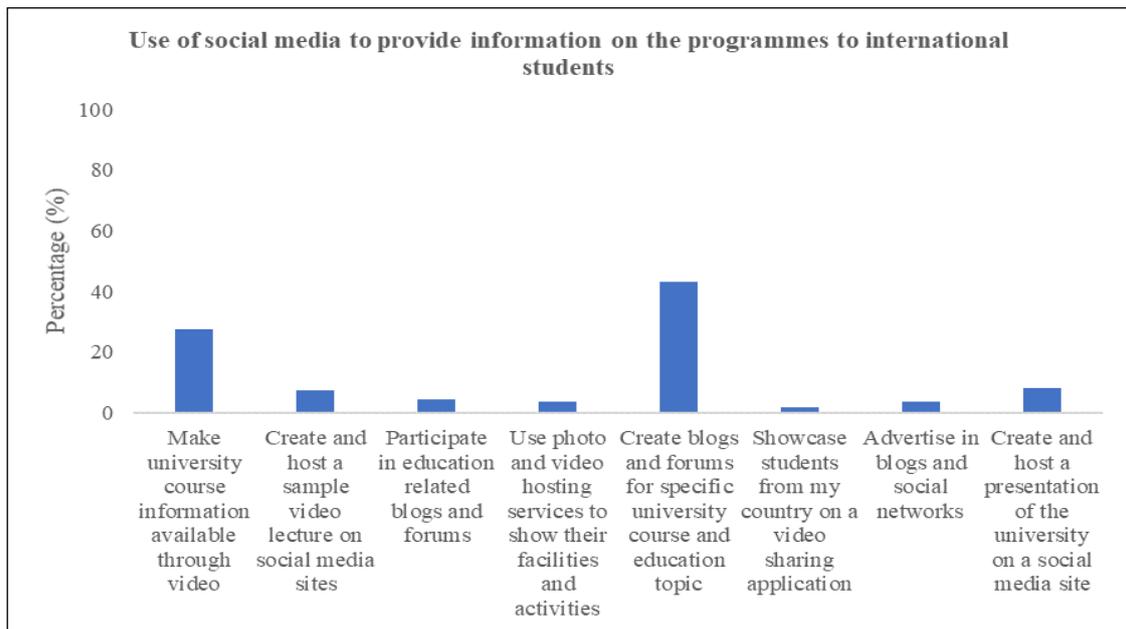
**Table 9:** Summary of the findings

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Facebook	105	27.5	77.5
Instagram	18	27.5	-9.5
Other social media sites	18	27.5	-9.5
Twitter	2	27.5	-25.5
Youtube	3	27.5	-24.5
<b>Test statistics</b>			
Chi-Square	273.073 <sup>a</sup>		
df	5		
Asymp. Sig.	.000		

#### 4.10 How should HEIs use social media applications to provide information on their programmes to students?

A chi-square test for goodness of fit with  $\alpha = .05$  was used to assess whether there is a difference in the number of people in the sample who chose a particular answer regarding how HEIs should use social media applications to provide course information to international students. The chi-square test was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 (7) = 268.606$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), indicating a significant difference in the number of people who chose particular answers to this question.

Most of the respondents (43.12%) think that colleges and universities should use social media applications to create blogs and forums about specific university courses and education topics to provide key information about their programs to international students. Some think that social media should be used to provide course information through videos (27.52%), while 7.43% think HEIs should use social media to host sample video lectures. A minority of respondents think that HEIs should create and host a presentation of the university on social media (8.12%), participate in education- related blogs and forums (8.26%), use photo and video hosting services to show their facilities and activities (3.67%), advertise in blogs and social networks (3.67%) and showcase students from their own countries on a video sharing application (1.83%).

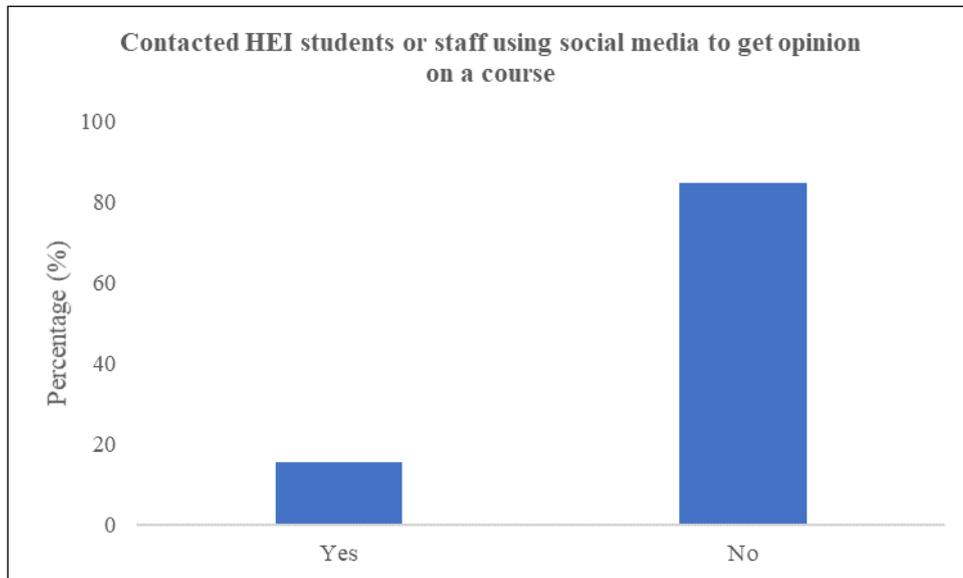


**Figure 9:** Use of social medial applications to provide information on the programmes to students

**Table 10:** Summary of the findings

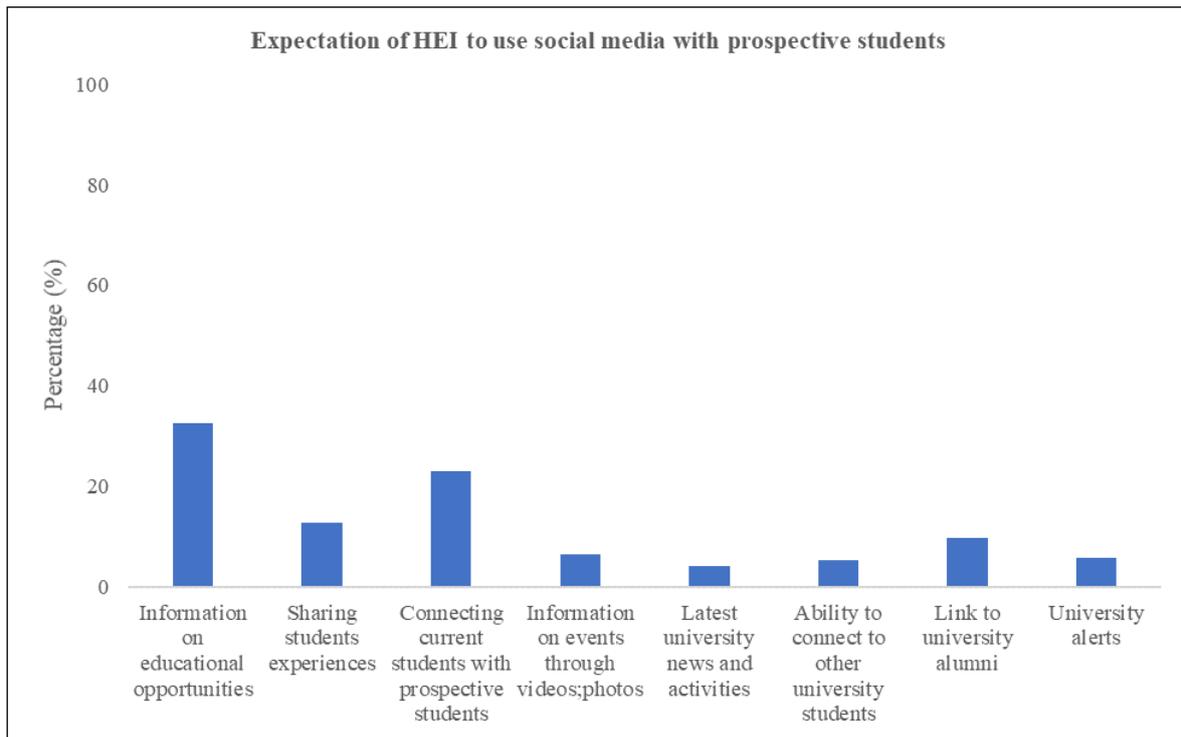
	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Advertise in blogs and social networks	8	27.3	-19.3
Create and host a presentation of the HEI on a social media site	18	27.3	-9.3
Create and host a sample video lecture on social media sites	16	27.3	-11.3
Create blogs and forums for a specific course and education topic	94	27.3	66.8
Make course information available through video	60	27.3	32.8
Participate in education-related blogs and forums	10	27.3	-17.3
'Showcase students from my country on a video sharing application'	4	27.3	-23.3
Use photo and video hosting services to show their facilities and activities	8	27.3	-19.3
<b>Test statistics</b>			
Chi-Square	273.073 <sup>a</sup>		
Df	5		
Asymp. Sig.	.000		

Respondents tend not to contact HEI students or staff on social media about their opinion on a particular course (84.71%).



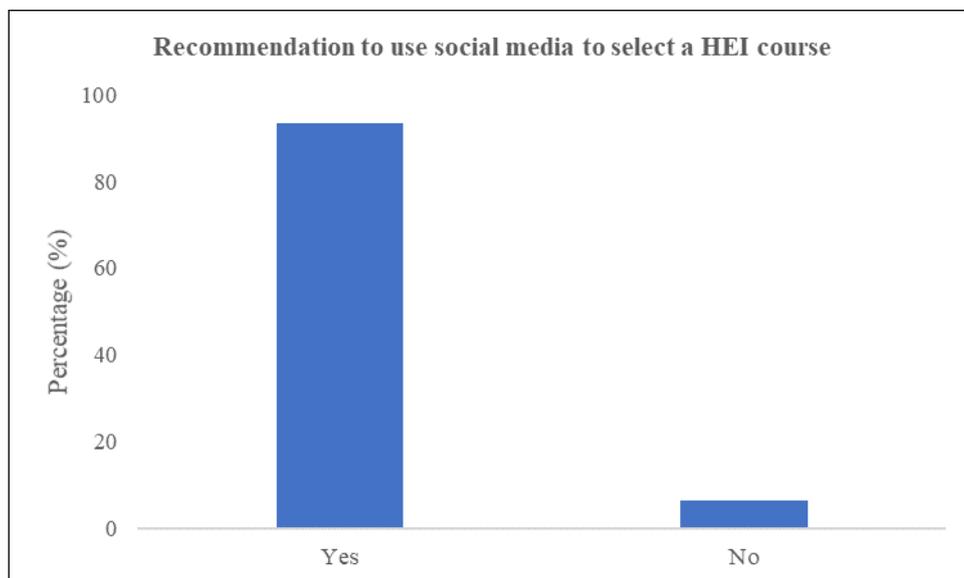
**Figure 10:** Contacted HEI students or staff using social media to get their opinion on a course

HEIs are expected to use social media to interact with prospective students mainly regarding educational opportunities (32.48%), to connect current students with prospective students (22.90%) and to share students' experiences (12.85%). In addition, HEIs are also expected to use social media as a link to university alumni (9.81%) and other university students (5.37%), to provide information on events through photos/videos (6.54%), send alerts (5.84%) and post the latest university news and activities (4.21%).



**Figure 11:** Expected ways of HEI using their social media with prospective students

Almost all of respondents (93.53%) would recommend the use of social media to their friends to select an HEI course, as they believe it is a useful, practical and efficient way of acquiring information, while 6.47% would not due to the limited amount of information provided on social media regarding the college and its courses.



**Figure 12:** Recommending friends to use social media to select HEI course

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

HEIs' websites provide a basis for attracting and engaging users (Weiss, 2008). Social Media Sites can be extended and comprehensive marketing tools, affecting human

behaviour both positively and negatively (Barker, 2009; Kolbitsch & Maurer, 2006). In educational circles, they primarily serve as an essential communication tool (Kietzmann et al., 2011) to target prospective students in particular and, more generally, alumni and multipliers, such as parents and employers etc. (Kohn, Griesbaum, Mandl, 2012).

Be they part of generation X, Y or Z, or Millennials, all students are exposed to almost all types of technology in many different aspects of their lives (Browning, Gerlich, & Westermann, 2011). In addition, HEIs are increasingly using social media as a tool of direct marketing at low cost, enabling direct communication with the target audience (Smajlovic, Kamaric and Sinanagic, 2015).

Our study aimed to authenticate the effectiveness of social media in general and Facebook in particular as a marketing communication tool for HEI's in the UK to attract prospective students. Primary data for the study was collected using Google Forms and analysed for statistical significance using SPSS; both tools are commonly used and effectively facilitated the study. However, there is room for improvement in the methodology for data collection, and a slightly different questionnaire structure would reduce the scope and improve the confidence factor.

The study explored to what extent social media influences students' choices and, in particular, how it influences their choice of HEI and programme of study. As part of our study, we conducted eight chi-square goodness of fit tests where we took an average of the responses given for each statement, which generated a new variable - social media and students' choice of HEI. For those two variables, we conducted correlation and regression analysis and confirmed that social media (especially Facebook) had a notable impact on students' choice of HEI. Although students first hear about their chosen HEI and courses from friends, they rely on the internet to obtain more information about the HEI and the courses on offer. Out of all the social media sites available, we found Facebook to be the most widely when searching for a course and HEI during our research.

Almost all HEIs have Facebook pages about contacting HEI staff for more details about the courses available but not about the courses themselves or current students' opinions on the different programmes of study. Prospective students also search HEIs' Facebook pages for course information that may only be available on the website. However, as HEIs' Facebook pages rarely contain such information, our recommendation based on these findings is that HEIs should incorporate more detailed course information on their Facebook pages.

Prospective students indicated that the information available on social media sites (Facebook in particular) influenced their course selection and HEI. When communicating with students, our survey results suggest that HEIs should mainly use social media to promote specific courses and present further information using different methods, such as videos on their social media sites. Furthermore, HEIs are expected to use their social media sites to share educational opportunities with prospective students. Almost everyone would advise their friends to use social media to select an HEI course since they believe it is helpful, practical, and efficient to acquire information.

HEIs should modify their social media sites accordingly, as currently, the majority of them provide limited information regarding the college/university and the courses available.

The findings revealed that prospective students widely use numerous social media tools to choose an HEI and particular programme of study. Although there was a variation in the appearance and use of a particular tool, social media was predominant compared to traditional tools, such as phone contact, emails, etc. Furthermore, among the various tools available, most prospective students used Facebook to communicate with an HEI and share knowledge with peers. Facebook also came out on top as the most recommended tool for researching potential HEIs and courses.

The majority of students also believed that Facebook is a fast and reliable source of information. The information obtained via Facebook is relevant, reliable, unbiased, valuable and convenient to obtain. Considering students' perception of the site, Facebook should be at the top of HEIs' list when it comes to spreading the message and reaching their target audience quickly and ubiquitously. Instagram closely followed Facebook in terms of effectiveness for education marketing, and these two tools alone accounted for a significant share of the effectiveness index.

A future study could look at just one tool, such as Facebook, and fine-tune the questionnaire accordingly. Furthermore, a broader, deeper and more systematic target audience selection might produce generalisable results. As more studies are done examining the influence of social media on the social, cultural and political aspects of our lives, it remains to be seen how these tools will transform traditional collaboration, communication and politicisation tools. There are already signs in related studies that these tools may significantly change political and even cultural dynamics. There is every reason to believe that education and educational marketers will make even more use of these social media in the future. However, to predict the longer-term effects these tools will have on educational marketing strategies and how they might indirectly influence social and political attitudes, and students' decisions would be mere speculation.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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## Appendix

### **Questionnaire on Social Media influence (with special emphasis on Facebook) on student decision making for the selection of Private Higher Education Institute in the UK**

The survey is being conducted for purely research purpose and you are being invited to be a part of this survey to spare some of your precious time. However, prior to participation it is important that you get the understanding about the study and your involvement. The questionnaire will take approximately 5 to 10 minutes to complete. It doesn't ask for any personal details such as name, address, and your participation will be kept completely confidential and anonymous. The data gathered shall be reserved in accordance with the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and OBC protocols and will only be used for the purpose of this Research project. The data gathered shall be kept per the GDPR (UK). Thank you for reading this survey and your valuable participation. For any other query, I can be contacted via email at [tayyaba.zia@oxfordbusinesscollege.ac.uk](mailto:tayyaba.zia@oxfordbusinesscollege.ac.uk).

#### **Section A: Demographic and General Information**

1. What is your gender? (Please tick only one)

- Male
- Female

2. What is your age group?

- 18 to 25
- 26 to 35
- 36 to 45
- 46 to 55
- Over 55

3. On which course you are currently studying or completed in past (please tick one only)?

- English Language Programme
- Foundation Programme(Pre degree)
- Bachelors Degree
- Higher National Diploma (HND)
- Other Programme Please specify .....

#### **Section B: Traditional Marketing Information Sources**

4. How did you first hear about your HEI (College/University) and course? (Please tick one only)

- HEI Website
- Internet Search
- Education Exhibition/Fairs
- HEI Representative
- Recruitment Agent
- British Council
- Newspaper Advertisement
- Education Guide/Directory
- Family member
- Friend
- Other Traditional Information Sources (please specify).....

5. How did you obtain more information about your HEI and course? (Please tick all that apply)

- HEI Website
- Prospectus
- Internet Search
- Email to HEI
- Phone to HEI
- Sent Letter to HEI (Snail Mail)
- Sent Fax to HEI
- One to one meeting with HEI Represented
- Visiting Recruitment Agent
- Friend studying there
- Other Traditional Information Sources (please specify).....

**Section C: Social Media Information Sources Think back to the time when you were seeking course information and tell us how you used social media.**

6. On which social media sites did you have a profile? (You may tick more than one)

- Facebook
- 
- Pinterest
- Twitter
- Youtube
- Instagram
- Other social media sites
- Not active

7. Which social media sites did you visit for course information?(please tick all that apply)

- Facebook
- 
- Pinterest

- MySpace
- Twitter
- Youtube
- Instagram
- Other social media sites

8. What kind of course information did you seek on social media site (s) when searching for a course? (please tick all that apply)

- Course information on the website
- Course Video
- Sample lectures video
- Other Information \_\_\_\_\_

9. During your course search, how did you contact? (please tick all that apply)

- I used an HEI Facebook page
- I followed an HEI on Twitter
- I used an HEI profile on
- I contacted an HEI staff using Instant Messaging (IM)
- I did not interact with the an HEI using any of the above
- Other interaction \_\_\_\_\_

10. Which of the following social media information sources influenced you most in your course selection? (Please tick only one)

- Facebook
- 
- Pinterest
- MySpace
- Twitter
- Youtube
- Instagram
- Other social media sites

**Section D :** Course Information on Social Media The questions ask you to reflect on how HEIs could have helped you further with your course selection process via social media and their websites.

11. How should HEIs (Universities and Colleges) use social media applications to provide information on their programmes to students (you may select more than one).

- Create blogs and forums for specific university course and education topic
- Participate in education related blogs and forums
- Advertise in blogs and social networks
- Use photo and video hosting services to show their facilities and activities
- Create and host a sample video lecture on social media sites

- Create and host a presentation of the university on a social media site
- Showcase students from my country on a video sharing application
- Make university course information available through video

12. Did you contact HEI students or staff to get their opinion on a course using social media?

- Yes
- No

13. Face book and Your HEI Admission. On a scale of 5, (5 is most important and 1 is least important)

- Good source of information about HEI
- Provides relevant information
- Provides latest information
- Provides unbiased information
- Makes information immediately accessible
- Convenient source of information
- Provides complete information
- Source of social influence for quality product & services
- Use is enjoyable
- Use is beneficial
- Specific Issues
- List of Programmes offered
- Contents for each programme
- Entry requirements
- Faculty and their expertise
- Tuition Fee and Cost of Living
- Location and surroundings
- Career prospects
- Alumni with jobs
- Student services
- University image and Ranking

14. How would you expect a HEI (Higher education institution) to use social media with prospective students? (You may tick more than one)

- Information on educational opportunities
- Sharing students' experiences
- Connecting current students with prospective students
- Information on events through videos; photos
- Latest university news and activities
- Ability to connect to other university students
- Link to university alumni
- University alerts

15. Would you recommend your friends to use social media to select a HEI course?

- Yes
- No

If "No" then, please give reasons, your answer.....

16. What is the reason for recommending social media ?

(please write your answer). Your answer.....

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