

SOCIAL MEDIA ADOPTION AND ITS INFLUENCE ON STUDENTS' UNIVERSITY AND PROGRAM CHOICES IN LEBANON

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Abstract *Getting enrolled in a university is deemed to be one of the exceptional experiences of any young person's life. With the Internet being a major source of information and with globalization, universities' social media presence is seen to affect the consumers' decision-making process more than when utilizing other channels, whether they were enrolled in the university or about to join. In addition, students can interact with the universities through the various social media platforms including Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and the latest, TikTok. These social media platforms can be used to provide accurate and up-to-date information to their existing and potential students and target fake news. Thus, the universities' social media presence can be a source of information for students going through the decision-making process. Therefore, it is essential to investigate how the adoption of social media promotion influences the students' decisions of university as well as program choices by using a quantitative research approach to identify the social media channels used by these students during the information search and selection process. Moreover, this study contributes to the understanding of university and program decision making by using social media aiding the higher education institutions to become present on and improve these platforms as well as develop appropriate marketing strategies to attract students and orient them towards certain programs.*

Keywords: *social media marketing, higher education, program selection, university selection*

1.INTRODUCTION

With the development and wide spread usage of social media platforms, marketers are able to utilize them in order to engage with their current as well as potential customers online. “Social Media” refers to a public platform that connects people all over the world, yet there has been a wide variety of definitions that provide a clear comprehension of the matter (Chen, 2012; N. Gizem KOÇAK*, 2013). Based on this understanding, social media networks can be categorized into eight categories including social networking sites, blogs, microblogs, content sharing sites, wikis, social bookmarking sites, podcasts and forums (Elizabeth Stoycheff, 2017). The wide variety and reach of such platforms have created a new channel of influence on consumers’ decisions that pushes educational institutions to adopt such strategies and engage further with their students (Aldahdouh, 2020). Higher education institutions (HEIs) in Lebanon as observed to be active on various social networking sites to provide their consumers a source of information yet it is still unclear how it will affect their choice of HEIs (Ghosn, 2019). Although HEIs aim at providing a source of information to help their prospects in their information search process, they aim to comply with the dynamic business environment in order to achieve their marketing goals (Sideri, 2017).

Based on previous literature, students also target traditional channels when searching for university information and those include friends, family, and the university’s website followed by social media. For sure most students communicate with their contacts or university staff for course information. As for social media networking site, students tend to search on Facebook, Instagram, Google+, and YouTube. As per Constantinidis' uncertainties regarding the use of social media such as the lack of related content, double-ended interaction, and creative applications, there remains an unclarity over the influences of social media on university choice particularly in developing countries, similar to Leban .

That's why this study aims to provide a comprehension of the importance of social media in student recruitment processes of Lebanese HEIs and to gain insights on how to use these tools to accomplish its objectives by applying the literature available on the topic. Thus, the main purpose is to investigate if and how the social media affects student university choice and decision-making process in Lebanon. In order to do so, a quantitative approach was adopted by distributing a self-administered, online-based questionnaire to a sample of 120 students from different Lebanese universities. Research objectives are set to answer the research question and include the following:

- 1) Examining which social media platforms are used by students to evaluate universities and courses.
- 2) Investigating if and how social media affects prospective students' university course choices.
- 3) Determining how students prefer utilizing social media networks.
- 4) Identifying social media networks and tools that could be utilized to recruit and engage with the students.

Referring to early researches, social media marketing strategies are realized to enhance the awareness regarding consumer preferences and expectations. Combined with a constructive stakeholder experience management process through such platforms, these tools affect consumers decision making process positively. So, based on such claims the below hypotheses are conducted

H₁: Social media networks and platforms are targeted by students when searching for university choice.

H₂: Students' decision-making process is affected by the efforts done by universities on social media marketing during their selection process.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

Like any consumer, students go through a decision-making process in order to choose a certain HEI. Such stages are analyzed in order to determine the various social media platforms that the students are most likely to include in their research (Norton, 2019). Students might also depend on information from traditional media like print media, direct mail, e-mail broadcast media like TVs and radio, etc. Primarily, universities used these marketing channels in their promotional activities (Eze, 2020). Recently, the significance of using social networking platforms in enhancing the interaction between students and instructors, information sharing and relations between students has been focused on. In addition, researches have been focusing on the need of adopting social media networks as they enhance the overall data management capabilities which potentially boost creativity in the management process (Santoro, Vrontis, Thrassou, & Dezi, 2017). Nevertheless, engaging stakeholders effectively is a key to increase creativity and innovation in addition to presence on online business channels (Lutz, 2014). This section focuses on a contextual background of Lebanese higher education institutions and how social media platforms affect student decision making process.

Referring to statistics accessible, higher education institutions sum up to 42 in Lebanon, after there were only 3, entirely regulated by general directorate of higher education with 1 public university only. According to researches of the year 2011-2012, 195,000 students were enrolled in the HEIs of Lebanon and based on an evaluation done by the Directorate General for Higher Education (DGHE), various higher education institutions have expanded as they increased by 33 new branches in 2010. It is obvious that Lebanon has been able to maintain high enrolment levels and universities have been managing well as, based on their enrolment rate, higher education institutions in Lebanon are in the second rank in the MENA region with a value of 48% according to UNESCO in a research done

in 2013. This shows that Lebanon's higher education institutions continuously exert efforts in order to increase their enrolment rates in addition to following novel technologies and trends (Mutinda, 2016).

Regarding such marketing efforts, higher education institutions focused on conventional channels of information sharing that affect decision-making processes. These can include family, relatives, friends, instructors, advisors, and many more who are influential in such buying process due to the necessity of having an experience or expertise in the field. If such recommendations are sourced from current and previous students, the student will get to know the culture, the programs available, the learning system adopted. Social media on the other hand have altered managing and marketing businesses, including higher educational institutions, especially as they target a market that belongs to generation Y, being one that grew up in a time of digital innovation and technology. In order to understand how student choices are affected, we have to understand first the process of university selection (Qualman, 2010).

Randall Chapman explains the process a student goes through during HEI's selection includes 5 stages that are, in order, pre-search behavior, search behavior, application decision, choice decision and matriculation decision. During such process, students have an array of universities that match their needs. They will compare each's benefits and advantages and choose the one that satisfies their needs best and apply to it (Vrontis, Thrassou, & Melanthiou, 2007). The emergence of digital marketing has provided universities and students the ability to interact over social media platforms. This capability has modified the choice process, especially in the application decision stage where seeking information from the university's website, social networking sites and word of mouth communications is key, students can be influenced by the information received and interactions experienced.

3.METHODOLOGY

A quantitative approach was adopted in order to examine how university choice of students is influenced by the institutions' social media marketing strategies in Lebanon. A web-based questionnaire was distributed to a sample of 120 students who were asked about their preferences of social media uses and which sources of information did they rely on to make their choices of university and program. The questionnaire was spread using a Google Forms' link and the collected data were analyzed through SPSS Statistics program.

Results and Discussions

A demographic overview of the sample will be presented in order to understand the background of students and their representation of the entire sample. Results showed that approximately 60% of the respondents were females and the remaining 40% were males. Most respondents were enrolled in a master's program, making up 72.6% of the sample and the remaining were enrolled in a Bachelor's program.

The majority of students first started searching for information about universities while they were in high school making up approximately 39% of the respondents. 34% started first searching for information about the university and its programs after completing high school and 23% started at other times.

Most respondents claimed that they were first knowledgeable of the university from their families and friends (58%), followed by internet search with about 10% and the remaining heard about their universities from university websites, education exhibitions, university representatives, school consultants, newspapers, education guides, and other sources. Moreover, the main information source that was adopted by students for universities and programs was the universities website (50%), followed by the internet search (17.7%) and university representatives (8.1%).

As for university and program information through social media, most sites utilized by students for the purpose of information search are Facebook and Google+ (74.1%) and the rest which are not as heavily used include LinkedIn, Instagram and other social media platforms. According to the respondents' answers, the information sought from social media and conventional media are similar as the highest percentage falls in university information and program information. Those who stated that it did affect their choice of university and program make up approximately 50% of the sample.

In order to understand if those who contacted staff or students via social media to get opinions on a universities' course offering and see its influence on their choice, a regression model was conducted to see if their contact with university staff and students provided added information, affected their university and program choice and helped them reach a decision.

In the regression table below (Table 1), the three factors proved to be insignificant. This can be accepted because a wide variety of students till now depend on conventional sources of information as the means all three determinants mentioned above did not prove significant as all of their p-values exceed 0.05. This can be explained that, still, students are mainly depending on traditional sources, and basically only using social media for additional information. In addition to the limited expertise and understanding of how social media networks and platforms can be utilized in order to provide a source of information that is considered credible by students in the Lebanese higher education institutions.

Table 1: Regression Table - The Influence of Social Media Interaction on Decision Making Process

Classification Table^a							
		Predicted					
		Observed	Did you contact University students or staff to get their opinion on a University program using social media?		Percentage Correct		
			yes	no			
Step 1	Did you contact University students or staff to get their opinion on a University program using social media?	yes	76	10	93.5		
		no	23	11	30.8		
	Overall Percentage				75.0		
a. The cut value is .500							
Variables in the Equation							
		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1 ^a	Additional information	-.910	.583	2.439	1	.118	.402
	Some Influence	.431	.718	.361	1	.548	1.539
	Helped Decision	-.202	.709	.081	1	.776	.817
	Constant	.910	1.208	.568	1	.451	2.484
a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: additional_information, some_influence, helped_decision.							

5.CONCLUSION

To conclude, the results of the study showed that although the students did use social media during their everyday lives and might seek it to collect information before making a decision regarding university and program choices, the influence was not visible from the sample that participated in this study. By this, we can accept the first hypothesis that was proposed and stated that students did use social media to collect information, yet it is not possible to accept the hypothesis of the influence of social media marketing strategies on their decision-making process, contrary to what previous studies have suggested.

In Lebanon, it is seen that traditional ways of information collection still prevail as potential students are most likely to visit the university physically or check its website for the most credible source. In addition, they highlight importance of the recommendations of family and friends in the university choice and those in positions of expertise at the university rather than their reliability on social media interactions.

However, this study did have limitations including the small sample of students taken randomly from different universities in Lebanon as well as the limited time and resources. Thus, it is recommended to perform a case study or observation on a certain number of universities that do apply social media marketing strategies effectively and target a questionnaire to their students in order to study the influence of proper social media marketing implementation.

As for universities, they are recommended to go deeper into the concept of social media marketing and widen their understanding of the concept in order to implement it as a supportive tool to their traditional media as it allows a two-way communication and allows engagement of the whole university's community rather than just relying on facts and numerical information.

In the students' perspective, they should increase their awareness of how to utilize such networks not only for entertainment but as academic and educational sources of information and be able to interact with other members of the university's community and create their own experience with it rather than depending on others' experiences because, in the end, experiences are subjective to each person and each situation.

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