

Original Paper

An Assessment of Students' Preferences Using Social Media Platforms on Their Selection of Private Universities in Lebanon

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Abstract

This paper assesses the behavior of prospective students of private universities in Lebanon on social media platforms; classifies them according to the extent and the way they use these platforms, and investigates students' preferences using social media to choose a private University. A quantitative approach was adopted using a structured questionnaire administered to a convenient sample of 527 students from private universities in Lebanon who responded willingly. Collected data were analyzed using the SPSS program employing descriptive statistics. The university sample consisted of six Lebanese Higher Education Institutions that belong to different socio-economic categories, diverse cultures, many geographic locations, and varying chronological seniority. Results showed the influence of university pages on these platforms on students' decisions and their adoption as a primary source of information before making their choices. Universities were unsuccessful in providing an effective communication channel with students or enabling two-way communication and motivating participation in comments, content creation, sharing experiences related to the universities, or sharing posts from their pages. Authors recommend universities review their motivational schemes for students to interact on university platforms regarding access to information and communication. For marketing, it is necessary to hire qualified staff, and provide a consistent and updated policy.

Keywords

higher education institutions, marketing, social media platforms, decision-making, students

1. Introduction

Decades ago, no one expected to measure popularity by the number of friends on social media platforms. As people find less time to meet each other in the real world, they spend more hours in the virtual community imposed by social media platforms. In addition, visiting shops and talking to sellers about products is replaced by consumer reviews and opinions on these platforms. The ease of access to the Internet almost everywhere has given rise to a world in which goods and services are acquired with behavior backed by the opinions and recommendations of friends, family, and peers (Gupta & Harris, 2010; Lee, Shi, Cheung, Lim, & Sia, 2011). The reliability of these people has currently gained importance over the traditional media for companies, institutions, and organizations. As the number of social media platforms users increases every day, these platforms have become a necessity and an urgent need after their role revealed much broader dimensions than the reputation of “wasting time” that they carried in an ancient era. When being social may mean being active online, candidates for management positions are either rejected or accepted after managers have seen their accounts on social media platforms. Consequently, a decision is made based on the benefit or harm of the employee in affecting the organization/company’s reputation, negatively or positively (Hosain, 2021).

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) subject to a highly competitive market will not be an exception. Some Lebanese universities have not yet realized the importance of the virtual world and are still missing a golden opportunity in strategic and systematic digital marketing (Bashir, 2022a, 2022b). They ignore the social media platforms’ exploitation to build societies whose borders do not stop at the outskirts of the country. Mostly non-profit institutions rely mainly on traditional marketing to attract students. Nevertheless, communication is often one-way, forgetting that promotion and diversified marketing are considered key factors in achieving the sustainable success of HEI. Social media platforms provide a potential solution to ensure two-way communication with prospective, current, and alumni students, who are waiting and expecting to feel valued, cared for, and directly addressed by the university administration (Bernardo, 2013). Social media platforms empower students to make their own decisions through detailed online searches. They actively search for institutions that understand their needs and make it easier for them to realize their aspirations (Newberry, 2021). TargetX & mStoner, Inc.’s study (2020) found that 58% of aspiring students use social media to research schools; 17% say these sources are “extremely influential”, and 61% say they are “somewhat influenced” by their social research. Hence, HEIs in Lebanon should look for new and innovative ways to communicate with students and build strong relationships in the best way possible.

The university’s success in performing its societal function is measured by its ability to bring about the desired change through its curricula, professors, graduates, research, and purposeful scientific, social, and cultural activities (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). It is no surprise that higher education’s discourse is in disparity with reality. Marketing university programs is a challenge that is becoming increasingly difficult with the advancement of the role of social media platforms in the world, as these platforms enable potential students to form opinions and make decisions based on unprecedented factors (Appel, Grewal, Hadi et al., 2020).

UNESCO (1998) asserts that “At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the challenges are immense, and it is necessary to create a matching dynamism to try to respond” (p. 10). Blessinger, Reshef, & Sengupta (2018) contend that we are witnessing a higher education paradigm shift “from an educational perspective, at the domain level, there is the scientific paradigm, the humanistic paradigm, and the artistic paradigm” (para 2). Moreover, Blessinger et al. assert the impact of the primary macro

forces driving the demand for higher education, including: “1) the globalization-internationalization process, 2) political-legal educational reforms, 3) changes in the socio-economic landscape, and 4) technological innovations” (para 12). Then, as a result, higher education “has experienced the following meso- and micro-level factors: 1) the emergence of universal access to higher education, 2) the emergence of more effective forms of teaching and learning, and 3) the emergence of a rights-based approach to higher education” (para 13). On the other hand, more changes exist in the increasing numbers of private sector institutions and institutional oversight bodies. Also, education is as a service “in the commercial sense” that could be developed and promoted (Naidoo, 2007). On a related level, it is imperative for educational institutions and universities to realize the increasing importance of digital influence, in their various media, in marketing and promoting the educational services they provide (Kusumawati, 2019a), and consequently the impact of this on students’ decisions in choosing their universities. The direct causal relationship between the quality of education and the institution’s reputation has declined. Institutions that master the art of digital marketing for their benefit can enhance their image as pioneering and contemporary institutions without, perhaps, making radical changes to their educational curricula and teaching methods. The aforementioned is alarming as Maringe & Gibbs (2009) assert that “it is morally dangerous to use advertising to promote the process of educating the autonomous individual through recruitment advertisements when no such education is available” (p. 160). However, a university that constantly develops its educational curricula and respects scientific standards needs to strengthen and show its image in front of public opinion. In that context, the study will explore the barriers between universities and their target audiences on social media platforms. It needs to assess the extent of their impact based on the universities’ marketing strategies after students have become dependent on them mainly to collect information, evaluate alternatives represented by competitors, and then reach a decision.

1.1 Contribution and Merit of the Study

The study deals with a sensitive topic whose consequences will affect the future of an entire student generation because it seeks to identify, assess and meet the students' needs for a correct choice and a better outlook. To the best of the author’s knowledge, no study has been conducted in Lebanon to investigate the impact of social media platforms on students’ decisions to choose a private university. The authors sought to study this effect, especially since social media platforms are the most used by the new young digital generation and the university community generation. A similar subject was being investigated in foreign countries, as shown in many sources of foreign studies. Therefore, this research shall enrich the scarcely reported literature in Lebanon and the region. The trigger for the research is the lack of secondary data on the topic in Lebanon. Amid the Lebanese universities’ competition, students lack precise and complete public information about the impact of universities’ social media platforms on students’ opinions and their role in raising their awareness about the universities. Lack of information includes all the educational programs’ aspects, reputation, and the consolidation of universities' brands. This research closes such a gap. Finally, this study can be considered a mainstay based on its results to encourage and complete subsequent research in developing the performance of universities towards digital marketing and for each university to study its audience in depth to reach for results. The study covered several private universities in Lebanon to assess university students’ characteristics and behavior on social media platforms. Thus opening the way for each university to study and survey its audience, each with different circumstances and reasons, and consequently more accurate and more specialized results.

The assessment of the students wishing to complete their university studies capitalize on the level of the institution, its position among the rest of the higher education institutions, the chosen university, and the student's field of work after graduation. Therefore, choosing the right university is an important decision that requires much research and thought. This paper seeks to investigate the impact of social media platforms on the choices made by students of several private universities in Lebanon, taking into account the presence of other factors that prompted them to register at the university in which they study and the indirect relationship of some of them with these platforms. The study also seeks to understand the barriers surrounding universities' discourse towards students and their understanding of their needs. Outcomes will help universities design developmental proposals to pay more attention to digital platforms strategically and thoughtfully and with best practices. The study also helps digital marketers in all sectors gain a broader understanding of this world.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The study aims to assess the impact of social media platforms on students' choices for the university by understanding the extent to which they use these platforms, the nature of their behavior on them, and the extent to which their information needs are satisfied.

The objectives can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Assess the extent of use and how the target group uses social media platforms.
- 2) Assess to what extent students rely on social media platforms for information before choosing a university.
- 3) Identify the reference groups that students consult before making their university choice and social media platforms.

1.3 Problem Definition

The presence of fifty private Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Lebanon, in addition to the development witnessed by the private higher education sector, exposes the intense competition among universities and exposes students to complex choices; prompting them to look at the various influencing factors for choosing a university including social media platforms. Therefore, it is imperative to assess how universities communicate with their audiences and how they deliver information to them. Subsequently, students or their parents can form a correct opinion about the institution, bearing in mind that some of the influencing factors are dynamic and subject to changes in university policies on these platforms.

1.4 Research Questions

The main research question is: What is the impact of social media platforms on students' choices for the private university in Lebanon?

The aforementioned constitutes the main question, from which many questions fall, which are the following:

- 1) To what extent do students rely on social media platforms as a source of information before making their choices?
- 2) Do social media platforms of private universities in Lebanon affect the choices of information users more than social users?
- 3) Do private universities' social media platforms contribute to raising students' awareness about them and establishing their brand?

1.5 Suggested Research Framework

The impact of social media platforms, students' attitudes, demographic variables (gender, age, among others), and the universities' branding and communications media formed the determinant factors to target and study the community of students' decision-making in selecting a university. Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of the conceptual framework used in this research.

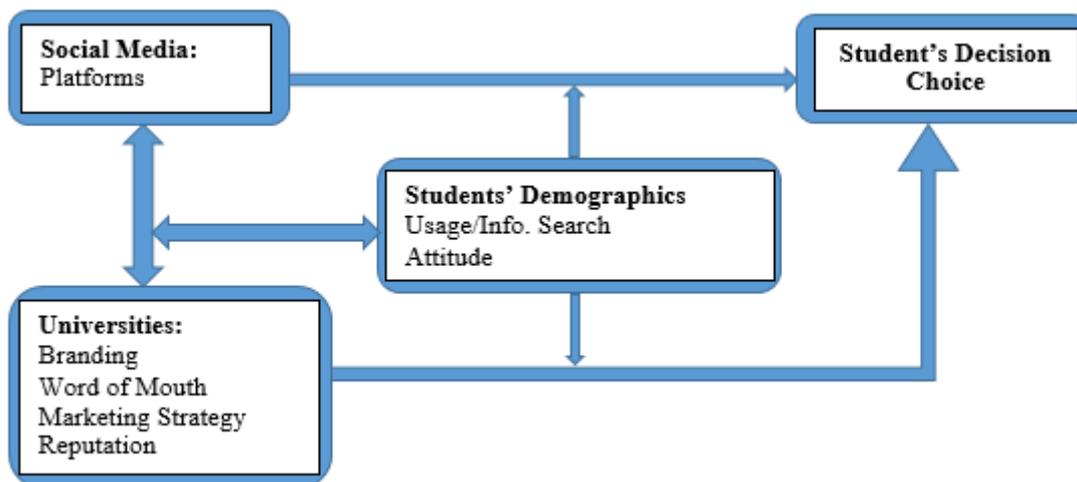


Figure 1. Study Model Prepared by the Researchers

2. Literature Review

Since its emergence, social media platforms have moved marketing, advertising, and media to new levels and horizons. It paved the way for all societies and organizations to converge and exchange opinions and ideas with ease, at a low financial cost, and empower all to rely on them in decision-making. The Lebanese higher education sector was affected by the revolution of the social media platforms, especially with the start of the transformations that swept the Arab world more than ten years ago. Social media platforms have become a mainstay for marketing and an essential factor in preparing the requirements for societal change by creating awareness (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2004, p. 2) and building a human view in any organization, society, or even the world (Guzman, 2016).

2.1 Arab Studies

2.1.1 Social Media Influence

Shamiya & Shehadeh's (2020) study "The Impact of Social Media Applications on the Purchase Decision of Young People at the University of Jordan" collected data from a sample of 100 students at the University of Jordan. An electronic survey published on "WhatsApp" and "Facebook" was utilized. Results showed that there is a significant impact of popular social media applications used such as "WhatsApp", "Facebook", "YouTube", "Instagram", and "Snapchat" on the purchasing decisions of young people at the University of Jordan. Also, Al-Madani's (2014) research on the role of social networks in shaping public opinion among students in Saudi universities relied on a survey questionnaire to collect data from a sample of 344 university youth from two universities in Saudi Arabia. The highest impact of social media platforms came in the first place, satellite channels came in second, electronic newspapers came in third, radio stations came fourth, and websites came in fifth. Moreover, the two university students showed a statistically significant difference in the average scores

on the scale measuring the impact of their use of social networking sites on other media. In addition, Helou, Greg, Kerkmaz, & Youssef (2018) investigate the effect of using social networking sites extensively on the psychological state of Arab university students. The researchers approached several Arab universities in the Lebanese Republic, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and occupied Palestine. A sample of 668 Arab individuals, aged between 18 and 24 years, from the targeted countries' research community, university youth. Results showed statistically significant differences between the environmental characteristics of Arab university youth according to their country concerning the gratifications achieved through the use of social media platforms. Also found that the use of these platforms enhances the sense of social presence. In addition, a relationship was found between the daily rate of using these platforms and cyber addiction, jealousy, and frustration. Moreover, Sahib and Al-Shammari (2017) investigated university youth's extent of use of new media. The study sampled 489 male and female students using a questionnaire. Results showed the majority of university youth use new media extensively and that the moral effects are the most prominent effects of the new media, including the decline in morals and the opportunity to express moral decay, followed by family influences, including the increase and disintegration of family members. Findings illustrated university youths' views about the different effects of the new media are somewhat similar. The majority are not sure if what was broadcasted and published is scientifically and ethically sound. The more hours they use the new media, the more they believe to be influenced by it.

2.2 University Branding

Sahin & Singh (2018) examined the university's brand image to explain its components and their effects on students' choice of university and the relationships between these components. The Kurdistan region was chosen as a geographical area because higher education is one of the most significant needs of the population for intellectual growth. The study measures the effectiveness of stakeholders' personal and social factors in building the brand image of an academic institution. Primary data were collected using a structured survey distributed to 481 undergraduate students. The results showed that the brand image is one of the most salient factors in choosing a university and that it is affected by all the variables mentioned.

2.3 Social Media Effect on Students' Selection and Enrollment in College/University

Masoud & Al kour (2015) researched the factors affecting Arab students' choice of Jordanian universities. The most prominent of which are; the quality of the educational service, marketing communications, cost of education services, physical environment, geographical location of the university, and environmental factors. In addition, a survey was administered to a sample of 375 male and female students from ten universities in Amman. The results showed that the quality of the educational service, environmental factors, and the cost of education services are the factors that most influence the choice. The study recommended that universities improve education service quality, enhance marketing communications, pay attention to various means of promotion, especially the website and social media platforms, and the physical environment, and reduce study costs.

2.4 Social Media in Education Marketing Strategy

Nawaleh, Al-Dmour, & Al-Assaf (2010) studied the importance of the elements of commercial advertisements in the decisions of university students to subscribe to the Jordanian cellular communication service. A questionnaire was administered to 580 university students. The study found that form, credibility, and simplicity are the most attractive and influential advertising characteristics in the university student's decision to choose a cellular communication company compared to the rest. In

addition, results showed a strong influence of the combined commercial advertisements' characteristics on the students' decisions. Moreover, advertisements effects showed differences found among students due to gender and level of education but not due to age.

2.5 Foreign Studies

2.5.1 University Branding

Brzaković, Brzaković, & Brzaković (2018) studied the determinants of brand positioning in Higher Education and explored what dominantly influences students' satisfaction in Croatia. According to the study, the brand's position is strategically significant because it represents the process of forming impressions in the minds of consumers in a way that the consumer associates the brand with something specific and desirable, which distinguishes one brand from others. A brand can also make consumers believe in its utility and superiority over other competitors; it creates an emotional connection with them. College students are also "consumers", and the findings apply to college brands. Also, Suleymanov (2019) researched University branding in Azerbaijan by studying empirically students' choices for education. Data were collected via a questionnaire from four private and public universities in Azerbaijan. The study conducted a comparative analysis of the criteria used by University students for choosing a particular university. The study revealed that Azerbaijani students consider various factors when applying to a university, including the presence of active student clubs. The results showed that most friends/family and, to a lesser extent, visiting the university play a significant role in obtaining information about the university.

2.5.2 Social Media Effect on Students' Selection and Enrollment in College/University

Joseph, Roche, Bock, & Albrecht (2014) examined the main criteria that drive graduate students to choose a university in Germany, how these criteria align with students' opinions of the institution they attended, and how graduate students obtained information about the colleges/universities they attended. The results revealed that students consider a variety of criteria when deciding which universities to apply to and that their actual enrollment behavior may not directly reflect the importance they state they place on specific selection criteria. These criteria include building awareness and branding, university image, interaction during campus visits, word of mouth from friends/family, advertisements, and information about universities you post to prospective students. Also, Reddy (2014) studied the influence of social media on international students' choice of university and course. The study surveyed 167 international students. Findings indicate active participation on social media among international students and a statistically significant role in influencing international students' decisions about choosing their chosen universities and majors and meeting their information needs. Moreover, Farid Shamsudin, Mohd Ali, Ab Wahid, & Saidun (2019) researched undergraduate students' decision-making to enroll using social media. A survey was administered to 500 undergraduate students in one semester at selected private higher education institutions around Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. The results indicated that decision-making is influenced highly by tuition fees, geographic location, institution arrangement, facilities, job opportunities, and social media. The main unimportant factor in decision-making was the academic program, while the main factor influencing students' decision to enroll in private higher education was employment opportunities. Also, Kusumawati (2019b) evaluated the social media role, as an information source, in the decision-making process of selecting an institution of Higher Education. This media is popular because it can provide information from three sources: direct information from universities, reliable information from social networks or reference groups, and real-time information from university websites. The results indicated that social media acts

as a source of information with an impact on the student's choice of university and is considered the most important in the searching for information and evaluating alternatives.

2.5.3 Engagement and Communication

Mahaney (2012) examined using social media as a form of marketing in higher education, specifically by colleges. Also explored are the reasons preventing students from following the pages of their universities on these means. The study found that only about one in eight students follow the university's Facebook page, the principal platform for communication among younger generations is social media, and; whenever companies and universities do not join in using these platforms, they are likely to miss out great opportunities. Also, Sutherland (2019) researched university students' social media use and its influence on offline engagement in higher education communities. She surveyed 106 undergraduate students to assess whether students who use social media platforms to interact online with their university felt connected to the broader university community or engaged in offline activities by meeting with their peers and attending university events. The results indicated that the majority never or rarely used technology to facilitate participation in such activities. More than half of the students felt that the university's social media profiles helped them feel part of its academic community. In addition, Nyagucha (2017) investigated the impact of social media on the consumer decision-making process among the youth in Nairobi. A sample of 389 young adults in Nairobi County aged from 18 to 35 years was selected to generate descriptive statistics of the variables. The results indicated that social media impact the respondents' pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages. The results also support that social media influenced respondents' awareness, informed decisions to buy, motivation toward a product based on the comments of friends/family, and product/service information has higher credibility compared to other media channels. The study recommended that organizations use the interactive platforms popular among young people as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter; to freely interact with them and track their experiences.

2.5.4 Social Media in Education Marketing Strategy

Rekhter (2012) examined the rapid penetration of social networking sites for marketing in higher education. Unique features offered by these sites are unparalleled tracking of student interests, immediate response, targeted customization of marketing efforts, and low financial cost. The growth in the rates of this penetration indicates further globalization of marketing strategies and the inclusion of low-income countries in the target markets. Concerns about using these sites include a lack of creativity in the content, a lack of specialized administrators, and a lack of control over the content. Also, Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2012) studied the impact of social media on study selection and university choice. Findings indicated that companies are increasingly adopting online marketing channels at the expense of traditional ones. Social media allows individual interaction, communication, customer engagement, and user-generated content. Therefore, HEIs are increasingly interested in social media as part of their marketing toolkit, but little is known about the potential of these channels and the role of social media in influencing future students' choice of study and university in higher education marketing strategies. Also, Thornton (2019) further investigated the impact of social media platforms on student selection for college by analyzing how universities use these platforms for marketing. The study selected sixteen universities based on size and ranking. Official social-media platforms' accounts were analyzed over seven days period. The results found that all universities were at least active on Facebook and Twitter. However, prospective students were extensively using Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat, so most of the universities studied lost the opportunity to connect to the better and more

important platforms for students, affecting the polarization results. The type of content posted on these platforms affected the number of likes, shares, and comments. Also, Pharr (2019) recommended effective best practices and techniques whereby some relied on empirical testing and application of digital content marketing use at a higher rate in educational institutions. These include digital content marketing implementation by defining the objectives of the content marketing program, focusing on content that meets customer needs, and mixing branded content and content Unbranded for maximum branding effect. In addition, Camilleri (2019) relied on a quadripartite analysis of the marketing environment of higher education institutions. The factors investigated may impact the delivery of student-centered education and the ability to produce high-impact research publications. The results indicate that many HEIs diversify their investment portfolios as they increasingly attract local and international students. Hence, this contribution deliberates on traditional and contemporary marketing communications used in different contexts to attract students and experienced faculty. The results show that successful HEIs can establish fruitful and collaborative relationships with various stakeholders and that in the future, they must benefit from effective marketing communications amid intense competition.

2.6 Characterizing the Use of Social Media in Lebanon

Despite the difficult economic and health conditions, the growth of digital marketing in Lebanon has not diminished. It continued its promising increase due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the move of many businesses to the virtual world. According to Kemp (2021a), the digital landscape in Lebanon shows growth with 78.2% of Internet users (a percentage of an estimated population of 6.8 million) and 64.3% of active users of social media platforms. Those who own a mobile phone constitute 67.3%, with 99.4% of social media users accessing it through smartphones. In a related context, Kemp (2021b, in the Slideshare section, p. 20) reports that 65.9% of these users are between the ages of 16 and 64, which is the segment targeted by higher education institutions and includes students (current, graduates and prospective), parents, university and secondary professors, and professionals.

In addition, the best websites in Lebanon ranked based on total traffic volume (Kemp, 2021b, in the Slideshare section, p. 27); Google.com came in first place with an average time of 15 minutes and 41 seconds and an average of 17 pages visited per day, “YouTube” came in second with an average of 17 minutes and 23 seconds and an average of 9 pages visited per day, while “Facebook” came in sixth place with 18 minutes and 47 seconds and an average of 8 pages visited per day. Moreover, 99.4% of all social media users do their activities through their phones (Kemp, 2021b, in the Slideshare section, p. 30). Furthermore, Table 1 depicts the statistics on the use of social media platforms in Lebanon, without the availability of figures related to the age group from the statistical company.

Table 1. Statistics on the Use of Social Media Platforms in Lebanon

Date	2018	2019	2020	Apr-21	Mar-22
Facebook	37.17%	41.34%	64.43%	62.42%	86.12%
YouTube	44.64%	33.19%	17.78%	18.19%	6.51%
Twitter	7.11%	9.88%	6.48%	12.04%	2.38%
Instagram	1.69%	3.96%	4.66%	2.76%	3.27%
LinkedIn	0.22%	0.17%	0.2%	0.55%	0.09%
Pinterest	8.39%	11.02%	6.11%	3.88%	1.41%
StumbleUpon	0.13%	0%	0%	0%	-
Google+	0.2%	0.08%	0%	0%	-
Vkontakte	0.04%	0.14%	0.09%	0.02%	0.01%
Reddit	0.17%	0.07%	0.12%	0.09%	0.15%
Tumblr	0.24%	0.15%	0.12%	0.06%	0.04%
Other	0.01%	0.01%	0%	0%	0%
Other	0.01%	0.01%	0%	0%	0%

Source: Global Stat. (2022a).

Table 1 shows that Facebook, the most used site in Lebanon, is the only platform that has not experienced a significant decline in the registration of new users over the years, and the increase in the percentage of users has been very active. The YouTube users' percentage fell by more than six (6) folds, likely due to the technology "Facebook TV" or (Facebook Watch *) added in 2017 by the company to the platform first in America and then around the world. It came as an alternative to watching videos on YouTube. Instagram witnessed an improvement while Twitter suffered a fall in the years 21 and 22, likely due to the acceleration and many political, economic, and health events that occurred in the country since the end of 2019. Worth noting that the Twitter platform is mainly for political activities and interactions.

On the other hand, according to Facebook Ad Manager, the number of users on the Facebook platform between 16 and 24 years old is estimated at 1,400,000 users, and on the Instagram platform at 1,200,000 users. It is the main age group targeted by marketers in universities. Another aspect used to understand the behavior of users is to understand the way they search online, as statistics show that "Google" is the primary site for search in Lebanon (see Table 2) with a rate of 96.44% (Global Stat, 2022b).

Table 2. Search Engine Market Share Lebanon: Mar 2022

Search Engine	Google	Bing	Yahoo	DuckDuckGo	Petal Search	YANDEX
Percentage Share	96.44%	2.42%	0.77%	0.14%	0.07%	0.06%

The phrases or terms most searched for on "Google" via (Google Trends) are possible to know by specifying a phrase, term, country, and time. As an experiment, the researchers looked for the names of the six Lebanese universities subject of this study in Arabic and English languages (see Table 3) with and without the Arabic articles on the words (a hamza [ء] and a shadda [ّ]). Of course, marketers can search for more detailed terms such as the names of specializations, the financial cost, student housing

or registration, or a phrase. For example, “the best universities in Lebanon” or “the best management program in Lebanon” ... etc. It is evident from Table 3 that the peak of the search for universities was during the registration periods.

Table 3. Searching for Universities via “Google” from 17/5/2020 to 18/4/2021

Term or phrase searched	Number of times	Peak
الجامعة الاسلامية في لبنان	1775	June 14-20, 2020: 100 September 13-19, 2020: 100
Islamic University of Lebanon	477	September 20-26, 2020: 100 April 11-17, 2021: 98
IUL	2058	January 10-16, 2021: 100 January 31-February 6, 2021: 97
الجامعة الأميركية في بيروت	755	July 26-August 1 st , 2020: 100
American University of Beirut	1288	August 2-8, 2020: 82 March 21-27, 2021: 100
AUB	2588	September 6-12, 2020: 100
الجامعة اللبنانية الأميركية	-	-
Lebanese American University	1065	October 11-17, 2020: 100
LAU	2518	August 30-September 5, 2020: 100
جامعة القديس يوسف	246	November 29-December 5, 2020: 100
L'Universit éSaint-Joseph	-	-
Saint Joseph University		
USJ	2835	September 6-12, 2020: 100 November 29-December 5, 2020: 95
الجامعة اللبنانية الدولية	1206	July 5-11, 2020: 100 July 19-25, 2020: 100
Lebanese International University	748	September 6-12, 2020: 100
LIU	1895	June 28-July 4, 2020: 100
جامعة المعارف	601	November 1-7, 2020: 100
Al Maaref University	261	January 17-23, 2020: 100
MU	1549	December 20-26, 2020: 100

2.7 Digital Marketing and Social Media Platforms

“Marketing was once a term that could only be spoken in the quietest of tones in academia” (Edmiston-Strasser, 2009, p. 146), and; ideas about marketing in educational institutions often had limited support. One of the main objections against marketing practices in universities was that “it would undermine academic standards of quality and excellence” (Anderson, 2008). But the speed with which social networking technologies penetrate educational institutions and the new ways and tools they provide for spreading knowledge in the world make cyberspace an education field without borders. Moreover, unprecedented developments in related digital information and communication technology have brought about many changes in all areas of life, including media and marketing. “Digital marketing has brought about changes in the world. The higher education sector is no exception. Without increasing enrollment, colleges and universities will not continue” (Martin, 2015). Traditional

marketers have realized that the proliferation of social media has increased market transparency and reduced their power and control over the media with money. Parise and Guinan (2008) contend marketers force themselves to find new ways to reach and communicate with potential customers.

Digital marketing includes “all digital media, including the Internet, mobile channels and interactive channels, to develop communication and exchange with customers” (William & Ferrell, 2011, p. 236). It has witnessed significant progress compared to previous years, and it increased after the COVID-19 pandemic, which paralyzed all parts of the earth. Marketing in higher education is “important to increasing the competitiveness of universities through information related to the university’s position, availability of budget and educational programs, college qualifications, scholarships on tuition fees, and possibilities for career growth” (Kalimullina & Dobrotvorskaya, 2016, p. 6039). As for digital marketing, it has become necessary and mandatory, as it connects universities with their students via the Internet, keeping them in line with the current generation that is constantly changing, along with the rapid development of technology. Digital marketing provides low-cost communication, a good return on investment, reaches a broader and more targeted community, and the possibility of fully offering services due to the various digital features. It also contributes to the ease of distributing information (by the university) and obtaining it by the target (mainly by students) faster compared to traditional marketing via social media platforms.

Marketing in private higher education in Lebanon is in transition, and students are becoming more selective in choosing a university due to intense competition and high fees. Universities have realized that today’s potential student is technologically savvy. To ensure the success of the polarization strategy, the organization must think about the individual receiving the message. Considering social media as a marketing tool for higher education is an attractive proposition due to its positive marketing outcomes in the business sector and its extent of adoption by the younger generation (Boyd, 2007). “A strong presence on social media platforms can positively influence student engagement” (Rutter, Roper, & Lettice, 2016), especially when universities interact with them through their accounts, respond to their questions and comments instantly, and publish content that meets their needs. These methods “are not only decisive tools for attracting but have also proven their effectiveness in consolidating the university’s brand” (Rutter et al., 2016). In addition, studies emphasize the need for marketers in these universities to communicate with current, alumni, and prospective students, and of the same importance, with parents and representatives of high schools and institutes because they are influential sources of information for students.

2.8 The Role of Social Media Platforms in Building Awareness and Changing Behavior

The role of social media platforms has grown in recent years, as they are no longer limited to being a window for communication between individuals. They are the most salient tools for influencing public opinion, nurturing and educating young people, building awareness, and are the means that can lead a movement for change in the country (Dwivedi, Ismagilova, Hughes et al., 2021). Some researchers describe it as constituting a “globalization media” that does not adhere to the national borders of states. It presents invisible virtual border lines making it the most influential in the individuals’ behavior, the direction of their trends, and the formation and generation of their ideas. These media are characterized by very high interactive characteristics in a short time and give strength to any audience member to become independent media in their own right. These platforms build awareness and contribute to building personalities, tendencies, behavior, perceptions, and trends in issues, principles, and values (Chivandi, Samuel, & Muchie, 2018).

2.9 The Most Important Factors That Influence Students' Decisions about Choosing Their Universities

There is no doubt that the choice of the university goes through many stages, passing various tests in terms of influencing the final result, succeeding in some of them, and submitting to other conditions that have no solutions. The criteria university students in Lebanon refer to when choosing between private universities and the Lebanese universities differ. These factors differ in their type and degree of importance among private universities. The most important factors affecting the choice of university can be summarized as follows (Exhibit 1):

Exhibit 1: Factors Affecting the Choice of University

Financial cost: Particularly in these difficult economic conditions, playing a significant role in excluding universities from the basket of options for parents or the student himself.

Geographical location: Students seek and prefer to choose a university geographically in proximity to their place of residence, save time in attendance and departure, and reduce the financial costs related to transportation.

Availability of scholarships and financial aid: One of the decisive reasons for students' choice of their university may be the availability of a scholarship in a particular program of study or financial aid.

Visiting the university: The visit to the university (open day, cultural, artistic, and national activities, etc.) plays a role in attracting students to university life, as the university administration focuses on its marked facilities, tactful interaction, and organizing entertaining sessions with current professors and students.

Academic Reputation: Academic and cultural university's reputation and word-of-mouth about it play important roles in the students' and parents' selection of the university, causing a decisive factor in the acceptance or rejection decision.

Time seniority and tradition: Some students choose a university having long-term seniority, legacy, and extensive experience, through graduates receiving suitable work positions, for example, after receiving their certificates.

Availability of student housing: Many students are afraid to enroll in a university outside their area of residence, but if they have to, they are looking for a university that provides them with suitable student housing.

Existence of desired academic program: A student may be attracted to a particular university it is imperative to have the availability of the desired major or the academic program.

Personal factors represented by inclinations and desires: Some students tend to choose a university that they consider to express their personalities with its culture, values, and the nature of its students' lives, and they prefer to integrate into its university community that suits their desires and tendencies.

Marketing and Media: They play an essential role in highlighting the university's achievements, academic level, distinguished campus, services, grants, etc.

Reference groups: Parents, relatives, friends, professors, and specialists directly and significantly influence students' college choices. Undoubtedly, the family is one of the most influential factors in an individual's decision.

Peers of current students or graduates: They are from the reference groups. The quality of university services depends on the "human actors" (Quyen, 2009) charged with providing reliable data on their experiences in real life and they are successful graduates.

Source: Bashir, E., 2022, pp. 45-46.

2.10 Integrated Marketing Communications for Higher Education Institutions

With the competition in the Lebanese private higher education sector, universities have become more than ever concerned with finding new ways of distinguished marketing to attract, and “it has become necessary to deeply understand ways to attract students and how to market themselves” (Kusumawati, 2013). Universities are increasingly relying on digital marketing channels compared to traditional ones. Universities need to look beyond and experiment with classical forms of polarization, including social media platforms (Choudaha & Chang, 2012). Many years ago, universities began adopting these platforms and realizing the power behind their use as a component of an integrated marketing mix.

The literature on marketing higher education is incoherent, incomplete, and complicated because “the basics of traditional business marketing do not fully meet the needs of higher education institutions, as they often depend on consumer models” (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Researchers considered that the relationship marketing approach is the best (Gibbs & Murphy, 2009; Gibbs & Patrick, 2012) for institutions of higher education, “especially when looking at it from an ethical point of view” (Helgesen, 2008). Relationship marketing means building and maintaining a value-sharing relationship between an organization and its three essential “customer” groups: alumni, current students, and future students. The quality of these relationships correlates positively with long-term stakeholder loyalty.

A possible explanation for digital platforms not being primary sources in influencing future students is the lack of relevant content published by universities leading to fewer students’ participation, not satisfying their needs, and thus unsatisfactory results for university management. This subjects marketers to challenges, i.e., getting current students and alumni to contribute beneficial and positive content for their organization and write on their accounts and university pages. Marketers at universities are supposed to deal with these platforms proactively and closely monitor the behavioral developments of the student market concerning their use of them.

3. Research Methodology

This study uses a positivism philosophy (Saunders, Philip, Thornhill, & Bristow, 2019), in which Hejase & Hejase (2013) assert, “the researchers act as objective analysts, independent, and neither affect nor are affected by the subject of the research” (p. 77). This research also uses a quantitative-deductive method whereby in the process to respond to the research questions, a structured survey questionnaire was administered to 527 conveniently selected individuals. The time scope covered three academic years: 2020/2021, 2019/2020, and 2018/2019, including the pre-and post-pandemic stage COVID-19 that arrived in Lebanon in February 2020 as well as a final academic generation. Hence, students can be in the first, second, or third year, or from the equivalency of a major or transferring from one university to another,

3.1 Sampling and Sample Size

3.1.1 Universities

The sample included six private universities in Lebanon (Table 4) as follows: The Islamic University (IUL), the Lebanese American University (LAU), Saint Joseph University (USJ), American University of Beirut (AUB), the Lebanese International University (LIU), and Al-Maaref University (MU). The universities were selected because they serve different populations with various socio-economic categories, diverse cultures, many geographic locations, and varying chronological seniority.

Table 4. Student Population in the Selected Universities

University	IUL	LAU	USJ	AUB	LIU	MU
(Year of Establishment)	(2001)	(1924)	(1875)	(1866)	(1996)	(2015)
Total No. of Students	5441	8409	10512	8505	33,200	708

Compared with the Public universities: The Lebanese University: has 81,024 students

Source: CRDP (2019). Statistical Bulletin for the Academic Year 2018-2019. Lebanon, Private Higher Education, pp. 86-88.

3.1.2 Students

A non-probabilistic convenient sample of 527 Lebanese students was selected based on students' free will and willingness to participate. However, the minimum sample size was calculated using Cochran's (1977, cited in Hejase & Hejase, 2013) formulas for large population size ($N=138,224$ Lebanese undergrad university students). $n_0 = Z^2 P(1-P)/e^2$ and $n = n_0 / [1 + ((n_0 - 1)/N)]$. Where, $Z=1.96$ for 95% significance; $p(\text{attribute is gender})=0.5$; $e(\text{precision error})=0.05$, and N as above. Therefore, using the above two formulas, Min. sample size=383 participants.

3.2 Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire consists of 41 questions distributed in five sections: demographic information including gender, age, university, etc., the second section measures the extent and how students use social media platforms; section three identifies the sources of information students resort to in choosing a university; the fourth section reports the students' preferences and needs in social media platforms, and the last section identifies the factors influencing students' decisions in choosing a higher education institution, especially reference groups. Questions are sorted into groups corresponding to the five main areas, including multiple-choice, dyadic, and restricted questions. In addition to questions using the five-point behavioral measure, i.e., the 5-level Likert scale. Participants, in this case, assess given statements indicating their extent of agreement so that the answer alternatives to a statement consist of five coded possibilities, starting with SA: Strongly Agree [5], A: Agree [4], U: Uncertain [3], D: Disagree [2] and SD: Strongly Disagree [1]. The questionnaire aims to determine the presence of profiles on social media platforms, the frequency of logging in, the frequency and type of activities performed, the preference for the type and format of content, platforms and their roles in the decision, etc. Activities were divided "based on social computing activities into three categories: social sharing, information search, and content contribution" (Li & Bernoff, 2008). Worth noting the questionnaire introduced the topic to participants assuring confidentiality of their responses and was assured of their free will to stop if they desire to.

3.3 Reliability Analysis

The Internal Reliability of the 15-item scale is assessed using Cronbach's Alpha technique. Table 5 shows that the 15-item scale produced a Cronbach's Alpha=0.825. The calculated Cronbach's alpha value fits the range 0.8-0.9 "Very Good" (Burns & Burns, 2008, p. 481). Hejase & Hejase (2013) contend that "the generally agreed upon lower limit for Cronbach's alpha is 0.70, although it may decrease to 0.60 in exploratory research" (p. 570). Moreover, Chehimi et al. (2019) assert that "strength of association proves that the selection of the questions is suitable for the questionnaire purpose" (p. 1915).

Table 5. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.825	15

3.4 Content Validity

Defined as “the degree to which elements of an assessment instrument are relevant to a representative of the targeted construct for a particular assessment purpose” (Rossiter, 2008; citing Haynes et al., 1995, p. 238). The questionnaire was validated by a group of expert researchers and academics who were familiar with the construct measured. They gave feedback on the status of each question and if it is measuring the construct in each question adequately. Corrections and changes are appropriately added before administering the questionnaire.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data collected were processed and analyzed using the Statistical Product and Service Solutions, IBM SPSS version 25. Descriptive statistics were used in the analysis of data. Hejase and Hejase (2013) assert, “descriptive statistics deals with describing a collection of data by condensing the amounts of data into simple representative numerical quantities or plots that can provide a better understanding of the collected data” (p. 272). Therefore, this study analyzed data collected with descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages supported with data tables for clarity.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Demographics

Results show that there are 45% males and 55% females. Also, 87% are Lebanese students, the remaining being foreign. 33.4% are between 18 and 19 years of age, 20.9% are 20 years old, and the percentage has decreased with the increase in age [15% are 21 years old, 8.90% 22 years, 5.3% 23 years, and 3% 24 years] noting that 13.4% are 24 years old. In addition, Figure 2 shows the participant students' distribution among the six universities selected for this research.

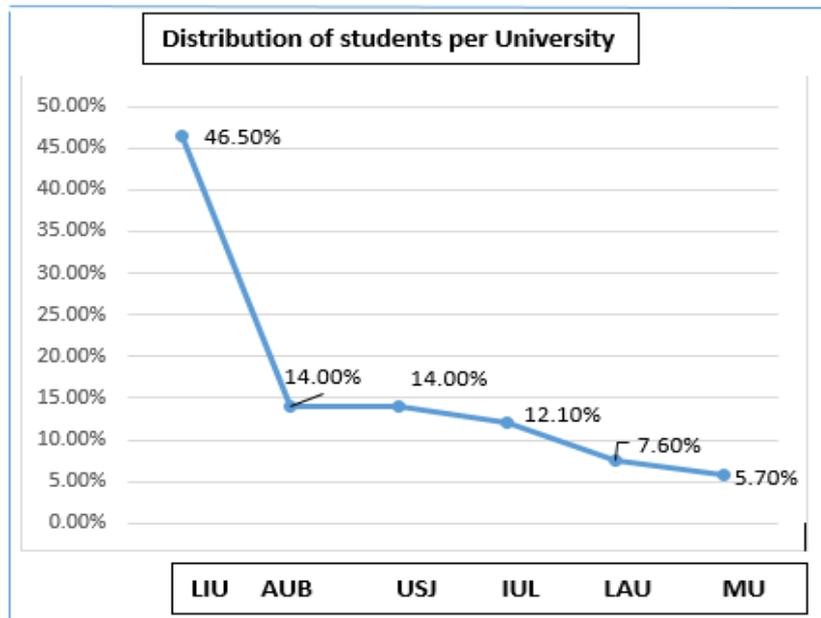


Figure 2. Students Distributed in the Selected Universities

4.1.1 Date of Joining University Study

The respondents were distributed almost closely between the university academic years in which they began studying at their university (see Figure 2), with a preference for students in the academic year 2018-2019, as their percentage was higher than those who joined the university in subsequent years (Figure 3).

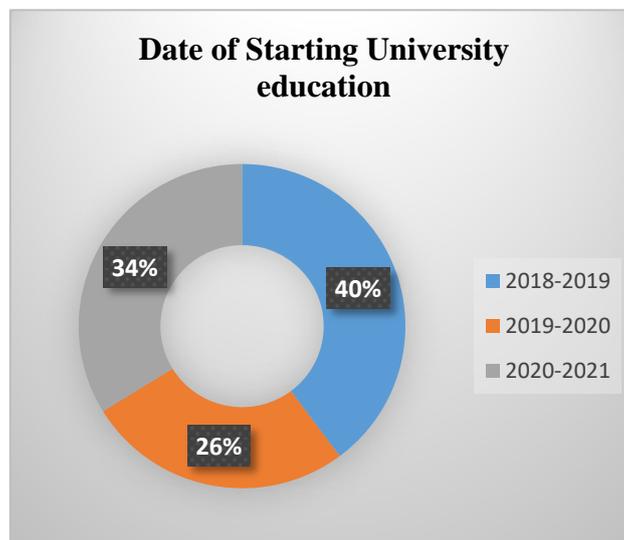


Figure 3. Date of Joining University Education

4.1.2 Status before Joining the Current University

Moreover, 76.5% of respondents were secondary level students before joining their chosen university, followed by 9.7% of transfer students from other universities, then 8.30% were university graduates studying new majors, while the lowest percentage (5.50%) was for students of technical/vocational institutes.

4.2 The Primary Device Variable for Using Social Media Platforms

The vast majority of respondents use their smartphones (85%) to access social media platforms, only 14% use desktop or laptop computers, and the percentage of those who use tablets is very small (1%). Using smartphones extensively is validated by USAID's (2014, p. 22) published guide on strengthening civil society through social media.

4.3 Publishing the University Name in Personal Platform Accounts

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of respondents put their university's name on their social media profile, which indicates their pride in belonging to their educational institution or the degree they hold, and their feeling of integration into the university community. In addition, this is in line with the nature of social media platforms that stimulate appearance, boasting of abilities, skills, and educational certificates, and competing in them.

4.4 Status of Respondents on the Social Media Platforms

The percentage of those who have accounts on the "Instagram" and "Facebook" platforms came with a noticeable difference from the percentage of those who have-in order from highest to lowest-accounts on "YouTube", "Twitter" and then "Snapchat", while the percentage of those who have accounts on "TikTok" exceeds only a third. As for LinkedIn-of course, it is more for professionals-about a quarter of the respondents have accounts in it, and due to the newness of the Clubhouse platform, the percentage of those who have accounts in it is still the lowest. The results reveal that "Instagram" and "Facebook" platforms are the two platforms that are closely related to students, which requires marketers in higher education to give them the highest importance in marketing, where about 90% of the target university audience resides on them (see Table 6). Similar to the presence on the platforms, as shown in Table 6, having more than one account appears mainly on "Instagram" and "Facebook" while having more than one account on the other platforms is very limited. The presence of more than one account on these two platforms is likely to return to the restrictions imposed by the owner company on users and to close many accounts due to what it called "use laws" towards specific topics, which prompts users to create backup accounts.

Table 6. Platform Accounts Ownership

Platform	Owning an account	Having more than one account
Instagram	91.5%	34.7%
Facebook	89.0%	20.5%
YouTube	51.8%	6.5%
Twitter	46.1%	4.9%
Snapchat	42.5%	4.4%
TikTok	36.6%	2.5%
LinkedIn	26.0%	1.3%
Clubhouse	14.4%	0.8%
Owning one account only in each	-	53.9%

4.5 Respondents' Use Habits of Platforms

The number of times the respondents access their accounts is high, as shown in Table 7, with the highest percentage (approximately 40%) for those who log in more than 8 times a day, which indicates that accessing these platforms has become an integral part of the students' daily lifestyle. The more they use it, the more it affects them, the amount and type of information they get from it, and, consequently, their decisions. Also, 20.7% of the respondents spend less than two hours on social media platforms, 59.2% spend between two and five hours, and 20.1% spend more than 6 hours of their day on these platforms. Results reflect an indication of some addiction. This addiction and this period are not separated from the ability of the platforms to affect everything related to the students' lives including their university stage and professional life, to form their vision and impressions of individuals and institutions through the information they collect about them through these platforms.

Although the number of accesses to the platforms and the number of hours students spend on them is large, the number of posts is relatively limited, as 91.7% of them do not post daily on their accounts. But this does not change the fact that they are users, followers, and recipients of information mainly through these platforms, according to the times they log in and the times they spend on these platforms (Table 7). In addition to the high number of hours students spend on these platforms, the main activity is watching and reading the news (37.6% and 30.90%, respectively), followed by interaction and communication with friends and relatives. The rates of publishing general information or materials about personal life are the lowest (6.3%). This means that students are more recipients than initiators of these platforms justifying the small number of students' weekly posts discussed previously (Table 7).

Table 7. Students' Activities on Social Media

Activity	Description	Frequency	Percent
Times do you sign in to your accounts daily?	Once or twice	91	17.3%
	3-4 times	90	17.1%
	5-6 times	84	15.9%
	7-8 times	53	10.1%
	>8 times	209	39.7%
	Total	527	100%
Approximate time you spent daily on platforms	<2 hours	109	20.7%
	2-3 hours	173	32.8%
	4-5 hours	139	26.4%
	6-7 hours	51	9.7%
	>7 hours	55	10.4%
	Total	527	100%
No. of posts added weekly to all your platform accounts	<4	431	81.8%
	4-6	47	8.9%
	7-9	25	4.7%
	10-12	9	1.7%
	>12	15	2.8%
	Total	527	100%
Main activity performed on these platform accounts	1. Observant	198	37.6%
	2. Reading news and searching	163	30.9%

	for information		
3.	Interacting & Communicating with friends, relatives, and acquaintances	91	17.3%
4.	Dissemination of general information (Political, cultural, social, ...)	42	8.0%
5.	Dissemination of personal life posts (pictures of picnics, sharing personal experiences, ...)	33	6.3%
		527	100%

4.6 Respondents' Attitudes toward Social Media Platforms

67.2% of respondents agree that they use these platforms to interact and communicate with relatives and friends; this is expected because it reflects the nature and name of these platforms and their public and well-known role in social circles. Also, 85.4% agreed that they rely on the platforms as one of the tools for searching and obtaining information, which makes it a primary source for gathering information and forming visions and impressions about the university and others. This percentage supports the impact of social media platforms on students' searching for information in the decision-making process. Such practice makes it imperative for marketers in higher education to enrich the platforms with the necessary information that students need to satisfy them sufficiently to enable them to influence their decisions, including the choice of university. Students also use this information to compare competing institutions and companies, which helps them distinguish what is best for them, noting that this comparison is the penultimate stage of the decision-making process.

45.9% tend not to adopt social media platforms to communicate with professors or employees at the university. The reason may be the weak attendance of professors or employees on them, their lack of correct and effective use of them in terms of providing adequate and quick results, or their adoption of direct communication because of its nature being more formal. For academics, it is often the official means of communication. Students could have had an unsuccessful experience in communicating with professors through these platforms during the period of closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They are traded with insufficient and thoughtless attention or a late response, which usually confuses students more than they benefit them. Such may be the reason for the students' negative and ineffective experience they had while communicating with professors who do not have the craft of using social media platforms and are not well aware of its role in attracting or retaining them, which prompted the students to abandon the idea.

81% use communication platforms for entertainment and fun, due to the interactive entertainment content of these platforms. And because entertainment in human nature is a basic need of the individual, it is at its maximum in the youth stage, while the percentage of those who do not use it for this purpose is 7%. In addition, there is a balance between the percentages of those who use social media platforms to build new acquaintances and friendships (39.1%), and those who do not use them for this purpose (30.1%), as it constitutes a door for less than (40%) to get to know others, while others prefer direct

communication and building new relationships outside the virtual world and then strengthening them, perhaps through digital technologies. Table 8 illustrates the above-mentioned results.

Table 8. Respondents' Attitudes toward Social Media Platforms

No.	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
1	Using platforms to interact and communicate with relatives and friends	11.6%	55.6%	18.4%	7.0%	7.4%
2	Using platforms to search and seek information	24.9%	60.5%	9.70%	2.8%	2.1%
3	Using platforms to communicate with professors or staff at the university	3.0%	26.6%	24.5%	27.1%	18.8%
4	Using platforms for entertainment & time spending	27.9%	53.1%	12.0%	4.0%	3.0%
5	Using platforms to build new acquaintances and friendships	7.4%	31.7%	30.7%	16.1%	14.0%
6	Using platforms to create discussion groups and study groups	3.6%	28.7%	27.9%	23.1%	16.7%
7	Using platforms to post news and comment on current issues	8.9%	34.2%	27.5%	15.9%	13.5%

Table 8 also shows that 32.3% and 43.1% of the respondents agree and strongly agree that social media platforms constitute a field for discussion and study, while the rest do not rely on them. Nevertheless, these percentages are not small and indicate that these platforms are no longer used exclusively for entertainment and communication, but rather their role has extended beyond that to include searching for information, research, and cooperation in the study. In addition, 43.1% of the respondents rely on these platforms to post news and comment on current issues, while the rest avoid it.

4.7 Sources for Information about the University and the College before Registering

The influence of graduates and currently enrolled students is still the highest on prospective students, as nearly 70% of the prospectors depend on them to collect information before choosing a university (see Table 9). Hence, marketers need to motivate graduates and currently enrolled students to write about their personal experiences, publish and promote them by the university, and increase their good reputation and positive word of mouth. The next chosen influencer was the university's website (46.8%). Thirdly, trust in family, friends, and relatives is still a primary source of information about the university (46%). A visit to the campus for direct information from employees and workers came in fourth place (44.3%). The university and student communication platforms were classified as a fourth source of information (33.2%). The next categories of sources were less than that.

Worth mentioning that the university website (third) is likely due to the poor alignment of the content and information that universities publish on their platforms, the information that students need, and the university is supposed to satisfy their needs. While the traditional media was ranked the least used by students to obtain information about the university. The aforementioned insinuates that social media platforms defeated the traditional sense in the past years.

Table 9. Sources for Information about the University and the College before Registering

Source	Percentage
Personal acquaintances or relatives of current university graduates & students	70.6%
University website	46.8%
Parents, relatives, and friends	45.8%
A visit to the university campus	44.3%
University social media platforms	33.2%
Social media platforms for university students	30.3%
University phone call	21.6%
University publications and brochures	19.5%
Orientation meeting for the university in high school/institute	17.2%
Teachers at the secondary school/institute in which you studied/in	9.9%
E-mail	8.4%
Traditional media: television, radio, newspapers, magazines...	3.8%

*The respondent can choose more than one option

Results also show that 73.2% of the respondents depend on the search engine “Google” to search for information about the university they would like to attend, the remaining depends on other means, including different search engines, or direct contact with the university. The relatively high result requires marketers in universities to work diligently to improve search engines (SEO) for the university’s website, and even the pages of its communication platforms to appear on the first search pages on Google, which often do not exceed ten links.

In addition, 77.6% of the respondents using Google indicate that their searches do not exceed the first page of search results for a topic, and here lies the challenge for universities and the competition is increasing. Moreover, 55.6% of the respondents agree and strongly agree that they have obtained sufficient and easily accessible information on the university’s website. This result does not express the true role of the website despite its importance in attracting students and introducing them to the university and its specializations and others. This percentage is low compared to the expected percentage given to the role that the site is supposed to play in responding to students’ inquiries and providing them with the necessary information smoothly and comprehensively and it is supposed to reach a higher acceptance rate.

As the university’s official website, its pages on social media platforms are essential in attracting students and constitute a significant resource in introducing those wishing to join the university and providing them with the necessary information (Appel et al., 2020). As discussed earlier, the percentage of students who visited at least one page of the university on these platforms (about 78%) indicates that the majority of them resort to visiting the university before registering, as more than three-quarters of students visited the pages of the university they joined before registering. Consequently, marketers in higher education need to make these pages richer with the necessary information, more creative, interactive, and attractive, and respond to responses and inquiries quickly. The more pages play this role professionally and efficiently, the higher their impact on students, their opinions, and decisions in choosing a university. Although Table 3, illustrated that 34.7% of the respondents use “Instagram” which is slightly more than that of “Facebook” users (20.5%), the official page of the university on “Facebook” is the most popular (Table 10). Results show that Facebook is the

first destination for students as a source of information about the university in the highest proportion compared to other social media platforms, followed by the university's page on "Instagram" (24.3%), and YouTube (15.6%). Moreover, LinkedIn and Twitter are very weak. And considering that LinkedIn is more for professionals, professors, and alumni, it is clear that Twitter is not an attractive target for marketers at the current stage to attract students, but this does not mean its removal from the university's digital marketing strategy. Rather, it is to know how to distribute content, effort, time, and money on the platforms according to their importance, space, and ability to influence the target audience. It has also become clear that the largest marketing effort should be directed toward "Facebook" and "Instagram".

Table 10. First University Official Website Page Visited First

Platform	Frequency	Percentage
Facebook	300	56.9%
Instagram	128	24.3%
YouTube	82	15.6%
LinkedIn	11	2.1%
Twitter	6	1.1%
Total	527	100.0%

Worth noting that 38.5% of the respondents expressed their satisfaction with the information and publications that the university publishes on its platforms. This result must be considered seriously by marketers in universities. It is necessary for them to re-study their audience more deeply and broadly to understand their needs and study the feasibility of the content they publish on these platforms. The neutrals scoring 37% and those who disagree 24.4% indicate that there is more thirst among students to follow the university's page and see more of what is issued by it. This proves once again that there is a gap between what universities publish on their pages and what students need to see on them of content. Also, there is a weakness in the effectiveness of communication platforms and their ability to change students' opinions on topics related to the university. About 28% agree and strongly agree, compared to 30.5% of those who disagree and strongly disagree, while 41.4% of neutrals were the highest. This is likely due to the insufficient professionalism of universities to create impactful content and consistent policies and mechanisms that affect students' opinions on issues related to them. And as in the previous results, publishing content that does not meet students' tendencies, desires, and needs, given that content is the biggest and first influence on these platforms.

Table 11 shows that about 50% of the respondents reported that they had viewed the reviews and assessments on the universities' pages on social media platforms, while the other half did not. It is a relatively acceptable percentage and indicates the need for marketers to attach importance to this field to push current students, graduates, professors, and staff to write reviews and evaluations to create and create positive word of mouth and disseminate it in the digital and real spaces. Results also show that the university's presence is weak in the students' publications on their accounts, as 82% of them refrain from publishing anything related to it. This indicates that they attend to their interests on social media very little or that they do not feel the need to talk about their experiences at the university. Students' publications do not receive enough attention from the university to interact with them, republish them, etc. Consequently, students stay away from it. Therefore, universities are supposed to work on

mechanisms to activate students' writings because of their role in influencing and increasing potential students' access. In addition, 67.9% of the respondents refrain from interacting with the university's page through comments on social media platforms, while less than one-third interact with it. This is due to the university administrators' weak interaction and ignoring students when inquiring or writing comments. This makes the university lose one of the advantages of two-way communication that these platforms provide "for free". Hofstedt (2019) reports, "Our student survey revealed that 5% of students expect to be responded to in less than a day, 40% expect to be responded to in one (1)-three (3) days, 40% expect to be responded-to in one (1) week, and 15% expect to be responded-to in over two (2) weeks" (para 5). Therefore, students who do not receive a response are prompted to avoid writing a comment, and those who have not yet written do not think about writing at all. Also, Table 11 shows that in the same context as the lack of comments, sharing posts from the university's pages on the students' pages reached 23.9% of the sample, while the majority do not. This means that the content published by the university does not match the students' interests and tendencies and does not correspond to what they prefer to post on their pages, which is a negative indicator for universities. The weakness of content is a serious reason that reduces and limits the role of these platforms in influencing students' opinions, choices, and decisions, because the content is the "king" of social media platforms (Content Marketing Institute, 2022).

Furthermore, the university pages constituted a source of real interaction for 40.6% of the students with the activities held by the university, as they attended activities after seeing it on these platforms; while the rest did not participate in activities that they saw advertisements about on the university pages or did not see them. However, the rate is very acceptable in terms of students being exposed to new information, news, or announcements through these platforms, including invitations to activities and so on. Especially since the policies of some of these platforms, such as Facebook, significantly limit the reach of posts, as posts appear in less than 2% of page followers and increase or weaken affected by many factors, including the degree of page access, interaction with it, paid promotion and others (Mocan, 2018).

A university shows neglect toward what students publish on their pages when it does not post students' work on its official page (8%). This neglect creates a gap between what students feel and believe versus what the university wants or accepts to publish on its official pages. This loophole is due to universities' misunderstanding of students and their needs, which reduces the impact of these platforms on students, and on the university's branding, which means not utilizing the platforms to the maximum extent to build a good reputation and create positive word of mouth by motivating students to share content related to it. Moreover, an equal percentage (about 50%) resulted between students and those who do not interact with news and topics related to their university on others' posts on social media platforms. Here, the university's administration must play a role in building a network of "student ambassadors" who indirectly interact with students' posts with the university's guidance to motivate other students to write topics related to them. Such action contributes to raising awareness and building positive word of mouth in the digital space (Education Marketing Solutions, 2021, para 10). In addition, the participation of students in topics and discussions that pertain to the university, especially those that may not be positive, is more effective and reliable than any other body.

Table 11. Students' Interactivity with the University Websites on Social Media

N=257	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Reading the reviews and evaluations on the university's social media pages	Yes	261	49.5%
	No	266	50.5%
Writing posts related to your university on your accounts	Yes	95	18%
	No	432	82%
Interacting with your university's page via comments on social media platforms (Comments)	Yes	169	32.1%
	No	358	67.9%
Sharing posts from university pages on your page on social media platforms (Sharing)	Yes	126	23.9%
	No	401	76.1%
Attending an activity at the university after seeing it on its platforms	Yes	214	40.6%
	No	313	59.4%
Did your university publish a post for you (which you wrote on your page) on one of its social media pages?	Yes	42	8.0%
	No	485	92.0%
Interacting with news and topics related to your university on other people's posts on social media platforms	Yes	254	48.2%
	No	273	51.8%

4.8 University Choice

The American University of Beirut and the Lebanese International University dominate the first mental place among students with 32.6% and 31.1% of respondents voting, respectively; when referring to any subject related to private universities in Lebanon, even for students who are not registered in them (Table 12). There is a significant difference between these and the next three universities. As for Al-Maaref University, due to its relative youth and the number of students compared to its age (almost seven (7) years old), it is attended by very few students.

Table 12. University Choice

Whenever you come up with any topic related to private universities in Lebanon, which university comes to your mind first?	Frequency	Percentage
American University of Beirut [AUB]	172	32.6%
Lebanese International University [LIU]	164	31.1%
Saint Joseph University [USJ]	60	11.4%
Lebanese American University [LAU]	50	9.5%
Islamic University of Lebanon [IUL]	47	8.9%
Al Maaref University [MU]	28	5.3%
Other	6	1.1%
Total	527	100.0%

4.9 Principal Reasons Motivating University Choice

Table 13 [with respondents may choose more than one choice] shows that the required competence/specialty availability is the first reason for choosing the university, followed by the university's academic reputation and educational staff, the financial cost, the geographical location, the encouragement from family and friends, followed sixth place by scholarships availability. More factors

are reported in the table. Understanding these factors and the extent of each of them helps marketers in universities to create content.

Table 13. Principal Reason Motivating University Choice

Reason	Percentage	Rank
Providing the required competence	67.4%	1
The university's academic reputation and teaching staff	54.6%	2
Appropriate cost	51.9%	3
The geographical location of the university	43.9%	4
Encouragement by family and friends	42.0%	5
Scholarship Availability	40.8%	6
Job opportunities for the major after graduation	36.3%	7
The cultural and social environment of the university	35.9%	8
University Ranking	35.7%	9
Distinguished graduates (Alumni)	31.3%	10
Student Activities	12.6%	11
Availability of university housing	4.0%	12

4.10 The Most Appropriate Means to Communicate with the University

Respondents agree (47.6%) that attending the university and communicating directly with employees and professors is the preferred method, with a large difference from electronic means (e-mail, 15.7%, university website, 14%, university social media platforms, 13.3%), while phone communication with the university is not very desirable (9.3%). The small percentage of social media platforms is likely due to the fear of violating their privacy. Perhaps students are not getting an appropriate interaction from the university, or even not getting any response in the comments and the inquiries they write down, which makes this method ineffective for them, so they exclude it from their preference.

On the other hand, results show that the university's Facebook page is the most preferred by students to follow the news and activities of the university on it 58.8% of the respondents agree with this, followed by the university's page on "Instagram" by 36.4%. The rest of the platforms are not as popular with students to see news and activities of the university far from the two main platforms scoring each less than 1.5%. This result confirms that Facebook and Instagram platforms are the main targets of university marketers, as they are supposed to focus heavily on them. In continuation to a previous result that indicated that the first page visited by the majority of students before registration was "Facebook", the authors find that the choice of this platform also to follow the news of the university cannot be separated from that result although the number of "Instagram" users by the respondents is slightly higher than the number of Facebook users.

4.11 Students' Preferences Observed by Universities on Social Media to Attract, Recruit and Retain Students

37.4% of the respondents prefer pictures on university platforms followed by 26% who prefer videos, and 14.8% are attracted by short texts and articles. Other less popular forms include infographics (6.5%), stories (5.5%), polls or questions (4.9%), links to news (2.7%), and live streaming (2.3%). These results necessitate marketers in universities to rely more heavily on images and videos in the

output of the content provided to students more than any other form of content, noting the nature of each platform and the form of the publication that receives more access and interaction on it. As for the type of content, respondents prefer informative style (42.9%), interactive and entertaining (29%), scientific (25%), and emotional (3%). Moreover, 42.3% of the respondents prefer a mix of languages (Arabic and English) versus either Arabic (22.9%) or English (30.9%). Very few supported a multilingual mixture of French-English (1.7%) and Arabic-English-French (2.1%). Such multilingualism behavior is congruent with Chehimi's (2021, p. 26) results. Nevertheless, the last choice will likely fit students from Saint Joseph University, where the approved language is French. Worth noting that each university has its environment that prefers a language over others, based on several factors that include geographical location, culture, environment, etc. Worth noting that using English is better in digital search compared to other languages, especially concerning websites and the necessities of SEO. On the other hand, respondents who own an Instagram account preferred attractive content posts (40.2%), stories (38.3%), and fewer video reels (7.8%) and Instagram TV (5.5%). The low percentage of the feature (video reels) is due to it being a relatively recent feature that students are not very accustomed to, but access through it is currently the highest on this platform.

4.12 Impact of University's Platforms on Students' Decision-making

Furthermore, 41.2% of the students agree and strongly agree, 36.8% are neutral, 22% disagree, and strongly disagree that the information they saw on the university's pages helped them get information to choose the university. This is a positive role indicator of the platforms in the process to search for information during the decision-making process for students. The abovementioned agreement percentage is considered relatively good but not sufficient. Universities require to adopt social media platforms to disseminate information needed by students professionally and effectively. The aim is to influence them while searching for a university or comparing one university to another (comparing alternatives), which requires the university's creative and directed content, that satisfies the students' needs after marketers have a correct understanding of them. However, when asking students if the university's pages on the communication platforms contributed to removing their concerns about it before registration, 41.2% agreed and strongly agreed, 27.3% were neutral, and 18.4% disagreed. Responses are acceptable and can be adopted to raise the level of influence on students to overcome their concerns about it. These bring the university closer to the recent "qualifications" students make in the pre-selection stage during the decision-making process. In the same context of the previous two questions, 54.3% of the respondents agree and strongly agree, 27.3% are neutral, and 18.4% disagree that the university's pages on social media platforms contributed to enhancing their awareness and knowledge. Therefore, it constitutes one of the resources to supplement students' knowledge about the university and raise awareness about it for them, i.e., it is a new indicator as a primary source of information for students and a determinant in establishing the university's brand.

Finally, the sense of students' belongingness to the university is enriched by all means of communication and interaction. 52.8% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed, 29.4% were neutral, and 17.8% disagreed that the student's interaction with the university's pages on social media platforms enriches their feeling of belongingness and integration into the university community. Therefore, and because the percentage of those affected is adequate, as illustrated above; the university's pages provide potential, currently enrolled students, and graduates an experience that is a welcoming, friendly, fast, professional manner, and far from automation, as this has a positive impact on more than half of the sample.

4.13 Students' Most Appealing Posts on the University's Website on the Social Media Platforms

The top five most appealing posts were voted as follows (Table 14): 65.7% of the respondents are interested in the availability of advice from professors and specialists, and 62.4% opted for the availability of information about specializations, faculties, and the labor market, 50.7% chose about tuition, installments, fees, and grants, 43.1% voted for the students' inputs on their experiences, and a lesser percentage is interested in seeing general news, academic and cultural activities organized by the university, learning about alumni stories, student art, sports and social activities, scenes from student life at the university, laboratories, and libraries, and scenes and photos of the campus. And even a smaller percentage are interested in looking at pictures and scenes from educational sessions and pictures of current students. Hence, the universities should diversify the topics they publish on their pages to suit students' interests, but with a logical division according to the most important and least important to students.

Table 14. Students' Most Appealing Posts on the University's Website on the Social Media Platforms

Posts	Percentage
Advice from professors and professionals	65.7%
Information about majors, colleges, and the labor market	62.4%
Information about tuition, fees, and grants	50.7%
Statements with the students about their experiences	43.1%
General news	42.3%
Scientific, cultural, and specialized activities	39.3%
Alumni stories	34.7%
Student artistic, sports, and social activities	34.7%
Scenes from student life	33.8%
Laboratories and Libraries	33.6%
University campus photos and videos	32.4%
Pictures and videos from the lessons	21.1%
Pictures of current students	18.4%
Other	6.3%

Note. More than one choice is possible.

4.14 Reference Groups That Students Consult Before Making Their University Choice, and Social Media Platforms

Table 9 showed that 70.6% of the respondents rely on the opinions of former, current, and alumni students about the university. In addition, Tables 14 and 15 support the aforementioned whereby 77.8% and 80.1% of the respondents rely on similar opinions and repeated statements about students' experiences and alumni stories. Such opinions constitute the main influence factor in choosing a university for potential students. Universities should pay attention to satisfying current students and graduates with university support, services, care, attention, etc. Moreover, encourage and motivate those "satisfied" to always talk about their positive stories and experiences on social media platforms to create a good reputation and positive word of mouth. For this reason, currently, enrolled students and

graduates should be considered a primary goal in marketing, and universities need to allocate specialized digital content that targets them directly and effectively over the long term.

The direct influence of the students' families' opinions is still very high (Table 9 and Table 15) 46% and 80.8% of the students consulted one (or both) of their parents about the university before enrolling in it. University marketers have a great challenge to target parents via social media platforms, influence them, and their opinions, and allocate a specialized space for them in digital marketing. Special attention is allocated to content, publishing mechanisms, targeting, access, paid promotion, the language of speech and style, etc. As this significantly impacts and reflects in students' decisions to choose the university. Parents, in this case, refer to the parents of current, alumni, and potential students. Worth mentioning that results from this study show that 74% of the respondents' parents do not follow universities' social media posts even though 19.9% follow Facebook and 4.2% follow Instagram. In addition, 58.2% of respondents' parents have no preference for any content or do not have accounts on social media platforms; nevertheless, if they do have, 30.2% prefer informative posts. On the other hand, the influence of high school/institute professors' opinion about the university is less than that of parents and students and graduates with previous experience at the university, as 42.1% did consult with their professors. However, it is a significant percentage where the university is supposed to allocate an area of its marketing plan to reach this segment effectively and effectively, whether in the digital space or real life. Teachers are attracted to content that motivates them to get convinced of the university's distinguished scientific level, efficient academic staff, practical research, community services, etc. Teachers are motivators if they are provided with justifications and evidence to be used directly or indirectly as proof to persuade students to the university, and here a new challenge arises for marketers in universities.

Table 15. Reference Groups That Students Consult Before Making Their University Choice

Reference Group	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Consulting former, current, or alumni of the university before enrolment	Yes	422	80.1%
	No	105	19.9%
Consulting father or/and mother about the university before enrolling	Yes	426	80.8%
	No	101	19.2%
Consult your high school/institute teachers about the university before enrolling	Yes	222	42.1%
	No	305	57.9%

Finally, the results show that there is an almost equal number between those who trust the content posted by students on social media platforms (30.6%) than the university and those who disagree with them (32.1%), while 37.4% of respondents did not prefer either one (students and the university) over the other in reliability. This means that the students' pages (current and alumni) compete with the official university pages to attract potential students and to build a positive or negative reputation according to the students' experiences and their satisfaction with the university's services, its level, and the way it addresses issues. It also competes with them to interact and convey information and impressions that they see fit to prospective students, which may not fit with the university's policies. Here the university loses part of its control over the published content about it in the digital space and its impact on the target audience. Such a gap triggers the need for the "social communication committee" the university administration is supposed to form with the students.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The sample of respondents was 45% males and 55% females (55%), 21% of respondents were 20 years old, 87% were of Lebanese nationality (87%), and 77% & 23% earned their preparatory (high school) and vocational certificates before registering to a university. Students sampled were equally distributed among the three academic years namely sophomore, junior, and senior levels.

This paper addressed three main research questions investigated using descriptive statistics, namely:

- 1) To what extent do students rely on social media platforms as a source of information before making their choices?
- 2) Do social media platforms of private universities in Lebanon affect the choices of information users more than social users?
- 3) Do private universities' social media platforms contribute to raising students' awareness about them and establishing their brand?

Therefore, results are discussed in the same order of appearance.

- 1) To what extent do students rely on social media platforms as a source of information before making their choices?

92% of students have accounts on Facebook and 89% on Instagram, a significant difference compared to those who have accounts on other platforms (YouTube, Twitter, Snapchat, TikTok LinkedIn, and Clubhouse). Also, having more than one account on the same platform appears mainly on "Instagram" and "Facebook", while it remains limited on the other platforms. About 40% of students log in more than eight (8) times a day to browse these platforms, and 21% spend more than six (6) hours a day on them, although more than 90% do not publish posts daily. The influence of currently enrolled students and graduates is still the highest on prospective students, as nearly 70% of them depend on them to collect information before choosing a university. While the other sources were of less importance in descending order according to the respondents' answers as follows: the university's website, parents and relatives, a visit to the university campus, the university's social media platforms, and social media platforms for university students, then phone calls, publications, and paper publications, and orientation meetings for the university in high school or institute, e-mail, and traditional media are ranked last.

81% of students consulted one of their parents about the university before enrolling there and found that 20% of the students' parents follow the "Facebook" platform, compared to 4% on the "Instagram" platform, which attracts mostly young people. 34% of students' Parents prefer news information content compared to 7% who look for interactive entertainment content. However, 58% have no preference for any specific type of content or do not follow any platform on social media. In addition, 41% of the students consulted one of their teachers in high school or institute about the university before enrolling, making parents and professors a primary target in digital marketing.

Part of the communication messages will be allocated and directed to them, as long as they are reference groups for students. Prospective students trust currently enrolled students with a high degree when they talk about the university, express their opinion about it, and share their experiences with it. Here comes the university's role in how to motivate them to write and create positive digital word of mouth in the space of future students.

2) Do social media platforms of private universities in Lebanon affect the choices of information users more than social users?

The student market segments are divided according to the extent and how students use universities' social media platforms. 39% of the students' main activity is reading news and searching for information, which prevailed over social users (24%) whose main activity is interaction and communication, and 38% are often only spectators on these platforms. Spectators did not receive any custom factor ratings, but a large part of their action (watching) is reading information satisfying cognitive needs. In the same context, a large group of 86% of students agreed that they use social media platforms to search for information, noting that the highest percentage of respondents tend not to adopt these platforms to communicate with professors or employees at the university. The reason may be the poor attendance of professors or employees on the social media platforms or not using it properly and effectively. Finally, 90% of the respondents agreed that they use these platforms for entertainment and amusement.

However, it provided only about a third of the respondents with a field for discussion and study, while the rest did not. Also, the "informational" group is characterized by its high participation in social, recreational, and informational activities. While the "social" type of users distinguishes their moderate activities in searching for information from their high participation in social and recreational activities. Worth noting that 59% of the students preferred to follow the university's news on the "Facebook" platform, compared to 36% on the "Instagram" platform, and the rest of the social media platforms did not get more than 1.5% of them. The abovementioned two platforms dominated the students' choices to a high extent based on the questionnaire's responses, which puts them in the priority of the university's digital marketing strategy. Also, 37% of the respondents preferred images and 26% videos over other forms of content such as links, text, etc. A good percentage of respondents (68%) tend to specialized news and scientific information content on university pages, compared to 32% who tend to interactive, entertaining, and emotional content. In addition, 42% of students had preferences between writing their published content in Arabic or English languages mixed on the university's communication platforms, compared to 30% of those who preferred the English language, and 23% chose the Arabic language. Such results should guide university content makers to create content that suits students' interests and needs, influences their decisions, and is more polarizing. Moreover, 70% and 58% of students do not support the presence of content on political issues and religious issues, respectively on the university's social media platforms, as they consider it a page for a student community of all sectarian affiliations and political orientations.

Moreover, results showed that 82% of students do not write any posts about their university on their social media accounts. This fact shows the university's weakness in motivating students to write, whether directly through certain "rewards" or by republishing what they write. Universities may reverse such a situation indirectly through current students serving in the "Social Communication Committee" or "student ambassadors". Hence, such issue points to the same weakness illustrated by 32% of the students who interact with university pages through comments, resulting due to lack of motivation and the neglect of the majority of universities to students' comments and not responding to them.

3) Do private universities' social media platforms contribute to raising students' awareness about them and establishing their brand?

Students responded as follows when asked if the university's pages on the communication platforms contributed to removing their concerns about it before registration: 41.2% agreed. This level of agreement is marginal though acceptable. It may be adopted to raise the level of influence on students to overcome their concerns and bring the university closer to the recent "qualifications" that students make in the pre-selection stage during the decision-making process. Also, 54.3% of the respondents agreed that the university's pages on social media platforms contributed to enhancing their awareness and knowledge. So, a university page on social media constitutes one of the resources to supplement students' knowledge about the university and raise their awareness, i.e., it is a new indicator as a primary source of information for students and a significant factor in establishing the university's brand. In addition, less than 40% of students expressed their satisfaction with the publications and posts that the university posts on its platforms, a percentage supposed to prompt marketers in universities to reconsider the content they provide and the publishing mechanism they adopt. And perhaps this is what puts the university's social media platforms in fifth place (see Table 9) as an information source for students. Moreover, about half of the respondents considered that attendance at the university and direct communication with employees and professors is their preferred method, showing a difference between electronic means (e-mail, university website, university social media platforms); while phone communication with the university is not very desirable perhaps due to the communication experience through university platforms was not efficient and beneficial for the students. The lack of preference for social media platforms as a communication channel is due to their ineffective use by universities to communicate with students or their unproductive experiences in this regard.

Although the results of this study illustrated that the university's interaction with students makes them feel more belongingness and integrated into the university community (53%), it is an automatic catalyst for interactivity and publication about the university, and it is also an essential feature of these two-way communication platforms. Similarly, the fact that 76% of students do not interact with the university's page by participation indicates a dangerous indicator inferring students are not interested in sharing the content published by the university. This is because the university does not correspond to their interests, meet their needs, or exchange communication and writing with them.

This study provided a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of social media platforms on the decision-making process of choosing a private university in Lebanon for prospective students. Having nearly fifty universities in Lebanon, the competition between them is increasing and becoming more extensive. Marketers in these universities face new challenges and opportunities in the digital age. The power of digital marketing has taken over all business sectors, and higher education institutions are no exception (Helgesen, 2008). Digital marketing is necessary and becomes mandatory with time for universities in Lebanon, as it follows the current generation that is constantly changing along with the rapid development of technology.

Successful digital marketing via social media platforms offers low-cost communication, a good return on investment, and has the potential to reach a broader community, more accurate, more targeted, and faster results. With its spread and gain in popularity, it has become an integral part of students' daily lives, and they certainly use it as their primary source of information. Platforms were ranked fifth (in this paper) because of the lack of relevant content published or the minimal presence on them without real effectiveness.

This weakness makes it difficult to communicate and provide information that future students need. Hence, influencing their assessments and decisions, an organization cannot simply create pages and wait for results. Marketing across these platforms requires research, planning, goal setting, policies, and an expert cadre to succeed in attracting potential students. Currently, social media platforms do not replace direct communication, the website, or other means but rather complement them.

The number of studies on social media marketing for universities and its effectiveness is still very limited in the Arab world, in spite of the efforts made by HEIs in Lebanon to include these means as part of their recruitment plan, in most cases, it is difficult to talk about comprehensive marketing strategies. Especially for social media platforms. In most cases, these efforts are “exploratory”. This study helps marketers at universities gain a broader understanding of the behavior of future students to use as a basis for developing their marketing strategies across social media platforms. The campaigns are supposed to focus on target groups and potential students’ parents and friends, and most importantly, a student database is built and used to support and guide marketing plans.

This research concluded that the social media platforms of private universities in Lebanon impacted students’ choices for their university. Despite this, universities have not yet harnessed the power and attraction of these platforms appropriately. All media are indeed influential but to different degrees. To a large extent, universities did not match the content with the students’ needs and tendencies or satisfy them with solutions; neither in content type, form, or output. Universities did not succeed in providing an effective communication channel with students, nor in activating two-way communication, motivating participation in comments, creating content, sharing experiences related to the university, or sharing publications from its pages. Universities have not mastered playing this role effectively despite the significant advantages available and the almost free ones provided by these platforms. The impact of university pages on these platforms on students’ choice of the university includes the ability to feel included in its community, raise awareness about it, increase word of mouth, and enhance reputation so that the search for information is an essential component of the decision-making model. These platforms are gaining more importance than ever in determining the need for higher education (Kuzma & Wright, 2013), searching for information, comparing alternatives, and evaluating post-decision, which are the basic stages in the process of decision-making to choosing a university by students.

From the point of view of educators, it is not possible to look at students in a purely marketing way. However, the common elements in marketing and the decision-making process between the student and the consumer are very broad and large. Digital marketing is applied in line with the educational principles of the university with ease.

Universities have to accept that the student is the stronger party, so creating pages on social media platforms that are attractive and provide effective communication with them is a challenge for marketers in universities. Dealing with these channels is supposed to be different, innovative, creative, and attractive (Rekhter, 2012; Rutter et al., 2016).

It should focus on two-way communication including dialogue, sharing, interaction, asking interactive questions, interactive content, answering inquiries, messages, comments, etc. (Hampton, 2016). The second challenge is to motivate influencers and brand advocates as well as alumni, current students, and academic experts to write critical reviews of positive and successful experiences on university pages, in blogs, online groups, and in-person accounts. These have positive results in brand awareness, acquisition, and customer loyalty.

5.2 Recommendations and Suggestions

In light of the findings of the study, and based on best practices, it is possible to suggest for private universities in Lebanon the following:

- 1) Re-study the structure related to the media and advertising department at the university to allocate and secure the necessary human needs (the full team) for professional digital marketing.
- 2) Implementing courses and workshops. Marketers' participation in universities in the relevant conferences must be constant to bring in best practices.
- 3) Conducting scientific research on the target audience and its behavior on the Internet.
- 4) Studying the audience of each university separately to understand it more broadly. The audience includes current students, graduates, prospective students, their parents, secondary professors, professors of technical institutes, and others.
- 5) Running annual training programs for the university council, academics, and staff on social media platforms. Subjects include how to use them to attract qualified students and professors and communicate with them to find out the latest developments in this world.
- 6) Reconsidering the digital marketing strategy if present, or plan for an effective data-based strategy for universities that did not plan for it. This is based on the identified students' interests and needs.
- 7) Making the university's pages on social media platforms is not only a tool to provide information and satisfy this need for students but to be an effective two-way communication channel in terms of communication and correspondence on the one hand, and content creation and exchange between the two concerned parties, namely the university and students, on the other.
- 8) Forming a joint social communication committee between marketers at the university and representatives of faculties, and among volunteers from current students and graduates.
- 9) Preparing a guide for social networking sites to be updated annually and circulated to academics and administrators at the university.
- 10) Preparing marketers in universities a summary of the efforts made in marketing through communication platforms and submitting it to the university council every quarter.
- 11) Focusing more on parents in digital and non-digital marketing campaigns to have more impact on students.
- 12) Equip the university, in addition to many specialized and experienced people, with the infrastructure and logistical techniques necessary for the success of the marketing strategy through social media platforms.
- 13) Using special and helpful tools to organize, schedule, manage and analyze results on social media platforms to direct digital efforts and campaigns and build a database about students.
- 14) Implementing benchmarks and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and comparing them with similar campaigns to develop performance and improve when needed.
- 15) Embracing data-driven digital marketing (DDDM) and building a database for every beneficial activity undertaken by students. DDDM is an appropriate tool that supports digital marketing including social media platforms, effective and results in the guarantee.

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