

DOCTOR OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

The impact that rich-media assets have in a digital marketing context on the student recruitment process

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Award date:
2023

Awarding institution:
Coventry University

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The impact that rich-media assets have in a digital marketing context on the student recruitment process



By

Paul Smith

Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA)

May 2022

The impact that rich-media assets have in a digital marketing context on the student recruitment process

By

Paul Smith

*A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the University's
requirements for the Degree of Doctor in Business Administration*

May 2022



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The following ethics applications were submitted and approved by the CU ethics system:

1. Access to literature both physical and digital for the literature review (P61334)
2. The survey distributed to the CU UCAS applicants (P75331)
3. The use of Google and YouTube analytics relating to the CU sites (P61147)
4. Focus groups conducted at Schools and Colleges (P77511)
5. Focus groups at CU (P93615)
6. YouTube-based Vlog data analysis (P93202)



Applicant: Paul Smith

Project Title: The use and application of rich-media assets as HE recruitment tools in a digital marketing context.

Certificate of Ethical Approval

This is to certify that the above named applicant has completed the Coventry University Ethical Approval process and their project has been confirmed and approved as Low Risk

Date of approval:

19 September 2017

Project Reference Number: P61334



Applicant: Paul Smith

Project Title: The impact that rich-media assets have in a digital marketing context on the student recruitment process.

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Date of approval:

20 August 2018

Project Reference Number: P75331



Applicant: Paul Smith

Project Title: The use and application of rich-media assets as HE recruitment tools in a digital marketing context.

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Date of approval:

19 September 2017

Project Reference Number: P61147



Applicant: Paul Smith

Project Title: The impact that rich-media assets have in a digital marketing context on the student recruitment process.

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Date of approval:

16 November 2018

Project Reference Number: P77511



Applicant: Paul Smith

Project Title: The use and application of rich-media assets as HE recruitment tools in a digital marketing context.

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Date of approval:

11 August 2019

Project Reference Number: P93615



Applicant: Paul Smith

Project Title: The impact that rich-media assets have in a digital marketing context on the student recruitment process.

Certificate of Ethical Approval

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Date of approval:

05 August 2019

Project Reference Number: P93202

Acknowledgements

I want to express my gratitude for the support and guidance that my supervisor Maureen Meadows has consistently offered me. Sincere thanks also go to my second supervisors, Danielle Talbot and David Jarvis, especially during the final stages of my research journey. Additionally, my thanks go to all the various members of the DBA course team who have delivered an exceptional experience for all involved.

Finally, I wish to thank my family, who have become accustomed to a father or husband who vanishes away into the back room seeking silence and solitude.

The impact that rich-media assets have in a digital marketing context on the student recruitment process

Abstract

Rich-media is driving applicant engagement within the higher education recruitment process, yet research into this area is limited. Responding to the current gap, this study aims to explain the emerging impact of rich-media on student recruitment choice criteria in a higher education digital marketing context. Higher education applicants inhabit a digitally connected world where online engagement and presence are a fundamental part of consumer experience. To explore this topic, the research adopts a mixed methods approach utilising qualitative and quantitative data from three key data sources; a survey, focus groups and Vlog content analysis. The study focuses on UK undergraduate applicants aspiring to join a modern higher education institution.

The findings confirm that many applicants are inspired by rich-media. Within this field, the growth of social media influencers or vloggers was a dominant theme; these often entertaining and emotionally charged interactions are emerging as influential factors in the applicant's decision-making process. In response, a social engagement framework was created for HE marketing managers depicting how potential students engage with digital media during the applicant-to-student journey. By reflecting on the stages of applicant digital social participation, this study presents a framework that maps the social media journey and provides the basis for structured marketing engagement points. The framework offers a platform-agnostic approach focusing on appropriate communication points to improve the customer journey. In addition, the framework identifies potential networked communities that enable applicants to connect, communicate and focus on topics that are relevant to their interests.

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Introduction

Chapter One

1.0 Introduction

This chapter introduces the core areas of research interest and outlines the context of the study. This leads to the research question, aims, objectives and how the study produces relevant, actionable knowledge that contributes to theoretical debates. Finally, the thesis structure is presented to guide the reader through the document.

There are a myriad of reasons why an applicant creates their hierarchy of universities to list within their UCAS application. Understanding the applicant decision-making process and identifying the points that can support and influence a potential student are fundamental components of any higher education marketing strategic planning process (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006, Ming 2010, Pratminingsih and Soedijati 2011). Therefore, this thesis has identified patterns of touchpoints that take place during the applicant to student journey that enable meaningful engagement to occur.

In today's digitally connected society, applicants desire more than just information; they want to feel inspired, entertained and valued. Applicants want to understand the modules they will be studying and the lifestyle they will be living. This information cannot always be found in the smiling faces located in university prospectuses. Customers want to feel involved in the consumption of information and equally in its production, review, and dissemination. Through engagement with various forms of social, digitally enabled media, applicants are shifting towards a shared experience, one that is connected to their emotional state of being (Farrell et al. 2017, Lindgren 2017, Zuckerberg 2021). The customer experience also relies on trusted and trustworthy sources of information that are increasingly located outside of the institutional marketing channels. Both applicants

and higher education institutions are motivated to create a trusting partnership and improve the applicant journey, yet few routes currently exist to do it collaboratively.

This study draws on data gathered from questionnaires, focus groups and vlog reviews to explore the core motivational drivers for choice criteria of UK undergraduate UCAS applicants. In the Higher Education (HE) marketing context, applicants are recognised as customers who have shifted from passive consumers of marketing material to active participants, producing material that holds real marketing value. In addition, universities are now applying business marketing concepts that are re-modelling the applicant and institutional relationship (Coates, Dollinger and Lodge 2018).

This research presents qualitative and quantitative data, analysis, and findings to establish applicants preferred modes of engagement and to understand the impact that rich-media resources have on their choice criteria. Using the 7Ps (**p**roduct, **p**rice, **p**lace, **p**romotion, **p**eople, **p**hysical facilities and **p**rocesses) educational marketing mix, the data analysed has been structured into appropriate themes (Fox and Kotler 1995). However, the study did identify an additional category, 'emotions', that can influence an applicant's behaviour and, therefore, applicant levels and enrolment. Both positive and negative emotional states are acknowledged within the data reviewed as influencing factors.

Digital media has always been a part of the social experience for the current generation of undergraduate university applicants. Previous HE related research has explored the growth of social media and the marketing potential that this new digital era holds. However, there is a gap in existing research that fails to identify how applicants and students use social media to be social. Therefore, there is a need to understand how and when to communicate and engage with customers while adopting a supportive, relevant, and social approach.

1.1 Context

This study draws on research and data compiled and analysed over five years (2016-2021). During this period, we have witnessed significant social change produced through the accelerated use of technology and the unique and natural phenomena of the global pandemic (Azhar 2021). These changes have resulted in substantial transformations in the operational practices of public sector services worldwide, including higher education. As the UK tries to recover from the impact of COVID-19, both the economic climate and Government reforms will reshape the higher education landscape.

The long-standing global demand for mass education had impacted the higher education sector before COVID-19 occurred (Chapleo and O'Sullivan 2017, Bennington and Brennan 2008). The HE environment was already undergoing significant changes as it shifted towards a highly competitive landscape (Brown and Carasso 2013). The recent UK political drive for massive growth in HE has occurred during a period of reducing student numbers due to a decrease in birth rates. This reduction was coupled with the effect of Brexit and the resulting decline in the number of EU students studying in the UK.

As the burden of costs gradually shifted from state to student, the expectations of the service provided have also altered towards a highly monitored and regulated environment. Within this new commercialised HE environment, potential students were viewed and treated as paying customers, and universities became the service providers (Bennington and Brennan 2008, Ivy and Naude 1999). In addition, the rapid growth of higher education within the UK system and the drop in potential student numbers have created an increase in marketing activity. As a result, a competitive environment now exists to recruit high-quality applicants or to fulfil the need to attract enough fee-paying students to balance the institutional financial commitments (Bennington and Brennan 2008).

Before 2000, the prevalent academic literature and empirical research considering HE marketing activity primarily discussed printed material and face-to-face communication. Since the emergence of social media, new and overt forms of marketing that exploit this emerging social system have dominated contemporary debates. However, the literature reviewed lacks focus attributed to the use of rich-media within this context, including the integration of film or live streaming. The shift towards digital video traffic is evident in other spaces, with CISCO (2020) reporting that 'Globally, video traffic represents 79 per cent of all IP traffic (both business and consumer) with an annual growth rate of 31 per cent.' The primary function of rich-media assets in the context of this research is to supply information in an appropriate format to potential applicants that will help support and direct their choice of HE institution. Customers will use the information provided as one measure to assess which course is most suitable for them (Molesworth, Nixon, Scullion 2011: 30). This dramatic shift from a text biased information source towards new dynamic forms of media consumption jeopardises established marketing approaches and digital marketing strategies.

During the initial stages of this study, TikTok started to emerge as a new social platform and Facebook launched its 'Live' capability. These advancements presented an early clue about future modes of engagement and further expansion of the digital landscape into a connected society. Furthermore, the global pandemic created significant transformations in the acceptable norms of digital social engagement, evidenced by a substantial increase in the use of cloud-based video conferencing services. These new forms of digitised media engagement have supported the arrival of a new breed of influencers that have disrupted traditional marketing structures through digital social networks. Influencers in this context relate to unknown peers who offer advice via a variety of digitally networked media sources relating to their experience of applying to an institution. The new virtual celebrity voice of the Vlogger or influencer employ charismatic authority to market their opinion or the sponsored institutional message to a vast collection of followers. In

addition, co-created marketing or customer-generated reviews have become an integral part of the contemporary digital marketplace, but this is currently an emerging strand of HE marketing practice.

Technology and the expectations of how we will engage with it continue to evolve, with the latest announcement of the rebranding of Facebook into Meta offering another glimpse into a possible future (Zuckerberg 2021). The promise from Mark Zuckerberg at Facebook's annual conference 2021 is that social engagement will be shifting towards a 'metaverse'. In this new domain immersive technologies will enable emotionally connected engagement that allows participants to 'feel present' in the moment (Zuckerberg 2021). For educational institutions, this technological advance might be the thread that joins the applicants' emotional connection in the decision-making process to a virtual marketing environment.

1.2 Research question

To what extent does rich-media impact the decision making process of UK undergraduate applicants in a contemporary digital marketing environment?

Rich-media in this context refers to the digital advertising interpretation that includes features like video, audio and elements that encourages the audience to interact or engage with the content (Google 2021).

1.3 Research aims

This study aims to present a contemporary perspective on how rich-media can support the application decision-making process and connect with a more holistic institutional marketing approach.

The rationale for initially commencing this study derived from three key driving factors:

1. This study is undertaken in part to meet the requirements of a DBA, and therefore, it has a business-orientated focus.
2. The core area of business interest is the higher education recruitment market intentionally linked to Coventry Universities (CU) 2021 corporate strategy.
3. The insights gained will contribute to current theoretical debates and CU higher education marketing strategies and practices.

1.4 Research objectives

1. Identify what the key factors that influence student choice within the current higher education digital marketing environment are.
2. Establish which modes of information delivery are the most appropriate in supporting the decision-making process.
3. Identify any common patterns of digital engagement that exist in the applicant-to-student journey.
4. Establish if there are any significant differences in how diverse sources of information are received and interpreted from the customer perspective.
5. Analyse the extent that authors and producers of rich-media become an integral part of how the material is perceived.

1.5 Contributions to theory and practice

This study demonstrates that emotional responses impact applicant preferences positively and negatively. Specifically, but not limited to, the euphoric moment of physical engagement with 'place' described as the 'vibe', alongside the damaging impact that the stressful application 'process' creates. Applicant decisions can pivot in these moments of emotional impact.

This study highlights the need to create a partnership between applicants, influencers, and higher education institutions. The focus groups and Vlog studies demonstrate the significant impact that peer advocate reviews now hold over the applicant decision-making process. This aspect is a defining feature of the research undertaken.

The research argues that the applicant journey is also dependent on the perceived trustworthiness of the information provider. Peer-to-peer communications and face-to-face academic engagement are indicated as trustworthy sources. Trust has been presented in the findings chapter as an emotional response in both the physical and digital environments. Within both settings, the added value contributed through trustworthy social connections and interaction resulted in an extended need to examine what constitutes valuable digital engagement.

The literature explored relating to the use of social media as a marketing tool focused on the potential benefits that social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter had in contributing towards marketing strategies (Antoniadis et al. 2017). This research takes both the theoretical understanding and practical engagement with social media forward by presenting a new and insightful approach that is platform-agnostic. This is achieved by evaluating the current use of social media as a marketing tool and considering how and when social engagement fits into the applicant's needs and wants. This tactic has produced a richer insight into the applicant's social media journey, creating an appropriate balance between paid, owned and earned digital social media engagement. In the discussion chapter this study presents a map of the applicant social media journey (Figure 8.2) that provides the basis for a new structured approach to digital marketing engagement.

1.6 Contributions of the research for practice

The following recommendations are drawn from the Discussions chapter (Chapter 8) and represent routes to enhancing the customer journey through an effective marketing strategy. These recommendations have been selected based on their relevance to a post-pandemic society:

- Adopting the applicant social media journey presented in chapter 8 allows digital marketing strategies to remain platform agnostic yet improve customer engagement at key influencing points. This structure provides a comprehensive approach for the CU to create a meaningful social media strategy.
- CU needs to seek advocates who can positively promote the organisation and support peers throughout the applicant social media journey (Figure 8.2). New voices and perspectives can be integrated into future marketing activities by working with students as co-creators and influencers.
- Emotions can drive actions, and CU could achieve a competitive advantage if they adopted a strategic approach towards managing the emotions of applicants. In addition, Web3 technology offers new routes to connect at an emotional level with future audiences, and CU should be innovators in this new environment.
- This study identified the need to review the UCAS application process's impact on pupils' mental health. The HE sector can respond by identifying key moments that require support or potential amendment to the application process. If resources could be created and support structures added that reduced the negative impact of applying to a university, both applicants and application levels would benefit.

1.7 Structure of the study

- The first chapter sets the broader context and scene for this study by outlining the current operating environment that this professional doctorate has been undertaken. The research question, aims, and objectives of this study are also introduced.
- The second chapter presents the first literature review that investigates and critically reviews the current higher education marketing environment. The subsection summarises some of the central debates that have been explored within the field and creates the foundation for this study.
- Chapter three considers the broader understanding of customer and consumer behaviour. This second literature review chapter presents the appropriate theories linked to the applicant decision making process.
- The fourth chapter is structured into a series of subsections. The first element considers the appropriate research philosophy and the approach to establishing a theoretical grounding. This is followed by an introduction of the research strategy, tools and techniques. Finally, the ethical considerations of the research are presented.
- Chapters five, six and seven take the reader through the various quantitative, and qualitative data collection steps that have been undertaken and the data is presented. These sections include the questionnaire, focus groups and vlog transcripts.
- Chapter eighth discusses the findings from the questionnaire, focus groups and vlog chapters. The data analysis is structured using the 7Ps educational marketing mix framework (Fox and Kotler 1995). The combination of both quantitative and qualitative data sources creates a mixed methods approach to address the research aims and question.

- In the concluding chapter, the significant points revealed throughout this thesis are drawn together to present recommendations about the knowledge gained, implications for future practice and emerging research opportunities. A positionality statement has been included that reflects any potential bias that might have influenced the study. Finally, in response to the unprecedented period that this research has been completed, two reflections have been included. The first considers the global pandemic's impact on the study, and the second is a personal reflection on the research journey.

Literature Review

Marketing in Higher Education Institutions

Chapter Two

2.0 Introduction

The literature review is divided into two chapters. The first chapter (Chapter two) investigates and critically reviews the current marketisation of HE, presenting an overview of scholarly articles. The second literature chapter (Chapter three) will establish a greater understanding of consumer behaviour, interpretation, and behavioural response related to contemporary marketing material.

2.1 Literature review methodology

The approach adopted for this literature review is based upon a rapid systematic review that locates key texts and critically appraises them according to their relationship to the research question, based on predetermined search criteria (Bryman and Bell 2015, Lewis, Saunders and Thornhill 2016). This approach was undertaken by initially establishing the search parameters based on the research question:

To what extent does rich-media impact the decision-making process of UK undergraduate applicants' in a contemporary marketing environment?

The scope of the review will be restricted by a shorter time frame than expected for a full systematic review, which directly connects to the increased use of rich-media due to technological advances (Bryman and Bell 2015). During the initial search stages of this

review, it was apparent that rich-media and its relationship to online marketing are intrinsically linked to the evolution of broadband (Dibb et al. 2016: 561). In order to locate and examine the appropriate body of theory, a time frame was identified that captured the window of progress relevant to the technological requirements for the development of a digital brand experience. The distinct era of Web 2.0, search engine optimisation, social networks and MOOCs is difficult to establish. However, a consensus in the literature indicated that post-2008 would provide an acceptable time span (Corley, Jourdan and Ingram 2013, Miles 2010, Haenlein and Kaplan 2016).

2.2 Literature platforms

The initial search applied keyword searches relating to the key areas of investigation and the definition of rich-media. Google Scholar and CU Locate were used to identify literature sources. The following search parameters were then applied to narrow down the scope of the investigation.

The following exclusions were applied:

- Text not published in English due to translation time and cost implications.
- Text that contains a bias towards international recruitment or focuses on the recruitment processes outside of the UK was excluded.
- Discipline-specific text that only considers limited subsections of the range of academic subjects was excluded.
- How to... guides that are not critically reflective texts were discounted.

(Lewis, Saunders and Thornhill 2016).

There was a considerable overlap of material found on Google Scholar and CU Locate. When an item was identified from both sources, CU Locate was prioritised for ease of access. The texts were scanned for appropriate titles that linked directly to the keyword

searches. When further filtration was required, texts were selected based on the highest citation levels and applicable connections to the research question. Occasionally, grey or primary literature (material not controlled by commercial publishers) was referenced. This additional search was required because of the rapid change in the digital marketing context and the global pandemic's impact on the study's relevance. Grey literature negates the delay created by formal publishing processes and can provide adequate coverage of new topics (Lewis, Saunders and Thornhill 2016). The final constraint was based on accessibility, particularly regarding Google Scholar. Where a document could not be sourced without payment or duplication was found through Locate, it was noted, and a request submitted if viewed vital for the review.

2.3 Defining rich-media assets

Rich-media refers to digital content that enables an engaged audience experience, often with an interactive component related to digital advertising (ClickZ 2000, Google 2021, Rouse 2021). Suzanne Brisendine is usually credited with creating the term rich-media whilst she worked as the director of PC advertising for Intel (Mand 1998). The term signalled a shift from static banners to sites that integrated dynamic features, including audio and video streaming. To help clarify the intended use of the term, the following definitions have been sourced from online advertising and marketing literature:

The defining characteristic of rich-media is that the media exhibits dynamic motion and this motion can occur over time or in response to an interaction with the user (Know Online Advertising 2013).

Rich-media is a digital advertising term for an ad that includes advanced features like video, audio, or other elements that encourage viewers to interact and engage with the content (Google 2021).

2.4 Marketing definition

In this review, the definition of marketing proposed by Armstrong and Kotler (2010: 29) as ‘the process by which companies create value for customers and build strong customer relationships in order to capture value from customers in return’ will be used. This will be set alongside the statement regularly quoted in related literature by the American Marketing Association (2017) that ‘marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.’ These definitions of marketing derive from the business sector, but resentment towards adopting this approach within the higher education sector is still prevalent (Canterbury 2008, Guilbault 2016, Simic and Stimac 2012).

‘Marketing is a central activity of modern institutions, growing out of their quest to effectively serve some area of human need’ (Fox and Kotler 1995: 6). ‘Marketing is a customer-focused discipline centred on an exchange between two (or more) parties’ (Masterson, Phillips and Pickton 2021). HEI’s exchange in the context of this study is devoted to the exchange of knowledge. An improved alignment of student expectations and experiences can enhance student satisfaction and retention (Cook and Rushton 2009, Elsharnouby 2015 and Wright 2014).

2.5 The marketisation of higher education

Research related to higher education marketing in the early 1990s was limited. It was predominantly located around recruitment connected to the need for improving the academic quality of the student body, alongside a drive towards increasing opportunities for minority students (Hayes 2009). Molesworth and Scullion (2016) indicate that the dominant academic attitude at the time towards HE strategic marketing and recruitment activities was rejection and resistance, viewing marketisation as inappropriate for HE. During this period, the prevailing attitude was an inward-looking, lecturer-centred

educational system where students were grateful for the education they received (Gibbs and Maringe 2009).

Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion's (2011: 16) research illustrates the gradual shifting attitude from reluctance to acceptance of dominant market forces, suggesting that 'marketisation is a reality that academics have to live with'. A study by Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2016: 27) identified that 'most educational institutions now recognise the need to market themselves, in what is for universities an increasingly competitive environment.' In this respect, the contemporary scholarly discourse, located within related research, has moved towards marketing as 'taken-for-granted' in the higher education sector (Molesworth and Scullion 2016: 129, Wright 2014).

In 2020 the combined impact of the Pandemic, Brexit and a declining student population brought a range of uncertainties that forced HEI to adjust their marketing approaches, echoing for-profit businesses strategies (Altinbasak-Farina and Tasel-Jurkovic 2021). Integrating existing business-focused marketing tools into HE is not a new endeavour, as clearly outlined in Fox and Kotler's original publication of 'strategic marketing for educational institutions' published in 1985. Gibbs and Maringe (2009: 23) question the transferability of business marketing techniques into an educational environment, suggesting that a better way might exist to 'allow higher education to flourish'. Some critics also claim that universities are failing in their marketing strategies because they are not going far enough down the pathway of adopting established marketing techniques and building appropriate customer relationships (Helgesen 2008). The lack of target marketing, segmentation, the integration of a marketing mix and the relevant market positioning are often cited as reasons some institutions fail to recruit (McGrath 2008). While Gibbs and Maringe do not elaborate on what the suggested new way might be, Molesworth and Scullion (2016) imply a metaphorical line has been drawn, one where marketisation is accepted providing it sits outside of the classroom.

The publication of 'The future of Higher Education' White Paper (DFES 2003) represented a shift in the income streams received by Universities and spawned a new mindset of the student as customer. As a direct result of the white paper, 87% of HEI now charge the maximum tuition fee of £9,250 per year (DFE 2017). In addition, market forces created through student choice, an increasing focus on league tables and provider competition have accelerated the commercialisation of higher education (Elsharnouby 2015, Wright 2014). This competitive environment is intended to be more efficient, more innovative, and more responsive to students (Brown 2011). Echoing this transformation, the field of scholarly research with a subject emphasis on marketing within the higher education sector has rapidly developed.

Since the publication of the white paper, the UK education system has continued to undergo a metamorphosis, rapidly evolving and expanding into the global markets to attract new staff, students, and research funding (Corrons et al. 2021). This transformation is not just inspired by international competition, as a new range of private providers are additionally entering the market (Barber, Donnelly and Rizvi 2013). As a result, institutions now need to go to considerable lengths to differentiate their educational offering from their rivals (Brown 2011). In response to these changes, universities are increasing budget provisions towards their marketing activities, with some HEI allocating more than £3m for marketing purposes (Hall and Weale 2019).

Marketing should engage, inform, and transform audiences. Still, limitations exist around the levels of information available and the range of information an applicant might require before joining an institution (Cook and Rushton 2009). Research has highlighted that a wide range of experiences and influences impact the customer journey and information needs differ (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2016, Melanthiou, Thrassou and Vrontis 2007). A positive emphasis identified in some of the recent HE marketing literature reviewed is the need to inform and support the pre-purchase decision-making process rather than purely sell the product (Canterbury 2008, Gibbs and Maringe 2009).

2.6 The service provided

When exploring the plethora of research material relating to HE marketing, a consensus can be identified around the function of HE as ‘Service’ providers (Altindag et al. 2016, Bowden 2011, Guilbault 2016). The most applicable definition of a service is ‘applied knowledge for another party’s benefit’ (Bolton 2016: 12). Universities are classified as services because they deliver an outcome created by the consumer and provider (Bowden 2011). The combination of a high level of customer involvement, the variety of services provided and the long-term nature of the relationship lead to questions regarding the expectations of the service users (Chalcraft, Hilton and Hughes 2015). Students have a high level of interaction with the service provider, and they are the primary beneficiaries of the HE service, distinguishing them from product-based consumption, where the benefits are derived from the product supplied (Guilbault 2016). The importance of establishing a distinction between tangible objects like cars or televisions and the service sector is that object-based purchases do not require the same level of risk as service outcomes. The value and quality of tangible goods can be reviewed at the point of purchase. In contrast, ‘the value attributed to a service can only be determined by the customer as they use the service for themselves’ (Masterson, Phillips and Pickton 2021: 275). A service provider’s outcome might be perceived in terms of behavioural transformation rather than the acquisition of goods (Gibbs and Maringe 2009: 4).

The COVID-19 pandemic has tested the various HEI’s ability to rapidly convert from physical to virtual in the way they teach and market their courses. This conversion has presented some new opportunities and challenges enabled by rich-media and the transformational power of new technologies (Azhar 2021). These changes, inspired by external factors, will have a long-lasting influence on the future of HE (Altinbasak-Farina and Tasel-Jurkovic 2021). HEIs continue to grapple with the long-term economic effects

of the global pandemic and in this complex environment attracting enough customers and supporting their diverse needs will remain a priority for HEI.

2.7 The reshaping of digital marketing in higher education

The foundations of digital marketing and the origins of e-commerce can be located around 1980-1990, when the focus of activity was predominantly sited around product launches (Gillin 2009). The new markets of the 1980s were described by Toffler (1980: 39) as 'nothing more than an exchange network, a switchboard, through which goods or services, like messages, are routed to their appropriate destinations'. While it is still debatable what the function of the current incarnation of the internet is, Toffler (1980) accurately predicted a paradigm shift towards a knowledge-based economy mediated through technology. The current mix of social, economic, and political demands are accelerating the development of new forms of technologies at an ever-faster pace, while HEI are changing more slowly, leaving a chasm between the two (Azhar 2021, Lindgren 2017). The breadth and speed of change mean that HEI need to adapt and adopt the relevant technologies and new infrastructures of social exchange or risk being lost to a new era of education.

The dominant initial digital touchpoint between HEI and undergraduate applicants is the university's website. Therefore, the university website acts as a bridge between the institution and the customers it wants to attract (Das and Daun-Barnett 2013). With the addition of rich-media, sophisticated social networks, blogs and streaming services, HEI websites now need to be attractive, quick to locate and easy to navigate (Corrons, et al. 2021, Ivanov 2012, Masterson, Phillips and Pickton 2021). Websites increasingly rely on rich-media to embed a visual experience (Lindgren 2017: 109). Therefore, the HE-marketing mix needs to integrate inspiring audio, images and videos that are deemed critical for the successful recruitment of new students.

Digital communication plays a dominant role in the decision-making process of digital natives (Peruta and Shields 2018, Schichet 2021). According to Das and Daun-Barnett (2013: 113), 'students and parents rely on web-based tools to navigate the choice process,

yet little research has been done to understand this environment'. The existing research on HE digital marketing appears to be biased towards exploring how social media platforms contribute to the applicant decision-making process (Constantinides and Stagno 2011, Peruta and Shields 2018). Furthermore, a new online culture has emerged since the advent of Web 2.0, enabling applicants to actively engage with media via online platforms and mobile devices. Kumar and Kaushik (2022: 27) state that 'consumer engagement has recently emerged as an essential and central construct in marketing'. Lindgren (2017: 11) suggests that 'today, we live in a digital society in the sense that we are in an era where our lives, our relationships, our culture, and our sociality are digitised, digitalised, and affected throughout by digital processes.'

2.8 Digital marketing in a Web 2.0 environment

As we now interpret it, the internet has evolved from information retrieval to interactivity. This digital environment is often referred to as Web 2.0, which is less about the underlying software but refers to the shift in engagement. The advent of Web 2.0 enabled and encouraged interactivity that changed marketing communications into a two-way collaborative process, giving a voice to the customer and reshaping the consumer decision-making process (Dibb et al. 2016, Lindgren 2017). While there is no single definition of Web 2.0, French (2011: 88) draws out five interrelated components that signal the change in web use brought about via Web 2.0: 'Social computing, social media, content sharing, filtering, recommendations and web applications.' Marketers now use these components to create appropriate virtual communities that connect with the individual, restructuring the social landscape. (Lindgren 2017, Pavlou and Stewart 2002).

Farrell et al. (2017: 59) discuss one such platform, stating that 'practitioners in every sector across the world consider YouTube as an efficient platform for advertising and marketing, and higher education makes no exception'. Alongside the corporate videos created by HEIs, YouTube hosts a diverse range of user-generated content, including the

format of vlog-based reviews. Students use vlogs and social media as a ‘conversational mode of communication through which they may seek opinion but not detailed information on which to base decisions’ (Dean and Gibbs 2015: 167).

The vlogs (films) relevant to this study are created, produced, and published by students (Vloggers) and intended for the applicant market. This experience credential helps create the emotional bond and authentic voice that is often lacking from traditional marketing created and distributed by educational institutions (Elsharnouby 2015 and Martinez-Lopez et al. 2017). These films are often peer-to-peer lived experiences designed to support the next generation of applicants along the UCAS applicant decision-making journey. Lindgren (2017: 121) suggests that ‘video affinity’ occurs when the author and audience come together around visually enhanced communication or rich-media to create communities of shared interest. Student Vloggers who shared information about their application journey and lived experience in a positive manner benefit the university in several ways, for example, by enhancing brand awareness (Elsharnouby and Naheen 2021). This form of earned media sits outside the HEI’s marketing control yet acts as a powerful way to communicate with the appropriate audience (Masterson, Phillips and Pickton 2021).

As students are the key stakeholders in the university environment, using the student voice to express persuasive messages through personal experience can help create a credible, factual, and trustworthy mode of communication (Abdelhamid 2020). In addition, these forms of co-created advocate communications represent individual opinions and help shape the thinking of other consumers (Dibb et al. 2016: 565).

Students have a dominant social presence within their peer groups. They possess influencing powers that could benefit or hinder HE institutions, but social marketing is not an exact science or set of exclusively definable elements (French 2011). What has emerged from contemporary research is a cautionary warning about capitalising

on social media groups (Jurgenson and Ritzer 2010). When the marketing activities are viewed as having little to do with education and the well-being of the students, they risk being interpreted as adopting an overwhelming consumerist approach (Dean and Gibbs 2015: 156). Seeking to turn social interaction into a marketing opportunity would require a delicate approach, as it can equally pose a significant threat to marketers (Dibb et al. 2016: 568).

Gillin (2007: 12) considers the driver for change in the digital domain to be the commodification of the mass market, influenced through a collection of ‘powerful voices’ that have found a place within the new market. Influencers who have credibility within the virtual communities, can be mobilised and could affect the markets (Gillin 2007: 73). However, these digital communities still embody power structures and hierarchies. For example, an individual’s status needs to be established by the number of followers a person has, and the more they have, the more influence they command (Gillin 2007, Lindgren 2017). Some researchers refer to these user-generated opinions as ‘electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) when social interactions emphasise an individual’s opinion that might influence followers (Brandao, Carvalho and Pinto 2021). Marketers can monitor this social sphere to acquire information to help solve issues or inform decision-making (Lindgren 2017). HEIs can act as information providers in these social spaces by participating as community members, but they should avoid taking advantage of their position (Martinez-Lopez et al.). Hollebeek and Macky (2019: 29) suggest a shift is required, moving from ‘selling to helping consumers by offering them relevant, valuable content free-of-charge’.

2.9 Knowledge economy

Toffler’s (1980) reference to a ‘knowledge-based economy’ links to contemporary thoughts on the value of the digital markets, characterised by broadening the boundaries of knowledge and the rapid pace of emerging technology (Simic and Stimac 2012).

Knowledge economies value education, innovation and the emergence of new ideas that generate economic development and prosperity (Farrell et al. 2017, Gibbs and Maringe 2009: 11). Miles (2010: 213) suggests that ‘the knowledge society has created the need for a revolutionary change in the way we think about service-based marketing, moving away from a goods-dominant logic.’ Today, as our online connections expand, HE institutions can interject into these social dialogues with targeted digital advertising. Most social media sites offer some form of targeted marketing, and Google’s AdWords is an example delivering the following:

‘Your audience is who you want your ads to reach. You can reach people based on:

- Who they are
- Their interests and habits
- What they’re actively researching
- People who’ve already interacted with your ads, website or app.

(Google 2021a)

This rapidly growing form of digital marketing relies on big data or social relationship data, enabling companies to sell to the appropriate, algorithmically selected audience (Gomez-Mejia 2020). HE marketing departments are now investing significant proportions of their marketing budget in these new forms of bespoke marketing tools. In 2020, ‘Anglia Ruskin University spent £515,000 on search engine advertising, £352,000 on social media and just £6,000 on Print’ (Hall and Weale 2019). The new knowledge economy has now revealed where its actual economic value sits, which is in the details of our data selves (Azhar 2021). A new stage of capitalism is being identified, one that is gaining recognition for exploiting the minds of those involved in the digital exchange system (Jurgenson and Ritzer 2010).

Universities need to be clear in their campaigns regarding who they aim to serve and how they communicate with them (Barber, Donnelly and Rizvi 2013). Modern marketing strategies stress the need for segmentation. If marketers want to target consumers with certain personality traits, they not only have to identify them; they also need to find ways to communicate with a specific segment without too much overspill into other segments (East, Wright and Vanhuele 2013).

Research on university choice suggests hyper-connectivity has forced a change to the traditional model of pushing communications via traditional media (Martinez-Lopez 2017). Consumers no longer trust institutional push messaging; they would rather opt-in and pull the information that suits their interests (Hollebeek and Macky 2019, Ivanov 2012). It is, therefore, essential to clarify which modes of engagement applicants are receptive to (Masterson, Phillips and Pickton 2021: 287).

When applicants and parents require information, they regularly need to navigate through complex web portals provided by HEIs. This can often make it difficult for individuals to locate the resources they are seeking (Das and Daun-Barnett 2013). Once the information is found, the material needs to convey the essence of what a course stands for and the benefits it will bring to the individual applying (Hunermund and Royo-Vela 2016). Each HE course has a limited but distinct market, and they are predominantly young tech-savvy individuals who arrive from an environment where formal and informal learning through online engagement is widespread (McHaney 2011: 140). Rich-media, created for this target audience, enables the potential applicant to gather the information they require without depending on a fixed time and place (Haenlein and Kaplan 2016). An example of the most widely used form rich-media used by HE is course-based videos hosted on YouTube and linked via university websites (Farrell et al. 2017). These films are created and produced for a niche audience's consumption and do not rely on customer social approval. However, the presented material requires 'constant monitoring and updating if the content is to remain accurate

and provide value' (Masterson, Phillips and Pickton 2021: 310). Though, the hybrid benefits of marketing via social approval demonstrated through shares, followers and emoji thumbs up seal of approval can help 'nudge' an audience in a given direction (French 2011).

Social networks and customer interaction with the digital brand experience are a key priority for many HE marketing strategies (Corrons et al. 2021, Dibb et al. 2016). However, what has emerged is that technology has changed the customer experience, making knowledge more accessible in different ways (Fanghanel and John 2016: 7). The digital-connected environment's future is already starting to reveal itself, with the potential shift to Web3, algorithms, and artificial intelligence reshaping how we will engage socially and exchange data (Bolton 2016, Hanlon2022). Computer-mediated communication enables an audience scattered over a global domain to draw upon information whenever they want, connecting either synchronously or asynchronously to address consumer requirements (Dibb et al. 2016). The effects of the global pandemic have hugely transformed society's reliance on digital communications. New forms of online self-expression have emerged, and the use of many existing platforms have grown at an exponential rate (Azhar 2021).

2.10 Summary of marketing in higher education

The main drivers of marketisation are being directed from a government level. This has been achieved by accelerating market competition in a race to increase student numbers, balanced against the need to maintain quality measured through various ranking and league tables (Molesworth, Nixon, Scullion 2011). HEI's continue to grapple with the long-term economic effects of the global pandemic and in this complex environment attracting enough customers and supporting their diverse needs will remain a priority for HEI. As new local and international players enter the UK education market the competition to attract applicants will only intensify. Traditional universities will need to

rethink their marketing approaches and act ambitiously to avoid being swept away on the sea of change (Barber, Donnelly and Rizvi 2013: 5).

Literature Review

Consumer Behaviour

Chapter Three

3.0 Introduction

This chapter sets the context that frames the broader understanding of customer and consumer behaviour and the influencer in the decision-making process concerning the marketisation of HE in England. The field of customer behaviour is complex and extensive. Therefore, identifying the appropriate theories connected to motivational concepts that link directly to applicant choice criteria requires a focused approach.

Echoing the time frame suggested in the higher education chapter, customer and consumer behaviour has evolved in parallel with the advent of Web 2.0 technologies and the marketisation of the HE sector (Lindgren 2017). Therefore, the majority of the literature considered was published between 2008 and 2022.

3.1 The Applicant

In HE there is a continued debate over referring to applicants or students as customers; there is no universal agreement that the student or applicant is a customer (Altinbasak-Farina and Tasel-Jurkovic 2021, Guilbault 2016). Applicant as customer positions the individual into the pre-purchase process, as opposed to the consumption stage of engaging with the goods or service (Gibbs and Maringe 2009: 34). The legal position and consensus in current HE literature indicate that students should be viewed and treated as paying customers and consumers of the service that HEIs provide (Altinbasak-Farina and Tasel-

Jurkovic 2021). This means that institutions must ensure that customers understand what they are 'buying', have access to appropriate sources of honest information, and are satisfied with the educational service provided (Guilbault 2016: 133, Bowden and Lay-Hwa 2011: 212, Elsharnouby 2015). The underlying subtext that sets the grounds for not viewing the student-as-customer is a belief in an 'agenda that seeks to discipline academic life through consumer pressure on higher education' (Molesworth, Nixon, Scullion 2011: 3).

When thinking about students through this lens, it is essential to consider who the dominant client base is. The HE marketing considered in this study is mainly aimed at 16 to 18-year-olds who are not familiar with making significant long-term purchase decisions (Brandao, Carvalho and Pinto 2021). Age is found to have a substantial impact on the customers' buying behaviour (Altinbasak-Farina and Tasel-Jurkovic 2021). Depending on a potential student's age, they will require different information and make different choices (Jisana 2014). Canterbury (2008: 17) suggests that this age group hardly know what the various educational benefits are and, therefore, decisions are often based on a 'feeling of well-being'; this is referred to as 'impulse buying' (Dibb et al 2016: 142). The literature shows that 'students have been identified as vulnerable consumers where financial matters are concerned, as they are in the main young and may have little financial experience' (Robson, Farquhar and Hindle 2017: 275). Fanghanel and John (2016: 35) discuss this in connection with the introduction of the fee structure and the prescribed political vision of a 'shared investment', resulting in the new interpretation of the student as a customer.

Tech-savvy consumers have become increasingly sceptical of traditional marketing and advertising, indicating a preference for learning through the acquisition of knowledge instead of being sold a product (Hollebeek and Macky 2019). This approach aligns with media brands' commercial aims of occupying consumer attention and supplying the desired information. Dibb et al. (2016: 161) suggest that due to the amount of time

consumers now spend online, their influencing factors and purchasing habits have changed. Masterson, Phillips and Pickton (2021: 25) determined that ‘changes in customer behaviour, driven by technological developments, present some of the greatest opportunities and challenges in marketing today’. The digital content marketing tools used by HEI and the engagement methods employed by potential students have had to adapt to this new terrain. Customer engagement in this new environment is no longer about one-way brand-related communications but also considers the consumer's ability to create user-generated content (Kaur et al. 2020). Through self-directed research into HE, applicants build a subconscious image of the HE service they aspire to purchase.

3.2 The decision-making process

To reach the stage of searching or applying for a particular course, a customer must first recognise the need to attend university and have a fundamental search parameter of the type of course they require (Blythe and Sethna 2016). The inspiration for this initial action may come from an external source, such as peers, parents, teachers, or a HEI (Masterson, Phillips and Pickton 2021).

The student application process, as suggested by Melanthiou, Thrassou and Vrontis (2007: 4), is a five-step process consisting of aspiration, search, gathering data, applying and enrolment. Similarly, Dibb et al (2016: 143) suggest a five-point buying decision process, including problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase and post-purchase evaluation. Blythe and Sethna (2016: 73) suggest that a staged process referred to as ‘developing goals’ is followed when an individual initially gathers information, then filters the data to create a consideration set and establish a hierarchy of goals.

The core components that connect directly to this study are the search, gathering of data, and evaluation of alternatives. When contemplating the pre-purchase stage, it seems

pertinent to stress that, while most of the previous research establishes a broad range of influence factors located at the pre-purchase stage, none claim to identify a definitive list. The process of structuring these determinates has been approached through various routes. Blythe and Sethna (2016) present a disciplined approach, referencing a diverse field of study ranging from psychology, sociology, anthropology and economics to neuroscience. Similarly, cultural, social, personal and psychological characteristics are identified as the drivers by Jisana (2014: 35). Finally, Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2016: 99) reference the broader spectrum of influencing factors; they conclude that ‘models are not attempting to show how all consumers make choices, they provide an outline of a typical decision-making process and there are no factors or characteristics that drive the choice of all students’.

Each institution has its strengths and weaknesses, and no one university can address the needs of all the customer groups (Barber, Donnelly and Rizvi 2013: 5). Universities, therefore, need to exploit different markets by linking their courses to an ethos that can locate them within a target segment:

‘Institutions that do not have a distinctiveness desired by students and which offer no practical solutions to the needs of diverse scholars will have to be content with a life in the shadows of competitors’ (Gibbs and Maringe 2009: 32).

Within the HE sector, the influence of socioeconomic groupings and enrolment is regularly under review, with widening participation projects aiming to influence decision-making attitudes (Bowen 2014). Das and Daun-Barnett (2013: 117) suggest that ‘students have access to types of information and the interpretation of that information is situated in the social and cultural contexts of each individual student’. Wright (2014: 92) suggests that ‘if universities do not properly recruit from the target customer segment

which is most likely to be satisfied with the institution's offering, then it will be necessary to satisfy the students who are recruited and do attend’.

Existing models of consumer behaviour include the ‘economic model’, where concepts of value and affordability are considered (Jisana 2014, Sethna and Blythe 2016). The economic approach presents one of the influencing characteristics in the marketing literature that impacts consumer choice (Dibb and Simkin 2008: 71). From an economic perspective, supply and demand are balanced through the price mechanism (Molesworth, Nixon, Scullion 2011: 26). Since the introduction of the higher fee levels, demand for degree-level education has continued to grow, but the fee price variations between institutions are limited. The DFE (2017: 29) claim that ‘there is no meaningful price competition in the higher education sector’. Therefore, understanding the appropriate criteria for economic segmentation would require a calculation that accounts for the complete cost package of attending an institution and the perceived long-term benefits that would be gained (Melanthiou, Thrassou and Vrontis 2007: 980). This approach is described by Das and Daun-Barnett (2013: 117) as being consistent with rational choice theories. Sethna and Blythe (2016) question the very extent that price has upon demand, with Foxall (2010: 5) claiming that formal economics as a basis for customer choice is an outdated perception and arguing that a wider range of stimuli is applied. For example, parents as potential financial stakeholders are often influential in setting their children on an academic pathway (Das and Daun-Barnett 2013).

An alternative route to assess customer motivation is the ‘status-attainment models’ when attainment patterns of the applicant overlap with variables such as reference groups to determine a student’s aspirations (Melanthiou, Thrassou and Vrontis 2007). The social role and status position are claimed to affect consumer behaviour profoundly (Jisana 2014: 35). Students self-categorise themselves into attainment and social groups and then apply a social comparison when selecting a HEI (Elshrnouby and Naheen 2021). Thus, as students search for information about the HE experience, they hope to get a glimpse of

how they will fit in both socially and academically (Peruta and Shields 2018: 131). In this sense, the social and economic models combine with the activities involved in seeking personal fulfilment, accompanied by a measure of attainment, derived from achieving a place at university and on course completion (Hunermund and Royo-Vela 2016: 114).

Factors that influence this approach are built from an individual's perception, as people occupy a myriad of potential roles set within different cultures (Masterson, Phillips and Pickton 2021). Blythe and Sethna (2016: 19) contribute an additional element that helps shape some of these subsections - 'attitude'; this is described as 'a propensity to respond in a consistent manner to a given stimulus'. Dibb et al. (2016: 155) claim that 'an individual learns attitudes through experience and interaction with others'. Drawn from behavioural science, this perspective connects brand identity and association, suggesting that changing an individual's mind starts with small interactions at the earliest brand awareness stages (Gillin 2007).

Dibb and Simkin (2008: 71) state that 'understanding the varying needs and requirements of different customers is fundamental to the principles of marketing'. If the applicants are 'attitude driven', they might not follow the anticipated search or evaluation of material before selecting an HEI (Altinbasak-Farina and Tasel-Jurkovic 2021). Emotional states of human behaviour are referred to as 'utilitarian or functional reinforcers' that can strengthen the drive to purchase and have been linked to intrinsic motivation or impulse buying (Foxall 2010: 7). A decision based on emotions is harder to influence, but interpreting and responding to an emotional state can still impact an outcome (Nair 2008: 232). Elements that could help drive the emotional decision are 'trust, commitment, dependence and relational'; these are referred to as relational states (Dant et al 2016: 54). Possibly the most important aspect in relation to this research is trust and its connections to the audience's faith in the information supplied via various communication channels. Trust has been cited as the key to improving recruitment, with customers' perceptions formed through openness, genuineness, and truthfulness (Guilbault 2016: 137).

Creating a marketing strategy based purely on individual aspirations would be difficult. Foxall (2010: 68) describes how considering several 'learnt histories' might help construct plausible histories that appeal to an appropriate target audience. The dominant social networks now hold certain types of data that enable automated histories to be constructed, and this level of 'psychographic' and 'behavioural' segmentation is possible for a price (Masterson, Phillips and Pickton 2021). Profiling in this way enables the HEI to select their students based on their nationality, ethnicity, religious and socioeconomic class and connect with others with similar traits (Elsharnouby and Naheen 2021: 3). However, the use of data-driven, algorithmic and automated segmentation carries the risk of only attracting a specific type of student, based on the ones you already have. Research has already proven that homophily can lead to a social breakdown (Azhar, 2021: 231). 'Algorithms that learn from historical data have not always reflected the good intentions of those who deployed them. Instead, they have exacerbated issues such as racial profiling' (Chen and Verghese 2020: 1).

Within a higher education context, institutional reputations have been built over centuries and can help universities withstand the tides of change (Barber, Donnelly and Rizvi 2013). Kernohan (2018) identified a trend of Russell Group institutions witnessing a growth in applications, with most other universities facing a decline in applications. Oxford and Cambridge have global recognition for knowledge and excellence, supported by global rankings that separate them from less reputable institutions. The 'behavioural perspective model' suggests that purchasing a well-known brand is in part connected to acquiring the attributes of the product class (Foxall 2010: 5). The perceived change in status gained from attending a Russell Group institution will depend upon an individual's social class and reference group, varying from acceptable expectation to unachievable (Elsharnnouby and Naheen 2021). Gibbs and Maringe (2009) refer to this inherent association as brand reputation, claiming that few institutions can mark out their territory in this way as most are commodities, in that they do not differentiate themselves

from the competition. To become the destination of choice, universities that are building upon their reputations have intensified their efforts via persuasive messages based on image (Molesworth and Scullion 2016: 130). Through their various communication channels, universities are showcasing their best image by highlighting their resources, staff and estates in an attempt to increase their brand equity (Hunermund, Royo-Vela 2016). Through enhancing brand reputation, universities enable the individual consumer to express an image to their reference groups that best reflects a projected personality (Sethna and Blythe 2016).

For many customers, the ability to trust a university perceived as a large institution seeking to gain from their applicant fees remains a source of tension. Therefore, applicants 'tend to use others' opinions and informal sources of information to form an attitude towards the university' (Elsharnouby and Naheen 2021: 5). This approach can remain a one-way process with applicants accessing recommender systems to help them make their decision, the sought recommendation is the desired end in its own right (Maslowska, Malthouse and Hollebeek 2021).

3.3 Consumer engagement

The growth of Web 2.0 based rich-media tools has shifted the initial mode of interactive engagement for HE consumers from the physical into the digital realm. The internet is now a social tool that has connected the masses in a socially networked environment that incorporates different levels of interactivity and social engagement (Corrons et al. 2021). For HE applicants, there is nothing new about using digital tools for establishing their choice criteria, building relationships, or for being social (Lindgren 2017). However, these digitally literate customers that HEI are looking to attract are increasingly seeking advice and guidance through comment threads and peer recommendations that often sit outside corporate control (Corrons et al. 2021: 2).

Within the Web 2.0 environment, the traditional divisions between producer and consumer of information have been eroded by interaction (Elsharnouby 2015). User-generated content is continuously produced, consumed, and altered by those acting collaboratively (Haenlein and Kaplan 2016). Co-creation of social knowledge drawn from computer-mediated communication is now predominantly focused on common interest groups (Chalcraft, Hilton and Hughes 2015). Consumers engage with virtual brand communities to access social networking with specific social groups (Kaur et al. 2020). These groups have been referred to as 'secondary relationships' in which people communicate with a single or a small non-geographically bound community of participants (Lievrouw and Livingstone 2006). 'Consumers who identify with the community develop an emotional sense of belonging both to the brand and the community' (Kaur et al. 2020: 2).

A potential route to generate, build and foster brand loyalty is engaging customers in virtual brand communities (Kaur et al. 2020). Unlike traditional advertising, corporate engagement in this environment focuses on developing customer engagement without overtly or directly trying to sell a product or service (Hollebeek and Macky 2019). This approach can strengthen relationships with customers by providing valuable content free of charge and involving them in brand co-creation (Martinez-Lopez 2017, Hollebeek and Macky 2019). In a HE context, an applicant who participates in a virtual community might seek a future possible self, striving for a vision of what they might become. 'The higher the match between a consumer's future self-concept and a brand image, the stronger the emotional bond between the consumer and brand will be' (Kumar and Kaushik 2022: 29).

Individuals are inclined to have a higher trust response to communities they encounter who have similar interests to them than in the HEI because perceived similarity leads to cognitive consistencies (Botsman 2015, Zogaj, Tscheulin and Olk 2020). The correlation between how a consumer perceives a brand and their self-concept is referred to as 'self-

congruence' (Kumar and Kaushik 2022). Applicants seeking to enhance their self-identity will pursue the HE environment that will contribute to their self-concept.

Returning to the concept of student as customer, a perception exists that 'they must be given what they want' even though these demands might conflict with what is required to deliver a high-level educational experience (Guilbault 2016: 135). Students publicly and privately express their opinions about the quality of service they are receiving, and they are now more likely to complain if the services cannot match their expectations (Bowden 2014, Hemsley-Brown and Khan 2021). Outside of higher education, if consumers do not get what they want, they can address quality issues through complaints and redress or switch to another provider. However, students are less likely to drive quality through switching providers as only 2% change courses (DFE 2017: 9). Once a positive relationship is established between the consumer and HE provider, the inclusion of an individual's direct experience into the marketing plans and through eWOM can improve brand reputation (Altinbasak-Farina and Tasel-Jurkovic 2021).

The National Student Survey (NSS) measures the quality of the relationship between students and the institution, allowing students to 'voice their opinions about the quality of the service they are receiving' (Bowden 2014: 211). The NSS affects league tables and, therefore, institutional reputation has created a HEI desire to achieve the highest levels of student satisfaction (Hemsley-Brown and Khan 2021). The use of the NSS as an indicator for understanding the student relationship with an institution has been questioned. Bowden (2014: 211) claim that 'student satisfaction, while a contributing determinant, alone was insufficient in generating loyalty'. Student satisfaction might not be best served by challenging coursework, but reducing the level of rigour to increase student satisfaction and retention is a dangerous pathway to tread (Wright 2014). Student satisfaction, trust and loyalty are achieved and most strongly determined by a high level of psychological attachment to the consumers HEI (Abdelmaaboud, Mahrous and Pena, 2020, Bowden 2011).

3.4 The influencer

Consumers' trust, association and dependence on digital communities has shifted from institutional faith to a new structure of authority in the form of independent digital influencers (Lindren 2017, Martinez-Lopez 2017). Social media influencer marketing operates by raising a brand profile, predominantly online, through the voice of a trusted and respected source (Lou and Yuan 2019). Both industry professionals and social media born celebrities occupy this new space where the main currency is the number of followers and influencer trustworthiness (Lindgren 2017). This is achieved through a large follower base and an informative, entertaining, and trustworthy voice that can inspire confidence in the institution being discussed (Dodd 2018). Applicants who have never engaged with a HEI may view a university as trustworthy or worth applying to, due to the opinions and information supplied via Vlogger recommendations (Kharouf, Lund and Sekhon 2014).

Within the HE Vlogger circles, smaller focused subsections can also be located. These niche groupings are based around subsets of focused interest, for example, an individual university or a focused point in the application process. The participants in these groups arrive with pre-existing motivational factors that are either served by the material viewed or the connection ends (Lindgren 2017). However, some followers establish longer-term links, particularly when the content creator continues with their sharing of personal experience that remains connected to and one step ahead of the intended audience (Farrell et al. 2017). Examples include the extension into postgraduate study and the initial steps into employment. The assumption here is that the viewer must identify some real gains from the information shared, and these gains should outweigh the potential losses or distrust in the 'informational influence' (Blythe and Sethna 2016: 347).

Applicants are also inclined to trust Vloggers they feel are like themselves or fit within a preconceived reference or aspirational group (Hardin 1993: 512). However, social media influencers' credibility is starting to be questioned as consumers become aware of the vast

financial rewards that can be achieved by these individuals through advertising. Influencers viewed as paid spokespersons for private gain and institutional benefit are now facing a decreasing social status (Zogaj, Tscheulin and Olk 2020).

Influencer marketing involves linking industries with social networks to help promote a particular brand (Lou and Yuan 2019). This popular method of gaining social endorsement requires a delicate balance between overt and covert routes to embed a marketing message. Blatant intervention from HE institutions or alternative commercial drivers could impact the trustworthiness, integrity and reliability of the information supplied (Abdelhamid 2020). Higher education institutions benefit from the social influencer endorsement if the view expressed is independent of commercial influence or the connection is subtle enough to go unnoticed (Brandao, Carvalho and Pinto 2020). The perceived unbiased advice of an influencer is often sought to create a sense of confidence in shaping the decision being made (Corrons et al. 2021). Ideally, the influencer will be credited with enough knowledge and trustworthiness to supply the confidence boost required to move the applicant into the next stage along the purchasing journey (Altinbasak-Farina and Tasel-Jurkovic 2021). Therefore, influencer generated content should be considered a critical component of a future HE marketing strategy when looking for routes to strengthen trustworthiness and online brand engagement (Brooks, Hughes and Swaminathan 2019, Kharouf, Lund and Sekhon 2014).

Influencers rely on their virtual communities to support and authenticate their actions and voice. YouTube generates the very credibility currency required to validate this through likes, views, and subscribers (Dodd 2018: 189). Comment threads within YouTube postings enable the audience to move from observers to engaged participants in dialogue with either the presenter or fellow followers (Farrell, et al. 2017). This form of endorsement exists through the balance of participant views and the trustworthiness they attribute towards that individual. Vloggers can either gain or lose their audience's trust based on shared opinions. This verification method affects the audience's confidence in

the message presented. Kharouf, Lund and Sekhon (2014: 362) state that ‘trust cannot represent the generalised perception of a group of people; rather, trust is held by the individual’. However, the HE Vloggers audience is seeking the collective endorsement of the individual presenter. The followers can then have faith in the authenticity and trustworthiness concerning the service provider review presented in the film. As Kharouf, Lund and Sekhon (2014: 362) also suggest, ‘the audience is willing to place their trust in the individual presenter as opposed to the institution being scrutinised’.

From a customer perspective, more specifically from a potential student view, rich-media assets are a subset of the broader higher education marketing mix of tools. They should represent a support mechanism for aiding in the decision-making process by presenting engaging and informative information that is appropriate to the audience. What has been demonstrated throughout this review is that the customers’ self-perception, brand relationship, personal context and list of hierarchical goals vary to the degree that the comprehension and interpretation of the material supplied will never be the same.

3.5 Summary of consumer behaviour

Aspects of student life step beyond the physical structures of the institution, including digital engagement, the social aspects and the relationships with peers and staff (Guilbault 2016). A holistic view of the educational experience needs to be considered and communicated in the marketing material produced to ensure that rich-media assets represent more than a localised version of life as a student (Peruta and Shields 2018).

Education is about people and the potential to transform lives, which is why the various debates outlined in this review regarding students as customers still evoke polarised views on this contentious issue (Guilbault 2016, Saunders 2015). To survive and thrive in this new HE environment, marketing practices need to consider a ‘philosophy and frame of thinking’ delivered through the ‘eyes of the customer’ (Melanthiou, Thrassou and Vrontis

2007: 988). The applicant or student's role in the HE partnership has already transformed from a passive information-seeking position to an active producer or co-creator of material (Elsharnouby 2015, Peruta and Shields 2018).

Social identity has been recognised as a significant contributing factor in the applicant's choice criteria. Customers seek to connect with a specific social group with perceived similarities between their self-perceptions and the community they aspire to join (Blythe and Sethna 2016). Brandao, Carvalho and Pinto (2021: 270) states that consumers 'rely on user-generated eWOM to make daily life decisions in university-related matters, like course choice.' If students develop a sense of belongingness to the HEI and the community, they are more likely to engage in supportive behaviour towards other students and applicants. (Elsharnouby and Naheen 2021: 8).

Understanding applicant choice criteria by recognising key customer values will help establish what should be presented in future marketing material, including the rich-media aspects (Dibb and Simkin 2008). However, despite the best efforts of the marketing teams, a recent study by Kernohan (2018) indicated that 'students are choosing the same kind of things as they would have in previous years'.

This chapter has critically reviewed the appropriate existing literature that has created a foundation for the study. The review focused on key topics that linked to the research question: assessing the current gaps in the existing texts. The next chapter will provide details of the proposed data collection methods adopted to address the research question.

Research Methodology

Chapter Four

4.0 Introduction

In the preceding chapter, a critical review of the existing literature was undertaken to reveal insights and information related to this study. The literature review chapter reflected on higher education's shift towards a marketised and globally competitive position. This perspective establishes why HE institutions need to adopt effective and coherent marketing strategies. In this new HE environment, the applicant is the customer, and the student is the consumer, with the HEI being the service provider. The various debates and marketing approaches explored in the literature review provided the basis for developing the research approach and process.

This chapter will draw upon substantive theories and existing theoretical frameworks to create an appropriate methodological approach relevant to this study's research questions. As all research inquiries adopt different research designs and methodologies, this chapter will consider the value of a diverse range of research approaches pertinent to this study and practice-based research (Costley and Fulton 2019, Jensen 2002).

The chapter is structured into a series of subsections. The initial elements will consider the appropriate philosophical and epistemological underpinnings that set the foundation for this research. This is followed by introducing methodological procedures and the rationale for selecting a multiple methods approach. Next, the justification for choosing and using the various research tools will be presented. The sample group and ethical considerations connected with the research design will create the final elements.

4.1 Research philosophy

When used in a business research context, research philosophy refers to ‘a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge’ (Lewis, Saunders and Thornhill 2016: 124). The epistemological considerations in a practice-based social science research context are used to describe ‘what should be regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline’ (Bell and Bryman 2015: 26) or ‘what good knowledge should look like’ (Anderson et al. 2015: 21). This research project will be located in the context of the social sciences. This discipline evolved alongside the growth of modern media and can support the discovery of new knowledge in a range of different scenarios, including the digital social environment (Jensen 2002). Social sciences investigate human interactivity and action, including the traditions, beliefs and cultural habits of people and institutions (Bell and Bryman 2015, Walliman 2006).

4.1.1 Positivist epistemology

Social reality, observed through the lens of the natural sciences, is a philosophical position known as positivism. The positivist school of thought adopt an objectivist approach implemented through scientific observation and measurements that presents facts and meaningful insights into society via direct experience and not speculation (Crotty 2005, Flick 2018, Jensen 2002). This belief stems from producing truthful knowledge through law-like generalisations drawn from the existing theory that can be tested and confirmed (Crotty 2005, Lewis, Saunders and Thornhill 2016). This positivistic position is commonly defined in quantitative terms, presenting universal laws that are consistent and reliable procedures (Denscombe 2014, Costley and Fulton 2019). However, the problem with positivism’s ontology is that it fails to acknowledge the full spectrum of shifting contextual factors, multiple meanings and interpretations that would need to be considered for this study (Costley and Fulton 2019).

4.1.2 Interpretivism epistemology

This study requires the researcher to interpret data from multiple facets of reality that could be open to various interpretations. Therefore, the interpretivist epistemological approach seems a viable alternative (Anderson et al. 2015). The interpretive epistemology avoids rigid structural frameworks. Interpretivists adopt the stance that enables researchers to consider the difference between people and the objects of the natural sciences, considering reality as something constructed from people's thoughts and actions (Denscombe 2014, Bell and Bryman 2015). This approach locates the researcher as an active participant within the research environment, experiencing the world personally through discourse and observations and not from a neutral perspective; 'there is no objective reality to generalise about' (Walliman 2006, Bougie and Sekaran 2016). The difficulty in claiming a genuinely objective perspective, alongside taking an active role in the research and the environment being observed, is one of the difficulties and key problems identified with this approach (Anderson et al. 2015).

4.1.3 Critical realism

While both positivism and interpretivist perspectives are contrasting philosophical positions, they both have elements of value that would help inform this study. Therefore, a combination of the two perspectives could be applied depending upon the methods employed. For example, critical realism combines the viewpoint of objective truth, and it 'recognises the reality of the natural order and the events and discourses of the social world' (Bell and Bryman 2015: 28). Presenting a 'critical view of our ability to understand the world' (Bougie and Sekaran 2016: 29). The critical realist perspective accepts the evidence of phenomena such as opinions, emotions, and attitudes, including the imperfections in these methods. Critical realism encourages triangulation across multiple

methods to gain an acceptable outcome (Bougie and Sekaran 2016: 29). This approach concedes that new knowledge can be produced through existing theoretical frameworks, but it is not theory determined.

In business studies, there is no 'best' research methodology, there are always options and alternatives (Denscombe 2014: 3). Therefore, the adoption of critical realism ontology and epistemology is based on its suitability to answer the research question: To what extent does rich-media impact UK undergraduate applicants' decision-making process in a contemporary digital marketing environment?

4.2 Research strategy, quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods

Now that a philosophical basis has been established, two different research strategies that can create the foundations of this research need to be considered: quantitative and qualitative. According to Brunsveld, Hair and Page (2020: 306), 'qualitative research emphasises the development of hypotheses, while quantitative research focuses on testing hypotheses.' Furthermore, the selection of a quantitative or qualitative strategy is often decided by what is required to answer the research question and how the researcher elects to acquire knowledge (Sarantakos 2005: 29).

4.2.1 Quantitative research methods

A quantitative approach interprets measurable numerical data acquired from new or existing databases to create generalisable conclusions or test hypotheses (Bell and Waters 2014, Kolb 2018). The common perception of a quantitative study is that it is derived from existing theory, and there is only one truth, which shapes a fixed reality (Sarantakos 2005: 32). However, this method can be used to analyse data drawn from people's opinions. For example, if the input data source was collected through a list of closed-end questions, the various responses could still produce a quantitative outcome (Walliman 2006, Azzaro et al. 2015). The researcher in this context is anticipated to be a 'neutral spectator' who reports the outcome (Costley and Fulton 2019: 192).

4.2.2 Qualitative research methods

In contrast, qualitative data effectively extracts meaning from personal experiences and narrative discourses (Flick 2018). Qualitative data can come from various sources, including participant observations, focus groups, interviews, videos, blogs and social media traces and interactions (Bougie and Sekaran 2016: 332). 'Qualitative research is of specific relevance to the study of social sciences' (Flick 2018: 9). Therefore, it is appropriate for exposing the motives for consumer decisions through empirical investigations. Furthermore, adopting a qualitative approach that can be used to discover 'consumer attitudes, beliefs and opinions rather than facts' might create unexpected results with new practical applications (Kolb 2018: 32).

4.2.3 Mixed methods research

Mixed methods research combines both quantitative and qualitative methods in a single study. This methodological approach is gaining popularity in the business research field as the quantitative and qualitative elements can be undertaken either sequentially or concurrently (Bell and Bryman 2015, Cameron 2013). Stockman (2015: 76) claims that if 'the choice for a mixed-method approach is driven by the search for a more sophisticated understanding of the subject at hand, then consideration for the combination of data stemming from different phases of research is vital'. McKim (2015: 203) argues that studies that use both quantitative and qualitative approaches gain a deeper, broader understanding of the phenomenon than studies that do not. However, utilising a mixed-methods approach is not without its challenges. A significant amount of additional time will be required to gain the essential skills needed to conduct quantitative and qualitative research in a harmonious and timely manner (Stockman 2015: 77).

Although mixed methods in social science research are increasingly being accepted, within academia, advocates for each specialist area of study retain domain loyalties (Costley and Fulton 2019). Therefore, the justification for selecting mixed methods will require an understanding of the various prejudices and possible conflicts of interests, justified through a well-rehearsed defence of practice (Stockman 2015: 78). Using mixed data to examine the research question in a single study can increase confidence in findings and help researchers make sense of the world (Cameron 2016, McKim 2015, Brunsveld, Hair and Page 2020). The research question should always guide the methodology, and if a mixed methods approach is applied appropriately, then the different research approaches will provide different complementary sorts of knowledge (Floyd and Fowler 2014).

Adopting a mixed method approach for this study will enable a fuller understanding of the applicants' interpretation of the decision-making process. The exact mixture of methods and approaches used in this study to answer the research question will be explored throughout this chapter.

4.3 Deduction, induction and abduction approaches

The three fundamental categories of inference or approaches used to test a theory or develop a theory are induction, deduction and abduction. Inductive reasoning adopts a data-driven approach, using the data collected to reach conclusions and construct theories (Lewis, Saunders and Thornhill 2016). Therefore, qualitative research 'provides the basis for inductive reasoning and theory development' (Brunsveld, Hair and Page 2020: 306)

In contrast, a deductive approach starts from a theoretical or hypotheses basis to test the data collected and guide empirical enquiry (Bell and Bryman 2015). Abductive inference uses an existing frame of what is usual or understood to explore data that might be considered puzzling or anomalous to the most plausible explanation (Kozinets 2020). This

study acknowledges the different forms of reasoning; however, it leans towards the abductive approach, as it seeks to discover insights into an experience. Bell and Bryman (2015: 145) describes an abductive approach as ‘collecting data to explore a phenomenon, identify themes and explain patterns, to generate a new or modify an existing theory which you subsequently test through additional data collection.’ Therefore, abductive reasoning is the most suitable approach for this study that begins with no specific theoretical explanations then produces tentative ideas about the data before looking towards previously developed knowledge to understand the data presented. Bell and Bryman (2015: 27) suggest that ‘abduction starts with a puzzle or surprise and then seeks to explain it’.

4.4 Triangulation

Triangulation comprises of several sources of data and various methods of collection to assess the validity of the material studied (Lewis, Thornhill, Saunders 2016: 207).

Researchers using mixed methods can improve the legitimacy of research through the use of triangulation (Bougie and Sekaran 2016: 106). This study employed triangulation because it is an effective method of validating results obtained from multiple sources of data (Flick 2018). In addition, the triangulation of evidence across various methods creates a sound study because it offers a complementary way for the strengths of quantitative techniques to help offset the weaknesses of qualitative methods and vice versa (Blumberg, Cooper and Schindler 2014: 287, McGrath 2008: 5).

4.5 Sampling

Flick (2018) highlights the importance of identifying the appropriate sample group to enable the research to present findings representative of a wider population. Through the engagement with relevant sample groups, this study’s findings will then be able to present

findings that are generalisable to the broader CU undergraduate UCAS applicant population.

This study focuses on participants' opinions who are interested in studying at a higher education institution. As previously explained, this study engaged a mixed methods approach, and each method utilised was intended to gather differing perspectives to address the research question. All the participants were linked through their prior knowledge or current engagement in the HE application process.

In the survey stage, the questionnaire was circulated to all 2018 undergraduate UCAS applicants offered a place at Coventry University. These participants were one month away from starting their studies. Selecting this sample retains the research question's focus on UK, UG, UCAS student recruitment. However, it restricts the participants to applicants who have already decided that CU is the appropriate destination.

The second stage of data gathering engaged two different groups of voluntary participants for the focus groups. The first group was aged 16-18, studying at a school or college and interested in attending a HEI. This group were all at differing stages of the applicant process, with some participants still contemplating the decision to study at HE. Working with the schools and colleges produced a convenience or voluntary sample group, with the majority still undecided about which HEI they intended to select. The second group was CU students who were within their first month of study. Therefore, they had experienced the complete research and decision-making process. This additional set of focus groups built on the information generated from the schools and colleges by filling in the data gap between the stages of application and enrollment.

The third data collection method was the vlog reviews, which required a representative sample from published vlogs. Collating the data involved seeking a subset of vlogs that had a clear focus on the topics explored and provided a sufficiently representative data

set. The criteria used to define the target elements relevant to this study are expanded on in Chapter 7.

4.6 Research design

The research plan (Figure 4.1) created to gather the necessary data to answer the research question will now be considered in this subsection. Additionally, the ethical concerns, sources of data collection and how these will be analysed and discussed will be considered.



Figure 4. 1 Research steps (Source: Author's own)

This study combines various methods, including a survey, focus groups and vlog analysis, merging quantitative and qualitative data to provide a sound basis for answering the research question. These data collection tools were used in a 'sequential explanatory research design, where one phase informs and directs the next phase of data collection', as indicated in Figure 4.1 (Lewis, Thornhill, Saunders 2016: 171).

The survey was the first stage in the research design. It was distributed to a well-defined yet significant sized sample group. The resulting data clarified some of the assumptions and findings from the literature review. Using the survey findings as the foundations for the next phase of the mixed methods approach enabled the cross-checking of information

from both data sources. The focus group script was created based on the insights gained and the data gaps identified from the survey responses. The intention was to elaborate on and explain the quantitative findings.

A final stage of vlog analysis was added to expand on the initial insights and findings from the other methods. This digital method relied on the collection of data from publicly available sources. Vloggers who use social media to communicate their opinions were openly discussing their experience of the application process. These influencers discussed the complete application journey, and therefore, the transcripts produced an alternative perspective on the application process. These published and publicly accessible vlogs coupled with the previous data sets enhance the generality of the findings. Through the combination and interpretation of these different methods and the triangulation of the resulting data, a more complete and holistic portrayal of the customer journey experience has been presented (Kozinets 2020)

4.7 Survey research method

As previously outlined, this study incorporates both quantitative and qualitative research approaches and techniques to produce a mixed method study. The first primary data collection stage involved a survey distributed before the students arrived at CU. This cross-sectional study was intended to create a snapshot of the applicant experience before the outcome of their decision had influenced them. The survey was predominantly based on the need to gain quantitative data to address the what, who, where and when elements related to the research question (Lewis, Thornhill, Saunders 2016).

The survey was designed to be an efficient and effective method of generating findings from a large sample group of 4428 UCAS applicants who had accepted a place at CU. According to the strategic planning and analytics office (SPAO 2018), central data from

the Coventry University enrolment system (2018), 85% of students were under 21 years old at the point of entry, and 60% of applications were female.

The data acquired formed the foundations of the qualitative aspects of this study.

4.8 Focus groups research method

This next phase of the study sought to extend the data and knowledge acquired using the survey to consider the why elements of the student application process. According to Flick (2018: 3), qualitative research methods are ‘of specific relevance to the study of social relations.’ Social relations were indicated in the survey results as a central component in the applicant decision-making process. Therefore, the focus groups explored how relationships are formed and why they significantly impact the decision-making process. Additionally, the qualitative comments located in the survey responses suggested that a difference in audience perception occurred when viewing marketing videos, with factors such as trust and peer advice emerging as elements that required further exploration.

To address the areas of particular interest outlined above, the focus groups were required to be both an exploratory and focused exercise. Therefore, a semi-structured approach was adopted to encourage participants’ interactions and to inspire dialogue that revealed participant views about set topics. Chapter six will begin by presenting the preparation elements of the focus groups, followed by the conducting and analysis phases.

4.9 Vlogs and Netnography

The survey and the focus groups provided valuable data exploring how potential applicants and incoming students were experiencing the UCAS application process and their touchpoints with various HEI. The resulting data indicated that peer-to-peer sharing of lived experience through digital social interaction was one of the dominant sources of trusted data that impacted the applicant's decision-making process. Vlogs were

an emerging form of rich-media and eWoM communication that became one of these trusted sources of information. The category of vlogs that were of particular interest to this study were the films that presented a reflective view of the videographers' or Vloggers' immersion into the HE application journey. These video posts are hosted on YouTube and connected to personal accounts or channels. Popular Vloggers who inhabit these spaces are often regarded as influencers, with some obtaining celebrity status.

This study utilised the transcripts of the vlogs created by individuals sharing their lived experiences of the UCAS application process. These transcripts provided all the data that was processed, coded, and analysed to build on the knowledge acquired from the previous methods. Kozinets (2020: 193) describes this information style as 'Investigative data' when the material studied is not directly created by the researcher but, instead, generated by others and selected by the researcher for inclusion in the project.

Using the vlogs as digital archives and viewing the data through a netnography perspective, the data can be critically analysed. 'Netnography is a form of qualitative research that seeks to understand the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, practices, networks and systems of social media' Kozinets (2020: 14). Chapter Seven will present the exact search method, selecting process, analytical process, and coding method used for this element of the study.

4.10 Ethical considerations

This research project complies with the Coventry University ethical processes that require all researchers to follow the procedures and act with integrity.

The following ethics applications were submitted and approved by the CU ethics system:

1. Access to literature both physical and digital for the literature review (P61334)
2. The survey distributed to the CU UCAS applicants (P75331)

3. The use of Google and YouTube analytics relating to the CU sites (P93615)
4. Focus groups conducted at Schools and Colleges (P77511)
5. Focus groups at CU (P93615)
6. YouTube-based Vlog data analysis (P61147)

In addition to the internal approval process, various additional specific ethical components were actioned. For example, the opening page of the survey started with a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix 1) that included a tick-box agreement to participate that needed to be completed before the survey could begin. The completed questionnaires were collated without the possibility of participants being identified. Therefore, all data collected was anonymous.

For the duration of the focus groups undertaken at the schools and colleges, a local staff member was present, but they did not join the group discussion. The voluntary nature of the focus group was reiterated at the start of the meeting, and the option to abstain from answering any questions was clarified. The focus groups were digitally recorded, and all participants were made aware of this in advance of the session and before the recording started.

4.10.1 Avoiding harm

Harm can be considered from various perspectives, including physical, mental, and legal harm. The researcher's responsibility is to ensure that practices employed do not risk harm to the participants, assistants, and themselves (Sarantakos 2005: 19). While the proposed data-gathering techniques do not present apparent risks, consideration was applied to the emotional well-being of the participants involved. For example, the less vocal individuals participating in group discussions were given the opportunity to contribute without any undue pressure.

4.10.2 Informed consent

According to the CU code of conduct (CU 2013: 5), a minor is a participant under the age of 16, and this age group would require consent from ‘both the parent or guardian and the participant concerned’ (CU 2013: 5). The UK data service (2012) echoed this age category classification; they state that ‘young people aged 16 years and above can give their own consent.’ The intended age group for the external focus groups was participants aged between 16–18 years old; therefore, consent to participate was sought from the gatekeepers (school or feeder colleges). Information relating to the research project’s purpose was supplied to the gatekeepers in advance of the session for distribution to parents if deemed appropriate (Costley and Fulton 2019).

Regardless of age, all participants had the right to determine whether to participate in the project and they had the option to withdraw at any point. According to Bell and Bryman (2015: 139), ‘informed consent means that all prospective research participants should be given as much information as might be needed to make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to participate in a study.’ Therefore, during the initial stages of the focus groups, all participants were required to complete an Informed Consent Form (Appendix 3), and hardcopy versions of the participant information sheets were distributed (Appendix 4).

4.10.3 Confidentiality and retention of data

To comply with the data protection requirements, all raw digital audio data files, informed consent forms, and survey responses have been stored in either a locked and secure facility or located in encrypted and password protected locations.

Limitations occur around the mechanism of conducting a focus group as ‘participants will be sharing information in front of others, you cannot promise participants confidentiality or anonymity, and you must remind them of that when you consent them and when you begin the group session’ (Davis 2017: 26). However, as the participants were an integral

part of the research activity, the participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity in the resulting published material.

From an institutional perspective, gatekeeper consent has been sought and acquired concerning accessing and using commercially sensitive analytics relating to the CU website and CU YouTube channel. In addition, before the findings are published, the study will require a review and approval from the CU digital marketing team.

4.10.4 Honesty

This study comprises of a mixed methods approach involving various data collection tools, and any methodology that a researcher chooses has ethical implications (Anderson et al. 2015). An honest and open approach was adopted when dealing with participants throughout this process. This means avoiding using techniques that might be considered deceptive by failing to reveal the underlying purpose of the study.

4.11 Positionality

A researcher's cultural, social, economic position and existing knowledge connected to the research project will influence the study's direction (Bell and Bryman 2015). When considering this study, the additional fact that the researcher is studying at and working for the institution that is the research subject has implications for potential research bias. Lewis, Saunders and Thornhill (2016: 209) suggest that 'all you can do is be aware of the possible impact on your research of being too close to your research setting.' For these reasons, an extended reflective section on positionality has been added to Chapter 9. This additional section reflects on the complex nature of possible bias encountered in the practice and process of this inquiry.

4.12 Summary

This chapter presented the rationale for adopting a critical realist philosophical approach to explore the decision-making process adopted by HE applicants. It has described how the interplay between quantitative and qualitative methods guided by critical realism principles to support a research design appropriate for this study. A mixed methods methodological approach was adopted to construct new knowledge concerning the relationship between the applicant and their preferred HEI.

The methods of enquiry to access and generate the data began with an initial survey distributed to all incoming UK, UG, UCAS applicants to CU in 2018. This predominantly quantitative data source was combined with secondary data to verify the findings and theoretical explanations presented. In addition, the recorded and transcribed discussions of the eight focus groups enabled various applicant journeys to be captured. Finally, the examination of appropriate vlogs added an in-depth view of how applicants acquire and disseminate information that is pertinent to this study. This mixed methods approach creates an appropriate response to the research question, and the acquired data is presented in the proceeding chapters.

Survey

Chapter Five

5.0 Introduction

Having identified and presented the methodological approach adopted for this study in the previous chapter, this chapter presents the output from the first data collection method used to answer the research question. The purpose of the self-completion survey was to gather predominantly quantitative data from a large and well-defined group of undergraduate applicants who have recently experienced the UCAS application process. The survey data contributes towards the mixed methods study, and the responses created the basis for the focus groups.

The rationale for selecting the self-administered online survey as a starting point for the data collection was:

- The incoming UCAS CU students represented a sizeable group, and a digital survey can be rapidly distributed to the potential participants.
- A survey instrument is a low-cost option.
- Surveys limit the opportunity for researcher bias in the responses provided.
- Web-based surveys can include rich-media elements.

(Blair and Czaja 2014)

5.1 Survey aims

This study aims to identify how rich-media impacts CU UK undergraduate applicants' decision-making process in a contemporary digital marketing environment. Additionally,

to understand the HE customer decision-making process, mainly connected to the choice of institution, a broader view of HE recruitment and marketing is required. Therefore, the survey represented the first step towards creating a better understanding of the opportunities available to address the existing gaps in knowledge and practice.

1. To determine what modes of information delivery are the most appropriate in supporting the applicant decision-making process.
2. To explore what are the most influential factors for applicants when selecting a HEI.
3. To establish a timeline for the information required to support the decision-making and application process.
4. To clarify which elements of the existing CU marketing material (2018) influence the decision-making process.
5. To consider the potential benefits that rich-media adds to the marketing practice.
6. To create the foundations for the next phase of data collection.

5.2 Survey design

The survey was produced using JISC Online Surveys. A diverse range of question styles was used within this digital questionnaire, including free text, lists, multiple-choice, and Likert-type scale questions. This created a mix of free form and closed questions that generated predominantly quantitative outcomes and some qualitative data. In addition, the survey was structured as a complex routing survey that filtered participants into different directions, depending on their responses, as illustrated in Figure 5.1. This had the advantage of reducing the time required to complete the survey.

It was not possible to undertake an extensive pilot test because of the delays created by complex issues relating to ethical approval. The survey distribution was time-dependent, as it needed to be circulated before the start of the academic year. If this deadline was not

achieved, it would have created a one-year delay. Therefore, the questionnaire was pre-tested by three CU first-year students to ensure it was user-friendly. Pre-tests are used to identify defects or flaws in the questionnaire and can be conducted with a small number of participants (Blair, Blair and Czaja 2014: 274). The issues raised in the pretesting debriefing stage resulted in minor amendments to the questionnaire. The range of questions aimed to explore if specific patterns existed in the applicant pathway when selecting a HE.

A Participant Information Statement was the opening element of the survey that informed the participants of the subject, purpose, and ethical implications (Appendix 1). The questions were then presented in a format that avoided ambiguous or complex questions or required long answers. Most of the questions created were ranking, multiple-choice single or multiple answers ending with a free text question (a copy of the survey questions is provided, Appendix 2). The initial questions explore the key drivers for selecting CU. Then, a routed system enabled follow-up questions exploring the key influencing topics depending on the answers given. All participants were then drawn back into a series of generic questions about the application process. Next, the participants were encouraged to select a promotional film from five options and review the material presented. Finally, all participants could add additional statements regarding what influenced their decision to apply to CU (Figure 5.1).

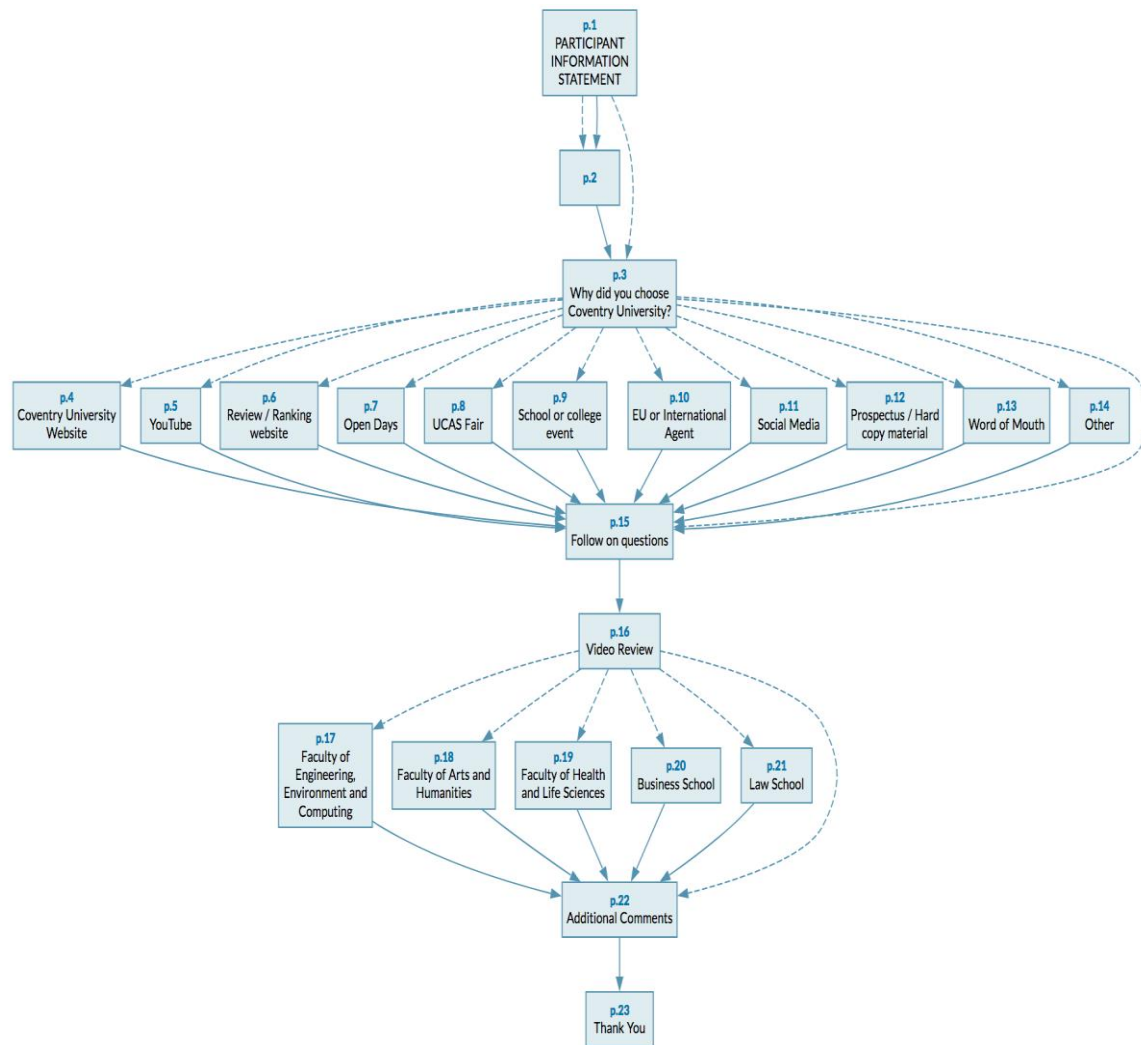


Figure 5. 1 Why did you choose Coventry University – Survey structure (CU 2018)

5.3 Distribution

In September 2018, the CU recruitment and admissions team circulated the survey to 4428 incoming UK based UCAS applicants. The ‘*Why did you choose Coventry University?*’ survey was distributed via email with a brief introduction and a hyperlink within a formal CU communication. The hyperlink was resent to the same group two weeks later. One significant issue with self-completing questionnaires is the potential for low response rates. Unfortunately, the response rate for this survey was extremely low despite the repeated call for action, with an outcome of 69 surveys completed. However, studies by Harris and Mellahi (2016: 426) revealed no fixed rules or ‘formulae’ to

determine the acceptability of response rate. Additionally, there are no clear boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable response rates, suggesting that the data harvested should still offer some insights. Black (2002: 238) recommends that new researchers keep surveys small, but large enough to find significant correlations if they exist (e.g. over 50 but below 200).’

The resulting survey data was processed through the statistical software SPSS as this software supports the creation of graphical representation. Brunsveld, Hair and Page (2020) advocate for the use of graphic charts, as they provide a simple yet effective route to communicate complex issues. Therefore, most of the survey data has been presented in vertical bar charts that give an appropriate route for visual comparisons to similar data sets.

5.4 Balancing survey aims and ethical dilemmas

Adhering to the survey tool’s ethical considerations and requirements created a series of restrictions and complications that influenced the response rate. The age range of the participants was predominantly 17-18 years old; therefore, ethical approval for the distribution of the survey was granted on the grounds of anonymity. This ruled out the possibility of offering an incentive to respond, despite this being standard practice for the recruitment and admission surveys distributed at CU. Coventry University relies on data-driven decisions; therefore, applicants receive a wide range of survey requests throughout their application journey. This surveying approach can create ‘feedback fatigue’, often resulting in a rapid decline in response rates, creating a diluted range of data produced (Glazer 2015).

5.5 The case for secondary data

Despite the problems outlined, one advantage emerged from the mass survey approach: the existence of significant data collected and archived from previous surveys. This material is referred to as secondary data, consisting of information not initially collated for the project under consideration (Brunsveld, Hair and Page 2020). Using this secondary data provided a viable option for improving the validity of the data set acquired from the ‘*Why did you choose Coventry University?*’ survey. In addition, secondary data analysis creates a workable method for researchers to utilise existing material that complements new primary data and decreases the burden placed on respondents (McCalman, Mills and Whiteside 2012). This approach is becoming more prevalent due to technological advances (Johnston 2017: 619).

The research question was used to decide which secondary datasets were relevant to the study. First, surveys were acquired that overlapped with the area of investigation explored in the distributed questionnaire, as indicated in Figure 5.1. These surveys included CU generated material and similar data created by external institutions, including UCAS and YouthSight. An additional set of secondary data explored was Google and YouTube analytics that provide historical records on the use and engagement points related to the CU website. This form of web history provided user engagement patterns that can highlight peak engagement points or dormant stages relevant to this study. Analytics sourced from Google and YouTube are based on interactions with the CU website. This was required to assess elements that include the number of views, period of interest, length of viewing time, social shares, likes, and the time an element has existed.

5.5.1 Primary and secondary data sets

This study draws together a collection of related data curated to create a foundation for the next stage of the research. The following data sets have been used to create this data chapter:

Data	Source	Date
Primary	Student survey	2018
Secondary	CU Website Google analytics	2018
Secondary	YouTube analytics	2018
Secondary	Faculty of Arts and Humanities, new student survey	2017
Secondary	CU recruitment and admission office, open day survey	2018
Secondary	Strategic Planning and Analytics Office, CU report	2018
Secondary	UCAS survey	2018
Secondary	YouthSight report	2018

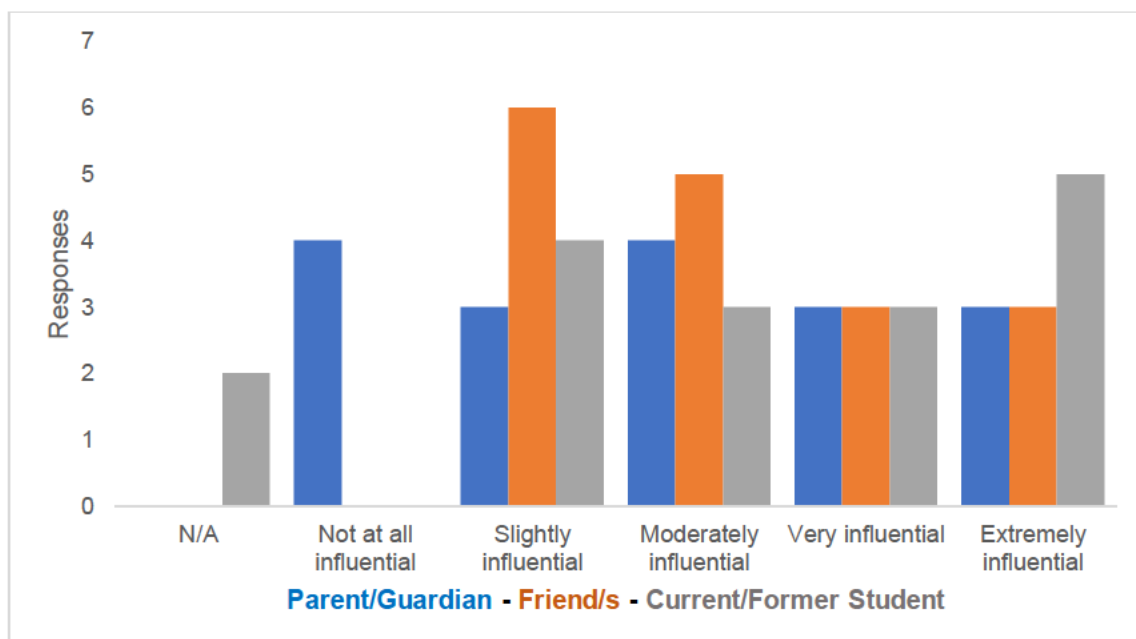
Table 5. 1 Data sources

The responses collected through the survey and the supporting secondary data have been used to substantiate the findings generated throughout this chapter, improving the validity of the research conducted (Bell and Bryman 2015). The secondary and primary data was collated in 2018, a period before the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic has had a significant effect on students, staff, educational delivery, and the routes to connect with future applicants. The researcher acknowledges that the world has now changed, but the data gathered prior to this period was accepted by CU as valid for inclusion in this study.

The following sub-themes have been used to group data into related areas of interest and present the quantitative primary and secondary data explored in this chapter: People, open days, place, facilities, product, reviews, timelines, CU website, social media and promotional films.

5.6 People

This section explores the first theme, people, connecting the touchpoints and people encountered, with the positive influencing facts identified.



How influential the following people were when considering your university choices.

Figure 5. 2 Student Survey (CU 2018) (N=17)

Figure 5.2 presents the potential influence of the various reference groups on the individual's behaviour. Many of these groups are primary influencers that would have mainly been influential through face-to-face communication. However, with the dominance of social media, some contacts might have occurred through eWOM, particularly with current students who discuss the merits or failings of the institution they attend. Parents, friends and current or former students have been reported as creating the most significant influence. All these groups are likely to have exerted varying degrees of influence over a sustained period, often making it difficult for the participant to attribute credit for the level of impact that has been exercised.

5.7 Open days

Open days rarely represent the first point of contact with a university. The very process of booking into one of these events requires applicants to access the CU website. The assumption could be that the university and the course choice had already been considered before this event.

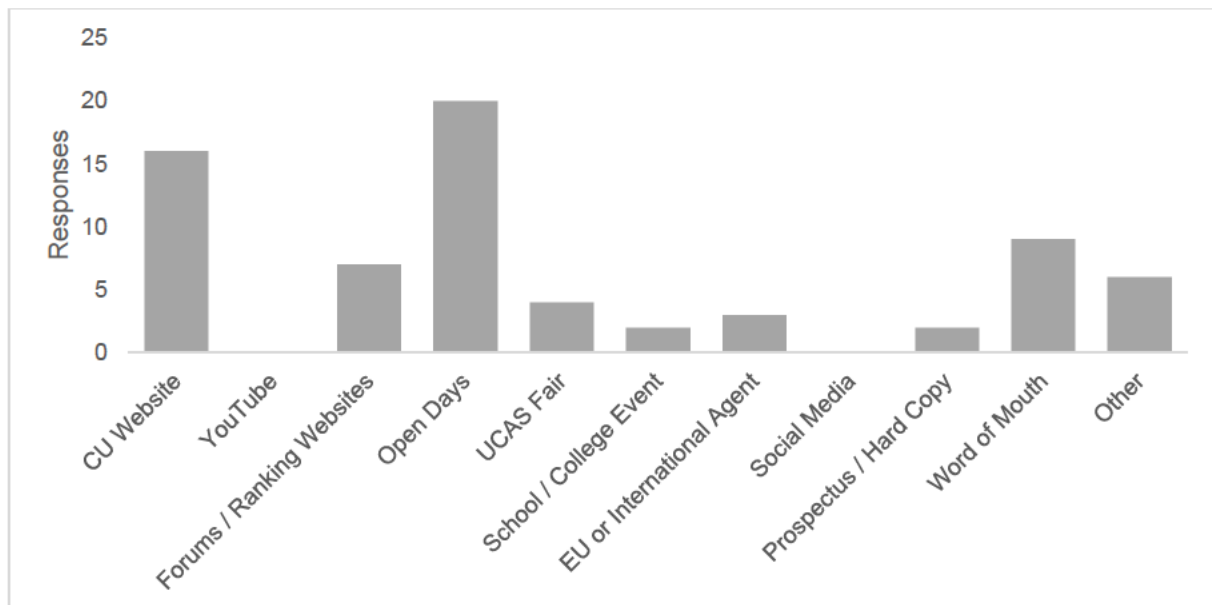


Figure 5. 3 Student Survey (CU 2018) (N=69)

Open days were perceived as the most influential source for information, with 28.8% of respondents selecting this option (Figure 5.3). These events allow potential applicants to meet academic staff and student ambassadors. Additionally, tours of the campus, including opportunities to view the teaching facilities, support services, and accommodation, can create the capstone to the decision-making process. At this point, customers have already reduced the selected process down to the limited number of institutions they intend to visit, suggesting that decision-making started at an earlier

point. Therefore, customers who have participated in the open day experience demonstrate a high level of commitment and customer engagement.

A survey of 234 attendees from the Coventry University open days was carried out by the recruitment and admissions office in 2018, revealing a more detailed understanding of the impact of open days within the recruitment cycle. 87% of respondents indicated they had not made a firm decision about where to study before their visit. However, 16% of respondents reported they were likely or very likely to select Coventry as their first choice before visiting. This response switched to a positive outcome of 50% after the open day. The average number of additional open days attended by the potential applicants was two.

The main reasons for attending the open days were finding out more about a course, experiencing what it would be like to study at CU and getting a feel for the campus. In addition, 65% of respondents reported that the information they gained about the course they were interested in positively influenced their decision to apply. In response to the question of satisfaction in attending a CU open day, all responses were within the good or excellent options (CU 2018).

5.8 Place

In both the CU 2018 and the FAH 2017 surveys, participants stated that the university's location was the main influencing factor in the decision-making process under the option to add a comment. Information sourced from the SPAO (2018) states that 12% of students come from Coventry and 15.6% from Birmingham. Most UK-based students who reject an offer at Coventry select an institution based in the Midlands. The focus groups will expand and explore this factor's importance in the decision-making process.

5.9 Facilities

The FAH (2017) survey and the UCAS (2018) report suggest that the applicants exhibited a high level of active learning while researching their chosen destination. Gaining a clear understanding of the equipment available to the potential student would require a significant investment of time to undertake competitor evaluation. This outcome points towards a critical factor: different subject groups might have alternative priorities.

Courses that rely on high usage of specialist facilities and equipment will be evaluated by applicants on what they perceive to be available to the customer.

5.10 Product

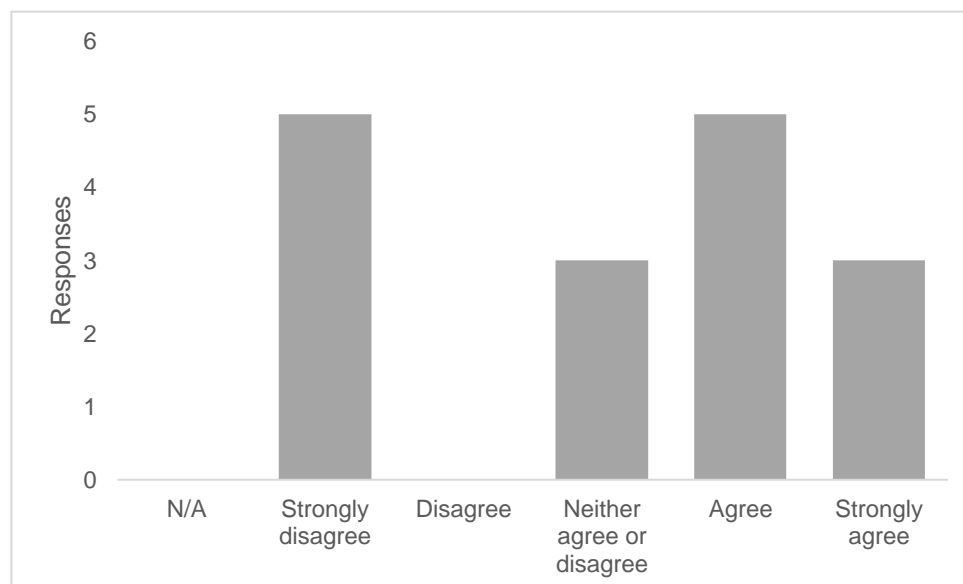
	Data source	Question focus	Top three influencing factors
1	Student survey CU 2018	Influential source of information	Open day Website Word-of-mouth
2	FAH survey CU 2017	Reasons for choosing a course	Equipment Industry links Passion
3	UCAS survey 2018	Audience interested in when researching a course	Modules Entry requirements Social aspects
4	SPAO 2018	Reasons for selecting the university	Range of modules Student reviews Graduate earnings

Table 5. 2 Summary of various data sources used.

Table 5.2 lists the differing top three influencing factors based on the data sources considered. These variations can be attributed to the subtle differences in the question focus. For example, an applicant might have a different rationale for selecting an institution compared to selecting the course choice.

Further research is required to establish the order of decision-making in relation to course or institution. The program and module content are core elements in the decision-making process. The three web pages that received the highest views on the CU website are all directly connected to course searches. To reach the stage of searching for a course, an individual would have identified CU as a preferred option and conducted a website content search or searched for their chosen course via a search engine.

5.11 Reviews

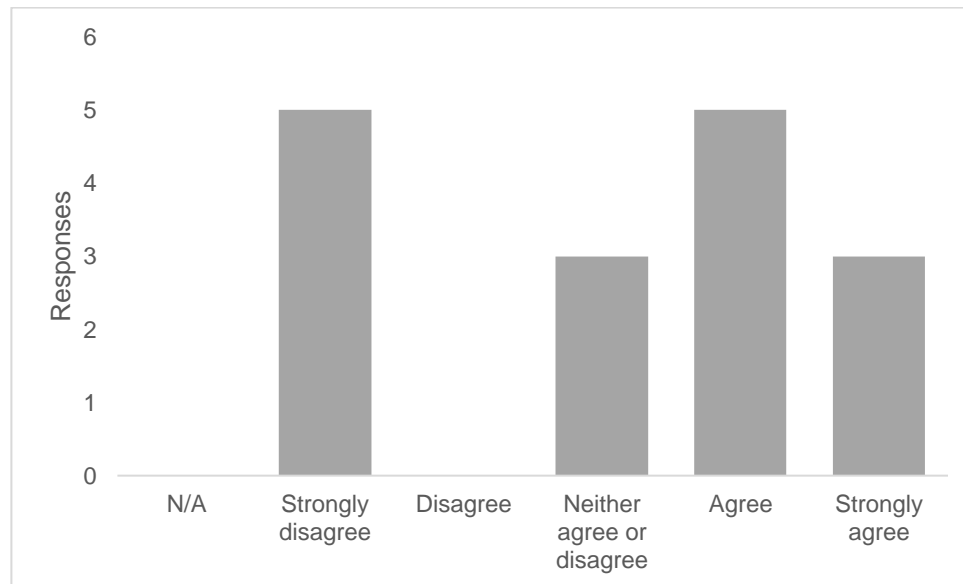


I trust independent websites more than the university website

Figure 5. 4 Student Survey (CU 2018) (N=16)

Figure 5.4 explores trust, a concept repeatedly addressed within related marketing literature and acknowledged as a vital aspect of the purchase decision process. This outcome suggests a divide between the material produced and distributed by the HE sector and independent websites. This division also demonstrates that each customer will

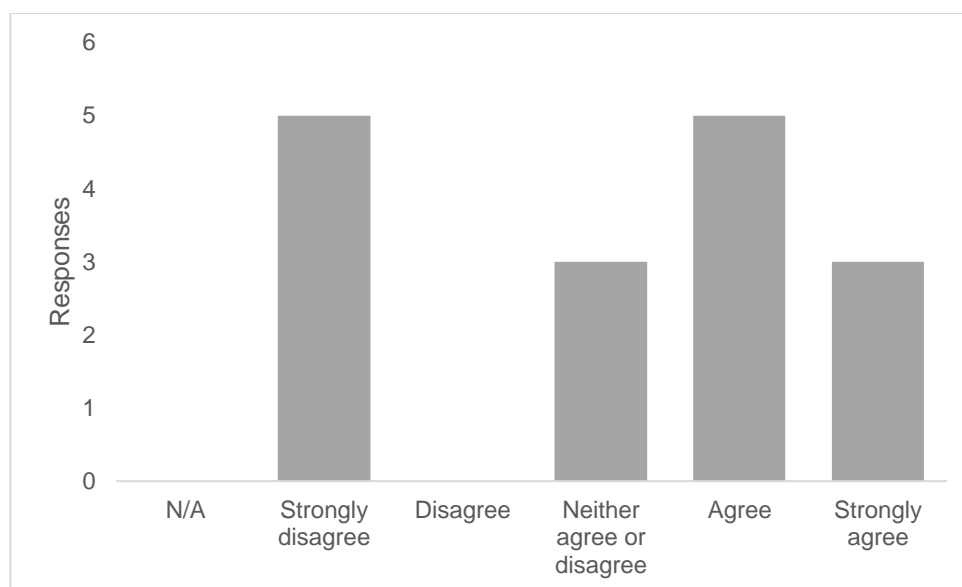
draw different conclusions or behave differently after being exposed to the same material. Therefore, it is important to understand and evaluate the touchpoints that influence the customer decision-making process and overall perception.



The review site influenced my decision to apply to Coventry University

Figure 5. 5 Student Survey (CU 2018) (N=16)

The impact of independent review sites (Figure 5.5) on the decision-making process suggests that trustworthiness or e-trust is not automatic. For example, customers might attribute a higher level of trust to an organisation if it receives favourable reviews from independent sources.



I was looking for peer reviews to help me make my decision

Figure 5. 6 Student Survey (CU 2018) (N=16)

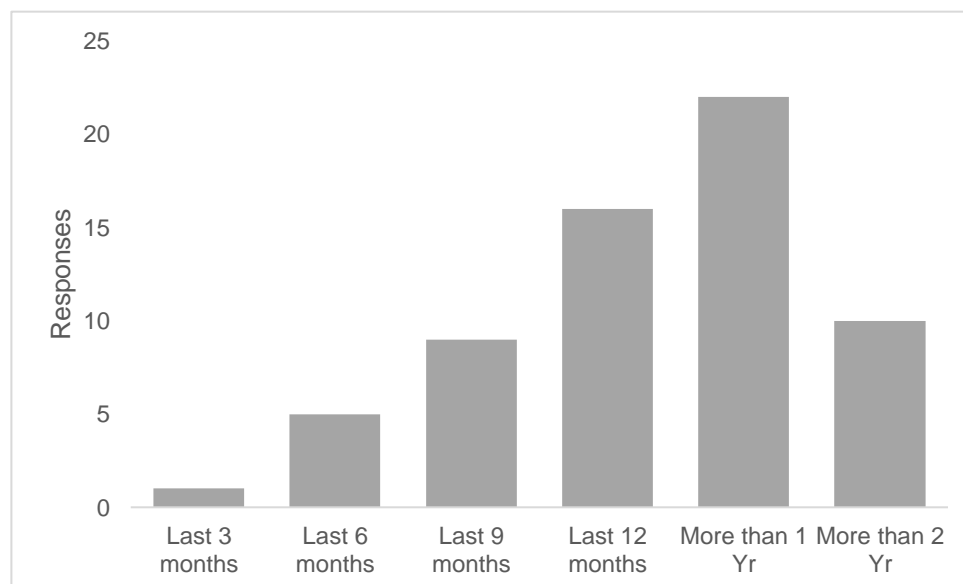
Peer reviews (Figure 5.6) link directly to reference groups explored within the literature review, and they contribute to the autonomous learning process. YouthSight conducted a survey in September 2018 which suggests that applicants are very likely to use peer reviews as a trusted source of information when selecting an institution.

Peer-to-peer reviews were the second highest-rated influencing factor in the SPAO 2018 survey. These interactions incorporate a variety of complex social customer-to-customer connections that link with concepts explored from a consumer behaviour perspective outlined within the literature review (Chapter 3). This survey does not clarify where these ‘student reviews of the Uni’ derive from. Reviews can be connected to the National Student Survey through social media channels or specialist university review sites like thestudentroom.co.uk or whatuni.com.

Concerning review websites, CU has limited influence over the content. However, these websites can offer an understanding of the student’s opinion that can help inform a

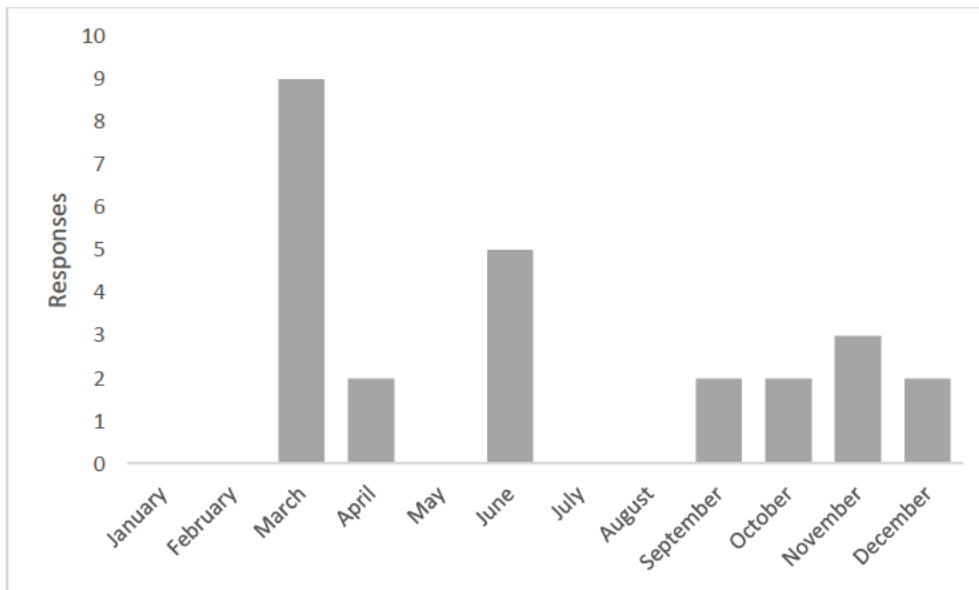
marketing strategy. For example, Wordnerds (www.wordnerds.ai) offers listening packages that use AI and linguistics to scrape information from social media channels. The resulting reports provide running commentaries on what is being discussed through the myriad of social networks and review channels. Once collated, information is repackaged into a format that offers insights into what students are saying to one another about a topic.

5.12 Timelines



When did you start searching for course-based information?

Figure 5. 7 Student Survey (CU 2018) (N=63)



Which month did you attend the open day?

Figure 5. 8 Student Survey (CU 2018) (N=25)

Figure 5.7 presents an overview of the diversity of decision-making styles. For some applicants, the decision-making process involves a pathway that echoes a 'low involvement decision-making pathway' (Piacentini and Szmigin 2018) which would align with the UCAS clearing during August. At the other end of the scale, 50% of students started researching their selected course more than one year ago, suggesting that some applications have taken an extended period to evaluate the alternative options available.

The survey (CU 2018) was carried out in September 2018. Therefore, it needs to consider the decision-making process directly related to the UCAS application timeline (Figure 5.9), including the time-critical points for decisions. Linking the data from Figures 5.8, 5.9 and 5.10 together, customer engagement patterns that connect directly to the UCAS system are starting to emerge. For example, peak engagement points identifiable within Figure 5.15 occur at the deadline points for UCAS and before the start of the first semester. Linking this information with the fact that most students entering HE are aged

17-18 would suggest that throughout the entire sixth form period, students are contemplating their destination of choice.

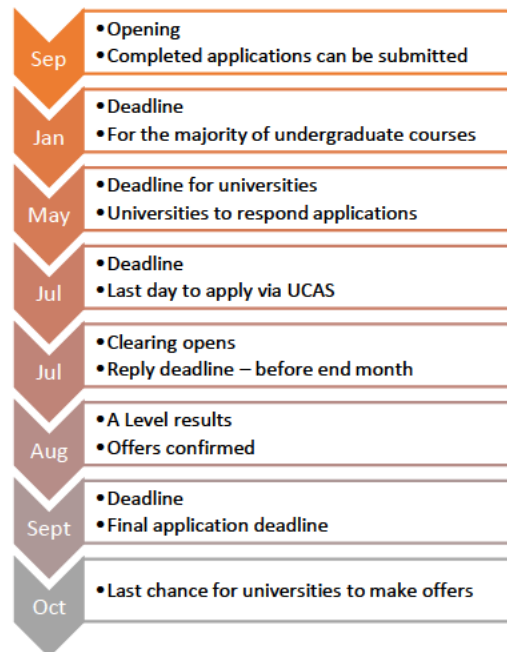


Figure 5. 9 UCAS application timeline adapted from - The Complete University Guide (2019)



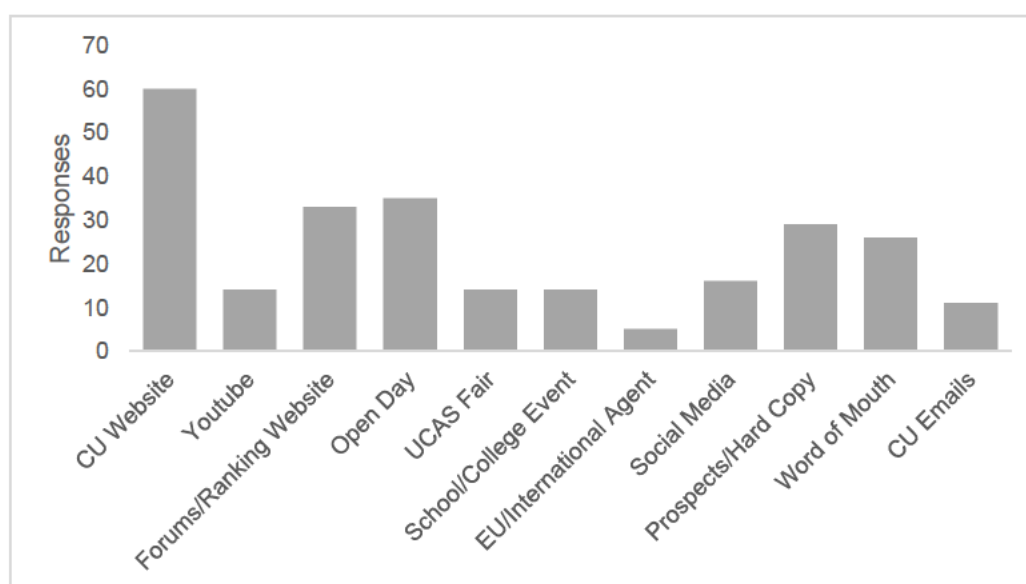
Figure 5. 10 CU website google analytics (27/10/18)

Aligning the data displayed in Figure 5.10 against the survey and UCAS timeline, Figure 5.9 demonstrates that the initial January spike links with the deadline for applications. After this point, a rapid drop in online engagement occurs. The July rise occurs when both open days and interviews start, suggesting a search point.

July's slow rise in interest also connects with the final university decision-making stage and the point that accommodation selection and arrival at university become a reality. September links with the UCAS clearing period that overlaps with the starting point for new students.

5.13 CU Website

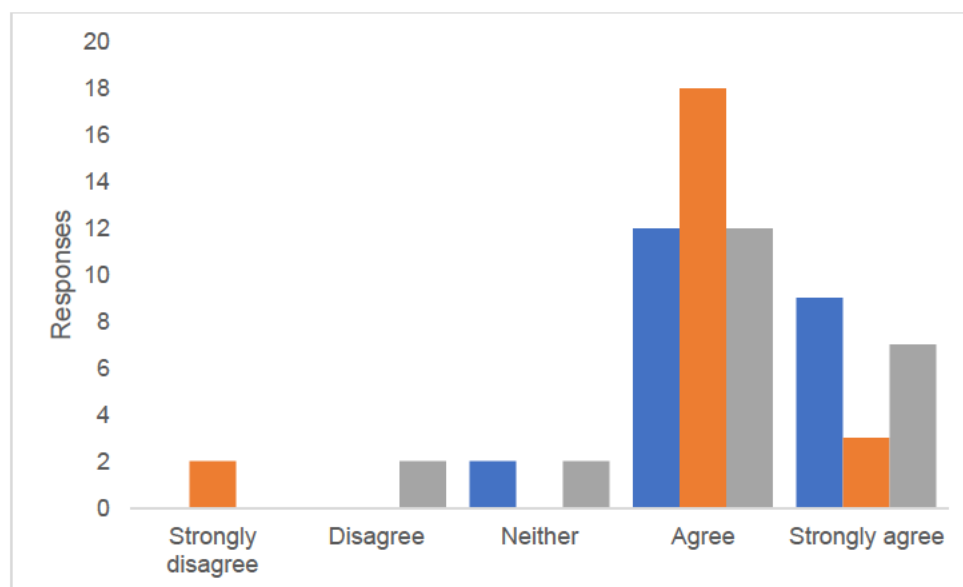
When asked to tick all the sources of information that participants had used when making their decision to join CU, the website featured as the most sourced resource (Figure 5.11). In response to the question, 'Did you locate the information you were looking for on the Coventry University Website?' 100% of respondents reported finding what they were looking for on the website.



Multi-answer question: Which sources of information you used when making your decision to join Coventry University?

Figure 5. 11 Student Survey (CU 2018) (N=69)

As discussed in the literature review (Chapter 2), previous studies suggest that the first research point for most potential applicants is the University website. This initial touchpoint can significantly influence the customer's decision to engage with a particular University. Figure 5.12 echoes this belief and emphasises the importance to a prospective student of engaging, relevant and easily accessible information.



- The information I found influenced my decision to apply to Coventry University
- The information on the Coventry University website was easy to find
- The information on the website answered my questions about studying at Coventry University

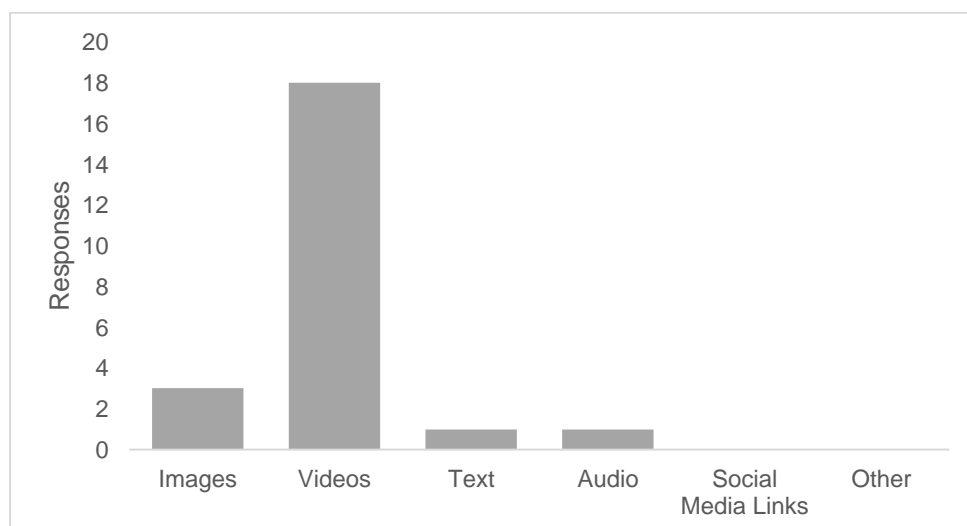
Figure 5. 12 Student Survey (CU 2018) (N=23)

Figure 5.12 suggests that most of the applicants who used the CU website could find the information they were looking for. However, the survey participants were all about to join CU; therefore, this question fails to consider the customers who tried to locate

information on the website and could not, resulting in them discounting CU as a viable option.

Figure 5.12 supports the view that the CU website provides the required material and influences behaviour. Although there is little evidence to indicate what are the questions that need answering. For this information to be relevant, it is essential to understand the very questions consumers are seeking answers to. Therefore, Figure 5.12 needs further exploration through the focus groups.

The research question seeks to ascertain if rich-media assets are viable tools in the student recruitment process. This element of the survey (Figure 5.13) suggests that most applicants would have liked more course-based videos. One interpretation of this response is that the website already contained enough material in other formats. Therefore, this does not present the definitive answer that video is the most popular medium of choice. However, it implies that additional dynamic elements on the website would aid in the decision-making process.



To support you in your course choice, which of the following would you have liked to have found more of on the website?

Figure 5. 13 Student Survey (CU 2018) (N=23)

5.14 Social media

Coventry University uses a diverse range of social media tools. Nevertheless, as identified from an earlier question (Figure 5.3), the impact on potential customers may be limited and difficult to establish. According to UCAS (2018), a shift is occurring in terms of social media and its impact on the application decision-making process. This report suggests a decline, with Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook's impact reducing and a rise in the use of Snapchat, Instagram and WhatsApp (UCAS May 2018).

Q: When you were choosing which university to set as your firm choice, what information did you look for from the universities?

Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	YouTube
Social life/ scene (42%)	Clubs and societies (26%)	Social life/ scene (31%)	Accommodation (43%)
Clubs and societies (31%)	Social life/ scene (24%)	Clubs and societies (28%)	Social life/ scene (41%)
Accommodation (27%)	Research performance/ news (23%)	Student/ graduate profiles (24%)	Clubs and societies (32%)


Figure 5. 14 YouthSight (2018)




The YouthSight survey (Figure 5.14) was created to establish which elements of student life were researched via the various information channels. This survey concluded that numerous forms of social media are used for different purposes. The primary use of social media was not focused on course selection but used to understand the social aspects of student life. The explanatory text alongside Figure 5.14 implies a more hedonistic approach to decision-making. It suggests that potential students visualise themselves participating in activities over the next three years. These aspects might include

imagining where they might live, socialising and possibly heading after graduation (YouthSight 2019).

5.15 Promotional films

The videos listed in Table 5.4 represent a sample of the promotional films created to market CU to potential applicants. The films were selected to create a balanced representation of subject areas from across the university and to enable the participants to select a film connected with their area of interest. In addition, the films selected were the most recent offerings from the subject area.

Film focus	Analytics	Participants' Comments
<p>Faculty of Engineering, Environment and Computing</p> 	<p>Posted 16 April 2018</p> <p>Total time 1.40 min Average view time 1.08 min</p> <p>55 views (6/1/19)</p> <p>No likes or dislikes or comments</p>	<p>The feedback comments included 'not so much talking to one individual', 'More enthusiasm' and 'Stats to back up'. One comment asked for 'More detail'.</p> <p>92% responded positively to the question regarding the range of information and its appropriateness.</p>

<p>School of Media and performing arts</p> 	<p>Posted 29 March 2018</p> <p>Total time 3.18 min Average view time 1.04 min</p> <p>568 views (6/1/19)</p> <p>8 likes and 2 dislikes, no comments.</p>	<p>This film received a highly favourable outcome, with most scores indicating that the format of this film met the audience's needs, with 73% of responses agreeing that this film would positively affect their decision to apply.</p> <p>One respondent would prefer a vlog style presentation. Another response pointed out the lack of diversity in the staff and student group presented.</p>
<p>Faculty of Health and Life Sciences</p> 	<p>Posted 17 January 2018</p> <p>Total time 3.49 min Average view time .38 min</p> <p>43 views (6/1/19)</p> <p>No likes or dislikes or comments</p>	<p>Most answers were in the 50% + positive sections, with more significant use of neither category than the Faculty of Arts and Humanities film. The comments suggested that this film was a 'dry presentation' and could be improved if it was 'more upbeat' with a suggestion to use students.</p>
<p>Business School</p> 	<p>Posted 9 January 2018</p> <p>Total time 2.03 min Average view time .59 min</p> <p>16,496 views (29/1/19)</p> <p>88 likes and 7 dislikes, no comments</p>	<p>This film was the only film to receive a 100% positive impression under the inspiration section, and all questions resulted in positive responses.</p>


<p>Coventry University</p> 	<p>Posted 2 February 2018</p> <p>Total time 2.15 min Average view time not enough data</p> <p>12 views (29/1/19)</p> <p>No likes or dislikes or comments</p>	<p>Scores are in the neutral zone for most of the questions, except for the range of information and film production quality. 67% of people would have preferred the information in a text-based format. Comment added was that it should have had 'more engaging audio features.'</p>
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Table 5. 3 Films used within the Student Survey (CU 2018)

Most of the survey participants felt that the video format was appropriate for the information supplied. However, video should not replace all the text-based information, as text was still reported as the preferred medium.

Questions	Engineering, Environment and Computing	Media and performing arts	Health and Life Sciences	Business School	Coventry University	Average %
Number of reviews	15	18	19	4	3	Total 59
The film was inspirational to watch	66.7	66.7	47.3	100	0	56%

The range of information in the film was appropriate	77.8	77.8	84.2	100	100	88%
The production quality of the film was appropriate	88.9	88.9	94.8	100	100	95%
The presenter(s) did a good job	78.5	83.3	72.2	100	66.7	80%
The film should have been longer	21.4	0	5.3	50	0	15%
I would have preferred the information in text format	21.4	0	42.1	25	66.7	31%
This film will have a positive influence on people deciding to apply to CU	64.3	72.3	73.7	75	66.7	70%

Table 5. 4 Film reviews

The data gathered was from 59 survey participants who opted to review a film. The findings are summarised in Table 5.5, demonstrating that some significant variation occurs across the range of films considered. Equally, these findings indicate that some positive and consistent features are revealed in the material explored.

- The survey demonstrates that the production quality of the films presented aligned with the applicant's expectations.
- The information presented in these videos was appropriate
- The presenters were appropriate for the associated films

The 15% response to the question relating to the film length suggests that the audience did not require a more extended version. The average viewing time across all the films considered was 57 seconds. These findings indicate that the maximum video length should echo the TikTok limitation of 60 seconds.

Films with a diverse mix of staff and students presenting and high production values received the most positive responses. These films need to be inspiring and upbeat to ensure that the audience remains engaged with the marketing material.

5.16 Summary

The data gathered in this phase of the study was necessary to capture a crucial stage in the applicant's journey towards starting at university. When the CU 2018 survey was distributed, participants had passed the decision-making point, but they had yet to become consumers. Therefore, the outcome of their choice had not affected their responses.

The findings in this chapter indicated that social connections with reference groups are regarded as very influential. These social influences included peers, current students and family members who were reported as highly influential. In addition, social networks located in different online environments act as insightful and substantial sources of information. In most data sets, parents were attributed as having the most significant influence.

Face-to-face networking activities reoccur as the most critical deciding factor. Open days were rated as the highest influential factor in the decision-making process. These events are generally attended once the decision-making process has progressed to the point that the final few options have been identified.

Based on the respondent's answers, the CU website is considered a vital information source, and this outcome is reflected in several supporting studies. The analytical data connected to the CU website shows that the main search criteria are based on individual course information. Most of the primary and secondary data referenced in this chapter

indicate that the course content is significant to potential students. The survey confirmed that the current CU website effectively communicates information to customers.

However, when it comes to social media created by CU and targeting customers, the engagement levels appear to be very low and the influence reasonably limited. Further investigation was conducted in the focus groups to identify the reasons behind this result.

For many students, the search for trustworthy sources of information takes them in different directions. The survey suggests that half the students search expanded social networks for independent verification that CU is an appropriate option. Peer reviews, ranking websites and chatrooms offer an independent voice that is drawn on when forming the basis for a decision.

The role of rich-media in the decision-making process was explored through video reviews. This section revealed that applicant expectations of institutionally produced material were mainly based on the information supplied compared to the production values. However, the feedback suggested that applicants did require engaging and informative material.

This chapter sets the foundations for the focus groups chapter that explore the marketing strategies and digital engagement used by universities. Furthermore, the following focus group chapter will explore, expand on, and clarify some of the key elements exposed through the literature review and the survey findings.

Focus Groups

Chapter Six

6.0 Introduction

This chapter analyses the qualitative data gathered from eight focus groups that explored the participants' experiences of the HE choice process. Chapter 4 outlined the rationale for undertaking a mixed methods approach and gathering data via focus groups. A mixed methods approach was adopted to enable the use of multiple data sources to create a structured and layered methodology to achieve greater confidence in the outcome.

This chapter will start by reporting on the focus group process, clarifying how it was designed and conducted. The analysis of the respondents' comments will follow, presented in subsections based on the coded themes developed in this study.

This chapter considers the data gathered from two clusters of focus group:

- Stage One consisted of five focus groups with pre-application participants.
- Stage Two comprised three focus groups with incoming CU UG students.

6.1 Focus group aims

1. To clarify which forms of rich-media add value to the decision-making process and why.
2. To establish why applicants trust independent sources more than institutional marketing material.

3. To uncover how information relating to the application process is shared and received between peers.
4. To establish a timeline for the requirement of information, to help predict what motivates applicants at a given point.

6.2 Rationale for choice of focus group approach: understanding the ‘why’

Collis and Hussey (2014: 341) describe a focus group as ‘a method of collecting data whereby selected participants discuss their reactions and feelings about a product, service or concept, under the guidance of a group leader’. Focus groups have become incredibly influential in marketing and, more recently, in media research contexts (Jensen 2002: 241). Davis (2017: 3) asserts that ‘the best-known use of focus groups is for marketing, advertising or consumer research; to determine consumer needs.’ While the survey considered in Chapter 5 created an insight into the ‘what’ applicants are doing, focus groups are an effective means of understanding the ‘why’ (Flick 2018: 263). These notions support the rationale for using focus groups as a suitable method to investigate the HE applicant consumer journey further.

Focus groups typically comprise six to twelve members, with a moderator focusing the discussion around a theme and ensuring that all participants engage with the process and none dominate (Bougie and Sekaran 2016: 120). Verbal responses can offer opportunities for individuals to express feelings, and the group structure creates extra time to contemplate a response. Crotty (2005: 75) acknowledges the benefits of research conducted through dialogue, believing that through interaction, we ‘become aware of perceptions, feelings and attitudes of others and interpret their meanings and intent’. Additionally, focus groups have been considered particularly beneficial when working with young people and more reflective participants (Colucci 2007: 1424).

6.3 Preparing

The focus group sessions were designed using the elements of preparing, conducting and analysis (Kolb 2018: 135).

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Figure 6. 1 Flow of the focus group, adapted from (Kolb 2018: 135)

6.4 Sampling focus group participants

The group sessions were conducted face-to-face and constructed out of homogeneous groups formed from potential students aged 16-18 interested in studying at Higher Education and CU students within their first month of study. Group members were selected from a particular demographic, connecting them to the research purpose (Lewis, Saunders and Thornhill 2016: 417). The participants were encouraged to support the study through the assistance of the teachers and academic staff who worked with the sample groups. Therefore, the composition was a convenience sample. Blair and Czaja (2014: 99) identify that 'convenience samples are useful when the population is homogeneous on the studied variable.' Participation was voluntary, and no incentives to participate were offered.

In total, 27 schools and colleges were approached based within a 45-minute drive of Coventry. The aim was to organise five focus groups from the responses received and then expand the number of groups if necessary. The five groups consisted of 40 participants (Table 6.1).

School	Male	Female	Status	Date	Words
A	5	3	6 th Form Comprehensive	23/1/2019	4960
B	4	3	6 th Form Private	23/1/2019	7519
C	3	6	College BTec	8/2/2019	5563
D	3	5	6 th Form College	10/9/2019	4175
E	4	4	6 th Form Grammar	8/06/2019	6078

Table 6. 1 Overview of external focus groups (Source: Author's own)

The three internal focus groups were undertaken with students who had arrived at CU and were within their first three months of study. This group of participants had the whole customer journey from application to arrival (Table 6.2).

Course	Male	Female	Date	Words
DM		3	07/09/2019	4280
MT	4		25/1/2019	4195
PH	3	4	8/2/2019	5055

Table 6. 2 Overview of internal focus groups (Source: Author's own)

The sample size was an important consideration, as enough focus group sessions were required to understand the decision-making process. The two distinct clusters used for the basis of the focus groups were the customers (applicants) and consumers (students). Both groups were formed from a convenience sample that involved using participants who were available and willing to participate in the study. Brunsveld, Hair and Page (2020: 205) used the following example of a convenience sample, claiming that 'when a college professor interviews students at the university, he or she is making use of a convenience sample'.

The number of sample groups used was based on three common considerations; time to locate, undertake and transcribe the data, budget constraints, and schools and colleges' willingness to commit to this study (Lewis, Saunders and Thornhill 2016). Powell and Single (1996: 501) suggest that 'the desirable number of focus groups sessions can range from one to 10, since at some juncture the group's discussions will simply replicate existing data, making further sessions unnecessary.' The focus groups completed reached the point of theoretical saturation, as no new or relevant data or theoretical insights were emerging (Bell and Bryman 2015).

Because of the diverse composition of the two clusters, the focus groups were not uniform; therefore, different interpretations of the material discussed were evident. The focus groups were conducted face-to-face and at the participants' place of study, and this familiar setting was selected to support an informal approach. However, focus groups are never 'natural' in terms of settings or conversations as few conversations focus on a single subject under the direction of a moderator (Catterall and Maclatan 1997: 4). All participants were reassured that the session was not a marketing exercise by CU and that the purpose was to gain their opinions with no right or wrong answers existing.

6.4.1 Focus groups – Semi-structured plan

Each group session lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and they were conducted in the following way: explanation and signing of the informed consent form (Appendix 3), introduction, rapport building, in-depth discussion, screening of two films followed by reviews and closure (Davis 2017). The structured element of the focus group required the creation of a script. This included an introduction, all the questions, a reminder to screen the films, and a summary method (Figure 6.2). A semi-structured approach means that the script should be viewed as a series of prompts or probes that remind the moderator of the timing and topics to be covered (Bell and Bryman 2015). A semi-structured approach was adopted because the sessions intended to gather in-depth information about various topics. The semi-structured approach helped ensure that a clear list of issues was discussed and considered, but with the flexibility to enable participants to speak more broadly on the topics presented (Denscombe 2014: 186). The information elicited from the focus group was achieved using a variety of questions and two sample promotional films.

Introduction: Objectives for the session, final outcome.	
Participant information sheet, consent forms, confidentiality, audio recording.	
Rapport building: open discussion on theme, why HE?	
1	<p>When did you start researching into Uni's?</p> <p>Did you look for course – then Uni or Uni then course?</p> <p>How did you decide which is the best course / Uni?</p> <p>Did you attend an open day?</p> <p>Did you meet any staff or student ambassadors?</p>
2	<p>How important was the location/city?</p> <p>Did you research, consider the equipment/facilities?</p>
3	<p>Did the cost come into your decision-making process?</p> <p>Fees?</p> <p>Cost of equipment/books required?</p> <p>Cost of living / Student accommodation?</p>

4	How did you conduct your search (Which sites?) What did you find useful or not? What sort of information are you looking for?
5	Has anyone used social media to connect with a Uni Social media with Peers to discuss Uni's? Did you search via YouTube and watch any Vlogs?
6	Has anyone seen a course-based film?
Introduce film to the group – (high production value mix of students and staff) Pause recording https://youtu.be/TdOG1-Pf6d0	
7	Start Recording Immediate responses, likes and dislikes?
8	Would this video have inspired you to apply if you were interested in area? Why?
9	What could be improved? Narrative, dialogue, production quality, participants, information. Are the range of people in the video important? Have you ever met any staff from a Uni? What was your impression?
Introduce film to the group – Pause recording https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjaXbNTxclQ&t=204s https://youtu.be/TdOG1-Pf6d0	
10	Start Recording Immediate responses, likes and dislikes?
11	Would this video inspire you to apply if you were interested in area? Why
12	What could be improved? Narrative, dialogue, production quality, participants, information.
12	What are the core elements that are required in a good promotional film?
13	Trust – Who do you trust more – Vlogs student voice or Uni made film? Did you trust the information you are finding?

	What helps you build trust in an organisation?
Summary and closing question	
14	How does the impression you had compare to the reality?
15	Have I missed anything that was important to your decision?
	Thank everyone

Table 6.3 Focus group plan (Source: Author's own)

Towards the end of the focus groups two films were shown as indicated in Figure 6.2. Both films were selected based on their category's highest number of views. The first one was a CU course-based promotional video that had received the highest number of views from the collection of films available on the CU YouTube channel. The second screening was a Vlog that represented the most viewed peer-to-peer HE applicant advise film on YouTube. Both films represent the most popular examples of their genre. This section of the focus group had two key functions. The first was to explore different interpretations of the two films presented, expanding on the areas of trust and audience preferences identified in the survey. The second consideration was that after 30 minutes of focused conversation, and accounting for the age group taking part, an activity-oriented exercise helped to refocus the group. The screening of the films was useful in this context, as using activity-oriented questions can help focus the group's attention, particularly when working with young people (Colucci 2007).

6.5 Conducting the focus groups

Each focus group was digitally audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. This aspect was made clear at the start of the session and was noted in the signed participant informed consent form. The purpose of recording the session was to ensure an accurate record was achieved and avoid the difficulty of writing and moderating the session (Bell and Bryman 2015).

All the focus groups were agreed and prearranged with the schools or course directors before participants were approached. All the gatekeepers were asked to identify volunteers in advance of the session, but the participants were sometimes formed out of pupils who turned up to class and were then asked to volunteer. At the start of each session, the purpose and process were explained to the participants, and the voluntary nature of the activity was emphasised. The participants who agreed to partake in a focus group were provided with a participant information sheet (Appendix 4).

The researcher moderated all the focus groups to encourage dialogue and gain detailed information from the participants about the HE recruitment process. The central role of the moderator within this structure is to generate interest in the topic, establish an atmosphere of trust, encourage individuals to contribute and facilitate the group interaction without interjecting bias or opinions (Davis 2017, Denscombe 2014, Lewis, Saunders and Thornhill 2016). Possibly because of their age, unfamiliarity with both the researcher and the mode of engagement, the participants tended to be reluctant to expand on their answers. In response, the moderator involvement increased until a more relaxed and natural conversation took place. Alongside the need to maintain an active session, part of the role of the moderator is to ensure the session is delivered within the allocated time. The researcher moderated all sessions to steer the conversation based on the central issues and topics while encouraging and reacting to the participants' comments. Each of the focus groups contained different group dynamics, and while the intended approach was to minimise the moderator's interaction, some groups required higher levels of active engagement than initially planned. The varying group dynamics included deviation from the topic discussed, a single dominant voice or single word answers to open questions. Each of these responses required the moderator to support the flow of conversation and encourage participation.

6.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was required and gained before conducting the first focus group. This was of particular importance, as the participants in stage one were adolescent pupils aged between 16 and 18 years old. The volunteers were either members of sixth form groups or they were studying at further education institutions. The participants were selected because they were interested in applying or were applying for a degree level course at a Higher Education establishment. It was not a requirement that the participants were interested in applying to Coventry University.

Ethical concerns for Stage Two differed from the originally proposed focus groups, therefore, additional approval was required and gained before conducting the stage two focus groups. The participants were students at Coventry University, and protecting the rights of those individuals raised different issues from the original groups. The respondents were all volunteers, and no pressure was placed on any student to participate in the research. All the CU students had followed the UCAS application process and were joining an undergraduate course. Care was taken to protect the anonymity of all the participants involved.

The impact of interviewer bias was a factor that needed consideration. As the researcher is an employee of CU this creates the potential for influencing that is reflected in the tone used and through the additional probing questions utilised. A positionality statement is provided in Chapter 9 that explores this potential conflict of interests.

6.7 Analysing the focus group data

The main output from the focus group sessions was the conversational transcripts derived from the audio recordings. Therefore, the group sessions were audio-recorded in a digital format to create accurate transcripts. The recordings were stored securely and were erased upon completion of the research. Once the session was completed, the participants' comments were transcribed to provide qualitative data. The transcription

was initially created using Trint, an automated transcription software, and then checked for accuracy by the researcher.

There is a range of benefits that recording and transcribing interviews can bring to a research task. Bell and Bryman (2015: 493) list the following advantages:

- It compensates for the limitations of our memories
- It allows for more extensive examination
- It permits repeated examination
- It enables public scrutiny by other researchers
- It helps counter-accusations of biases
- It will enable data to be reused in other ways

The focus group narrative transcripts produced from the audio files were imported into NVivo12, where the material was collated, organized, and analysed. These transcripts provide raw data about the emotions, experiences, preconceptions, and the rationale why and when the applicants were applying to HEI.

6.8 Coding the focus group data

‘Codes are the tags used to assign meaning to data collected. Generating a code is an act of interpreting meaning, and the beginning of a process of pattern detection, categorisation and theory building’ (Kozinets 2020: 338).

Coding was used to convert the acquired data from the focus groups into manageable data sets related to the research question. These coded datasets are linked through various patterns or themes drawn from the material gathered to enable further analysis. ‘The primary purpose of coding is to organise the data in a way that assists further analysis and interpretation’ (Catterall and Maclaran 1997: 5).

The transcripts were organised into appropriate data sets by developing a thematic coding scheme. The traditional phases of the thematic analysis are listed in Figure 6.3.

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Figure 6. 2 Phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006: 87)

The first step of this study's coding process was achieved through the transcription stage, as previously discussed. During this phase, the data was not only read but the audio recordings were repeatedly examined to distil the data down and identify previously undetected patterns. After transcription, the material was then imported into NVivo12, a dedicated research software designed to enable the organisation and exploration of data.

The second phase was to identify the initial codes that appear throughout the data collected, as these formed the building blocks to address the research question (Kolb 2018: 256). The codes created from the data collected were based on whether they captured something important in relation to the overall research question (Braun and Clarke 2006). As indicated in blue, the initial codes were data-driven (Figure 6.4).

Once the initial coding stage was completed, the third stage of focused coding and the identification of themes began. What emerged was a recognition that the initial coding phase lacked the level of consistency required because of the absence of clear boundaries in each code category, and this issue is highlighted by Boyatzis (1998: 30) as a common

concern when a data-driven approach is adopted. Bryman (2016: 245) suggests that distinct categories are required to enable efficient coding to be created.

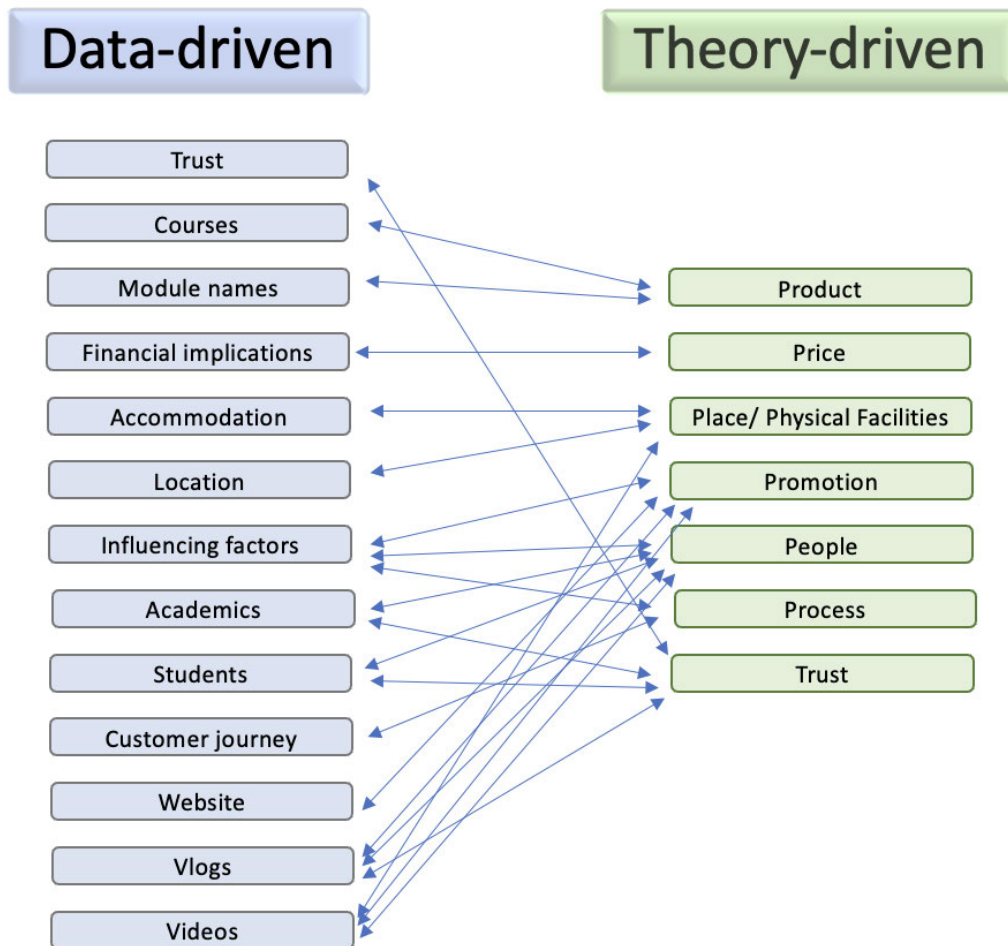


Figure 6. 3 Thematic partnering showing 13 initial codes and 7 refined themes (Source: Author's own)

After several reviews of the data, a clearer set of re-focused themes was identified. Initially, these refined themes retained the names that had emerged from the data, but the link to an existing framework became apparent. For example, location and place were interchangeable as a theme title.

Due to the proximity of the themes to the 7Ps marketing mix produced by Fox and Kotler's (1995). Kotler and Fox's marketing mix was designed specifically for the education sector, and it offered a structure that could be adopted. There was not enough data or separation to support both the place and physical facilities; therefore, they were

collapsed into one theme. Trust was included within the initial coding structure constructed from a data-driven perspective, trust remains relevant to the project and warranted an additional theme. Through the use of an existing framework, clearly distinguishable themes have been created that allow for a more explicit connection to the research question.

6.9 Stage one data

Stage One comprises five focus groups with pre-application participants.

6.9.1 Product

The word ‘course(s)’ was the third most used word throughout the focus groups (Table 6.3). While the course appears to be the primary driver for choice, the distinction between course types, including part-time, full-time, blended and online, was not considered. All the participants were aiming to apply for full-time face-to-face onsite delivered courses.

Word	Count	Similar words
Think	186	think, thinking, thinks
University	161	universities, university
Course	135	course, courses
Really	82	really
Video	78	Video, videos

Table 6. 4 NVivo word frequency query (Source: Author’s own)

Information directly relating to courses occupied 7.64% of the total conversation, and course-based information was perceived as the main consideration when selecting an institution. Most students knew the type of course they intended to study or at least the subject area they wished to specialise in.

“I look at film and then I look for different types of film courses on offer and what would be best for me. So, I had a look at film production, then I had a look at film studies, and then I pick my like, preferred option from that choice. So now I have chosen film studies.” (School D)

“I looked at the course first because not all universities do sports.” (School E)

While the course is the starting point for many customers’ research journey, finding the level of detail that an individual required was quite variable. Some students wanted the bullet point headline information based on course structure. The headline features included international opportunities and business connections that could narrow down the options. Others required detailed course material, including the core subjects covered and teaching styles adopted.

“I’d say film production, because I’d prefer production over studies, so I need more specific information. For me I don’t particularly want to sit and analyse film, I actually want to make them.” (School D)

“I think there should be a bigger emphasis on what is actually being taught. What it is actually going to entail.” (School A)

In general discussion, most respondents referred to the course they were looking for as opposed to the university, suggesting the university selected was based more on pre-conceived notions of the institution’s reputation. This was particularly apparent when discussing top tier Russell Group institutions.

“I'm kind of now at the stage where I'm going to choose a course before I choose a university, so looking at the things I want to do.” (School A)

For some participants, selecting a course involved a prior decision around the general subject area of interest. This step is required before a more general search is conducted of the range of courses that fit under the umbrella of a subject group.

“I want to do something in computing or that kind of area. I'm not exactly sure of the specific course I want to do.” (School A)

The focus group conversations suggest that customers usually begin their decision-making journey by identifying the subject area and then connecting this with a course offer that meets their expectations and needs.

“The difference between LSE and King's College is the different emphasis, one is split like its politics and economics and the other has political economy. So, they have variations in what they offer although they are very similar. So, I kind of look towards the modules and what they offer specifically because I'll probably look for more politic side of things than economics.” (School E)

The university appears as the wrapper that contains the course rather than the focus of interest. As the University is a service provider, the course is viewed as the purchase option supported by the institution.

6.9.2 Price

The financial implications of studying in Higher Education including the cost of tuition fees, accommodation and other elements that impact on the student's ability to undertake a course, were discussed.

When considering the cost of studying, most participants had accepted the idea that a set fee and future loan would be required regardless of their chosen course or selected

university. Therefore, for those wishing to attend a UK university-based course, it was not a major defining factor in their decision-making process.

“You're going to be in some kind of debt at the end of it and you're going to have to pay, you're going to have to go through it anyway.” (School C)

“I don't think it's much of a big deal, because if you want to go you'll be alright and paying it back, it's not like you paying hundreds at a time.” (School D)

While they did not deem tuition fees to be an influencing factor, the general cost of living was for some a factor that was considered, with a few indicating they would not consider London as an option because of the high cost of living.

“London, it's too expensive to live, but you do get paid more with the loan to go to London. But you do end up having to pay more back.” (School D)

“Obviously, price will vary, especially in London it's quite high. So, the accommodation costs £300 at King's College, but you'd get similar accommodation, for instance at Warwick for half the price, if not less.”
(School E)

However, two of the participants had contemplated studying overseas to avoid the UK fee system, while others had considered apprenticeships. Respondents also spoke positively about potential value-added elements that would influence their decisions.

“Not little gifts, but to go on international trips or getting the textbooks for free would make a difference.” (School B)

Following further discussion, it was clear that the majority of the participants were not aware of the different incentives, including support for international field trips, supplying technical equipment, or scholarships offered by universities.

“If it was a university I was looking at, it might be in the back of my mind. If I apply there, I can get all the textbooks for free. But it wouldn't be a massive influence.” (School B)

Interestingly, the cost of getting to open days was raised as a concern. This issue has impacted on the number of locations an individual would visit and sometimes, participants relied on recommendations of friends rather than first-hand experience.

“It's not always easy for people to travel to the open days and it can be quite expensive, especially if you have like siblings and your parents are busy.”
(School B)

This section suggests we can consider the economic impact in the broader context of the full price of undertaking the course. For students only considering a UK education, tuition fees seemed to be accepted as inevitable and therefore, does not act as a comparative element. Influencing factors within this section include significant incentives, accommodation costs and these are often weighed against the option of remaining local.

6.9.3 Place / Physical facilities

Separating the discussions about location and campus facilities proved to be difficult. For this research, these two elements were considered in tandem. The idea of ‘place’ for all the participants was focused on the geographical location rather than a virtual environment.

Location reoccurs as a factor that, for some, is a significant feature of the process, while others have stated they are more flexible in this aspect.

“I don't wanna go more than three hours away, once I've looked at how far they are I look what the city is like. I want to go to a really nice city as well, that influences my choice.” (School B)

The defining features described in the quote above can be broken down into the common themes of city reputation, distance, amenities and campus structure. Some participants were only considering local institutions, they were therefore limiting their search criteria down to a very restricted number of universities. The reasons for studying at a local university varied. For some, it was about the confidence to leave home or the cost of living, while others prioritised the need to remain in contact with their existing peer groups.

“I'd rather stay local. I don't want to be in a place with a bunch of different people yet.” (School B)

“I want to stay near my friends and family.” (School D)

Therefore, the decision to stay ‘local’ would mean that participants would only consider the higher education opportunities available within the West Midlands region.

“I've looked at Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Nottingham. I look, like an hour's drive.” (School D)

The focus group participants were all studying in a geographical area that has a diverse range of institutions that could be regarded as commutable. Some participants were keen to move further afield to gain independence: several students were considering international options.

“I'd look anywhere. I'd like to go abroad.” (School A)

“I don't mind where I go. I kind of want independence, so I don't really mind going far away from home. I've been looking at places like Liverpool to Manchester, but if I had to go up to Scotland, I would.” (School D)

The discussions that followed this element included preferences for city living and more campus-based student-focused environments. While there was no clear consensus regarding the ideal location, the participants agreed this was down to individual preference and therefore, no single campus structure would be ideal for everyone.

“Maybe someone might not feel comfortable in the middle of London surrounded by all the buzz and the busyness. Yeah. But then again someone might not feel comfortable at a university like in the middle of nowhere with nothing around them. So, it's just up to them. The location where it's best for you.” (School B)

When contemplating the location, the university was one aspect of that decision process, as societies and additional amenities were also taken into consideration or could even represent the deciding factor.

“If they don't have a hockey team, I probably won't go there right. Okay, so that's a major influence as I really enjoy playing hockey. If they don't like have a pitch with the facilities, then it's not really somewhere I want to go.” (School E)

The additional elements that were discussed included retail shops, nightlife, and the general atmosphere of the location. The importance of the factors varied between the pupils, but the majority agreed that access to resources was an influencing factor.

“I need a lot of social stuff, to get me involved in things, because I am quite reserved, but when I go to Uni I want to get myself out there meet new people and do new things and just have the whole experience.” (School E)

“It's going to be somewhere I'm living for three, maybe more years and you won't be studying all the time.” (School B)

Student accommodation was the main aspect discussed as the influencing factor that featured in the physical facilities category. Applicants were seeking something that was clean, well located and would make them feel relaxed.

“I'd say accommodation is very important. If you're not comfortable. It often enhances stress and if you're not comfortable where you're living, then that's going to affect everything else in life. So, I think it's very important you must have nice accommodation.” (School E)

“I'd say the quality of accommodation is something to look for. When going to a university, if you have a stress-free environment, you'll enhance your studies.” (School E)

During the focus group discussions, a reoccurring theme was emerging, and that was the customers' reliance on their emotional response to a situation. While the participants found it difficult to explain what they were looking for, they were convinced that they would experience an emotional response to the space or place. The notions of feeling at home, stress-free or just having the right atmosphere were often significant influencing factors.

“It looked really good, and it had loads of facilities, but then it just seemed like a little bit dead. It was just good, but there wasn't any atmosphere really or anything else which I feel like you kind of need to have.” (School E)

In common with many areas within this study, place and facilities are down to individual presences. For some participants in this section, their focus was still at the point of

deciding how far they want to be from home and which course or institution was the most appropriate option. Once an initial shortlist had been created the distilling process began based on a range of priorities which were centred on either emotional responses or practical requirements.

6.9.4 Promotion

In the struggle to secure student numbers, a range of strategies are adopted by institutions to improve their brand presence. This subsection considers the elements discussed during the focus groups that refer to the tools used by institutions that provide information to potential applicants during the decision-making process.

Positions in the university rankings, including in *Times HE* and *The Guardian*, were discussed at various points, but the importance of these and the level of institutional positioning varied. For some participants, they deemed the course reputation and ranking position as the primary driver for establishing the best choice.

“I just like to look at league tables online and see what unis are the best for which type of courses and based on things like student satisfaction and then take it from there.” (School E)

“If it's on the rankings and it's quite high up, I think. OK, it would encourage me to go there more than others.” (School C)

The university reputation and ranking position that an institution holds affected the various cohorts of focus groups in completely different ways. Most pupils at School B and E regarded the Russell group institutions as their primary target. Other universities that are positioned above many in this group were discounted based on preconceived notions of institutional reputation. In contrast, at schools A, C and D many of the participants are discounting the top tier of the Russell group. These discussions were based either on their

lack of confidence in achieving the grades required or the perceived sociocultural perspective that the individual does not want to be associated with.

“Russell Group, I wouldn’t want to go. I think that the kind of pressure you would be under to fit in with people who maybe I don't identify with isn’t something I would want to do.” (School C)

Course-based rankings were also stated as key starting points for establishing a shortlist, with the lower-ranking courses being discounted.

“I just typed in top 10 and the site came up. I have just looked at the top 10 rated courses.” (School B)

“If I was looking at psychology and criminology, then I'd look at say the top three and if they had extremely high entry requirements, I might then look at the top five.” (School E)

A key factor that was discovered suggested that the UCAS tariff points would help provide an alternative ranking system that would enable pupils to identify an appropriate peer group based on their academic ability.

“The grades that are required to get into a course affect the type of people that you're gonna be around.” (School A)

Grade requirements reoccurred as a theme at various points with all the focus groups. Some pupils held the perception that high-grade requirements equated to a better course and, therefore, this becomes a core influencing factor.

“The grades would probably affect me quite a lot. If it’s got higher entry grades, then it would be a better course.” (School A)

Another participant viewed the UCAS point requirements as a suitable method for assessing courses’ popularity.

“I feel like obviously if they ask for high grades it’s because a lot of people want to go.” (School C)

Besides the grade requirements of the various institutions, unconditional offers and additional entry requirements were discussed. Unsurprisingly, most participants would welcome an unconditional offer from their chosen institution.

“I would love to get unconditional. If it was Aston, I would probably just take it. It makes you feel safer by knowing it is unconditional.” (School B)

For some pupils, the idea of gaining a place before completing their ‘A’ levels would take an element of reward away from the process. This appeared to be the case where students had selected their ‘A’ levels to gain a place at a particular university.

“I would have a sense of pride at earning my place. But, I think it would also be nice being easy.” (School C)

However, the participants were also aware of the downside of receiving this style of offer.

“If you get an unconditional offer, you think I’m safe, and some people think that I don’t really have to try anymore. So, you can fail your ‘A’ levels and get in any way.” (School B)

“I think they've got their positives and negatives because with an unconditional offer I feel that would take quite a lot of stress off, but at the same time you wouldn't be as motivated to achieve as high if you've already got the offer.” (School E)

Applicants who were considering creative courses, and those who selected the top tier Russell group universities, wanted to be selected based on more than the grades alone. This group of pupils seemed to welcome the opportunity to prove themselves via an interview process.

“I think I like interviews because the university is picking you because you got your grade. But I'd also want to be picked because they like my work.” (School C)

One participant suggested the longer-term benefit of undertaking an interview at this stage.

“I think it's good as well to get a bit of experience in the interview before going off to get a job. It's good to get experience in interviews.” (School C)

The draw of a particular university based on perceived expertise in a specialist area was discussed, with a pupil only considering one institution because of its reputation in sport. Equally, other students indicated they would avoid this university because they had no interest in sport “I'll avoid any uni that specialised in sport” (School C), even though the named university offers a diverse range of courses.

As part of the spread of promotional activities, universities host open days. These events vary in scale and quality, but they can act as the definitive factor in the selection process. Most of the participants in the Stage One group were still researching their appropriate course via internet sources. Only a limited number of the participants had visited a university. A common response amongst the participants who had attended an open day was the need to get the correct ‘feel’ for a university. When exploring in further discussions what that feeling was based on, it was clear that a myriad of factors contributed towards the correct feeling.

“I would go on an open day and see how I feel about the university. See if you like the feel of it yeah. You can feel if generally, it's going to be the right university for you.” (School B)

Several pupils discussed the need for suitable facilities and accommodation.

“So, if I go to the open day, I want to see the accommodation, and then I reckon I don't want to be living there if it's not a good living standard of living.” (School B)

For those students who had attended an open day, one frustration they raised was when the same generic information was given that echoed the material already on the website.

“When we go to an open day you sort of get, for me anyway, because I’m confident in the course I’m doing, you end up getting similar information about the course just put sort of a little bit differently.” (School B)

The use of hard-copy material was discussed, and for many, it was just an indicator to direct them onto online resources. “I think if you see a leaflet, you might not read it all, but it might get you to look for it online” (School B). Using prospectuses in the marketing mix seems to add little value. Prospectuses were mainly gathered at open days, but their onward function appears to be limited.

“You read it say on the way home from an open day. But then, it’s not going to be something you read over and over again.” (School B)

Since the original proposal for this study was written, rich-media including Vlogging, has gained significant traction as new promotional marketing tools that are applicable to a HE context. This aspect was discussed in the focus group discussions and the need for easy to locate, informative and inspiring videos was apparent.

“I would search on YouTube and see if I could find a video tour of the campus. It might be somebody talking about the course that I want to do. Someone talking about their experience at university. Anything that will give me an idea of what it's like.” (School B)

“I think videos would be best for looking at universities, because if one of the students was to almost like tour the university it would give a better insight

and you can get their opinion, you could be more informed. I think it's just better.” (School E)

Expectations of what the videos would be like varied between schools and individuals. For many, the expectation was that universities would create professional standard films that matched the presentation standards and production quality of TV adverts.

“If you're watching a string of adverts, if one is shot differently in lower quality in comparison to the other ones, then the better ones are going to stand out and you're just going to forget about the previous one.” (School A)

“If you're on like social media and it comes up as one of the adverts. If it's not made in high quality you're gonna assume that the rest of it is not good quality and so I think it's really important that it's done well.” (School A)

Some participants reported that, as a direct response to a marketing push, they had watched promotional films, even for universities they had no interest in.

“Yes, but not for one I want to go to. I've seen a lot from De Montfort.” (School A)

Adverts seem to attract interest if they are engaging, entertaining and align with an individual's expectations.

“Well, it depends on what the advert has in it. If it's just someone talking to a camera that doesn't really appeal to me, but if I see like stuff they've been doing and like behind the scenes, like what you don't see, then it kind of appeals to me more because I get interested in it.” (School D)

Participants indicated that what connects them to vlogs are digital social networks that recommend or link to content, rather than a push style of adverts.

“If I saw that as just a thumbnail, I could've thought that is just someone else shouting about what they do.” (School A)

The transcript revealed that context was an influencing factor in the type of video the applicant would expect to see. As previously mentioned, participants would expect a professional standard film on a university website, and equally, they were more accepting of a vlog style film if it was on YouTube.

“I think it's difficult because, personally, if I went on a university website and that was that video, I wouldn't get engaged as I would I feel like it would be less serious. And if like if I was looking at universities on YouTube for example in my free time and I came across that, I'd feel like, yes, I'll watch that.” (School D)

Poorly conceived marketing material carries the risk that it will create a negative impact, with some participants claiming that it would put them off an institution.

“If I see a video and realised I don't like it, then I probably won't even go to an open day.” (School B)

The second film shown to the focus groups was a radical departure from the classic HE marketing style, and a clear attempt to create something that would resonate with a contemporary YouTube savvy audience. This film avoided the well-trodden pathway of hiring in an advertising agency or production company and following a scripted engagement with academics and student representation. Instead, it relied on the charismatic presence of an experienced Vlogger. This route had the additional bonus of

an established audience of followers who subscribe to the Vloggers' channel. However, a film based on a single figure's charisma carries the risk of appealing to a very segmented target audience.

"This kind of video that appeals to like a very specific audience because for the people that liked that kind of person and would like that kind of video. I think it would be great to advertise a unique life. But for the majority of people, they would find it annoying and too long." (School A)

This film divided most of the focus groups into a love or hate response. What can be established from the associated YouTube statistics is that the professionally produced promotional film achieved 257K views over a 6-month period (ending in April 2019) compared to the Vlog view rate of 689K over a 5-month period (ending in April 2019).

"It's quite funny and it entertained you a bit more. Rather than just education all the time. It's a bit more of a student perspective." (School B)

"It just felt like he actually knew what he was talking about and he was funny, it was more personal in the way he was talking. It wasn't serious, it was just more-light hearted." (School D)

"I like the fact that it was a bit more casual, and it was just kind of a normal guy, kind of chatting about like things and it kind of like interests you."
(School C)

The notion of truth reoccurs within this section, with many participants relying on the peer-to-peer style vlog as a more authentic version compared with the more corporate style university produced film.

“They just feel more real, because like that trailer from Coventry University, it feels like it was set up, everyone was just told what they're doing, just to make it look good, whereas if you're vlogging it or doing like a normal video, so it's gonna be like a normal day. And you're going to be able to experience that for video and film, so you can imagine what you're going to be like, what you will do at the Uni.” (School D)

Promotional activities and ranking comparisons appear to be effective when they target potential students with course-based material. Institutional level marketing helps to raise brand awareness, but as similar ranking focused campaigns are adopted by universities across the HE sector the impact seems to get diluted.

6.9.5 People

The decision to apply for a university place is an action that is rarely taken alone. Most of the participants referred to someone whom they had turned to for guidance. Given that the processes of establishing which university represents the ideal option is new to all the participants, advice was sought from many sources. Fox and Kotler (1995) refer to the people element as ‘employees’, but the importance to this study of including a broader group of people has resulted in this section including influencers. The most common and what appeared to be the most powerful influencer was peer-to-peer sharing of information, particularly around the search experience. Elliott and Healy (2008: 10) suggest that ‘the most effective and efficient means of recruiting students is through word-of-mouth promotion which comes from current satisfied students.’

“A few of my friends went to visit that university and I asked them to tell me what they liked about it.” (School C)

“I have a few friends who are going to Uni now and I've asked them what it's like right. Not really in much detail. Just like how's it going.” (School E)

Peer influence at this stage can occur in a myriad of ways. From the respondents' comments, most recommendations came from fellow pupils who have already attended open days and shared their opinions.

“She spoke of the professor and the things he would ask you. The way he'd speak and the way he wrote himself and I thought that sounds really, really cool.” (School C)

The influence exerted by peers seemed to be more impactful when a negative message was being shared. The quote below describes how one participant's friend was dissuaded from applying to Oxford University because of a poor experience during an open day, even though “she had worked so hard to get the ‘A’ stars required”. (School C)

“When one of my friends visited Oxford, she was going for ancient history, which was something I'm very interested in. She told me she sat there and it was so dull. She was like, it was just really off-putting for her.” (School C)

Peer-to-peer advice also included acquiring guidance from students at universities, although this was sometimes done via eWoM. School B had formalised this process by creating a school Facebook group linking current pupils with recent school graduates.

The other schools relied on the links the pupils had independently established. When the focus group was asked about their preferred sources of information, peer-to-peer was cited as the most important.

“I think talking to people who are already at the Uni because they can tell you a bit more in-depth rather than what the university is selling online.” (School B)

The importance of face-to-face contact was repeated at various points during all the focus groups. Students wanted to have the reassurance that the students they are going to be working alongside and the staff who will teach them will create a community of shared interest.

“It's nice to know how they teach and then how these students respond to that teacher. I like both sides of it.” (School E)

The peer-to-peer sharing of information and watching peer YouTube videos were quoted as significant engagement points for the use of social media.

“I think YouTube is useful to see the student perspective. So, when students make videos about their life at university, I think that is mainly what I've used it for.” (School E)

Only a very limited number of the participants had engaged with an institution's social media channels. The two modes of engagement stated were Twitter and Instagram.

“I'm on Twitter, so sometimes a tweet might appear about a university like praising them or saying about how bad they are, or there could be like incidents that have happened. And so, if that kind of builds up like for example, if you hear like a university in Scotland has had the worst violence, I'll think about steering clear of that place.”
(School D)

Advertising through social media channels was viewed as a positive approach for universities to adopt, as it offered the participants the choice to engage or ignore.

“There are Instagram adverts that I’ve seen, so when they come up I’ll go onto their profiles and have a look through to see what information is on there.”

(School D)

“Adverts on the Internet, you can just like scroll past perhaps some of them. If you see one and see a university, you can choose to look at it. I think, it's at least giving people the option to look at the site.” (School E)

One respondent mentioned an additional influencing factor that is worth some consideration: the idea that some decisions are made based on personality traits or characteristics, rather than the broader marketing factors.

“I've seen some people who may be less confident who want to go somewhere where their friends are going because they automatically know at least one or two people, rather than going on the right course for them and not knowing anyone.” (School A)

One comment made in jest also contained a similar concern regarding the applicant’s confidence at leaving the support and comfort of home life, therefore restricting the search criteria to a commutable distance.

“I'm looking at courses really that are kind of local. I really don’t want to go too far because I cannot look after myself.” (School A)

The comments in this section indicate that face-to-face and peer-to-peer contact is used not only to gather information but additionally to reaffirm the social networks that the participant would be joining.

“I’d want to talk to students because they're the ones having to go through that process, the same process you're going through. So, if they don't like it then there's a chance that you won’t like it. If they really like it then that's always

going to boost your confidence in the university a lot because if they like it you will probably like it.” (School E)

The applicant decision-making process can be affected by the influence of one individual contact from a positive or negative perspective. Participants appear to be unforgiving of a contact point that results in a substandard experience.

6.9.6 Process

The process element has been considered in relation to the administrative activities required to achieve a place at a HE institution. This aspect is intended to include the UCAS elements of the application process, alongside reviewing the HEI touchpoints that have occurred. Numerous steps need to be undertaken before arriving at a university and for many of the participants interviewed in stage one, this was a process they had only just begun.

The pathway to becoming a student varies vastly, with some participants using their chosen career as the driver for course selection.

“I look on UCAS, I type in Film and then I look at the opportunities and what the courses are about and what university does it.” (School D)

However, others consider the course or university as their guiding light, even selecting their ‘A’ levels based on entry requirements.

“I’ve considered a couple of universities, but I’m still not sure what kind of job I want to get into.” (School A)

“I started looking kind of before I chose my A level options just to get an idea.” (School A)

The anticipated ‘normal’ route a diligent applicant would take should track the UCAS timeline. This established pattern of activity enables marketing intervention at key decision-making points. However, a wide spectrum of alternative pathways were

discussed that appeared as varied as the individuals interviewed. For some, the starting point for their route into HE was still something to face in the distant future.

“I’m not overly sure what career path to take here. So, I’m quite open to what kind of course I might want to do. I would like to look at every option.”

(School A)

“I’m not really sure what I want yet so I’m more looking about. Location and things like that rather than the courses first. I’m still sort of searching.”

(School E)

Variations also occurred between schools, with School B offering clear guidance and support at an early stage resulting in most of the participants having a course and potential university in mind. In contrast, School A students had very limited knowledge of the variety of courses on offer, and they claimed to have received limited career guidance.

“You need like a kinda careers day. Yeah, when some universities and some companies would explain like some of the courses and some of them would bring in multiple people.” (School A)

“I find it quite hard to do the research on my own, so I think it would be helpful if, like, universities reached out to schools.” (School A)

The pupils at School A had an expectation that it was the responsibility of the university sector to reach out to them and present the options available.

Respondents from School C had already attended a presentation from a local university. This visit had a significant influence on many of the students participating in the study, with 4 out of the 9 in attendance selecting that institution as their main option.

“The University that I’m looking at, they actually came into the college and did a presentation and I found that very useful. You actually got to hear their

information and you got to talk to them. And, yeah, I found that really useful. So, I just went on the website and found when the open day is.” (School C)

“I wasn't even thinking about university and they came right in. I didn't want to go to university before that day.” (School C)

Most participants claimed to use the main UCAS subject-based search tool as the starting point for web orientated searches. This tool was of particular value to those students who did not have a clearly defined destination in mind.

“I usually start by the UCAS search. You choose a subject and it comes up with all the universities that do it, and it kind of gives you a bit of information. If you like it then you can then go on to that university's website.” (School E)

The university websites were discussed as a key source of information, but they could also act as barriers if they were too difficult to navigate or they contained information that was not presented in a digestible format.

“If you go to the website you just need clear information. I don't want to sit there and read through loads of paragraphs of information, you just want it bullet-pointed, entry requirements, location, what's around, what the campuses are like. You don't want to be like reading through or going through loads of information, it should just be easy to look at it and then you can have that information quickly.” (School C)

The route to selecting an institution and a course sometimes started with the consideration of the end goal, a job in a predetermined sector. Some participants stated that the delay in starting the application journey was being affected by the uncertainty of their final career choice.

“I've considered a couple of universities, but I'm still not sure what kind of job I want to get into.” (School A)

The consideration of a chosen career pathway also influences the need to evaluate institutional reputation, although when encouraged to expand on this point, the assessment criteria of what constitutes a 'better' university was not clear.

"I feel like, if you look like you have gone to a better university, then you're going to stand a better chance than if you have gone to one that maybe isn't recognised as being so good." (School A)

Most of the pupils interviewed were at the early stages of their journey towards a place at university. This limited the number of conversations that were possible regarding the later stages of the application process, something that will be addressed in Stage Two.

6.9.7 Trust

The following section emerged from the data as a key issue for participants.

The various focus groups responded to the notion of trust in different ways. Some groups assumed that all the information supplied by universities would be honest and accurate, while other participants were more sceptical and reviewed the information through the understanding that they were being marketed to.

"I'm more cynical. I believe that they're being paid to say it right. So, I will go more for the overall feel of the place and I will talk to everyone including the staff. I know they're going to be biased." (School D)

"I think universities need to be quite honest about what the university is like and not try to oversell it." (School B)

When this aspect was expanded on, some students accepted the need for marketisation and, therefore, the drive for emphasising the best attributes of a university was inevitable.

“I've never thought of a university to lie, but I'm aware that they are only going to point out the positives.” (School E)

“No university is going to put something out, right, that slates their course and Uni.” (School C)

The techniques used by universities to market their courses were discussed and the participants remarked that ranking statistics were often used. The difficulty the pupils faced was that, as most of the institutions were quoting some form of statistics, it was difficult to establish which ones added true value.

“I think it's confusing if they're all playing the ranking game.” (School B)

Universities with similar structures and programmes often quote a diverse range of statistics from NSS outcomes to global rankings in their marketing material. With institutions adopting similar approaches, applicants turned to alternative sources for a trusted opinion.

“Without the schools help it's hard to know which ones are the good ones and bad ones.” (School A)

Potential applicants were sometimes confused by the information they found through the marketing channels adopted by universities. This could indicate why they turn to alternative sources to find information that they considered unbiased, hoping that a balanced opinion can be identified.

“It's not that I don't trust it, but I would want to do my own research.” (School C)

“I've also read the website about the university. I would trust what they've said, but I wouldn't trust it enough to want to go there based on that. I'd have to go and meet the people and go to the university to get better insight into it.”
(School E)

Face-to-face communications were generally regarded as the most reliable and trustworthy routes to gain information. However, there still appeared to be a level of distrust, as several participants needed to read the faces or the students' body language to gain the reassurance they were getting an authentic message.

“For me, the only way I could properly trust it is if I'd been there and talked to the teachers that would be teaching the course I'm interested in.” (School A)

“If they are saying good things but the faces aren't reading the good thing, it's kind of like, oh, I want you to go here because I've been told to, but I don't want to be here.” (School D)

The term 'trust' was used to encapsulate a wide variety of marketing approaches and social engagements encountered along the decision-making pathway. Each participant responded to the various conversations that related to notions of trust in different ways, suggesting that applicants do not always act or respond in the way marketing approaches might have intended.

6.10 Stage Two

Stage Two comprised three focus groups with incoming CU UG students.

6.10.1 Product

This set of semi-structured focus groups occurred at the point when the students had already joined the course and were within the first month of study. Despite the short period between applying and arriving, some students struggled to accurately recall the decision-making process they had followed.

“I was looking for a course. No, I was looking for a university. I knew the course, I was looking for the university.” (Course DM)

In common with the previous focus group, the starting point for most of the participants was a course-based search.

“You look for the course you want and then the universities that are available.”
(Course PH)

“I'd I start looking at the course because although the Uni could look as it might have certain good things, the course has to be right. That's ultimately why you're going to that certain uni.” (Course MT)

While most participants followed the route of an initial course search that linked them into a particular university, this set of participants had continued to explore and expand on their knowledge of how the course was structured and what the course offered.

“I was looking for either a photography course or a history course. I wanted to have something that basically balanced my two favourite A-levels and so once

I knew that this course did history as a practice module and had that kind of approach, it kind of balanced the two out for me.” (Course PH)

“After going to Coventry it made me realise how much I like the course, the DM course was different and how much better it was and how much they have to offer.” (Course DM)

The second quote indicated that while students often undertook initial broad-brush approaches towards selecting their university place, it is still possible to create an impactful contact point that crystallises the decision-making journey. In common with the first group, the quotes relating to the product started with the course selection rather than the institution. The majority of participants suggested they had a subject area in mind and then undertook an online search that was followed up with a more detailed scan for information that would support their choice.

6.10.2 Price

The participants were asked about the impact that the financial implications of studying had on their decision-making process. The resulting conversations suggested that price had a limited impact on their decision making, which is an outcome worthy of further consideration by CU.

“The tuition fees, I never actually thought about that.” (Course DM)

“The rate you pay it back is low, and it’s only when you get a certain income anyway, so it's not really that big of a problem.” (Course MT)

The focus groups revealed that while tuition fees were viewed as inevitable, the other cost implications did feature in conversations as challenges the new students were facing.

It is interesting to note that some students were concerned about the difficulty of managing financial matters for the first time.

“It's mostly the living costs that's the problem, it's not really the course fees because that gets paid for you by your student loan. But with the maintenance, you got to do it yourself. It's like your first year of doing it on your own.” (Course PH)

“Because I know I would get so stressed, I've looked at videos of how to like budget. I set myself a weekly budget, so take out the money for my accommodation. I took out the money from my bills and stuff, like my phone bill, then I find out how much money I had left and I divided that by the time until I had my next grant.” (Course DM)

The transcripts revealed that most students did not consider the financial implications of studying as a determining factor in the choice of institution. The only exception seemed to relate to the possibility of studying in London, which for one student had dismissed because “the living costs was ridiculous” (Course PH).

6.10.3 Place / Physical facilities

Participants were asked about the importance of the universities' locations, and the role this played in their selection process. Responses were based on either only wanting to select a local institution, wanting to get away from the family or because they had visited and liked the 'vibe' of the city.

“It's Coventry and I live here, so it was convenient.” (Course MT)

“My family lives in London and I kind of wanted to separate a little bit from my family.” (Course DM)

“The location is a big thing. Just the vibe of the city. It's all right having the course, but if you don't feel comfortable in a place it makes all the difference.”
(Course PH)

Some of the other responses indicated that the decision regarding the location had been influenced by family or friends' experiences and recommendations.

“My mum's side of my family is from Coventry, but I've never lived in Coventry.” (Course PH)

“I have got a friend who's in the second year and he said he liked living in Coventry.” (Course PH)

While the geographical location of the city influenced many of the participants, the scale and mix of the city centre and campus feel was an additional contributing factor that was commented on.

“It's very student friendly, the whole city. Everything is quite close to each other. So, it's good.” (Course DM)

“I wasn't sure about Coventry and then as soon as I got here I wanted to choose it because I liked the place.” (Course PH)

“It's a city location, but it's also really close together, so it's not like it's like London and it's all spread out. Yeah, I think it's kind of the perfect mixture for me.” (Course PH)

Alongside the importance of location, the data revealed the significance of the student accommodation. Students who had visited Coventry before making their decision spoke highly of the accommodation on offer and the impact that had on the selection of their course.

“Accommodation is the best from every university that I visited.” (Course DM)

Many of the remaining responses in this section discussed facilities in relation to technical equipment. For example, “I’m gonna chose it because I just like the facilities the best.” (Course PH) Interestingly, this focus could relate to the type of course the students were undertaking, or it might be an area that CU has a particularly good reputation for. The students in the three focus groups were all from predominantly practice-orientated subjects, where the quality and quantity of equipment often becomes a defining feature.

“I remember on the tour when you went into like the audio studio it was really cool, and they showed us a robot from the media loan shop and that was cool as well, I wanted to learn how to use that.” (Course DM)

6.10.4 Promotion

This section explores those promotional elements that are produced and adopted by institutions to provide applicants with information to support them in their decision-making process. In discussions with the student participants, this topic has highlighted four key areas that could be considered: face-to-face, ranking sites, hard copy material and social media. The first area to explore relates to attendance at face-to-face organised events, including UCAS fairs and open days.

“I went to a different university, Lancaster open day and then after going to Coventry it made me realise how much I like the course.” (Course DM)

“I was sort of leaning to another university that I'd already gone to. But when I came to the open day, I sort of opened my eyes to Coventry and I just really enjoyed it.” (Course MT)

“Coventry came up on the league tables, I was like ok, I'll just go to the open day and see what it's like, but I hadn't actually come here with the intention of actually wanting to apply. I just kind of liked it when I did come here.”
(Course PH)

Promotional elements that could be considered as earned media, sit outside of the control of the institution and include the various university ranking systems. The importance of these rankings in the early stages of the decision-making process was very apparent in the conversations, as they often acted as devices to aid in the short-listing of interesting institutions.

“On the Guardian website Coventry was like the best course which kind of influenced me.” (Course PH)

“There was a piece of software or like a website that our school used called Uni Frog, and it would rank all the different universities in different categories like teaching, like contact hours price like loads of different categories. We then compared to find what suited us best.” (Course PH)

A very limited number of students had received or viewed any hard-copy marketing material. The positive comments raised in the focus groups about this style of marketing

material related more to the unusual and novel objects they received rather than the standard prospectus format.

“Other universities gave us a really nice welcome pack, I even got something simple from DMU. They just gave you a box and when you open it, it’s confetti!” (Course DM)

“Bournemouth gave us postcards. They were pretty postcards.” (Course DM)

Social media started to feature in this set of focus groups, but the focus of conversation centred around further information about life at a selected university, rather than the early stages of decision-making.

“I remember seeing Instagram Stories a couple of weeks before we were getting our results back. They had questions like, you could ask questions and the Uni would respond back.” (Course DM)

“I watched like anyone I could find and I even watched a tour of my accommodation.” (Course DM)

The participants were using a wide range of social media platforms to conduct their searches, including Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Vimeo and blogs. Several comments suggested that the availability of material was not as easy to locate or as prolific as institutions might believe.

“I went on the hunt on Facebook to see any group chats. I joined my accommodation one and I joined the digital media one. Oh yeah, I joined the Freshers one as well.” (Course DM)

“I followed the student union and I think there's Coventry university Facebook page, just to get an idea of what was going on. There wasn't much on there that was particularly relevant.” (Course MT)

“I looked at some people's blogs from the university, like course videos and what it was like to live around here from ex-students' perspective, stuff like that.” (Course PH)

The single most striking observation to emerge from this group of conversations was that the ranking systems or earned media are key influences at the initial search stage. Furthermore, social media is more commonly used to strengthen the applicant relationship, connect with peers and expand an individual's understanding and knowledge of a selected institution.

“Make a Facebook page, like this is the 2019 course. Just make it by the tutors so then they can accept. Because they have the names of people who are coming obviously and it can't just be anyone and then we can get to know people or maybe learn their names.” (Course PH)

The participants were asked to discuss any films they had viewed as part of their decision-making process. The films they had viewed were a mix of institutionally produced promotional material and peer experience. One participant had produced a vlog of her moving day and was keen to continue creating material that might interest others. Most of the comments related to searches they had conducted to find further tailored material about their courses, life in the city or the accommodation, elements that would be of use to them once they had arrived.

“It gave me an insight into what the university was like, you know, what happened, what went on. The kind of layout, the events for freshers, like places to go places not to go. Stuff like that.” (Course PH)

“I found a girl who moved into Bishop Gate, because it was only the first year it was open, I thought, nobody would have a video, but I found one girl and yeah, I watched her video and it helped a lot.” (Course PH)

The marketing films produced by the university were less popular, often seen as repeating the same material available in different spaces or viewed as bias information that was aimed at selling the courses.

“All videos are likely to be the same as they're all trying to sell the Uni to you.”
(Course PH)

“There were a few videos, but it was more just sort of like an introduction kind of thing and just advertising rather than anything more in-depth.”
(Course MT)

Most participants agreed that they would have benefited from a wider range of rich-media that offered a deeper understanding of what life for them would be like once they arrived.

“I looked to some people's blogs from the university, like course videos and what it was like to live around here from ex-students' perspective, stuff like that.” (Course PH)

“It'd be nice to get like, not overly produced video, just what lecture actually runs like, even if it was just the camera at the back of the room for an hour,

just to get an idea of how much work is in classwork, how much work is in your own time and stuff like that.” (Course MT)

6.10.5 People

Within this subsection, the focus groups seemed to consider three groups of ‘people’ the staff, student ambassadors and peer-to-peer. One of the key decision-making aspects was a sociocultural perspective, where the importance of fitting in with their peers or identifying like-minded individuals became a determining factor.

“At the end of the day they’re the people you are going to spend the most of your time with and if you get on well with them and they’re telling you everything you want to hear you’re more likely to go to their uni.” (Course PH)

“I knew people that already came to Coventry, so I used to come to the area a lot and visit them. They used to talk about their experience at Coventry University and it impacted my decision positively.” (Course DM)

During the customer journey, two key touchpoints were discussed when direct contact is made between the applicants and staff or student ambassadors. Open days and interviews represent significant points when managed interaction occurs. The impact of these events appears to derive from two different priorities: knowledge-based and emotional response. Some students’ comments emphasised the need to like the staff or students they communicated with.

“The student ambassadors, they were really nice. She was so helpful, like so helpful giving us an insight of what it’s like through a student as well. So, it

was really nice getting to know the student ambassador and she spoke to us for so long and yeah it was nice.” (Course DM)

“He was one of the photography teachers. He just loved it. He talked about it and it inspired me to want to go as well.” (Course PH)

Respondents in this section were mindful when expressing their opinions of staff and student ambassadors. The outcome, therefore, needs to consider the potential for positive bias based on these students being interviewed by an internal academic member of staff who has connections to the staff being discussed.

6.10.6 Process

Participants were asked about when they first considered their university choice, something this set of focus group participants struggled to recall and many were unable to respond. Table 6.4 illustrates the varying responses ranging from under 6 months to more than three years.

Time period	Responses
Over 3 years	2
1- 2 years	3
6 months – 1 year	2
Under 6 months	1

Table 6. 5 Choice timeline (Source: Author’s own)

The only respondents who could narrow down their timeline further were two students who could recall a presentation they had attended.

“I think it was around college year 2 around September.” (Course DM)

“That was the same for me, my teachers would have PowerPoints up about UCAS.” (Course DM)

This focus group revealed that during the final stage of the application process, some students had undertaken interviews as part of the application process.

“He tried his hardest to make us feel calm. The interview wasn't scary because of him. The fact that it's an interview was scary, but he tried his best to make us feel comfortable.” (Course DM)

“I had an interview at Anglia Ruskin. I think that was the only other place that I had an interview at. And then I had offers from all the other ones. It was like a mixture of unconditional and conditional.” (Course PH)

The outcome from the application process for some included unconditional offers. The transcripts revealed that the students understood the positive and negative impact that unconditional offers had on the applicants.

“I feel like it's 50/50. There is always the side where people are like, I've got an unconditional I'm not going to try my A-levels and there's like another side to it where especially with my A-levels I had a really tough time towards end of it. Like, I was in hospital and I didn't get the grades I wanted. But, because I had the unconditional, I was like, I know I'm going to be okay even though I did try my hardest.” (Course DM)

“They make you feel good and your family feel good, as well and your teachers. I think they're a good thing, but you should also have to work for them.” (Course DM)

Most of the negative experiences connected to the process were focused on the lack of communication, particularly after an offer had been made.

“Coventry did not really speak to us a lot. We both felt like Coventry just said okay you're accepted unconditionally. And then just ditched us until closer to the date.” (Course DM)

6.10.7 Trust

The following comments suggest that there is an acceptance that a sales pitch is occurring when in discussion with staff and a biased opinion is being presented both online and in person.

“That’s their job, it’s kind of, that they're there at open days to persuade you. Yeah so. But I still trusted them.” (Course DM)

“Staff are trying to persuade they are mainly talking about the good stuff.”
(Course DM)

Several of the participants were confident that despite the sales approach adopted, they could identify an authentic message and filter this information into their decision-making process.

“I just know that open days are just to try and sell you the uni. I'm not too influenced by that really.” (Course MT)

“I think you have to go into it knowing that they're not going to show you the bad bits. They're only going to show you the good.” (Course MT)

“Yeah, you can tell what's real and what's like really fabricated because some videos can be so exaggerated. Like there are videos out there about accommodation and all of that. Like some are true, you can tell they have like pictures, they have like yeah evidence, but then some it's just like you can just tell that something is too made up, something like that.” (Course PH)

At this stage in the applicants' journey, they have passed through the decision-making point and are committed to the university. A few participants were keen to point out that compared to the marketing, the course “exceeded my expectations” (Course DM) and another student commented, “It's been really exciting” (Course DM).

6.11 Summary

This chapter investigated applicant and new students' perceptions of the marketing and application process. This was achieved through a series of focus groups broken down into two groups, with stage 1 representing the pre-application point and stage 2 post-application. The findings in this chapter have then been structured into two sets of seven subthemes: product, price, place & physical facilities, promotion, people, process, and trust.

The findings indicated how a potential student arrives at the final decision to apply for a university. This process is rarely one that is completely echoed by their peers. For example, the variations in time taken to make this decision ranged from over three years of contemplation down to a few months of pressured decision-making.

When considering the product, most applicants consider the reputation and ranking of a course more than they do the host institution. The cost of living, including accommodation, was discussed, but this was from the perspective of learning a new life skill, as opposed to being a deciding factor. Regarding the location, the obvious impact of geographical positioning is a driving factor. For some participants, only local will do, while others, the need to find independence is key and another group were seeking a lifestyle associated with the location. A city's reputation was important, but for those applicants who visited a location, it was down to the 'feel' or 'vibe' of the place. This emotional connection could not be defined, but when the desired emotion was felt, it became the determining factor.

The substantial changes in the HE marketing environment have shifted the applicant's response of HE promotion towards a belief that the market needs to come to them as the customer. The participants indicated they are not averse to being supplied with information that will be engaged with if it inspires. Regardless of the format, marketing material must be appealing, stimulating, concise and easy to locate. Schools offer radically different levels of support, with some organising engagement points with HE that have a significant impact, while others appear to expect pupils to undertake independent research.

Influencers, including family, friends, and peers, were acknowledged to act as powerful contributors to the decision-making process. The applicant decision-making process can be affected by the influence of one individual contact from a positive or negative perspective. Participants appear to be unforgiving of a contact point that results in a substandard experience. Identifying a sociocultural fit or aspirational group to improve a perceived and potential future lifestyle was a key influencer in the decision process.

Participants knew that HEI were adopting sales techniques. A diverse range of relevant communication remains the key to boosting the applicant's confidence and trust in the

pathway to selecting the University. Ultimately, some decisions applicants make will be immutable, as they will reflect personal characteristics, circumstances and attitudes.

Vlog Studies

Chapter Seven

7.0 Introduction

Applicant reliance on web-based data sources and interaction via social media platforms has undoubtedly helped shape the customer's choice of higher education institutions. Digitally networked social exchanges have been credited and acknowledged as a significant influencing factor in the customer decision-making process that is rapidly evolving (Hanlon 2022). The burgeoning use of rich-media content and the impact of online social interaction has given rise to the need to integrate netnographic research (Kozinets 2020) into this thesis. Online traces that linger from social dialogue and the production of rich-media assets are embedded within open digital media platforms. These data sources present the opportunity to explore the consumer's lived experience unobtrusively. YouTube is an excellent repository of this style of data, as it hosts a diverse archive of user-generated content, including the format of vlog-based reviews.

While each applicant journey is an individual pathway, some key elements have already been identified in this study. This final data chapter presents an alternative perspective from which the research question can be considered, that of the social influencer.

7.1 Vlog studies aims

The overarching aim of this research is to address the question: *To what extent does rich-media impact UK undergraduate applicants' decision-making process in a contemporary digital marketing environment?*

This chapter will combine the views of ten Vloggers to address the following aims:

1. To reveal the factors expressed by Vloggers as the most important elements in the HE applicant choice criteria.
2. To clarify the use of rich-media in the process of decision making
3. To understand the emotional highs and lows of the application process
4. To validate the independent sources of data used in this study

7.2 Rational for using YouTube vlogs

Vloggers share their opinions through various platforms, but the dominant domain for these social exchanges in 2018 was YouTube. This space allows individual Vloggers to publish videos and receive feedback via the comments section, creating a feeling of connection with the author. Lindgren (2017:121) suggests that ‘video affinity’ occurs when the author and audience come together around visually enhanced communication or rich-media to create communities of shared interest.

These digital social exchanges can be based on an individual’s desire to share their experience with peers, or they can be utilised as a direct marketing tool commissioned by institutions. This study engages with rich-media posted on YouTube to enable an understanding of the range of published peer-to-peer advice that applies to the HE undergraduate applicant journey.

7.3 Data sample selection

The vlogs relevant to this section are created, produced, and published by students. These films are peer-to-peer lived experiences envisioned to support the next generation of applicants along the UCAS applicant decision-making journey. In line with the previous data chapters, the scope of this chapter was designed to focus the search on UK based

undergraduate applicants who have engaged with the UCAS process. Further boundaries were applied to help align the material discovered with the scope of the previous chapters. One example is the exclusion of commissioned vlogs, where rather than an individual peer opinion being expressed, the marketing drive of the institution is underlining the focus of the review.

Films that were included within the scope of this thesis:

- Vlog style reviews
- UK focus reviews
- Peer-to-Peer advice
- 5000+ views (2018)
- Broad perspective rather than a single course or university focus
- Vlogs related to the application journey

The films were identified and located through a series of keyword string searches:

- How to pick University
- Choosing a University Course
- Uni Choices
- University Application
- UCAS
- Clearing

The material used was selected during 2018; therefore, all films would have been uploaded before or during 2018. Each selected vlog can be found in Table 7.1 and in the following text, they will be identified by a corresponding abbreviation code.

YouTube film title	Web link	Author	Abbreviation
How to pick a University! My tips and advice	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6c1b8X5xo4&t=214s	Noo Stenning	NS
My University choices for 2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nu2qjmb4_mI	Dylan	D
How to pick the perfect Uni	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuVZlcWGNd0	Jack Edwards and Unjaded Jade	JJ
How to pick the right University for you	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=usxV9rDjMiY	Eve Bennett	EB
Choosing a Uni for 2020	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQJP8hnPWK4	Joseph Baldwin	JB
My University choices for 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRajzBwdWVM&t=38s	Mahel Kahn	MK
UCAS tips	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmgu4FrByNA	Kors	K
All About The UCAS/Uni Application Process	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZR40X0o0PY	Nikita Jade	NJ
How to choose a University	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2w-vfW9GSJg	Steff	S
UCAS/Uni application experience	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEdArTAB-Zg	Charlotte Mulcahy	CM

Table 7. 1 Overview of data sources from YouTube videos (Source: Author's own 2018)

The sample of ten vlogs were located based on strict adherence to the outlined scope of the search criteria. Expanding beyond the identified sample would have required adjusting the project's scope. The authors of these films were all students at the time of uploading, and no prominent sponsorship was identifiable outside of the standard YouTube channel monetisation adverts. The Vloggers selected were presenting a peer-to-peer perspective to their audiences, and they represented the dominant voices in this field. The themes that emerged from the transcripts were echoed throughout most of the

vlogs reviewed, and therefore, the sample size was deemed to offer an applicable range of data without compromising the scope of the research.

7.4 Ethical considerations

Before conducting online research, ethical approval was required to operate within CU ethical guidelines; this was sought and achieved. This study explored a range of vlogs, and according to YouTube's terms and conditions, YouTubers retain the copyright of their videos. Under the fair use category, the use of the material is permissible for research purposes without the copyright owner's permission. This is reinforced when a 'transformative' adjustment process has been applied. By converting the videos into transcripts, acknowledging their origins and subdividing the material presented in this study, the ethical and legal concerns have been addressed (YouTube 2022).

7.5 Coding

The data acquired for this chapter was drawn from the selected vlog video scripts that were transcribed verbatim. Each transcript was entered into NVivo and subdivided based on themes stemming from the previous data collection chapters (Chapter 6.8). The original coding strategy adopted in the previous data collection chapter was initially based on a thematic data-driven coding approach, resulting in a set of potential themes. These original themes closely aligned with the 7Ps marketing mix produced by Fox and Kotler's (1995). Therefore, a theory-driven and data-driven approach was adopted. This coding strategy includes additional related themes developed from the original coding sets that are core to the research (Lewis, Saunders and Thornhill 2016). Both the data and theory-driven coding structures outlined in Table 7.2 have been amended to reflect the themes that have emerged from the new vlog data sources.

Theory-driven	Data-driven
Programme / Product	Entry Requirements / Offers
People	Trust
Place / Physical Facilities	Reputation
Process	Emotions
Promotion	

Table 7. 2 Adapted from the 7Ps Marketing Mix (Kotler and Fox 1995)

Nine predominant factors contributing to the decision-making process are indicated in Table 7.2. Each additional theme created enough data to justify the expansion from the previous data chapter. Price was dropped from this list as only two identified points connected directly to cost as an influencing factor. In both cases, the comments directly related to the higher cost of living when considering London and therefore, this information was considered under the 'place' theme.

The following subsections are based on the themes listed in Table 7.2 and they present the collective opinions of the ten vlogs explored.

7.6 Programme / Product

The decision-making steps taken by an applicant can either start with the course or university selection. All the selected Vloggers advocate that the course should be the priority; "number one tip is let the course dictate the Uni, not the Uni dictate the course" (EB). Course selection was sometimes discussed as a straightforward pathway. This was presented as a natural progression from the A level that the individual enjoyed the most,

progressing to a degree that echoed the A level title. While for others, the full range of options available to study at university created new pathway options. These opportunities were only discovered after the decision-making process had progressed into a deeper research stage.

“I really liked the Uni, but the course was not as good as I hoped. I just didn't get to do as much maths as I wanted, it was a lot more science-focused, and it was so important that I could do maths because that's what I felt was my best subject.” (CM)

The initial course selection is usually based on preconceived ideas regarding what the course title would relate to. With further investigation, potential applicants realise the gap between their expectations and the reality of what is being offered.

“I ended up going for political economy at Kings College London. Now economics and politics and political economy are two very different courses. This one is joint honours, so I have economics and I have politics and political economy is very much everything mixed together.” (K)

“Start looking at the course breakdown. Every website should have one of these, it's basically the names of all the modules and roughly what you might be learning in each. If you like delving into the websites, you can find it in even finer detail.” (NS)

With most influencing factors, what an individual is looking for, even when considering the same course title, can vary significantly. The quote below emphasises the need for precise information and indicates that what appeals to one applicant might put someone else off.

“You can look at optional modules as well. I mean, don't be heavily swayed by this, but I remember that Surrey had a really cool optional module in the biochemistry degree on like sleep and like the science of sleep and I thought that was so cool I didn't end up picking it, but sometimes optional modules can be something to look at.” (NS)

7.7 Place / Physical facilities

A significant driver of choice is the university itself, the actual physical structure, its location, what facilities are on offer, and its relationship to the local city or countryside. These factors are significant motivating elements that are harder for institutions to influence but act as key components in the choice criteria for most.

“The University of Nottingham is beautiful; the David Ross sports village is just on another level.” (MK)

“I also went to Nottingham and I liked their natural sciences course, but I didn't like the Uni too much.” (CM)

An interesting point that is difficult to influence is the distance between the family home and the selected institution. The choice criteria in this section vary dramatically between individuals, with some driven by the need to put significant distance between themselves and their families. In contrast, others seek a more local solution.

“Distance, so I think for me, an ideal amount would be like two and a half hours away. I want to be close enough that like I can still come home, far enough away that my family can't just come down like every few days. You don't want to be like popping home for dinner. I say that about two hours would be perfect.” (JJ)

“One of my regrets is not applying to Edinburgh or St Andrews, because they are lovely places and, in my head, I was like, that’s so far away.” (JJ)

“It was my number one choice for a while and it's because I really like the actual city itself. The reason I decided to withdraw from it before receiving a decision is that I actually found it was way too far for my liking.” (MK)

The relationship between attending a campus, town or city centre-based location appears to be an area that is often overlooked or misunderstood at the start of an applicant’s selection process. Some of the Vloggers expressed clear preferences, while others expanded on the difference between a city-based university and the campus alternative.

“I really wanted to live in a city I wanted it to be busy. I wanted it not just to be only students.” (JJ)

“The reason why I like it is because when you go there, it's like this is the university, everything you need is there and it's kind of like just full of students. You don't really need anywhere else, you don't have to mix into town and I just love the community feel.” (D)

“Sometimes the thing to watch out with campuses is that the campus isn't always in the city or anywhere near the city, it can be like in the middle of nowhere. Like, I'm pretty sure Warwick campus is actually in Coventry, it's not in Warwick.” (JJ)

Applicants who selected city-based locations often cited shopping facilities or the nightlife options as the main driver for their city versus campus decision.

“Then the other thing to think about is like campus versus city is see if they've got the shops you like etc, important.” (NS)

“If you're going to choose an average university, you might as well consider other factors such as why a student would really want to live there, such as a nightlife. Nottingham is seen as one of the top nightlife cities in the actual country as a whole and therefore, I chose Nottingham Trent University as my back up.” (MK)

“You may prefer the city lifestyle or a small uni or a big uni with like really great nightlife. It's just totally up to you, and you just got to remember what you really like and what's going to suit you and then consider that when you're choosing which university want to go to.” (S)

The Vloggers suggest that applicants should have a broader range of expectations about their higher education experience, including a more holistic view of what will be provided, and the opportunities presented to them. The transcripts included references to social life, sports facilities, societies, and additional study support, including library facilities.

“You can look up all of their facilities online. They should have them listed somewhere you can check they have a big enough pool or a diving pool.” (NS)

“If you love sports, check its sporting reputation, especially when choosing colleges and the facilities as well. What do you have available, is there a gym you can go to and is it free? Like those things really do matter.” (JJ)

“Most universities have really good facilities these days, but they can vary, make sure you check out the sports facilities, music facilities, anything that you're interested in and see if the university that you're looking at has those things.”

(S)

Student accommodation was extensively discussed in one film, but most of the other vlogs only mentioned this topic rather than focused on it as a key driver.

“Accommodation is so important. It's not like there's just one type of accommodation there will be so many variables and different things that you can go for at each University.” (JJ)

The expanded version of this discussion included an extensive outline of catered versus self-catering and the reason for selecting each. Within this conversation thread, the Vlogger explains they are vegan, this became a significant factor in their decision-making process. This aspect was not discussed by the other Vloggers.

7.8 Promotion

Part of creating a successful vlog is producing something that keeps the audience entertained or engaged. Therefore, one difficulty in analysing this data is separating sarcastic, ironic or tongue-in-cheek comments from influential features. The following statement might be one of those entertaining features or indicate the abnormal importance given to a random comment or moment.

“At school, we had a couple of talks and I remember someone from Leeds coming in and they said something about puppies, so I wrote them on my list.”

(NS)

The importance attributed to the vlogs and the Vloggers’ opinions is debatable. Some applicants who trust and value peer-to-peer advice will seek any available material.

“If you can find YouTubers or Vloggers who are doing your subjects and they are talking about it from their perspective, who's studying it, that is gold dust. Find them, watch them and watch them all.” (JJ)

Peer-to-peer advice can also be located on independent sites, such as the websites suggested below.

“There are some websites as well you can use, unistats, which Uni, Student Crowd, whatuni and The Student Room.” (NS)

These websites also offer easy access to statistical data that can contribute to the decision-making process.

“Some of those stats websites are really useful for like graduate employability or the ratio of like professors to students and lecture times, contact hours and that kind of thing.” (NJ)

University websites are suggested as a valuable source of information. Still, the Vloggers imply that universities are promoting their products and indicate the need for further consideration of the rankings displayed.

“For example, Coventry University has been trying to push that they're like 12th best in the country according to some table, but in QS world rankings they're nowhere to be seen.” (MK)

The use of prospectuses was another area that was viewed as predominantly a promotional tool, and therefore, there was likely to be bias in the information given.

“I'm looking at prospectuses. Obviously, they're trying to sell their Uni to you, so you have to be like wary.” (NS)

Within the collection of vlogs reviewed, open days featured as a central conversational thread. All the Vloggers noted the value attributed to these events, and they appear to be key influencing points in the final stages of the decision-making process.

“So, make sure you go to lots and lots of open days they're so useful just to be able to get a feel for the uni.” (EB)

“Go to the universities that you're interested in. This is probably the best research you can do is to actually go and visit the campus, go and have a look at the university.” (S)

“Make sure that you've visited the university open day, so I went to Warwick's open day and I went to King's College open day, to be fair the field that I've got I kind of preferred King's, so that kind of swayed my choice.” (K)

7.9 People

A dominant influencing factor was people; this includes peers, family, career advisors and employees in the university setting. In the vlogs, the presenters expand the traditional notion of friends into a broader community of peer groups; this community of advisors and support are found via social media channels, including online chat forums.

“There are group chats for people that are doing different course subjects, so for example, there's an English and literature studies one, there's a chemistry one, there's the exam prep one, there's loads and you can kind of pick a chat go through the chat and talk to new students, people that might be going to the same uni as you, or people that might be interested in the same universities as you.” (EB)

“The other thing I'd recommend is talking to the current students, you can tweet or use the student room or use an App, there'll be loads of students that have already gone to that Uni or have graduated from that Uni and they're the best people to ask because they will be honest.” (EB)

“The Student Room is your best friend, you can kind of get an idea of what students actually achieved their entry requirements and those that are on your course that hadn't.” (K)

The authors of the vlogs referenced within this research are part of the peer circle and therefore, their community of subscribers or followers also rely on their voices for advice or guidance.

“So many people have tweeted me and added comments on my video saying I'm going to university, like next year and I don't know which university to pick, I don't know which ones to go for.” (EB)

Family members affect the decision-making process in various ways and most of the reviewed vlogs mention a family influence.

“Essex, which I can say is bad because both my brothers went there.” (MK)

The family influence extended beyond the immediate family circle and into the family's connections for additional insights.

“I looked at other courses, and I remember my brother's friend had done this course called natural sciences... I emailed him asking him about it, he got an unconditional” (CM)

For some Vloggers, their parents were a central part of the decision-making process, and the advice received was viewed as valuable and actively sought.

“I was very lucky that my dad offered to come with me on all of those, it was so useful to have a second opinion.” (NS)

“I actually have some films on my little GoPro, so I could share some of the Unis with my mom to get her opinion of the Uni.” (JJ)

Several Vloggers viewed their parent's intervention less favourably, suggesting that parents have an overtly biased approach or adopt an authoritarian parent-child relationship.

"Yes, don't just do what your parents want you to do. Don't just go and do medicine because you know your parents go, yeah go be a doctor, I'm a doctor." (JJ)

Alongside the family sphere of influence, educational or career advisors were frequently mentioned as key influences that significantly impacted the final course and institutional choice. For many of the Vloggers, the impact of face-to-face advice from schoolteachers, academics, or student advisors was deemed as vital in their final course selection.

"My maths teacher said to go to some taster days and then you can get a feel for Maths because it isn't for everyone. It's also a chance to like meet people also doing maths, speak to them about why they're doing maths, or why they want to do maths." (CM)

"I enjoyed maths in school, so my teachers were like oh you should do actuarial studies you know they use maths it's really good pay, it's a good job, I was like sweet." (JB)

The educational sector is intrinsically linked to the people who deliver the service (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2016). Fox and Kotler (1995) acknowledge the diverse and essential role that the people contribute to service delivery throughout their book. Academic and support staff play a fundamental role in attracting students, and they can be viewed as 'part of the product offering' (Dibb et al. 2019). One video repeatedly credited a single interaction as the key to their decision-making process. The named

academic and the experience they created during an open day had such a profound impact that it was the determining factor.

“Simon Singh was there, he wrote a book called 'The Big Bang Theory' I think and he also wrote one called 'The Simpsons and Their Mathematical Secrets' and I'd heard about this book but I never read it before I'd gone. And when we were there, I was literally like, what the fuck, this is amazing, and he talked about his book and talked about all these things and it got me so interested in it, and I bought and read his book afterwards, and like 'oh yeah I really wanna do maths' and I was really feeling maths.” (CM)

Some applicants have had their higher education pathway presented as an expectation rather than an option. The final quote in this subsection kicks back against the influencers and suggests an alternative option, digging deep and looking for what the individual wants to do.

“Probably the biggest realisation that I had is that most voices in your head telling you to do something aren't actually your voice, they are other people's voices that have been implanted into your brain. Now a lot of people, whether it be parents, friends, school advisors, teachers, recommend a career path for you, that idea gets buried into your head and then after a while, you just start to think that it was your thought in the first place, which it wasn't.” (JB)

7.10 Process

The previously outlined scope of this research resulted in a focus on the UCAS system, which is the process discussed within the vlogs. For many applicants, the actual process of applying to a university can be a big learning curve. What might seem apparent steps

to academics, recruitment staff, or students who have passed through the system can be the first hurdle the applicants need to master.

“So, what might be obvious is that everything is done online, I didn't know this, that's why I'm saying it, so UCAS, Student Finance everything is done online.” (NJ)

“So basically, you have this website called UCAS and you list your top 5 choices on there once you've done your personal statement and everything like that and it is quite a long process.” (D)

The point at which an individual begins the selection process for a university place varies, but the advice given within the vlogs was to start as early as possible.

“I don't think it's ever too early to start looking, oh god no, if you're in year 11 and you kind of know the course why not go and have a look.” (JJ)

“In year 12 go to open days, obviously if you've missed that then there's nothing you can do.” (CM)

One restriction applied to selecting the YouTube clips was to avoid vlogs that focused on either a single institution or purely on the Russell Group universities. Within the selected films, some of the advice focused on particular institutions and the difference of applying for a top tier Russell Group university.

“The city is so lovely, but applying to Oxford is intense and you need to be prepared for that.” (JJ)

An interesting point was highlighted in a few vlogs related to committing to a final firm choice.

“I know this sounds silly, but not a lot of people consider this, your firm choice should be your first choice, right, it has to be the course that you love the most you have your heart set on. Remember that you can't swap between your firm and your insurance once you've made the decision. I feel like there's a misconception that they're Interchangeable, make sure you make that decision and you're happy with it.” (K)

“Your firm choice has to be the one that you want to go to, yes I can get those grades and yes I'm gonna get into that one and I want to go to that one.” (NJ)

The application process predominantly occurs without university involvement and often relies on the support and guidance of the school system. The Vloggers explained that “Some schools give a lot more help than others.” (NS)

One of the key areas that schools support is the creation of personal statements. This component of the application process is deemed to carry different levels of merit, with some viewing this aspect as adding little value.

“If you haven't submitted your UCAS application yet and you're worried about your personal statement, don't worry about it, teachers say your personal statement is so important, right, my personal statement was good, but it had a lot of errors in it, like I submitted it to The Student Rooms personal statement reviewer and they pointed out a lot of errors in it, I submitted it, and I still got offers in one day or four days, so they don't care about it too much as long as it's legible. So minor errors like capitalisation or whatnot don't matter, don't stress over it.” (MK)

Before reaching the point where applicants submit their firm and insurance choices, various ranking systems were employed to select which institutions make the shortlist.

“I made a list of all of the things that were really important to me in a university and when I was going through all of the different Unis, I was ticking it off.” (EB)

“We had a page on my phone and we gave each Uni a rating, so we gave like accommodation a rating, the course a rating, the Union as a whole a rating, the city as a rating and the sports facilities.” (JJ)

While the process element of this chapter does not appear to act as a determining factor in the decision-making process, the timeline that it creates affects when the other key factors occur, creating the influencing points.

7.11 Entry requirements and offers

Another theme that emerged from the vlog data was the importance of entry requirements in the selection process. This is a complex topic and one that the Vloggers broke down into varying degrees of detail. It was a topic that all the reviewed vlogs covered.

“I am studying three A levels and one A level equivalent, it's a diploma level three qualification, but universities do accept it as an A-level, and it's the most important thing, I'm gonna talk you through it.” (MK)

Within the vlogs, different levels of understanding are demonstrated between predicted grades and UCAS points requirements. Various anxiety levels were evident in the films, with some narrators proud or embarrassed by the predicted grades they were given.

“The way UCAS works is that you get given predicted grades, mine were, B B C. B in maths, B in economics, C in politics, not actually that good, yeah everyone's like you make videos about student life on YouTube, but you're not smart.” (D)

Some Vloggers offered additional advice about UCAS points, particularly concerning converting grades into points. This included some basic calculations or redirecting people to alternative online support.

"There's also a UCAS points calculator, so if you type in your grades, then it will tell you how many you UCAS points it is. So, for example, if I got A*, A, B, for example that would be a hundred and forty-four UCAS points.” (EB)

The importance of the required grades was something that all the reviewed films identified. The following quotes suggest that predicted grades and an individual's perceived ability to achieve or exceed those grades are significant influencing factors.

“The first thing you probably have to check is the entry requirements because if you are massively shooting above your like potential, your UCAS application is going to be a bit of a waste of time.” (NS)

“Just make sure you choose wisely and be realistic with yourself. Think, am I actually gonna go get those grades because getting an offer is one thing, but

actually getting in with the grades is another thing and you need to make sure that you can get those grades if you want to go there.” (NJ)

“Like I just wasn't working hard enough and I knew deep down but I wasn't going to get the 138 points.” (K)

The Vloggers suggested using predicted grades as a tool for narrowing down the selection of courses. Most suggested looking for courses that require a few points up from predicted levels and keeping an additional safety net of a few points below, although the margins suggested are relatively narrow.

“It's really useful to sort of consider what your projected grades are and give yourself a bit of margin, either way, so look at some of the Unis that are above your grade expectations and below, because, that way when you apply a nice wide range and you're not going to set yourself up for disappointment. But you're also not going to sell yourself short.” (EB)

“You have to choose like an aspirational one, one that you think, oh it's gonna be hard to get into, but I want to get and try to get into that one, for me that was Oxford and Liverpool and Kent. You have to choose an insurance one like a backup one that has quite low entry requirements for me that was Anglia Ruskin and Hertfordshire.” (NJ)

Besides the predicted grades, some Vloggers suggested offers are also made not just on a points basis, but achievement at set levels on pre-defined subjects. This additional condition seemed to have a negative impact on the various narrators' decisions.

“I was applying for a business course, most of my courses were management, but it's still in business. I really did not understand why Sheffield wanted me

to get B in Religious Studies when it has no relevance to business, and they didn't even ask for a specific grade in business!" (MK)

"Essentially, like you need A*A*A and you need an A* in Maths and an A* in Further Maths and there didn't seem to be any compromise, there was pretty much just: you need to have done further maths and I think I just thought, God, like not having further maths is really gonna hold me back." (CM)

The statement above identifies how the relationship between predicted grades and university published grade expectations can significantly impact the student choice criteria. For some, the responses received from their selected institutions were an unexpected positive outcome or a complete shock.

"You're not guaranteed an offer, they can decline your offer if that wasn't obvious already, but yes they can. Some people believe that you get offers and they can't turn you down, yes they bloody can. Just know it is very competitive, and don't be too, you know, optimistic." (NJ)

"I was like, let me just apply to Lancaster, I'd never been there, I didn't even know where it was. So, I applied to Lancaster, and they came back to me first, and they said if you firm us then it's unconditional and they also said, if you meet your offer, you'll get £1000, and if you get A*A*A, you'll get £3000. It was an unconditional offer, so I knew that I was going to Lancaster. Obviously, I didn't have to worry that much about my grades." (CM)

"I didn't meet up to the entry requirements and they still let me in!" (NJ)

The type of offers received was also discussed, as stated in some of the comments above. An unconditional offer seemed to be something applicants wanted to receive, although

some remarks hinted at this as a desperate measure or an obvious ploy to encourage accepting an offer.

“I then put Birmingham as my insurance choice. Funnily enough, Birmingham gave me an unconditional offer.” (K)

“Some Unis drop the entry requirement when/if you make them your firm.

Some even offer you an unconditional offer if you make them your firm.” (NJ)

Vloggers also discussed the flexibility of the required grades. While none of the narrators explained which universities or courses were more flexible in their offers, many suggested that a degree of leniency could be expected.

“Is your offer flexible? While in theory you only achieve your place if you get your conditions or meet the grades that the Uni has given you an offer for, in practice some universities actually accept near-miss applicants.” (K)

“There's a lot of Universities that do lower the entry requirements on results day. I'm telling you from experience that universities are very lenient on results day, so obviously don't get a bit too optimistic with that.” (NJ)

One Vlogger suggested that teachers could be influenced into increasing predicted grades to help ensure that a university takes your application seriously.

“You don't put your predicted grades on your form, your teachers do, but it's important you get them to put it as high as possible because that will determine whether a Uni considers your application or not.” (NJ)

Part of the reason predicted grades are viewed as important is the potential to secure an unconditional offer. So, the tactic of asking teachers to boost predicted grades to secure

an unconditional place, regardless of the reality of what is achievable, seemed to be a tempting pathway.

“Like I could do terribly in my exams and still get into Uni, so I was like yeah I'm all for that.” (NJ)

The tactics discussed above were predominantly around two core areas: how to narrow down the choice of institutions and is it possible to improve one's chances of achieving a place.

7.12 Trust

Trust is an element that has been explored in the previous data chapters, but the quotes in this section demonstrate a more comprehensive lack of faith in a more diverse range of information sources. When previously exploring this area, the primary information source discussed was the university literature, which reoccurs within the examined vlogs. “Obviously, make sure that you don't like get lured in by the hard sell” (EB). This quote indicates the shift in student perception, where universities are perceived as service providers selling their products and applicants are now customers in this new relationship. The following quote even suggested a technique for digging under the surface of the promotional sell to help uncover what is credible information and the truth about life at university. “Ask them about the negative things if you're really worried that the Uni is like selling you” (EB). One insightful comment suggested that while peer-to-peer information is valid, each opinion is derived from an individual perspective and, therefore, should be viewed through this lens.

“People just write their opinions and sometimes it's very personalised, something that might annoy them about the Uni won't annoy you, so be careful.” (NS)

The need for filtering out biased views from pre-university guidance extended beyond peer advice and included rethinking the information parents supplied.

"Most of the time the recommendations are biased and the people recommending you the careers only know about 5% of what you actually want in your life, including parents." (JB)

The lack of trust identified concerning educational advisors relates to the perceived extrinsic motivation that the Vloggers believe is strived for by this professional group.

"Some school advisors try and get you to put a degree that's like really easy to get into as your first preference so the school can be all like, yeah 90% of our students got the first preference of their university degree, which is a really bad thing actually because they shouldn't be doing that. So, if you feel like your school's trying to get you to choose a degree that's really easy, then slap them in the face and walk out the door." (JB)

Trust and the biased nature of the information was a reoccurring theme. Some presenters only hinted at this, but the general advice given was that the decision made needed to be an individual's choice, guided by others rather than dictated.

"Whenever someone offers you recommendations for a Uni degree, surprise, surprise, you're the one that's actually going to be studying the Uni degree. You have to remind yourself that every recommendation is probably going to be biased in some way, shape or form, and eliminating all these skewed, biased recommendations might clear the way and help you actually figure out what you really want." (JB)

7.13 Reputation

A university's reputation can be long-standing and have a significant positive or negative impact on the applicant's choice criteria. Some prestigious institutional reputations can become a dominant feature in the applicant's choice criteria.

"What attracted you to Oxbridge? Partly, I'm gonna be honest, partly just the reputation, I don't think there's any shame in that." (JJ)

"I put down York because that's a Russell Group University. I put it down and didn't do that much research into it. I didn't visit it, I just thought it's got such a good rep." (D)

Judgement of the newer institutions seems to require supporting evidence of their standing in the field, often found in externally verified statistics. One key source quoted was the NSS figures, "I very much paid attention to the National Student Survey. I know they're just numbers, but they can be really useful" (S). The importance attributed to these statistics varied, with some Vloggers confessing to the fact that it was a primary reason for selecting their institution, "It's high on the university rankings and yeah, that's truthfully why I put it down" (D). Additional recommendations included looking at a broader set of data before making a final judgement.

"So, you need to kind of look at a lot of reputable different tables and compare them. Tables for subjects or just whole universities." (JJ)

Notably, the use of league tables was helpful in confirming a pre-determined view of an institution or course. Where a significant difference between the statistics identified and the choice occurred, some narrators quickly dismissed their relevance.

“I loved Edinburgh, but on the league tables for Modern Languages, Edinburgh was like 23, whereas all of my others were in the top ten so I was like, do I really want to go to a uni that's got such low league tables? League tables are not that important, Edinburgh has got a really good global reputation anyway and who really cares at what place they're on the league tables for your specific subject.” (EB)

Peer pressure linked to reputation was reviewed from two perspectives. One angle was ‘prestige’; this was a Vlogger’s descriptive term and refers to career paths encouraged by family or friends and held in high regard.

“Prestige, well I'm referring to the degrees that people choose because they want to see themselves enjoying that thing, it's not necessarily meaning that they're going to actually enjoy it, it's just the way they're going to be seen and viewed by their parents, friends, family or whatever.” (JB)

The other viewpoint was more along the lines of peer humour or a more sardonic approach where individuals are mocked for their choice of institution.

“Nottingham Trent University, now some of you may be thinking ha Trent and believe me a friend of mine a guy called George sent me 14 Trent University mems when I had gotten the offer, and they are quite funny, but I believe that it's a decent insurance, like a very good insurance.” (MK)

The importance of reputation in evaluating university choices varied significantly, with those opting to apply to a Russell Group institution often discussing this almost apologetically. The comment below expresses the overall impression of why some applicants only focus on prestigious high-ranking universities.

“Universities, you know everyone is gonna come out of university with a degree, hopefully. But when you say I’ve got a degree from the university of... you know sometimes reputation is important.” (JJ)

7.14 Emotions

When reviewing the various vlogs, one new theme that impacted students’ decision-making process was their emotional state. Most Vloggers discussed the importance of finding a location and university with the right ‘vibe’. Typical comments included, “I think you really get a gut instinct and a gut feel for a place” (CM). What the correct feeling or vibe was constituted out of was not explained, but the need for ensuring all interactions contributed towards creating the appropriate atmosphere was evident.

“I know this sounds super cheesy, but everyone I’ve like spoken to has said to me you’ll go to a few and there’ll be one you just know, that’s the right one. You get the right vibe, you get the right atmosphere.” (EB)

“When I found the right uni, I knew it was the right one for me, I just kind of felt it, you know, you just feel something in your heart. I got the gut feeling, and hopefully, that will be the same for you as well.” (S)

“When I found the right uni, I knew it was the right one for me. I just kind of felt it, you know, you just feel something in your heart.” (S)

The reality of the decision-making process for this group of Vloggers was an emotional roller coaster, with the high points alongside the stressful stages of selecting and applying for a place or waiting for offers. Several Vloggers described high levels of stress and negative feelings towards the applicant process.

“The university application process was the bane of my existence, and it stressed me out to the max.” (NJ)

“I'm just going to be honest with you probably the most stressful and confusing time of my life was year 12.” (JB)

“I got my AS results, and I had an A in maths, but I hadn't done as well as I had hoped. I was feeling very insecure in general. And then obviously, now I had to worry about predicted grades as well. I became really stressed, and I was so upset.” (CM)

Within the literature review, the positioning of the applicant as a customer who is unfamiliar with making life-changing decisions was explored. While most of the Vloggers comments suggested that the decision-making process was stress-inducing, some reflected on the process more positively.

“I feel like it's definitely one of those very hard decisions because it's three or four years of your life which you'll never get it back. It's a really exciting and fun time.” (NS)

Having considered a wide range of influencing factors throughout this section, it is encouraging to read a few final quotes that show the positive outcome of this process.

“If you can find the perfect Uni for you and you will be so happy in a place that you end up.” (CM)

“I am currently sitting in my room in London, not Coventry. I'm having the best time.” (K)

“I'm buzzing and I'm moving on the 16th of September, and I am absolutely buzzing and like I'm so excited to move. I'm so excited about the next few years of my life there.” (NJ)

7.15 Summary

The data analysed in this chapter was drawn from a series of vlogs hosted on YouTube. These short films present the application process from an individual's perspective, and they are informed mainly from the narrator's experience of their engagement with the UCAS process. Therefore, it is essential to triangulate this information with the diverse data presented in earlier sections of this thesis to avoid individual bias. Most of the presenters appeared to be highly motivated and driven individuals who actively engaged in the application process, often with the support and encouragement of others. Therefore, these vlogs might not genuinely represent the broader range of experience within the market sector.

Given the limited experience of these Vloggers in dealing with the application process, some suggestions and advice presented would only apply to an individual applicant following a remarkably similar journey. This presents new Vloggers with the opportunity to discuss a completely different experience; for example, none of the films located discussed clearing as a route to admission or direct entry into higher levels within courses.

The significance of the vlog's steps beyond the individual experience, as these Vloggers should be viewed as influencers. While their HE experience is limited, the information they share is consumed by a large audience that is typically seeking guidance and help with their own choice of institution. Therefore, what is being shared on these vlogs and the importance that the influencers attribute towards a particular factor in the application process is highly significant to this study.

The findings identified and discussed in the subsections above often echoed the outcomes from the earlier data analysis chapters. The importance of peer support through face-to-face or interaction via social media channels was once again indicated as a significant influencing feature. The Vlogger's choice of HEI involved peer support through social interaction with fellow applicants, family or advisors.

Vloggers indicated that unconscious bias could direct applicants towards a set pathway. These influencing routes are created through parental advice and shared peer experience.

Additionally, the importance of attending open days at a range of institutions was indicated as a vital step in finalising the decision-making process. As previously discussed in Chapter 6, the emotional response encountered during a visit to an institution regularly creates the capstone moment for the applicant.

The data presented in this chapter contains some new areas of interest. These include the impact that entry requirements have on the ranking given to a university. UCAS point requirements appear to inspire a tactical response to the application process. Higher entry requirements give the impression of higher quality and more desirable courses. This has the balancing effect of either being an aspirational goal or ruling out an option based on perceived unachievable targets.

Another significant theme that emerged was the need to understand the student journey from an emotional perspective. The emotions indicated might be considered a natural cycle of emotional states connected to the application process. However, identifying supporting opportunities and reducing the stressful points should be an ambition of the future marketing and admissions teams. Additional emotional states were discussed, including the 'vibe' when visiting a HEI, which has been identified as having a significant

impact on the consumer decision-making process. Therefore, emotional states, including the connection to trust, must be recognised within the marketing mix.

Given the collective mass of views, likes, and followers attributed to the Vloggers selected, the audience must value and desire information from these independent sources. Lindgren (2017: 87) claims that for a 'community to emerge, social relationships must form based on common beliefs, common interests, which generate feelings of kinship and togetherness'. The Vloggers included in this study create digitally networked communities that seek information in a form and format viewed as authentic, relevant, and trustworthy. Combining rich-media and social networks creates the ideal platform for influencers to convey their stories. The ease of creating, locating and consuming information in these communities is something that future recruitment and marketing strategies should engage with to help create a coherent marketing mix.

Discussion

Chapter Eight

8.0 Introduction

This discussion chapter critically assesses the findings from the previous questionnaire, focus groups and vlog chapters and outlines the research findings in connection to the literature review. It then explores future opportunities to support the decision-making process for new applicants applying to Coventry University (CU). In addition, this chapter outlines how this study will contribute to the existing marketing activity that supports CU's strategy to grow student numbers at a manageable and sustainable level.

It is important to note that the data-gathering period was between April 2018 and June 2020. Therefore, the impact and aftermath of the global pandemic occurred after the data gathering had been undertaken. As a direct consequence of the pandemic, a dramatic and rapid shift away from face-to-face marketing activities occurred. At various points during the pandemic digital platforms became the only route to connect with HE customers. As the UK emerges from the lockdown cycle, a new balance between physical engagement and computer-mediated communication is occurring.

Covid-19 has changed how human interaction occurs in the daily lives of the majority of the population. An example of this change can be viewed through the success of Zoom. This digital video communication platform hosted over 300 million daily virtual meetings in April 2021, up from 10 million in Dec 2019, according to the BBC (2021). This new way of working and engaging with the world accelerated the need and demand for rich-media. This digital activity stepped beyond any level of engagement originally envisioned during the early stages of this thesis.

Despite the impact of the global pandemic on the higher education sector, significant value can still be gained by undertaking this review process. Therefore, this chapter will continue to analyse the data gathered before the pandemic and interpreting it in a 'new world' of 'hybrid' interactions taking place both in-person and online. The study will identify the key influencing factors that impact the customer journey to address the research question: *To what extent does rich-media impact UK undergraduate applicants' decision-making process in a contemporary digital marketing environment?*

8.0.1 Chapter structure

Previous data collection chapters have utilised the 7Ps marketing mix created by Fox and Kotler (1995) as the basis for structuring the data explored. The marketing mix created for education by Fox and Kotler (1995: 277) provides a framework that offers a structure to explore the pertinent steps that occur during the applicant decision-making journey. The following subsections utilise the key findings from the data collection chapters and frame this information in relation to an adapted version of the 7Ps marketing mix.

8.1 Product or course

Throughout this study, a clear message emerged from the data analysis that the product or course was the principal starting point from which the search for a university place begins (SPA0 2018, UCAS 2021). This view was echoed throughout the data collected and was exemplified by the following comment: "Number one tip is let the course dictate the Uni, not the Uni dictate the course" (EB). However, exceptions appeared, including when an institution or small group of universities held an aspirational level of reputation that focused the course search within those set domains. Additionally, when participants had a fixed location in mind. This aspect was mainly linked to the need to stay at the parental base or within a limited driving distance from home. This option has been

reported to have significantly increased since the pandemic, with more students opting to commute from the family home (Jones 2020).

Traditionally styled programme titles were mainly referred to as the starting point for searches. Applicants used keyword searches like; Computing, film, business, engineering, politics or maths. These familiar titles were the basis of what many students entered into the UCAS database to find an initial collection of courses related to their area of interest. The range of familiar course names discussed was predominantly based on A level or job titles. The diverse range of opportunities was only revealed when a deeper level of research was undertaken. Having clarified their broader area of interest and identified a suitable match, many applicants proceed to examine the course structure at a modular level. Participants were seeking clarification that the program aligned with their expectations.

Hensley-Brown and Oplatka (2016: 9) appropriately identify that 'consumer choices do not take place in a vacuum; choosers are surrounded by a wide range of influences in their environment that prompt them to consider certain options'.

For example, the pandemic has dramatically increased the levels of applications focused on subjects allied to medicine, creating an increase of over 10,000 additional applicants in 2020 (UCAS 2020). This shift illustrates the need for universities to scan the educational, economic and political environment continuously. HEI need to review their mix of courses, rapidly adjusting the options in response to the shifting patterns of applicants' needs and wants.

8.2 Place and facilities

'The solid classical buildings of great universities may look permanent, but the storms of change now threaten them' (Barber, Donnelly and Rizvi 2013: 1).

Digital transformation was the future that Barber, Donnelly and Rizvi predicted as the driving force for change within HE. Since this paper was published and the pandemic temporarily closed the doors of HEI, technology and the way we engage with it has undoubtedly evolved. The migration to a digital campus that occurred as a direct response to the impact of Covid-19 and the subsequent return to campus has altered the mindset of potential applicants. Questions relating to hybridity, digital poverty and expectations of contact hours have entered the applicant lexicon. The consideration of place and access to technology might have developed into a broader influencing factor. For the participants interviewed and surveyed (pre-pandemic), the place remained the university campus and geographic location. The influencing factors of place can be considered in various groupings, but the identified elements that directly correlate with the applicant decision-making process were the distance from the family location, the city or region's reputation, and the type of campus.

Individual choice varied significantly when contemplating the appropriate distance to consider from the parental home. The option to remain within easy commutable distance or at the family home and close to established peer networks was discussed within the focus groups. For some, this was an immutable aspect of their decision-making process. Most UK students who reject an offer at CU select an institution based in the Midlands (SPOS 2018). The focus group participants who expressed a desire to move away from the home location mainly wanted to remain within a two to three-hour driving distance. A minority of participant comments within this category suggested that any distance, including international opportunities, would be considered.

Cities and regions have distinct identities that significantly affect the decision-making process. The hierarchy of determining course selection factors depends on the lifestyle the individual is pursuing. Some areas have well-defined identities that act as positive drivers for potential applicants. These attributes can include a more holistic view of the anticipated student life. Alongside the educational offering, social opportunities were identified as the main influencing factor, with some participants narrowing down their selection process on the perceived standard of nightlife alone, e.g. "Nottingham is seen as one of the top nightlife cities in the country" (MK). Additional pre-existing narratives or stereotypes were applied to locations because of their reputation for sport, shopping, music connections, or perceived community types. The participants identified geographical and physical aspects of the considered locations as additional desirable factors. For example, some participants expressed a requirement to be near the sea or within a historic city as an expectation for their chosen institution. These external factors have been analysed within associated literature, and a rise of 'place marketing' has emerged within HE marketing. The approach adopted is to distil down the positive aspects of a region and to create the desired brand image (Thompson-Whiteside, and Winter 2017).

When considering 'place', the participants were influenced by the perceived socioeconomic status associated with a location. The place either offered an aspirational option or could be rejected because of the anticipated disconnect with the type of student likely to attend. These location-based narratives are in circulation among peers and help to cement applicant perceptions and influence their expectations. Engaging students as co-creators or influencers within the marketing process will help portray the location in a manner that is appropriate to the audience it is seeking to attract (Coates, Dollinger, and Lodge 2018).

Suggestions from the focus group participants and the data analysed indicate that new rich-media assets should include an introduction to the campus, facilities and

surrounding locations to present a distinctive impression of the 'place' on offer. CU's top viewed YouTube film is a tour of the accommodation on offer, indicating the interest that place can hold for a diverse mix of applicants. The CU survey research data identified that 69% of applicants would have liked more video content to be available via the university website. Therefore, the effective use of rich-media can help to inspire a positive response to a location.

Some participants talked enthusiastically about campus or city-based preferences, but most were either unaware or indifferent to the choice on offer. Campus-based universities were considered as more student-focused, with 'everything you need' in one location and a 'community feel' (D). This aspect appealed to some applicants who were mainly interested in a social community that stopped at the institution's boundaries. Conversely, applicants who expressed a preference for city-based destinations sought the interplay between what the university can offer, balanced alongside the additional opportunities that a city creates. Among all the participants who looked at leaving home, there was a strong sense of seeking a new life and the opportunity to engage with new communities. This sense of adventure was sometimes offset against the varying levels of confidence demonstrated by the participants. Future marketing material needs to strike the balance of opportunity and adventure against a strong desire to bond and fit into a new, safe and familiar environment.

Undoubtedly, physical facilities became a theme that represented the most individualised aspect of the topics explored. Participant preferences and expectations included sporting facilities or access to programme related technical equipment. These factors represented essential requirements from the individual perspective. For example, one music student participant expected "several high quality, expensive studios that he could work in" (School E). Potential customers are looking for elements that connect to their personal interests and needs. Therefore, marketing managers need to plan an approach that

includes the more generic showcasing of the campus alongside the granular details of the resources that align with the needs and wants of the customers.

8.3 Promotion

What is clear from the data analysed is that a complex range of promotional tools are already employed in marketing the services offered by universities. Interactivity through digital social engagement provides the market with information in new and dynamic formats, but this component cannot be viewed in isolation. There is an interdependency of all the marketing activities that are appropriate for HE. But the rationale for maintaining some traditional formats might need further consideration. For example, the findings indicate that the conventional hard-copy prospectus now holds little promotional value to applicants: their preference is a digital solution.

Promotional media explored throughout the qualitative and quantitative data analysis can be categorised into three distinct themes '**paid**, **owned** and **earned** media' (Masterson, Phillips, and Pickton 2021: 296). The various tools and approaches associated with the themes are explored in this section.

Paid media, in this context, refers to the use of marketing tools owned by an external provider. CU predominantly pays to push or broadcast advertising media to an established and targeted audience. What emerged from the focus group conversations was an expectation that universities should be actively marketing to their customers. In a digital society, it is an expected occurrence for targeted marketing material to appear within digital feeds. The applicant then has the option of engaging with this material. This is particularly influential at the early stages of the application journey when potential customers are content to be passive information consumers. During this initial stage of social consumption, information needs to be entertaining and engaging to capture attention and audience imagination. Several participants indicated they had clicked links and watched marketing films that have appeared within their social streams, even when they had little interest in the university that had generated the material. One focus group participant explained their experience of early digital connections to HEI, stating that

“there are Instagram adverts, so when they come up, I'll go onto their profiles and have a look” (School D).

While several of the participants could recall seeing and watching pushed media produced by or for higher education institutions, they could only recall one institutional name: De Montfort. This institution was credited with creating the most visibly active presence, rather than the quality of the material shared. The competition for attention within a virtual marketing environment suggests that the style of advertisement and the entertainment value attributed to it might overshadow the message (Blythe and Sethna 2016). Paid media offers the opportunity to reach out to an unfamiliar audience who fit within a target audience grouping. This form of mass marketing can be effective as a pre-application influencing tool for building brand recognition and should be considered as a useful starting place to engage prospective students (Peruta, and Shields 2018).

If the push method cannot capture the audience's attention or supply the information required in a format that meets the applicants' needs and expectations, customers will adopt a pull approach. Therefore, information on HEI controlled domains must be easy to locate and in a format that captures the applicant's interest (Ivanov 2012). Applicant expectations for the standard of HE marketing material were high, with the requirement for professionally produced material.

The most influential form of *owned* marketing activity identified from the data analysed is face-to-face interactions during open days. These events have acted as the definitive decision-making moment for the majority of applicants who could attend. This form of owned marketing activity was viewed by the participants as highly significant and an influential source of information gathering. In connection to the applicant journey, these events are normally attended once the selection process has reduced the consideration set down to the final few institutions, therefore, at the latter stages of the customer journey. The average customer to attend a CU open day only visits two HE institutions (SPAO 2018). The very process of booking onto one of these events signifies an intended commitment or serious consideration of that commitment. Further analysis suggests that

the attendance at these events is aimed at acquiring granular details on the course being considered. The key considerations were gaining a feel for the location, visiting the facilities and applicants visualising themselves as part of the community they aspire to engage with.

The sequence of activities leading up to when an applicant is motivated to attend an open day is an important consideration that has been explored through the data analysed. Although applicants cannot be viewed as a single homogeneous group, common patterns can be identified that show the pathway followed by the majority. The first step identified was the use of the UCAS database to list the institutions that offer the course of interest. This process creates a list of options based on the alphabetical order of the university's name. From this starting point, a series of choice reducing pathways were identifiable, with participants applying different emphasis to the evaluation of their options - see Figure 8.1. Some applicants start with a set of preconceived judgements, both rational and emotional. These initial personal preferences are conscious or unconscious factors that have been explored throughout this study and include location, reputation, and gut feelings. Information seekers move towards owned or earned media for further information that is relevant to their decision-making process.

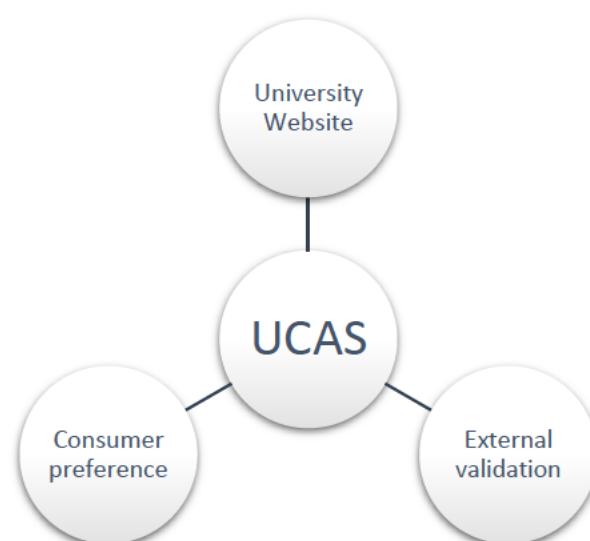


Figure 8. 1 Information gathering stages (Source: Author's own)

Regardless of the order in which the participants moved through this initial phase of choice reduction, most CU applicants visited the CU website during the initial information gathering stage. The quantitative data analysis and literature review suggest that applicants viewed the official university website as the most important source of online information (QS 2018). The recruitment and admissions department at CU reported that 86% of applicants used the CU website as a key source of information (SPAO 2018). The highest sought CU website page was the link for course-based searches receiving 475K visits (2018). The Faculty of Arts and Humanities survey (FAH 2017) identified that 53% of participants were positively influenced by the material they found on the CU website. For CU applicants, the website was primarily a route through which they gained the basic information required to narrow down their choice sets. Furthermore, the web pages related to course-based information represent a vital first impression point for applicants to engage in. The survey participants indicated that, while they were satisfied with the website, 69% would have liked to have found more videos to help with the decision-making process.

Course-based videos are marketing resources created by universities and aimed at presenting a glimpse into the course on offer. Sample films were shared and reviewed throughout the qualitative and quantitative data collection stages. The survey participants could select a film that directly connects to their area of interest. The range of video material used within the survey varied in production quality, length and who was presenting. The well-crafted professionally produced films all fulfilled the required function of expanding on the marketing material that accompanies these courses and offering an in-depth view of the course they represent. One video reviewed was produced to a reasonable standard, but it was limited in terms of participants and camera edits. The feedback for this film suggested that most viewers gained the information they required, but found the film was dry and less engaging. When a participant was searching for information, the entertainment value and style of the video seemed to be less of a concern

than when the push approach is adopted. The priority for sought media shifts towards the need for the film to contain the information required to support decision-making process.

Replicating and sustaining the emotional connections between the place, product and people in a digital environment appears to require more than a marketing film can provide. Social media and the use of rich-media in this environment is a low-cost option and one that can easily be adopted for the broad university demographic. Current research indicates the existing extensive use of social media, with 88% of adults aged 18-29 holding social media accounts (Peruta and Shields 2018: 70). What is lacking from the literature reviewed is the impact that social media has on the various key points along the applicant decision making journey.

The findings from the data analysis identified a lack of customer engagement with official university-level social media channels during the application journey. Both the qualitative and quantitative data suggests that social media was not used to research universities. This perspective was supported within the literature and secondary data reviewed (QS 2018). The survey data returned a response that showed that none of the participants were influenced by the social media produced and distributed by CU. Several participants from the focus groups had watched films from the official CU YouTube channel. These participants did not regard this mode of communication to fit into the social media category. YouTube was regarded as a source of entertainment or information.

However, an important aspect that emerged from the findings is that social media was mainly being used to be sociable. Participants engaged with different social media platforms in different ways and with different communities depending on the stage they were at in the application journey. Previous research on the use of social media and HE marketing has warned of the dangers of an 'invasion' into the social domain (Fodry and Lindbeck 2010). However, this social 'invasion' or intrusion appears to occur when there

is a disconnect between the applicant requirements, the point of engagement, and the style of information supplied.

Independent HE review sites create social networks that often rely on consumer to customer communication. This is achieved by creating independent spaces and places for focused discussions, channelled through easy-to-use communication tools that place the consumer's opinion at the forefront of any interaction (Pavlou and Stewart 2002).

Unifrog, Whatuni, The Uni Guide, Unibuddy and The Student Room are social spaces discussed throughout the focus groups as trusted spaces where opinions and information are shared reciprocally.

Universities want endorsements. This is evident in the league table information HEI highlight on their websites. External reviews and league tables present opportunities and potential barriers to successful recruitment campaigns. The notion of quality can and is assessed by applicants in many ways. The National Student Survey, TEF awards, QS world ranking, The Guardian and Times HE rankings are the more established sources of comparison (QS 2018). One participant stated that "If it's on the rankings and it's quite high up it would encourage me to go there more than others" (School C). CU is not alone in recognising the marketing value attributed to achieving a TEF Gold or being ranked highly in one of the dominant league tables. This marketing technique is repeated throughout the HE sector. The main disadvantage with this approach is that most institutions can claim success in at least one area in one league table. Applicants, therefore, cannot distinguish which are the metrics they should take notice of. Some participants refer to this one-upmanship as the 'ranking game' (School B). Without additional support to filter this information, applicants struggled to comprehend the relevance of this data.

8.4 People

This study identified the importance of social influence through human interaction in supporting the decision-making process. The mixed-methods analysis confirmed that the application process is something rarely undertaken in solitude. The relationship between a trustworthy human source of information and a positive influence was identified within all data sets and the key influencers were:

- Peers
- Academic staff
- Student ambassadors
- Influencers (Social Media)
- Parents
- Relatives/siblings
- Careers advisors / teachers.

The list above indicates the range of potential people as influencing sources. A single significant positive encounter with any of the listed groups could prove to be the dominant determining factor in the decision-making process. In this study, peer influence was the dominant source identified within the 'People' theme. Masterson, Phillips and Pickton (2021:109) described the need to connect with like-minded individuals and echo common behaviours as 'reference groups' or 'membership groups'. These groups often set aspirational standards for applicants wanting to find a location and community where they can fit in. 'The bonding elements here are created through common languages, common beliefs and common interests, which generate feelings of kinship and togetherness' (Lindgren 2017:87).

According to the UCAS 2018 report, 'nervousness over fitting in' was one of the key factors that applicants considered when researching university options. When exploring this topic, a broad range of views and perceptions existed. One end of the spectrum viewed Russell Group institutions as the aspirational benchmark, while other participants

actively avoided this group of universities based on self-esteem and preconceived notions of the community type. Alternatively, some applicants either elected to stay within the local area to maintain established friendships or, as one participant explained, 'go somewhere where their friends are going because they automatically know at least one or two people' (School A).

Virtual social networks formed through digitally mediated communication offer an evolving and rapidly growing alternative to face-to-face interaction. Within these networks are peer connected groups who share informal opinions and advice through social interactions (Hanlon 2022). Information is, therefore, sought from a perceived trusted source who might have a tangential connection to the applicant, but whose opinion is valued. Common examples of these networks were Vloggers, siblings of peers, or school graduates already studying at a potential institution of interest to the applicant. One school created a graduate-to-applicant network via Facebook that expanded the parameters of social interaction for many of their students. This more formalised networking system was positively received by the participants and should represent a useful example of how current CU students could be encouraged to support future applicants. Once an applicant has expressed an interest in joining CU, online peer-to-peer social communities should be encouraged to form, enabling a sense of attachment and belongingness to the course or university (Lindgren 2017).

Influencers were included within the people group. These unknown peers offered advice via a variety of digitally networked media sources relating to their experience of applying to an institution. The quantitative data pinpointed that peer reviews influenced 52% of the survey participants. In addition, a similar survey undertaken by the CU strategic planning office states that 87.7% of applicants reported that student reviews were a key influencing factor. The internet has empowered individuals with a computer-mediated communication tool that enables them to share a personal experience with vast

communities. Digital social networks create a feeling of being part of a group of shared interests as opposed to the broadcast approach adopted by many institutions.

Social media and social networking can extend and amplify an individual's influential circle to create a powerful voice that can exceed the efforts of large institutions. CU, for example, has a YouTube channel with 12.6K subscribers (2021), compared to one of the HE Vloggers featured in this study who has 296K subscribers (2021). While followers are one comparative factor, the flow of information from these independent and trusted reviewers creates part of the 52% of peer reviews that helps to inform the decision-making process. Coker and Cronin (2017: 458) refer to these individuals as 'commodity celebrities' who, because of their social appeal, can produce a form of sacred authority. There are different types of influencers, with some seeking social recognition, while others are recruited to endorse a product or service (Hanlon 2022). HEIs can earn these endorsements through positive engagement with the influencer and a desire by the Vlogger to share their experience.

During the focus groups, two video examples were screened: one was produced by a Vlogger and influencer, while the other was created by Coventry University. The participants discussed the appeal and value of both videos, and a clear divide was identifiable. Most of the participants regarded the vlog as 'a bit more of a student perspective' (School B). Corrons et al. (2021: 2) suggest that 'social network users believe the information provided by other users, such as comments and recommendations, to be more valuable than corporate information.' On the other hand, the CU professionally produced film met the expectations of the audience - although it was also referred to as a corporate video or marketing tool where "everyone was just told what they're doing, just to make it look good" (School D).

The Vlogger and influencer Ibz Mo kick-started his HE reviewer career with a vlog labelled 'Why I hate the university of Exeter' (Ibz Mo 2017). As the title suggests, he

presented a negative review of the institution, and the vlog received 363K views (2022). Ibz shared his individual and extremely critical experience of applying to Exeter in a jovial manner. This vlog carried a level of charismatic authority, something his followers identified with and responded to. A quote from the comments section stated 'I think Exeter's going to get a grand total of 3 applicants this year' (Parth G 2018), and this comment received 1.3k likes. Cambridge University identified the marketing potential of this celebrity or influencer and worked with him to create a series of vlogs, including the one shown to the focus group participants. Masked in the 'authentic' independent celebrity voice of the Vlogger or influencer, Ibz uses his form of self-expression and charismatic authority to market Cambridge University to his vast collection of followers. Co-created marketing or customer-generated reviews have now become an integral part of the contemporary digital marketplace. True value in this environment is only achieved by genuinely satisfying the applicants' needs as opposed to intensive selling (Smorvik and Vespestad 2020). Connecting with established social networks can amplify promotional activities, but only when the targeted community would naturally view the information as important to them. Future CU marketing campaigns should seek advocates to participate in co-creation partnerships that bring relevancy to a modernised HE marketing approach. Equally, HE institutions need to prepare for the unexpected impact of influencer reviews.

Higher education is regarded as a service industry (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2016). The product viewed from an applicant's perspective was, in part, the standard and style of education they were likely to receive. Open days create a touchpoint where sample lectures, course-based talks, or demonstrations are undertaken by the academic staff. These activities were key moments in the applicant decision-making process, either positively or negatively depending on the experience they encountered. The importance of open days was not limited to academic engagement; a myriad of other key drivers occurred, but the contact with either the academic staff or student ambassadors was a dominant element. Open days feature as the most influential source of information used

in the decision-making criteria according to the survey data. All the Vloggers reviewed added recommendations that applicants should, at a minimum, visit open days for their top university choices. For those applicants who have attended, open days become the main key influencing factor in the final stages of the selection process. What is worth noting is that both positive and negative outcomes were quoted. The information and experiences encountered were often shared with peers via social networks, creating an expanded impact.

'People' and their importance as service providers is a thread that Fox and Kotler (1995) address throughout their book. The remaining 6Ps have separate or grouped subsections; the rationale for this approach is not expanded upon, but 'people' are integrated into all the variables. This study identified that human interaction, either face-to-face or social media-enabled, is the dominant determining factor throughout the applicant decision-making process. Furthermore, in today's digitally connected society, the prevailing knowledge base that was once the domain of the parents or academics has shifted towards an increased reliance on peer-to-peer guidance. Applicants can reach out and interact with participants who are living the reality of their aspirations.

Fox and Kotler wrote their book 'Strategic marketing for educational institutions' in 1995. In this second edition, they outline the shift away from presentations and text-based sources towards videodisks and informational software. Media formats have now evolved and 'key shifts in technological ability and practice have changed how people relate to the social sphere and the world around them' (Lindgren 2017: 7). The 'people', as described by Fox and Kotler (1995) and considered within the data analysed here, have a new digitally enabled relationship with each other. These social connections link niche audiences who supply bespoke material that is relevant to their peers, whenever it is required.

Alvin Toffler (1980: 156) identified that 'an information bomb is exploding in our midst, showering us with a shrapnel of images and drastically changing the way each of us perceives and acts upon our private world.' New customers can now be digitally profiled to enable the 'shrapnel' or rich-media to be neatly packaged into relevant personalised resources and distributed to targeted individuals through paid, earned or owned media (Masterson, Phillips and Pickton 2021).

8.5 Process

The process element of the 7Ps has been described as the 'administrative and bureaucratic functions linked to the application and registration' of students (Ivy 2008: 290). In this subsection, the 'process' element relates to the UCAS and CU application process.

The UCAS timeline creates an integral link between appropriate timing for the administrative actions to occur and the information a customer is expected to be requiring. The timeline triggers key moments in the applicant's administrative requirements. It can additionally be utilised to understand the rationale for engagement in the marketing material provided. Hamsley-Brown and Oplatka (2016) are convinced that there are research opportunities that could illuminate the connections between timings when applicants make their decisions and the potential impact on choice behaviours.

Applicants engaged with the decision-making process at a variety of stages, with the average participant exploring their options approximately two years before the application point. Each student application journey is unique. Some customers follow a logical pattern, starting from GCSE choices that will take them along a set pathway, while others explore a more reactive or emotive approach.

UCAS applicants are predominantly first-time customers of an age where they have not previously been required to undertake a purchase option requiring a high-involvement decision (Masterson, Phillips, and Pickton 2021). The complex, time-consuming and time-dependent UCAS process was unfamiliar to the participants. Parental support and guidance during this period varied with positive comments like "I was very lucky that my dad offered to come with me. It was so useful to have a second opinion" (NS). Conversely, some participant statements suggested parental opinions might force applicants into specific courses or career directions, "people only know about 5% of what you actually want in your life, including your parents" (JB).

During the focus groups conducted at schools, it was apparent that levels of support during this period varied dramatically. Significantly higher levels of engagement with HE institutions were articulated from the private and grammar school participants compared to the comprehensive school groups. Additionally, the aspirations of the participants at these different schools were consistent with Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka's (2016) findings, where the status and rank of a university chosen by an applicant is strongly linked to the type of school they previously attended.

Regardless of the type of school attended, participants considered entry requirements as a defining feature in their choice criteria. UCAS limits the number of universities an individual can apply to, and a ranking order is required. The separation of first and second choice selection was often viewed as a tactical decision, with the UCAS points influencing the ranking order. Advice given predominantly via the vlogs suggested making the first-choice selection based on high-level grade requirements, a choice that should be aspirational but also realistic. The second choice or the insurance option should include a tariff point level that was easily achievable. This perspective assumes that the higher the entry grades required, the better the course. "I feel like obviously if they ask for high grades, it's because a lot of people want to go" (School S).

The study exposed some frustrations that existed when specific subject requirements were linked to the admission criteria. This aggravation occurred when participants could not undertake their chosen degree course based on the wrong combination of post-16 qualifications. Additionally, some admissions criteria required the achievement of set grades in pre-defined subjects. Therefore, it is advisable that marketing departments work alongside academic teams to review the entry requirements from an applicant perspective. Additionally, there is a need to regularly conduct a competitor analysis and benchmark the grade criteria within a selected field.

One of the key stress points that the data revealed is the requirement, creation and value of the personal statement element of the UCAS application process. This component of the UCAS process evoked a mix of responses concerning the value this contributes towards the overall application. Variations in opinion occurred based on the type of university the application is destined for. Vloggers who had already secured a place at a Russell Group University emphasised the importance of creating an inspirational personal statement. Conversely, the experience of applicants to modern institutions suggested personal statements held little value compared to the grade requirements. Further research could be applied to the actual value that a personal statement has in the current application process. Future analysis could establish if removing the requirement for a personal statement or supplying statement templates would reduce applicant stress levels. This review would need to be measured against the potential impact on the academic decision-making process.

The pre-application stage offers a range of key influencing touchpoints to support and encourage applicants to consider CU as one of their UCAS choices. Once that application has been submitted, the selection process begins, representing the final stage in the applicant journey. However, the students identified this stage as another stressful and confusing element in the decision-making process. The data indicates that participant outcomes varied, ranging from unconditional offers to conditional offers based on

predicted grades, additional stages of interviews, and rejections. Most of the data analysed related to the post-application period showed that the main offer received was a conditional offer, including grade requirement adjustments to the published grades. A conditional offer was the expected normal outcome from the application process, but it was not the only outcome received. Unconditional offers created a mixed reaction; some participants indicated they would ideally like to receive an unconditional offer: "It makes you feel safer by knowing it is unconditional" (School B). Equally, many participants felt they had experienced the tactical use of these offers. Examples included time-limited propositions when applicants are expected to quickly respond to the offer that might shift the decision away from a first-choice option and into accepting an insurance choice. Additional financial incentives, alongside priority access to accommodation, were used to encourage applications to accept the offer made.

"They said, if you 'firm' with us then it's unconditional and they said if you meet your offer you'll get £1000 and if you get A*A*A you'll get £3000" (CM).

However, it is also important to consider that a significant number of participants who had applied for their aspirational institution received a rejection, even when their predicted grades aligned with the entry criteria.

"Some people believe that you get offers and they can't turn you down, yes they bloody can. Just know it is very competitive and don't be too you know, optimistic" (NJ).

Interviews added an additional layer into the process. The use of interviews was only recorded concerning either the top tier Russell Group universities or arts-based subjects that required a performance or creative portfolio submission. The number of participants who had experienced this additional step was limited. The feedback received suggested that this additional interaction presented the applicant with a further opportunity to

engage with the academic team. If an offer occurred after this interaction, the prospective students demonstrated a further sense of pride based in their achievement.

Once the offer is secured, the student journey begins, but from a marketing perspective, the gap between receiving this offer and arriving on campus should not be ignored.

Potential students want to become part of their new community, and they need information that enables social engagement with their new peers. During this period, Vloggers often step in and offer advice about a diverse range of topics, including what you need to purchase and bring to the university, campus life, social life, and accommodation.

8.6 Price

Blythe and Sethna (2016: 39) assert that 'price is the total cost of adopting the product' and, therefore, the complete financial implications of undertaking a course need to be considered. A university education currently requires a significant financial commitment. Applicants do not appear to be overly concerned with the inevitable debt and continue to consider the investment in higher education as a choice worth making (Beech and Bekhradnia 2018, Robson, Farquhar and Hindle 2017). The qualitative and quantitative data indicate that the fee costs did not impact the participants' choice of higher education institution. It is worth noting that all participants were either already interested in studying or current students.

Participants viewed the costs associated with studying as an inevitable part of the higher education journey. For those willing to accept the fee rates, the resulting average student debt is around £47,000 for a three-year degree. This figure includes the main financial consideration quoted, the cost of living (Bolton 2020). The additional cost of living associated with selecting a London-based institution was an influencing factor for a

limited number of participants. However, outside of London, the cost-of-living differentiation was not a significant determining element.

The notion of 'value for money' is a term currently used by the government, and how this influences the choice criteria depends on the value being sought (Department for Education 2019). From the data analysed and the Office for Students annual report 2019, the expectation is that students will receive a high level of customer experience during the period of study. This will lead to graduate-level employment, resulting in earnings above non-graduate levels (OfS 2019). While most courses offer a higher return on investment than just completing school (OfS 2019), it is 'not clear that this will continue for all time and all degrees' (Barber, Donnelly and Rizvi 2013: 14). Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2016: 26) identified that 'earnings prospects are not a particularly important factor in the choice of a specific university'; this statement aligns with the data analysed. UCAS (2021a: 5) reported that course-based decisions are mainly based on the enjoyment of the subject, indicating that graduate prospects were considered but not regarded as a dominant element in the choice criteria. However, Fox and Kotler (1995: 313) state that 'assessing the actual value of attending a particular school is also nearly impossible in advance of enrolment and perhaps not until after graduation'. Therefore, price concerning the marketing opportunities needs to focus on the quality-of-service provision.

Another financial consideration identified by the participants in the qualitative data was the time and cost of travel to the universities for the various open days. Several participants were at the stage in their application process of attending events, and this helps to contextualise why they were highlighting it as an issue. This concern could offer an opportunity to shift the focus away from the restrictions of travel and create online alternatives. Using rich-media and elaborate modes of engagement that retain the interactive opportunities, online alternatives or complementary activities could be implemented.

8.7 Trust

Higher education has faced a series of controversial scandals and accusations that have created the impression that it has become a self-serving part of the publicly-funded sector (Boland and HazelKorn 2018). In parallel to the lack of public trust, a well-documented shift has occurred towards the marketisation of higher education, as outlined in the literature review. The student as customer and the university as a service provider has created a tension of expectations related to consumer demands and academic integrity. These debates were not referenced by this study's participants. The conversations that emerged indicated that some applicants believed they were in a purchase style position. They were equally aware that institutional marketing approaches were likely to adopt aggressive sales techniques.

The balance of trust between applicant and institution has swung towards the pessimistic direction when 'owned' marketing material was discussed. The glossy marketing veneer connected to the courses, campus and accommodation appear to mask a commercialised layer that applicants struggle to believe in. Thankfully, the optimistic antacid to this concern is delivered through the people that the applicants encounter. Social interaction is reported to create the trust factor that is lacking in the marketing material provided. The participants claim that through face-to-face interaction, they could listen to and observe the presenter's actions and from this, an assessment could be made about the validity of their message. Botsman (2012) suggests that these interactions can offer the solution to the separation of individual and institutional trust that is rapidly evaporating.

“It's about empowering people to make meaningful connections, connections that are enabling us to rediscover a humanness that we've lost somewhere along the way”
(Botsman 2012, Ted talk).

The level of distrust in the marketing material provided did not reach the point that applicants felt they were being duped or lied to. Instead, participants merely accepted that the lens they were viewing this information through only allowed them to see the positive monocular perspective.

The quantitative and qualitative data analysed provides evidence that the format information is now digested through has increasingly shifted towards digital sources. Customers are currently operating in a digitally networked, social landscape that has developed since the publication of Fox and Kotler's (1995) original text. Web 2.0 technology has enabled and encouraged connections to form between institutions and customers (Lindgren 2017). In this new landscape, social interactions occur that can form the foundations of an emotionally driven, affect-based trust. However, applicants seek interaction through social media and the trust associated with that format is not currently designed for institutional systems (Anaza et al. 2018). Institutional trust in the digital environment currently depends on an established reputation that either has a sound historical basis or is built from communities of advocates (Gorlich and Katznelson 2015).

Online connections now restructure the traditional format of relationship marketing into a co-creation process. This shifting of roles relies on an arrangement where advocates collaborate and co-produce the marketing material that helps to erode the gap between audience and institution (Coates, Dollinger and Lodge 2018). CU needs to view and value this partnership as a reciprocal arrangement where customer-influencers-business becomes the new normal. This approach can become a strategic choice that empowers consumers to act as advocates for the service provided.

Trust and the formation of applicant social communities should form an integral part of future marketing strategies. Ideally, these communities should create an environment that generates the aspirational desire for new members to become part of the group. The

virtual social communities can then support each other in the applicant journey (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2016).

8.8 Emotions

Digitally enabled social interactions can operate 'on a much more personal, albeit emotional level than traditional mass communication media' (Anaza et al. 2018: 19). With every new advancement of technology, the sense of emotional and cognitive connection makes sharing and connecting easier to implement (Botsman 2012, Lindgren 2017).

Applicant emotional responses and behaviours form an essential part of the decision-making process. Belli and Broncano (2017: 435) suggest that 'we are culturally shaped to experience emotions'. Effective marketing relies on understanding evolving customer needs and the responses required and Hung and Lu (2018: 302) suggest that 'positive and negative emotions play important roles in predicting consumer behavioural intention'. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2016: 9) acknowledged that 'emotions can affect how consumers' think, the choice they make and how they feel after making a decision'.

An aspect of the customer journey that emerged from the data analysis is the importance of having a positive emotional response when participating in the UCAS process. As previously discussed, there is a direct correlation between the UCAS application process and the applicant's emotional state. Within this customer journey, emotional spikes occur that are both euphoric and highly stressful. Xin, Zhu and Septianto (2022) reveal that a mixture of both positive and negative emotional states can increase favourable consumer evaluations.

The applicant decision-making process follows the classic five-stage pattern involved in a high-involvement purchase as outlined below (Piacentini and Szmigin 2018, Dibb et al.

2019). For this study, one amendment has been made; the stage 4 purchase point has been substituted with an application* stage.

1. Problem recognition
2. Information search
3. Evaluation of alternatives
4. Application *
5. Post-purchase evaluation.

(based on Dibb et al. 2019: 145)

The stages listed above are acknowledged steps along the purchase journey, but the focus of this section is to link the varying emotional states encountered during this five-step journey. This is necessary because classic purchase models assume applicants follow a logical and rational pathway towards an end goal. However, the mixed emotional responses identified within the analysis suggest that the pressure created by the UCAS timeline regularly results in an emotional reaction based on the necessity to choose within a predetermined time frame rather than a logical process.

Throughout the initial stage of problem recognition, this study highlighted that applicants see themselves as customers and, therefore, they expect to be marketed to. The mode of engagement during this period predominantly appears to be a passive stage of social consumption. Emphasis is placed on the universities or schools as responsible for supplying information. During this phase, marketing departments need to compete for their audience's attention, and rich-media conveyed through social media provides the tools for delivering this material. As discussed in previous chapters, potential applicants engage with advertising because it is intrinsically stimulating and exciting (Hung and Lu 2018). This study's analysis indicates that, at this point, participants demonstrate a willingness to absorb information. As outlined in this study, the participant's emotional state appeared as lacking in confidence, insecure, yet open to support and direction.

This study identified that participants often struggled to trust their own judgment during the second information search stage. For many, the realisation of the significance of their decision becomes a reality. The emotional response to this moment can cause the desire to remain with the familiar, either seeking a local institution or connecting with a peer support network that can offer reassurance and advice. Emotional 'attachment is important because it relates to other significant constructs, including trust, satisfaction, commitment, and loyalty' (Hung and Lu 2018: 303). During this phase, new social connections start to occur, and the need for institutional advocates becomes apparent. Regardless of the connection mode, peer-to-peer sharing of preferences and experiences were a key influencing feature (Pavlou and Stewart 2002).

During the evaluation of alternatives phase, a shortlist has already been identified and the final ranking order, as required by UCAS, is yet to be established. Therefore, participants who had reached this stage required detailed course-specific information. When applicants could not locate this information through official sources, or those sources were not viewed as reliable, they turned to their social networks.

Open days represent an emotionally charged touchpoint that often creates the defining moment for many applicants in the decision-making process. This was achieved through the people they encountered or the feelings they experienced. The focus groups participants and vlogs described the emotional contribution towards this stage as significant. Comments relating to a gut feeling or vibe for the place were common threads that indicated the significance of ensuring the experience on offer aligned with the applicant's emotional expectations. Tomson et al. (2005) suggest that it is a basic human need to desire an emotional attachment, with stronger feelings of affection, love and passion stimulating a favourable attitude towards a brand, place or object. Of particular interest here is the need and process required to distil down the component parts that form this 'gut' reaction. Separating the elements that can be adapted to improve audience

experience and provide a point of differentiation would be ideal, but the participants could not articulate what these factors were.

Online marketing substitutions for these events offer a radically different experience from the physical encounter, but often fail to evoke the same level of emotional reaction. This does not mean that emotional connections cannot be created. Lindgren (2017) proclaims that online, people develop interests, articulate desire and when engaging with the content, they laugh, cry, become frustrated or inspired. What is often described as lacking in the digital environment is the feeling of 'warmth' that encompasses such emotional aspects as friendliness, sincerity, and trustworthiness (Ivens et al. 2015). Creating the gut feeling through online engagement is possible, but it requires identifying the pertinent elements that connect with the desired emotional response.

The application stage represented the most significant shift in emotional repositioning, with frequent references to the high-stress level encountered. One participant stated that "the university application process was the bane of my existence, and it stressed me out to the max" (NJ). The UCAS application deadline is in January, alongside the A-Level mock exam period. This combination of demands creates an emotional stress point when the marketing approach adopted could offer supportive and informative activities.

A growing body of academic literature exists relating to the positive shift towards the need to inform and support the decision-making process rather than sell a product (Canerbury 2008, Gibbs and Maringe 2009). However, there appears to be a lack of academic literature that contemplates the emotional stress that occurs during the application to student journey. The support offered during this period by CU should focus on promoting psychological well-being through empathetic practices and creating supportive social environments. Through a deeper understanding of the emotional factors relating to the application process, CU could create information resources that are relevant, enjoyable and inspirational to future applicants.

After the application stage and before the post-purchase point, a void was identifiable when applicants awaited their outcomes or before joining the selected institution. Digital media creates a sense of 'always on'; therefore, customers expect content to fill in downtime with an endless supply of novelty (Murphy et al. 2022). However, CU applicants reported a lack of institutional communication compared to their peers who had received celebratory messages from their chosen university. During this period, an applicant's social media landscape is restructured into new social communities based on future participatory relationships and the need to feel a sense of closeness with the institution occurs. The bond with the university begins, and a new social sphere is formed.

The post-purchase period occurs once the applicant becomes a student. The stage 2 focus group participants were all students at CU. Some of these consumers reported high satisfaction levels in the service they were receiving from their HEI. These advocates have already experienced the various emotional states encountered during the application to arrival period. Therefore, connecting and sharing the positive outcomes might help provide additional support and guidance for those still on their customer journey. At various points in this study, the need to build trust and embed an emotional basis into the marketing material has been discussed. Since peer-to-peer trustworthiness is valued above institutional, engaging with this group of advocates is essential.

8.9 The applicant social media journey

The applicant journey is both preceded and encompassed by digital tools that enable diverse forms of social engagement. Figure 8.2 framework is derived from the data analysed and depicts the social media stages an applicant progresses through. The findings identified six stages of digital social engagement that informs the customer decision-making process. This journey starts with a limited level of active engagement and expands gradually outwards to create new networks and active participation. The very nature of

customer engagement with new media evolves over time, and the indicated boundaries are permeable (Pavlou and Stewart 2002). Not all the stages shown in Figure 8.2 were undertaken by all the participants, but this framework offers an overview of the main steps most participants discussed.

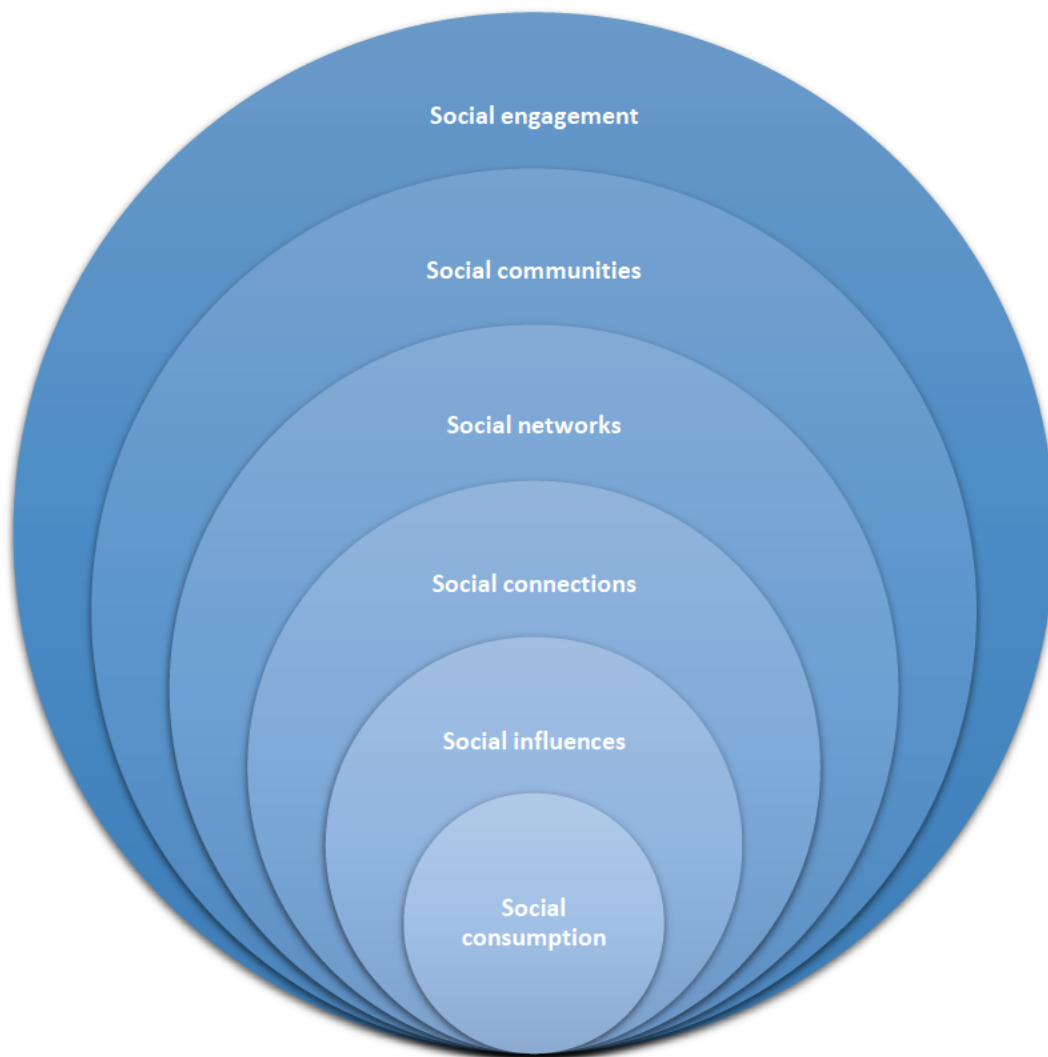


Figure 8. 2 Applicant social media journey (Source: Author's own)

1. **Social consumption.** This initial stage represents the passive absorption of information that is presented rather than sought material. Customers expect entertaining and engaging information to be supplied in their social streams during this period. At this stage, the marketing material is supplied in a pushed approach through paid sources.
2. **Social influences.** Applicants are already connected with peer reference groups who share their HE application experience or discuss their intended pathways. These existing networks represent the established communities with which customers have already established trusted bonds. Positive marketing within this sphere is achieved through pre-existing earned reputation.
3. **Social connections.** As the decision-making process progresses, applicants expand their connections outwards through their existing networks. The aim is to locate a perceived trusted source that might have personal experience or connected experience of the subject, institution, or location under consideration. Common examples include current school or college alumni, family connections or peers' siblings. These connections might have a tangential relationship to the applicant, but their opinion is valued.
4. **Social networks.** At this stage, customers seek specific content in new virtual social networks formed through digitally mediated communication. Applicants link into existing forums, blogs, vlogs, chat rooms to assess the collective attitude towards preference sets. The appropriate network sought will depend on the individual's selected HEI.
5. **Social communities.** These new communities are created around the application stage. Digital communities form the foundational stages of a social presence. Therefore, community building at this stage is based on future participatory

relationships in the physical world. Social media creates the opportunity to forge new friendship groups based on course cohorts, shared accommodation, sports interests, and society groups.

6. **Social engagement.** This final stage occurs around the point of acceptance on a course or arrival at the institution. Students are often required to engage with and use HEI owned social media as part of the learning process to acquire information. HEI use social media channels to broadcast information related to the students' union, social events, or educational communications. These channels offer HE vital routes to push information and update students on essential aspects of student life.

8.10 Chapter summary

This study investigates the influential factors that impact the HE customer-to-consumer decision-making process, utilising the 7Ps marketing mix as a framework to divide the study data into themes. A comprehensive range of academic literature already exists that focuses on the value the 7Ps add to the higher education marketing strategies (Gajic 2012, Ivy 2008, Pratminingsih and Soedijati 2011).

The findings from this study indicate that 'price' has limited influence on the decision-making process. Before researching any university, a value judgment must be reached regarding the value of studying at HE. Once this milestone has been passed, price has a diminished impact on the overall marketing process. However, recent government intervention has brought into question the value for money that specific courses can offer (Department for Education 2019). Therefore, the perceived impact of price might rise in significance again.

Under the people banner, social influencers, through the use of rich-media were able to exert a significant influence on potential customers. As extensively outlined in the literature review, HE is recognised as a service industry, one that is predominantly a people-based service where the true value does not exist until the service is provided (Gajic 2012). Dibb et al. (2019:28) describe people as 'the providers of the service who interact with customers and organisations'. This study proposes that, the divide between the customer, consumer and institution can be eroded through co-creation.

Place and facilities were considered as intertwined components that contributed to the decision-making process. This study's data collection phase was conducted before the pandemic and a significant shift has now occurred towards a flexible, blended, and hybrid teaching approach in HE delivery (McIntosh 2021). This 'new normal' requires further

research to establish if a shift in applicant emphasis has now occurred regarding the 'place' in which education is currently operating.

Emotions, including trust, represent a key decision-making component present throughout the customer journey. Emotions are proven within this study to drive actions and are part of the decision-making process (Bormann and Thies 2019).

Universities could achieve a competitive advantage if they adopted a strategic approach towards managing the emotions of applicants. Additionally, this approach connects with the social responsibility of supporting applicants in a personal and constructive manner.

Alongside this finding, a clearer understanding of the applicant to student social media journey has been plotted and presented in Figure 8.2. This new conceptual framework represents the progressing and expanding digital pathway CU undergraduates undertake during their UCAS application journey. This chapter has considered these key findings in direct relationship to the current UK HE environment.

Chapter 9 summarises the insights identified throughout this study and presents an outline of the positive contribution to knowledge that this thesis has demonstrated, from both a practical base and theoretical position. This is followed by a section that reflects on the impact that the global pandemic has had on the findings of this study. Next, the research limitations and the potential areas for future research consideration will be discussed. Finally, the study concludes with a positionality statement and a self-reflection that considers the research journey undertaken in the creation of this study.

Conclusion

Chapter Nine

9.0 Introduction

This final chapter summarises the outcomes of the research undertaken, drawing together the major points and insights gained throughout the study. Because of the turbulent period during which this research has been conducted, the concluding chapter begins with a reflection on the perceived impact that the global pandemic had on the student recruitment process. It will then discuss some of the key elements from the literature review and describe the contributions made to both knowledge and practice. The chapter continues with an explanation of the research limitations, presented alongside some recommendations for future research. Due to the proximity of the researcher and the subject explored, a positionality statement has been included that considers any potential bias. Finally, a self-reflection on the learning journey will create the end of this thesis.

9.1 Impact of the global pandemic on the research undertaken

The final write-up stage of this thesis was undertaken in 2022, during a period in the UK of increased vaccination levels and community confidence in the potential to connect again physically in a COVID-19 world. Academic journal publications are appearing that dissect the pandemic's impact and predict the future in this new normal. However, it is essential to note that the data-gathering elements of this study were conducted pre-pandemic.

The original overarching aim of this thesis was to evaluate the use of rich-media in the HE digital marketing context and consider the balance between people-centred modality

versus digital engagement. During the pandemic, a dramatic and rapid shift has occurred away from face-to-face marketing activities and towards using rich-media located on digital platforms as the new route to connect with customers (McIntosh 2021). For most prospective students, there is nothing new or novel about using digital technologies to research a potential purchase option (Lindgren 2017). But the new generation of students joining HE over the next decade have been forced to engage with the digital learning environment in new and unpredicted ways. For some, the experience of home learning during the pandemic was a seamless transition between learning environments. However, it was also evident that for many, the isolation or lack of access to technology may have dramatically altered their perception of the value of digital educational engagement.

New technology has also complicated the computer-mediated routes for HE marketing departments to engage with potential customers. CU marketing has been forced to shift from tentative engagement with rich-media into a position where they are the primary route to engage with future audiences. One of the impacts of COVID-19 is the increased engagement with digital connectivity, but limited scrutiny has been applied to how this has affected the customer journey. The HE sector now desperately needs relevant research to understand the changing requirements of the new digital community and how these mediated connections can open opportunities for active promotion. This study evaluated the balance of interdependencies between physical and digital in a pre-pandemic environment. The findings clarified the importance of face-to-face interaction alongside a balance of digital interaction. While the pendulum rapidly swung towards digital-only during the pandemic, the appropriate balance in the new normal is yet to be established. Therefore, the data presented within this study can set the foundations from which this rebalance can be established.

As we emerge from the pandemic crisis into the new reality, the appropriate way forward is to assess if transformative social interactions have developed. Using the applicant digital social media journey (Figure 9.2), coupled with a need to create a safe, empathetic, and

productive recruiting environment, CU can understand the longer-term needs generated by the crisis and the responses required.

9.2 Contribution to knowledge

This study sought to understand the role of rich-media in a digital marketing context on the student recruitment process. When analysing the key drivers of the applicant decision-making process, the Fox and Kotler 7Ps marketing mix (1995) was used as an appropriate framework to examine and categorise the data gathered.

The findings from this study identified that 'Price' did not significantly contribute to the CU applicant's decision-making process. However, it is worth acknowledging that all the participants in the study had already decided to undertake a HE course. Therefore, because of the amount of debt students incur, 'Price' might have been a factor for individuals who elected not to study at any HEI.

This study highlighted the role that trust and emotional responses play in the HE marketing context. The research demonstrates that emotional responses impact applicant preferences in both positive and negative manners. For example, the euphoric moment of physical engagement with 'place' that occurred during an open day. The participants describe this new emotional bond as the 'vibe' they encounter, and this connection can motivate applicants to make their final HEI choice. Equally, the damaging effect that the stressful application 'process' creates produces a level of customer anxiety that requires a supportive and considered response. Applicants' decisions can pivot in these moments of emotional impact; therefore, these findings legitimise the need to include emotions in future HE marketing strategies.

This study highlights the need to create a partnership between applicants, advocates or influencers, marketing departments, and higher education institutions. The research

revealed that the applicant journey also depends on the perceived trustworthiness of the information provider. Peer-to-peer communications and face-to-face academic engagement were identified as trustworthy sources. Chapter 8 presents trust as an emotional response in physical and digital environments. The added value contributed through trustworthy social connections and interaction within both settings resulted in an extended need to examine what constitutes valuable digital engagement.

The literature review also exposed that previous research into social media had focused on the potential benefits that platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter had in contributing towards marketing strategies (Antoniadis et al. 2017). However, some published articles claim students are unlikely to follow or like institutional social media accounts (Peruta and Shields 2018). Therefore, this study reviewed student engagement with social media from a different perspective; it adopted a platform-agnostic approach and focused on what applicants are doing in these online domains. Through the analysis of applicant engagement with social media, a structured approach to the use of social media at CU has been created and presented that offers a significant contribution to

current knowledge (Figure 9.2).

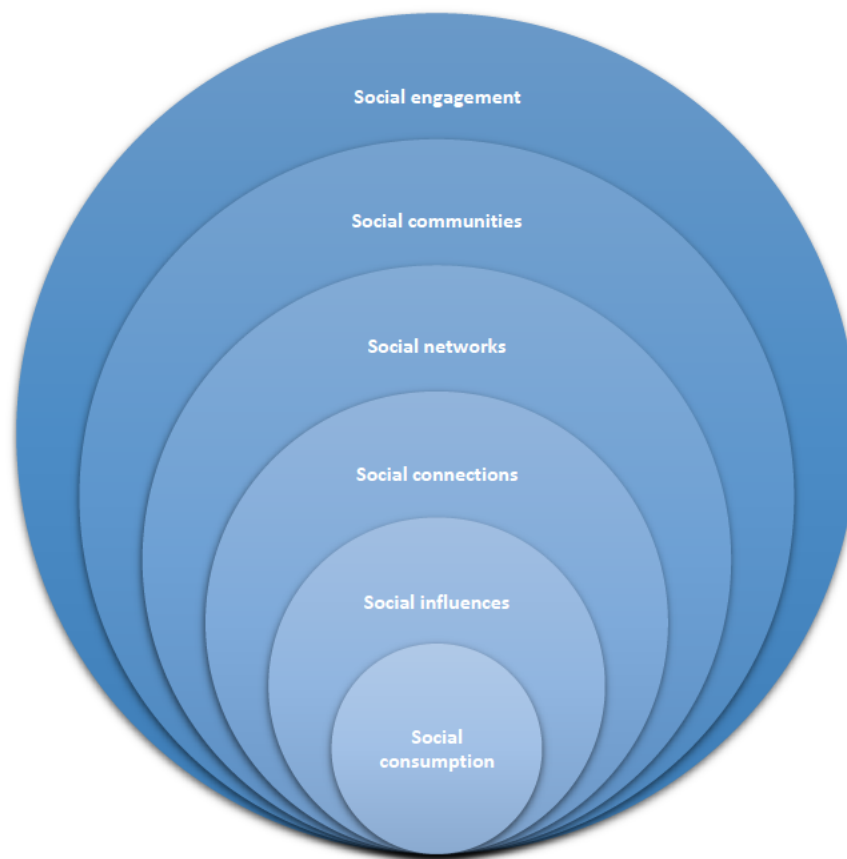


Figure 9. 1 Applicant social media journey (Source: Author's own)

The applicant social media journey considers when and why social media affects the applicant's decision-making journey. This approach has produced a richer insight into the applicant's social media journey, creating an appropriate balance between paid, owned and earned digital social media engagement. In addition, by reflecting on the layers of digital social interaction, this study has presented a map of the applicant's social media journey that provides the basis for structured marketing engagement points.

9.3 Contributions of the research for practice

Some of the practice-based contributions created by the findings were operationalised into practice at an early stage in the study, as insights were gained. Additional contributions are listed in this subsection, and they will be implemented after the completion of this study. For example, during the planning stage of the survey reviewed in Chapter 5, a series of marketing films were required. The sourcing of this material highlighted a significant concern. CU marketing films were created by individuals, schools, faculties and the marketing department, yet they were hosted on various institutional and private accounts. The lack of central marketing control had resulted in material that was still locatable but was out of date or no longer CMA compliant due to inaccurate information. This discovery triggered a rapid review by the digital marketing team of all published video material, resulting in one central CU YouTube location for all CU films.

Within the CU Faculty of Arts and Humanities, rich-media was being accepted as a viable and cost-effective marketing tool. As a result, new forms of engagement were occurring, including live streaming and recruitment webinars. Working alongside the digital marketing team, the Faculty of Arts and Humanities live-streamed the first CU Facebook Live event produced during an open day. This was followed by another live event with a commercial partner, who shared the activity with their social media followers. Additionally, the school of Media and Performing Arts created Facebook groups for incoming students to inspire social communities based on course level groups. Recently, the applicant's social media journey (Figure 9.2) and the breakdown of how each layer is integrated into future modes of social engagement have been distributed at school and faculty level for consideration.

The following section provides essential recommendations drawn from the discussions chapter and represents routes to enhance the CU customer journey. The implementation of these actions needs to be owned by the relevant CU managers, either within schools, recruitment teams or the marketing department. In addition, managers need to create

meaningful partnerships with the applicants, students, or influencers to create a dynamic marketing and communications process. These recommendations have been selected based on their relevance to a post-pandemic society:

- During the applicant social media journey (Figure 9.2), priorities shift from a visual experience that is entertaining push marketing towards the pulling of information acquisition. CU must provoke potential customers into a position of active engagement through the provision of inspiring rich-media. This should be followed by providing informative and easy-to-locate material related to course-based facts and place marketing.
- CU needs to seek advocates who can positively promote the organisation and support peers throughout the applicant social media journey (Figure 9.2). Advocacy marketing for CU would include the positive endorsement by loyal consumers, including applicants, students, or alumni. Connecting with existing influencers who have a proven ability to produce and circulate material would reduce the need for production support. These new voices and perspectives can be integrated into future marketing activities by collaborating with co-creators or influencers and offering rewards or acknowledgement for their contributions.
- Emotions can drive actions, and CU could achieve a competitive advantage if it adopted a strategic approach to managing the emotions of applicants. For example, it is vital to establish when customers are at a passive level of engagement and need entertaining, compared to the goal-directed stage of information seeking. In addition, Web3 technology purports to offer new routes to connect at an emotional level with future audiences. A new front-end interface should create emotionally connected social sharing opportunities through immersive technology in this developing digital environment.

- This study identified the need to review the UCAS application process's impact on pupils' mental health. The HE sector can respond by identifying key moments that require support or potential amendment to the application process. If resources could be created and support structures added that reduced the negative impact of applying to a university, both applicants and application levels would benefit.

In summary, the theoretical and practice-based contributions are based on the identified opportunities to proactively engage with the applicant-to-student journey. Each element suggested could play a crucial role in future CU marketing plans. Therefore, the contributions indicated above should be integrated into the current marketing activities undertaken by CU. In addition, this study proposes that the applicant social media journey would support customers through a confusing and challenging period. Ultimately, CU will only grow its student numbers if it continues to improve and innovate in both its marketing practices and the student experience it offers.

9.4 Limitations and opportunities for further research

The scope of this study was deliberately limited to UK undergraduate UCAS applicants only and the associated marketing produced for this recruitment sector. Therefore, this research offers significant insights into the decision-making journey for a restricted group of applicants. Nevertheless, many considerations and recommendations may apply to CU's diverse range of applicants. For example, both international and direct entry applicants require detailed information about courses and the campus location that would echo the needs of the study participants. Conversely, differences such as the ability to visit or even study at the campus might shift the required marketing strategy into new directions. Hence, the need for further research that would enhance CU's understanding of the diverse range of applicants that it attracts.

The Vloggers, survey and focus group participants were already students or customers committed to studying at HE. However, on reflection, it would have been informative to gain the perspective of participants before they reached the stage of considering HE. This would have enhanced the understanding of the first stages of the decision-making process. Therefore, it would be advantageous if a future study identified the key influential factors that create the divide between continuing onto HE or taking an alternative future pathway.

Netnography is a relatively new form of digital research that can explore societal change and new forms of social connection. 'Netnography is a form of qualitative research that seeks to understand the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, practices, networks and systems of social media' (Kozinets 2020: 14). However, the difficulties of navigating the complexities of ethical approval to integrate a netnography approach and engaging in digital research limited the original research plan. For example, social digital spaces such as discussion forums might have provided additional data, but they did not fit within the ethical boundaries approved by CU. After identifying a less invasive approach and gaining ethical approval related to digital data collection, an appropriate solution was found in Vlog transcripts. From the complications encountered in this study, an opportunity has emerged to consider how HEI ethical processes align with current digital methods research in a contemporary environment.

A limitation acknowledged within this research is the response and engagement levels associated with the questionnaire. This data collection process was conducted with the support of the University recruitment team, who distributed the survey to all 4428 Coventry University incoming UK UG applicants. Because of the ethical requirement for participants to remain anonymous, adding in any form of incentive for participation was not feasible. The survey response produced a limited but usable outcome of 69 returns. Using secondary data that was comparable and aligned with the data collected, the study

was able to draw on existing findings that served to affectively authenticate the primary data acquired.

During the focus group data-gathering stage, it became evident that participants were being asked to draw upon their recollections of past events. When the responses related to the stage they were currently at or had a significant impact, these points were articulated with clarity and detail. However, when participants were required to recall details from several months ago, their responses were more fragmented. While this cross-sectional approach provided enough data to address the research question, a longitudinal study could have more accurately recorded the various engagement points present in the full timeframe involved in the customer journey (Lewis, Saunders and Thornhill 2016).

The post-COVID-19 new normal will require further research to establish if a shift in applicant emphasis has now occurred regarding the 'place' in which education is now operating. For example, pedagogical responses to the pandemic shifted the learning environment from physical to digital. However, we know little about the applicant preference regarding the shifting balance between onsite and online engagement.

The unanticipated emotional influence on the decision-making process was identified through the initial coding of the data gathered. Although this was not the study's initial focus, the impact that stress created as part of the application process surfaced. Therefore, while the awareness and importance of the applicant's mental health are discussed within this study, a comprehensive exploration of this factor using appropriate methods is recommended.

A balance of positive and negative emotional states was identified as part of this study. The need to extend this study and distil the pieces that form the positive 'gut' reaction is of particular interest. Further research could establish the key components that contribute to this emotional state. The new Web3 enabled Metaverse promises to offer a

new route to online social connections via heightened emotional networks (Zuckerberg 2021). Once the emotional influencing factors are identified, additional research could explore how these elements can be embedded in emerging online environments.

The focus of this research was to explore digital marketing and present insights into the decision-making process. By applying the 7Ps as a coding structure, the 'process' element revealed how various stages of the application process impacted the individual's emotional state. For example, creating a personal statement was highlighted as a key tension point. This element requires further focused analysis to evaluate the negative impact it generates. CU could establish if templated personal statements, online training resources or removing the requirement for a personal statement altogether are appropriate solutions.

The applicant social media journey (Figure 9.2) will evolve in tandem with new modes of social engagement. This continuously developing relationship can reveal significant insights into future marketing opportunities. Future research should continue to explore the impact of new and emerging forms of social media on the decision-making process.

9.5 Positionality statement

The following positionality statement considers the impact that working, studying and using the researcher's academic institution as the professional context for the study has on the thesis. In practice-based research, the effect of 'interviewer bias' is a factor that requires special consideration (Costley and Fulton 2019). Being an employee of the institution at the centre of this study might mean that preconceived notions of the expected norm are reflected in the applied tone or the additional probing questions used. Costley and Fulton (2019: 87) suggest that 'No one can ever be entirely objective, and although prior knowledge can enhance research, it can also give rise to ethical issues and dilemmas'.

Therefore, it is helpful to present a positionality statement that considers the lens through which I am approaching this study. In my role as the deputy head of a school, I hold a positive view of the value that higher education can bring and the benefits that effective marketing adds to the recruitment process. However, the literature review revealed that not all academics share this opinion (McGrath 2008). Furthermore, successive government policy amendments have inspired the competitive drive for student recruitment and created a marketing approach viewed by many as damaging academic integrity (Brown and Carasso 2013, Chapleo and O'Sullivan 2017). I, therefore, acknowledge my standpoint as a researcher who is not challenging the shift towards a highly marketised education environment, but accepts the need to operate within this domain (Brown, Curnow and Pratt 2019).

During this study, I have changed roles from an Associate Head of School responsible for Marketing and Research, to Deputy Head, and for one year, I was the Acting Head of School for Media and Performing Arts. This eclectic mix of responsibilities has afforded me a middle management leadership perspective. As a practising manager, I have witnessed the impact that fluctuating student numbers have on course survival. Furthermore, I have engaged with the shift to online and hybrid recruitment activities.

My educational background has been as diverse as the roles I have held. Through a commitment to lifelong learning, I have acquired the following academic achievements; BA Fine Art, MA Photography, PGCert HE and MBA. The various theoretical and methodological approaches encountered during these educational phases include creative practice, business studies, and media theory. This blend and convergence of interests have shaped my perception of how a creative, technologically driven approach can underpin a HE marketing strategy that supports CU's institution's business needs.

The mixed-methods approach adopted within this study involved active engagement with participants predominantly aged between 16-19 years old. For example, the focus groups conducted for this study were undertaken face-to-face. As an academic and manager working at Coventry University with a few decades gap since originally applying for an undergraduate course, a clear divide was evident between the participants and the researcher. While a non-hierarchical relationship was sought, the separation in age, personal experience, and the potential for participants to view the researcher as a figure of authority existed. My management position became an influencing factor in at least one of the stage 2 focus groups sessions. Some of the participants discussed their reservations about criticising the academic staff they had encountered during the application process. This hesitancy related to the fact that the same staff were now their course directors.

Throughout the focus group data analysis stage, I had intended to adopt a grounded approach. The objective was to avoid fixed predetermined codes and adopt a more fluid approach to ensure that the data provided the basis for the emerging themes. However, during the disaggregation of information into a coding structure, the proximity of the categories produced and the 7Ps marketing mix was identified. Having recognised the connection and relationship to the 7Ps, the decision to accept and embrace the existing framework for the focused coding stage was made. While this approach broke with the acceptable boundaries of a grounded approach, it retained some of the traditional procedures. As a new researcher, I found this shift in mindset a challenge. I was convinced that a grounded approach would offer the best route to analysing my qualitative data. However, after adopting the 7Ps as a coding structure, the benefits gained seemed to outweigh my anxiety.

9.6 Reflections on the DBA journey

The initial motivation for this research topic was derived from a combination of inspirational marketing sessions undertaken as part of my MBA and the role that I held as Associate Head for Marketing and Recruitment. At this point, I had an established research career focused on creative practice. Having already adopted an interdisciplinary approach that combined both lens-based and digital media in the production of new artwork, I was inspired by the prospect of exploring opportunities to find creative solutions to industry-based issues. The DBA has given me a different way of expressing myself and engaging with the educational environment. For example, whilst I was employed as the Associate Head for Marketing and Recruitment, I was responsible for my school's recruitment strategy and activities. I drew on the emerging research to implement alternative approaches to the marketing activities undertaken throughout this period. As a result, new rich-media assets were introduced, including live streaming activities, commissioning new marketing films, CU website updates and initiating social communities for incoming students.

During this study, I was promoted into new roles that changed my involvement in the marketing and recruitment activities for the school. I was the Acting Head of School (HoS) for one year. In this leadership role, I faced the challenge of responding to the pandemic. I implemented changes that included converting the schools' pedagogic approach from the standard face-to-face delivery to a fully online mode of engagement. The knowledge gained from this study helped inform the appropriate digital engagement required for this new way of working. In tandem with the educational response, a new recruitment strategy was needed that demanded a research-informed approach to establish a digital-only solution. Academic presentations, including the HoS introduction, campus tours and student interviews, were created for this new environment.

The additional challenges associated with the HoS responsibilities during the pandemic resulted in a drop in DBA productivity. However, once the new HoS was appointed and the new ways of working were established, the impact of the pandemic on this study was more apparent. Not only had my progress slowed, but the original focus of this study, the use of digital technology as a marketing tool, had accelerated. In parallel with the shifting educational approaches, technological advances had occurred that supported the new digital society. Both the hardware and software capabilities had developed to meet the demands of this new digitally enhanced environment. For example, one of the focal points of this study, YouTube, was surpassed by TikTok for both the number of app downloads and average watch time in the UK (BBC 2021). The shifts in online engagement enabled through Web2 technology that formed part of the original inspiration for this study are now on the cusp of being superseded by Web3. Zuckerberg (2021) has promised technological advancements that will connect humans emotionally and in places and spaces augmented by new social environments. Additionally, Meta believes that this new environment will be platform agnostic. Technology and the pace of change that it presents can transform social actions in various ways that cannot always be predicted.

These changes have created new and inspiring opportunities, but the challenge of keeping this thesis aligned with technological, political, and social changes has been a constant source of frustration. To mitigate the impact of these changes, I initially applied a post-2008 literature search, a strategy I found extremely useful at the time of writing the literature review. However, during the final write-up stage, it became clear that the material explored had become disconnected from the contemporary marketing environment, and a considerable update was required and undertaken. Additionally, I have witnessed the rapid shift in CU digital marketing engagement from something that was experimented with, to the accelerated crescendo that accompanied the pandemic. Therefore, this thesis had to consider the relationship of this study to the new digital-first marketing environment. Rather than inspiring a shift in the digital direction that I had

initially predicted, I needed to reflect on the new ways of working and how this research could support CU's organisational change. Thankfully, the research informed decision-making process I had developed throughout this study helped equip me with the tools required to respond in an informed and appropriate manner.

During the literature review stage, it became clear that a broader and deeper understanding of how CU deployed a diverse range of marketing tools would be required. This has led to a more comprehensive exploration of the various touchpoints encountered during the applicant journey that ultimately enriched the outcome of this study. While this approach expanded the scope of the research undertaken, it had the additional advantage of increasing my understanding of the customer's needs throughout the application journey. Therefore, I felt better placed to consider the appropriate solutions that could be applied.

The research benefited from the advice and guidance of the supervision team, wider course team and mentor. One key area that evolved from the experience and expertise held within this group was the expansion of the data gathered to include digital methods. The decision to add the additional data section derived from Vloggers was based on the emerging importance digital social influencers had on the applicant information gathering process. After navigating the complexities of ethical approval, the vlog chapter was created from data extracted from YouTube. The initial review of material gathered from message threads linked to vlogs resulted in little usable data. The coded shorthand language, collection of emojis and critical commentary relating to the presenter offered little insight into the customer journey. Through open and honest conversations with my supervisor, an appropriate solution was found, and the Vloggers' dialogue transcriptions were used.

Throughout this study, I have received the support and trust of the CU recruitment and marketing teams. Therefore, I wish to thank them for their support and clarify that the

purpose of this study was not to criticise the excellent work they do but to look for creative and proactive ways we can work together.

Finally, this study's methodology enabled a diverse range of perspectives and techniques to be included, adding the additional advantage of educating me in a wide range of unfamiliar research skills. This new knowledge will provide valuable tools for expanding my research engagement and it has given me the confidence to develop a new research trajectory. While I do not regret the approach adopted, I had underestimated the plethora of skills acquisition required to complete this study. However, each new strand of knowledge gained can now be built on, and I am looking forwards to adapting various elements of this research into publishable papers.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 Survey Participant Information Statement

Why Did you choose Coventry University?

(UK students only)

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT

The aim of this study is to improve the marketing material provided to individuals when considering making an application to one of the Coventry Universities undergraduate courses. The study is being conducted by Paul Smith as part of his doctoral studies at Coventry University.

You have been selected to take part in this questionnaire survey because you have applied for one of the undergraduate courses at Coventry University. Your participation in the survey is entirely voluntary, and you can opt out at any stage by closing and exiting the browser. If you are happy to take part, please answer the following questions relating to the marketing material you have used in relation to your decision-making process when applying for a place at Coventry University. Your answers will help us to improve the marketing material Coventry University produces and therefore, improve the experience for future applicants.

The survey should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Your answers will be treated confidentially and the information you provide will be kept anonymous in any research outputs/publications. Your data will be held securely on the Coventry University OneDrive account. All data will be deleted by 01/12/2021. The project has been reviewed and approved through the formal Research Ethics procedure at Coventry University. For further information, or if you have any queries, please contact the lead researcher Paul Smith aa5172@coventry.ac.uk. If you have any concerns that cannot be resolved through the lead researcher, please contact Maureen Meadows ac3495@coventry.ac.uk. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey. Your help is very much appreciated.

I have read and understood the above information. I understand that, because my answers will be fully anonymised, it will not be possible to withdraw them from the study once I have completed the survey.

I agree to take part in this questionnaire survey.

☐

I confirm that I am aged 18 or over.

☐

Appendix 2 Survey questions

P1 – What was the most influential source of information you used when making your decision to study at Coventry University (CU)?

Select main information source used to make your decision to join CU.

(Drop down menu that routes onto a related subsection)

- Coventry University Website
- YouTube
- Ranking websites
- Open Day
- UCAS Fair
- School/college event
- EU or International Agent
- Social Media
- Prospects/hard copy material
- Word of Mouth
- Other (please specify)

Subsections -

P2 Website

Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements (*Scale/Rank questions*)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
The information on the CU website was easy to find						
The information supplied met with your expectations						
The information you found influence your decision to apply to CU						

Please rank the following communication methods in order of your preference as a route to receive course related information. 1 being your preferred method and 3 least.

	1	2	3
Video			
Text			
Audio			

To support you making your course choice, which of the follow would you have like to have found more of on the CU website:

Images	
Video	
Text	
Audio	
Social Media Links	

Did you watch any of the Coventry University related films? Yes (Move to YouTube section) No (move to last section)

P3 YouTube

Approximately How many films did you watch? (*Drop down menu*)

1, 2, 3, 4, 5 ... (end with) More than 10

Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements (*Scale/Rank questions*)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
The information in the films met my expectations						
There were enough films to provide the full range information you needed.						
The production quality of the films is not important.						
The films were inspirational to watch						

The films influenced your decision to apply to CU						
---	--	--	--	--	--	--

Please rank who you would prefer to present the information in the films? (Ranking question)

- ☐ CU teaching staff
- ☐ Students
- ☐ Staff & Students
- ☐ Senior CU management
- ☐ Professional presenters

P4 Ranking websites

Please provide the name of the most influential website? (*Free text question*)

In relation to the site you used, please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
You trust independent sites more than the CU website						
You couldn't find the information you required on the CU website						
You used this site because of a search engine (Google) result						
You were looking for peer reviews						
You needed more information than could be found on the CU website						
The review site influenced your decision to apply to CU						

P5 Open Day

Which month did you attend the open day Multiple choice (*Scale/Rank questions*)

Please rate the following aspect of the open day

	Excellent	Good	Acceptable	Poor	Disappointing	Not applicable
Organisation						
Academic Staff						
Accommodation						
Facilities / Equipment						
Presentations						
Course information						
Campus tours						
Student helpers						
Overall experience of the day						

P6 UCAS Fair

Which month did you attend the fair Multiple choice (*Scale/Rank questions*)

Please rate the following aspect of the open day

	Excellent	Good	Acceptable	Poor	Disappointing	Not applicable

Organisation						
Staff						
CU Stand						
Course information						
Student helpers						
Overall experience of the day						
Information you received after the event						

P7 School/college event

Was the event you attended in collaboration with staff from CU? Y/N

Did this event encourage you to look at further CU information sources? Y/N (No on to next section)

Yes – Which resources where you direct to? (*Drop down menu that routes onto a related subsection*)

- ☐ Coventry University Website
- ☐ YouTube
- ☐ Ranking websites
- ☐ Open Days
- ☐ UCAS Fair
- ☐ Social Media
- ☐ Prospects/hard copy material
- ☐ Word of Mouth
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Follow links to above sections.

P8 EU or International Agent

In relation to the agent you met, please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements (*Scale/Rank questions*)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
The agent influenced your decision to apply to CU						
The agent had the appropriate information on CU						
The agent was able to advise me on an appropriate course						
The agent was trustworthy						
You would recommend the agent to others						

P9 Social Media

Which social media channel did you use? (*Multiple choice, multiple answer*)

- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ LinkedIn
- ☐ WeChat
- ☐ Instagram
- ☐ Snapchat

Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements in relation to your decision to join Coventry University (*Scale/Rank questions*)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
Social Media influenced your decision to apply to CU						
You were able to find <u>university level</u> information via social media						
You were able to find appropriate <u>course</u> information via social media						
You used social media to connect with other applicants						
You used social media because you wanted the latest information						

P10 Prospects/hard copy material

What material did you receive? (*Multiple Choice, Multiple answer*)

- ☐ Prospectus
- ☐ Faculty/School brochure
- ☐ course based material
- ☐ Accommodation
- ☐ Other (please specify)

How did you get the hard copy material? (*Multiple Choice, Multiple answer*)

- ☐ School/College
- ☐ Friends
- ☐ Visiting a university
- ☐ UCAS fair
- ☐ Postal request
- ☐ other

P11 Word of Mouth

Was your connection to Coventry University: (*Multiple Choice, Multiple answer*)

- ☐ Graduate of CU
- ☐ Staff at CU
- ☐ Staff at School/College
- ☐ Current Student at CU
- ☐ Friend of someone connected to CU
- ☐ Family connection
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Did your contact direct you to further CU information sources? Y/N (No on to next section)

Yes – Which resources where you direct to? (*Drop down menu that routes onto a related subsection*)

- ☐ Coventry University Website
- ☐ YouTube
- ☐ Ranking websites
- ☐ Open Day
- ☐ UCAS Fair
- ☐ School/college event
- ☐ EU or International Agent
- ☐ Social Media
- ☐ Prospects/hard copy material
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Follow links to above sections.

P12 Other

What was the most influential source of information you used when making your decision to study at Coventry University (CU)? (*Multi-line free text question*)

All subsection to follow on from this point:

P13 When did you start searching for course-based information? (*Selection list question*)

- Last month
- Last 3 months
- Last 6 months
- Last 9 months
- Last 12 months
- More that 1 year ago

Can you offer CU any additional advice on how we can improve our course-based information?

(Multi-line free text)

If you can spare another 5 minutes, please could you watch one of the videos linked ... and offer some helpful feedback.

Or you can submit your survey now - [Submit](#)

Faculty of Engineering, Environment and Computing

https://youtu.be/ANevPLz_p2g

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

<https://youtu.be/Ae5SkWYYEAI>

Faculty of Health and Life Sciences

<https://youtu.be/-L5c9jGKA0>

Business School

<https://youtu.be/v4D6J5ktdzQ>

Law School (Generic CU film)

<https://youtu.be/RTH77wrx2r4>

Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements based on the film you have just watched (*Scale/Rank questions*)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
The film was inspirational to watch						
The information in the films met with my expectations						
The production quality of the film met with my expectations.						
The presenter(s) did a good job						
The film should have been longer						
You trust the information included in the film						
You would have preferred the information in text						
This film would have help to positively influence your decision to apply to CU						

Can you offer any additional advice on how we can improve the film you have just watch?

(Multi-line free text)

Submit your survey now – [Submit](#)

Appendix 3 Informed consent form

Participant
No.

INFORMED CONSENT FORM:

**The impact that rich-media assets have in a digital marketing context
on the student recruitment process.**

You are invited to take part in this research study for the purpose of collecting data on which mode of information delivery is the most appropriate in supporting the decision-making process when selecting a university.

Before you decide to take part, you must read the accompanying Participant Information Sheet.

Please do not hesitate to ask questions if anything is unclear or if you would like more information about any aspect of this research. It is important that you feel able to take the necessary time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

If you are happy to participate, please confirm your consent by circling YES against each of the below statements and then signing and dating the form as participant.

1	I confirm that I have read and understood the <u>Participant Information Sheet</u> for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions	YES	NO
2	I understand my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my data, without giving a reason, by contacting the lead researcher and the Research Support Office <u>at any time</u> until the date specified in the Participant Information Sheet	YES	NO
3	I have noted down my participant number (top left of this Consent Form) which may be required by the lead researcher if I wish to withdraw from the study	YES	NO
4	I understand that all the information I provide will be held securely and treated confidentially	YES	NO
5	I am happy for the information I provide to be used (anonymously) in academic papers and other formal research outputs	YES	NO
6	I am happy for the interview to be <u>audio recorded</u>	YES	NO
7	I agree to take part in the above study	YES	NO

Thank you for your participation in this study. Your help is very much appreciated.

Participant's Name	Date	Signature
Researcher	Date	Signature
Paul Smith		

Appendix 4 Participant information sheet

The impact that rich-media assets have in a digital marketing context on the student recruitment process.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

You are being invited to take part in research on rich-media. Paul Smith, Deputy Head of School, at Coventry University is leading this research. Before you decide to take part, it is important you understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study is to:

To determine which mode of information delivery is the most appropriate in supporting the decision-making process when selecting a university. It will also establish if the production standards of the material supplied align with audience expectations and clarify which elements of the rich-media assets add value to the decision-making process.

Why have I been chosen to take part?

You are invited to participate in this study because you are a student who has recently experienced the UCAS application process.

What are the benefits of taking part?

By sharing your experiences with us, you will be helping Paul Smith and Coventry University to better understand the impact that digital marketing has on the recruitment process at higher education establishments.

Are there any risks associated with taking part?

This study has been reviewed and approved through Coventry University's formal research ethics procedure. There are no significant risks associated with participation.

Do I have to take part?

No – it is entirely up to you. If you do decide to take part, please keep this Information Sheet and complete the Informed Consent Form to show that you understand your rights in relation to the research, and that you are happy to participate. Please note down your participant number (which is on the Consent Form) and provide this to the lead researcher if you seek to withdraw from the study at a later date. You are free to withdraw your information from the project data set at any time until the data are fully anonymised in our

records on 12/12/19. You should note that your data may be used in the production of formal research outputs (e.g. journal articles, conference papers, theses and reports) prior to this date and so you are advised to contact the university at the earliest opportunity should you wish to withdraw from the study. To withdraw, please contact the lead researcher (contact details are provided below). Please also contact the Research Support email researchproservices.fbl@coventry.ac.uk; telephone +44(0)2477658461 so that your request can be dealt with promptly in the event of the lead researcher's absence. You do not need to give a reason. A decision to withdraw, or not to take part, will not affect you in any way.

What will happen if I decide to take part?

You will be asked a number of questions regarding your method of researching into what various universities have to offer, you will also be shown a short promotional course-based film to review. The focus group will take place in a safe environment at a time that is convenient to you. Ideally, we would like to audio record your responses (and will require your consent for this), so the location should be in a fairly quiet area. The focus group should take around 45-60 minutes to complete.

Data Protection and Confidentiality

Your data will be processed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. Due to the nature of a focus group your responses will be shared with the other members of the group, but otherwise all information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential. Unless they are fully anonymised in our records, your data will be referred to by a unique participant number rather than by name. If you consent to being audio recorded, only anonymised data and no personal data (i.e. identifiable to named participants) will be shared with the 3rd party transcriber and all recordings will be destroyed once they have been transcribed. Your data will only be viewed by the researcher/research team. All electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer file Coventry University OneDrive. All paper records will be stored in a locked filing cabinet Ellen Terry Building, Room 202. Your consent information will be kept separately from your responses in order to minimise risk in the event of a data breach. The lead researcher will take responsibility for data destruction and all collected data will be destroyed on or before 08/10/21.

Data Protection Rights

Coventry University is a Data Controller for the information you provide. You have the right to access information held about you. Your right of access can be exercised in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018. You also have other rights including rights of correction, erasure, objection, and data portability. For more details, including the right to lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner's Office, please visit www.ico.org.uk. Questions, comments and requests about your personal data can also be sent to the University Data Protection Officer - enquiry.ipu@coventry.ac.uk

What will happen with the results of this study?

The results of this study may be summarised in published articles, reports and presentations. Quotes or key findings will always be made anonymous in any formal outputs unless we have your prior and explicit written permission to attribute them to you by name.

Making a Complaint

If you are unhappy with any aspect of this research, please first contact the lead researcher, Paul Smith, aa5172@coventry.ac.uk. If you still have concerns and wish to make a formal complaint, please write to:

Maureen Meadows,

Professor of Strategic Management, Coventry University, Coventry CV1 5FB

Email: ac3495@coventry.ac.uk

In your letter please provide information about the research project, specify the name of the researcher and detail the nature of your complaint.