

Understanding Russian students` digital behaviour in selecting Higher Education Institutions

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<p>Abstract:</p> <p>This qualitative research, conducted with the aid of in-depth interviews, examined the factors that influenced students' decision in the selection of the Arcada UAS, as their choices of Higher Education Institution. The research examined three research questions. The first tried to discover the factors that affected the choices of Higher Education Institutions in the current Russian students at Arcada. The second question examined the functions of digital media in influencing students' choice of Arcada UAS as their choice of Higher Education Institution, while the last research question examined the types of digital contents that potential Russian students would be attracted to while choosing Higher Education Institutions.</p> <p>The overall aim of this research was to get fuller and better understanding of Russian students' online behaviour in selecting Higher Education Institutions. The marketing funnel and the customer buying process models were the theories that guided this research. This research was conducted among six (6) young Russian students, three of whom were current students of Arcada UAS, while the other three were prospective students of Arcada UAS.</p> <p>The results revealed that factors that determined Russian students' choices of the Arcada UAS, as their favourite Higher Education Institutions the university's closeness to the city centre; the institution's atmosphere, buildings and its organization, and also the university's very friendly teachers, and modern approach to education. Most of the respondents have had some kind of previous connections to Finland. In addition, the research revealed that the functions of digital media are students' guidance in identifying the right actions to take while seeking admission into any university of their choice; learning about the institutions that offer their preferred courses, the cost of the courses, and the location of the institutions. Lastly, contents of digital media ought to be translated into Russian and other languages so as to include parents in the decision of the appropriate Higher Education Institution for their children.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In today's increasingly competitive market to recruit international students, with the vast amount of information and choices available, the competition between universities has never been higher. There is no doubt that marketing plays an increasingly important role in student recruitment, however, traditional marketing is no longer sufficient to fulfil the needs of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The world is developing and changing rapidly, technology is changing the world we live in at an unprecedented. The boom in technology has brought a lot of opportunities for advancement in how professionals do business nowadays, and marketing is not an exception (QS Digital Marketing, 2019; Gibbs, Dedrick & Kraemer, 2003).

The majority of marketing efforts of universities have moved online, ushering entirely new ways for connecting and presenting information to prospective students. Thus, it is extremely important for Higher Education Institutions to understand its target groups as well as customers' online behaviour, factors affecting decision-making and use of digital marketing strategies effectively to stand out from competition and successfully attract students. It becomes even more important when it comes to international student recruitment (Appel, Grewal, Hadi & Stephen, 2019).

The birth of new media and digital information and communication have all combined to alter the manner in which persons and businesses sell either their products or services as well as communication with one another. Apart from the social communication benefits of digital communication, businesses worldwide have become compelled to keep developing to keep up with the continuously changing and dynamic trends of marketing so as to remain relevant in this era's stiffly competitive market. The concept of marketing commenced in the mid-1950s, with marketing goals not only restricted to finding the appropriate customers or client base for a business or a product, but also finding appropriate products or services for customers and clients (Kotler & Keller, 2012). The major pillars of marketing hold the secret to achieving a business' objective and aims of becoming more effective and successful beyond its rivals in product or service creation, and delivery, as well as the communication of better customer value directed at the tar-

get market segment (Kotler & Keller, 2012).

Marketing is described as a societal process, where persons and groups of individuals acquire their needs and wants through economic activities such as the creation, offering and exchange of valuable goods or services freely with other groups or persons (Tallon, 2000). Therefore, for any form of business or establishment, either for profit or non-profit, it is pertinent to adequately understand the idea of the purchasing behaviour of customers, or the target market to be specific.

Marketing (management) can be considered as an art or science of selecting the appropriate target markets and acquiring, maintaining, and increasing customers through economic activities such as the creation, delivery, and the communication of better customer value (Kotler, 2016). Hence, to achieve success in marketing, which also guarantees business success, a business or any form of establishment must ensure proper understanding of economic activities such as creation, proper product and service delivery; the acquisition and maintenance of customer value and other related activities.

Therefore, a marketing plan is necessary for the coordination and direction of a clear and targeted marketing effort. Understanding customers and their online behaviour and factors that affect their decision-making are essential steps in the overall process of digital marketing. With the introduction of digital marketing, more opportunities have opened for businesses and other organizations, as digital marketing allows businesses and organisations become closer to their customers and even increases their (organisations') understanding them (the target market) even better (Chaffey & Smith, 2017 pp. 13-14).

In the same vein, technological advancement, especially typified by the advent of the Internet, could also help Higher Education Institutions to capitalize on and harness the opportunities inherent in digital and social media marketing. This is predicated on the existing trend where higher education institutions are in desperate need to appeal to an always increasing and variegated student base; the requirement of an efficient and successful outreach and digital marketing are increasingly becoming significant activities for higher educational institutions. According to Kowalik (2011), Higher Education Institutions are in the search of novel opportunities and systems of engaging and interacting with potential students, alumni and relevant stakeholders.

Furthermore, according to a study carried out by Hanover Research (2014), there was a reference made to describe “digital” and “social” as the utilization of social media and digital marketing respectively by Higher Education Institutions to interact with potential students. This suggests that in the course of this study, the terms digital marketing and social media marketing could be used interchangeably to refer to the same concept.

Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the definition of digital marketing is considered as the strategic decisions made by HEIs to continuously make investments in the aspect of engaging with their target audiences through the employment of social media and other digital platforms. Hence, the social media activities from HEIs are dedicated to the engagement of potential students; audiences and stakeholders of the universities and drawing attention and traffic to such institution’s website wherein the in-depth interaction between agents of the institutions and the potential students occur. These digital marketing by HEIs are also aimed at the management of their social presence and acquiring audience involvement, while also receiving students’ feedback via social media or digital marketing. Numerous studies have indicated that those higher education institution that are currently utilizing social media and digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube, in the marketing of the institutions and programmes, are portraying higher visibility and hence demonstrating how HEIs can and should create awareness of their existence to potential young students (Hanover Research, 2014).

On a final note, the employment of social media and digital marketing as tools of higher education marketing appears to be an attractive proposition; this is due to the benefits and advantages of social media to businesses, in conjunction with the high rate of adoption of social media by the younger generation (Boyd, 2008). Digital or social media marketing result in improved communications, increased customer engagement, which further enhances brand loyalty. Based on the foregoing, it is logical to assume that the utilization of digital marketing and social media platforms as an aspect of HEIs’ marketing has the capacity to fuel increased enrolment numbers and also aid potential students to reach well-informed decisions about their course of study and also the choice of HEI to eventually pursue their academic careers.

Furthermore, little knowledge, however, exists to date about the manner in which potential students of higher educational institutions employ social media and also how digital marketing by HEIs influences their decision in the selection of a course of study and also higher educational institution.

It is therefore against this foregoing that *this research investigates customers' online behaviour and factors that affect their decision-making of selecting Arcada University of Applied Sciences (UAS) as their choice of institution of higher education, while also evaluating the function of digital media in influencing students' choice of Arcada UAS as their choice of higher institution.*

1.2 Problem statement

Like many other European countries, Finland distinguishes between traditional research-driven universities and universities of applied sciences (UAS), or polytechnics (Study.eu, 2019).

Arcada UAS is owned by the Arcada Foundation and was established in Helsinki in the year 1996. It is a University of Applied Sciences in Finland, which offers a high-quality, practice-oriented higher education at both Bachelor's and Master's degree programmes, which are taught in Swedish and English languages. (Arcada, 2019)

Arcada UAS has been ranked number in the yearly comparison of all universities of applied sciences in Finland for two years in a row, both in 2016 and 2017. The survey suggests that Arcada is “the highest performing university of applied sciences in relation to its size” (Arcada, 2017). However, according to the Head of Student Services and HR at Arcada, even though there was an increase in applicants to Arcada's bachelor's degree programmes in English during admission and application period in 2017, the number of applicants to Arcada UAS from Russia has slightly decreased. (Arcada, 2017) One of the reasons, might be that the Ministry of Culture and Education, from autumn 2017, introduced tuition fees that apply for non-European Union/EEA-area students studying at higher education institutions in Finland. (ICEF Monitor, 2016). Until now, the tuition-free higher education has undoubtedly been among the main attraction factors of Finnish HEIs.

It is important for HEIs to consider their strategies and measures regarding the international student marketing and recruitment from a new basis. The understanding of customers, is an essential step in the overall process of digital marketing. For universities, content marketing and search engine optimization strategies, strong social media presence are needed.

For Arcada UAS, growth is a priority for the period 2017-2020. According to Arcada's Strategic objectives for 2025, one of the quantitative targets is to have more than 150 new bachelor's degree students admitted from outside of the EU/EAA per year (Wolff, 2017), which also includes Russia. Moreover, Russia is considered to be one of the most important target groups and Arcada is thus interested in understanding and attracting Russian students.

At the same time, completing a higher education degree abroad is a growing phenomenon globally and the number of Russian students studying abroad is increasing. In 2019, it was confirmed that the demand among young Russians for study places in foreign universities is steadily growing. (Vorotnikov, 2019) Moreover, Russian students are one of the largest groups of international degree students in Finland. (Hudd, 2018)

Taking this into consideration, it is vital for Arcada UAS to build a new digital marketing strategy to attract potential Russian bachelor degree students. It is based on some of the background information that this research investigates Russian students' online behaviour and habits in the selection of the Arcada UAS as the choice of learning, while also learning the function of digital media in influencing students' choice of Arcada UAS as their choice of higher institution. In the end, findings from this research will be recommended as suggestions for the improvement of Arcada's digital marketing.

1.3 Research aim and questions

The purpose of this thesis is to obtain a better understanding of the target group's online behaviour in the selection of institutions of higher education and to eventually provide some ideas for Arcada UAS on how to use digital marketing to attract potential Russian

Bachelor's degree students. Therefore, in order to fulfil the aims of this thesis, the following research questions are stated:

1. What are the factors that affected the choices of Higher Education Institutions in the current Russian students at Arcada?
2. What was the function of digital media in influencing students' choice of Arcada UAS as their choice of Higher Education Institution?
3. What kinds of digital contents are prospective Russian students interested in when making the choice of Higher Education Institutions?

1.4 Focus and demarcation

This research focuses specifically on Russian students' choices of institutions of higher learning as well as the factors that affect their selection of these institutions. This research also pays attention to some of the digital media of communication and how they influence the choice behaviour of Russian students, while selecting their choices of university, especially how these influences and choices affect the Arcada UAS. Therefore, this research shall cast some light on the digital media platforms that these Russian students spend their time on as well as acquiring relevant information from the appropriate authorities of the Arcada UAS.

In the area of limitation, it is important to reveal that the limited scope of this research, in investing only Russian students is duly acknowledged. Similarly, the number of respondents of this research can also be considered as a limitation because the thoughts and opinion of 6 (six) respondents cannot be generalized as factual and the true opinion and reality of all the Russian students in Arcada UAS.

1.5 Thesis structure

The thesis is structured as follows. The introductory chapter follows a review of literature. The third chapter discusses methodology, while the fourth chapter reports the results from the empirical study. The fifth chapter discusses of the results. The last chapter presents conclusions and makes recommendations for further studies.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The following subheadings will be discussed in this chapter: trends in social media and digital marketing; higher education institutions and digital marketing; benefits of social media and digital marketing to HEIs; the challenges of the use of social media and digital marketing to HEIs; the rise of competition among institutions of higher learning; general information about Russian students in Finland; the international market for students' recruitment utilizing social media and many more.

2.1 Trends in Social Media and Digital Marketing

Over the last ten years, many social media networks and platforms have emerged, thereby providing higher education institutions with a variety of choices to select from in order to carry out their marketing strategies. As revealed by Wikipedia (2012), the most widely received and popular social networking platforms used by young university-age scholars are; Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. These social networking platforms possess various features. For instance, Facebook possesses a social role, which connects people and friends. Twitter on the other hand combines instant messaging and also allows micro-blogging called "tweets" among users (Reuben, 2008). YouTube in its own right functions as a platform for the uploading of informative videos (Pearson Education, 2010).

As stated by Arrington (2011) there were more than 500 million global users of Facebook within the average of 18-24 years old. Furthermore, as at 2010, Twitter recorded over 100 million distinct users within the age range of 25-44, while YouTube exceeded a billion views on a daily basis (Pearson Education, 2010).

According to a research carried out by the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth regarding the utilization of social media and digital media by HEIs as an aspect of the marketing campaigns, the findings reveal that all of the respondents of the institutions currently utilized social and digital media, while also revealing that there exists no dependable data regarding the effectiveness of the utilization of digital marketing, with respect to students' enrolment and improving the institution's image. Similarly, in regard to the particular social media employed, the findings revealed that Facebook was the most widespread social networking platform used, 98% of the HEIs revealed that

they had their Facebook page, while 84% indicated having an official Twitter account. Another 86% of the institutions that participated in the study also revealed having a YouTube channel and presence.

Similarly, according to research by Merrill (2011), social media and digital marketing are capable of being a very affordable recruiting strategy. In the year 2010, a study involving 30 international university admissions staff revealed that institutions were increasingly employing Facebook and Twitter as their devices for digital marketing. In the same vein, in yet another study conducted by Slover-Linett and Stoner (2010), it revealed that a large percentage of HEIs employed social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, or YouTube. According to the research, 96% of HEIs used social media to interact with alumni, while merely about 57% utilized it as a marketing tool for prospective students.

2.2 Higher Education Institutions and Digital Marketing

In the past, the concept of Marketing used to be discussed secretly in the academia (Edmiston-Strasser, 2009, p. 146). This has, however, changed. Recently, in the words of (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Jongbloed, 2003; Maringe, 2006), government deregulation and growing competition have spurred higher education institutions to recognize the fact that they ought to market themselves in order to successfully compete in domestic and international markets.

According to Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006), “literature about higher education marketing is incoherent, and devoid of theoretical frameworks that reflect upon the particular context of higher education and the nature of their services”. This represents an obstacle to higher education marketing efforts because traditional business marketing fundamentals cannot totally address the requirements of higher education institutions as they are predominantly based on consumptive frameworks (Gibbs, 2002). Gibbs (2002) further argues that higher education marketing needs to be studied from the standpoint of collaborative relationships. Meanwhile, other scholars have suggested that the relationship marketing perspective is the most appropriate for marketing institutions of higher education (Helgesen, 2008; Klassen, 2002), especially when examined from the ethical perspective (Gibbs & Murphy, 2009). In the marketing of higher education institutions, relationship marketing represent the activities of building and sustaining rela-

tionships of value exchanges between the HEIs and the three main customer groups - alumni, present students and potential students. The quality of these relationships is positively connected and associated to customers' sustained loyalty (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001).

Moving further, Barnes & Mattson, (2009) reveal that HEIs in the United States of America are increasingly utilizing social media as an extension of their marketing activities. Similarly, Hayes, Ruschman and Walker (2009) studied the utilization of social networking platforms as marketing devices by educational institutions and found that there existed a significant relationship between people that logged into their social network platforms and the possibility of applying to the institutions.

With the introduction of digital marketing, more opportunities opened for businesses and other organizations, as it allows getting closer to customers and understanding them even better. (Chaffey & Smith, 2017 pp. 13-14)

Digital marketing has taken the world by storm and has transformed how businesses and other organizations communicate with their audiences. Digital marketing is simply marketing online. It can be defined as the marketing of products and services using digital technology and various forms of digital media to achieve marketing goals. (Thompson, 2017) The Digital Marketing Institute describes digital marketing as “the use of digital technologies to create integrated, targeted and measurable communication which helps to acquire and retain customers while building deeper relationships with them” (Wymbs 2011, p. 94).

Effective digital marketing strategies are needed for many different business niches, including HEIs. However, it might be difficult to build a digital marketing strategy for an educational organization, and one of the obstacles is reach target audience. (Brand24 Blog, 2018) Therefore, the focus of this thesis is to understand target group's online behaviour to plan digital marketing activities.

2.2.1 Benefits of Social Media and Digital Marketing to HEIs

Constantinides (2010) argues that generally, comprehensive and full-scale social media strategies are non-existent in higher education marketing domains. However, based on experiences from the business practices, one can assume that such marketing strategies

are capable of providing HEIs with novel communication possibilities that give room for direct engagement with potential students. This engagement entails interaction and communication with recruiters from institutions, or even constitutes interactions with other students while in the process of looking for an institution of higher education.

In principle, the engagement of potential students via social media marketing is a very cost-effective system for HEIs to attract and persuade potential students to select their institutions. Similarly, social media networks and online communities established by these institutions represents an arm of their digital marketing and online presence, which are both capable of bringing together prospective student and students that makeup the current student body of an institution. These forms of interactions have been highlighted as effective mechanisms that encourage potential students and other young consumers as recommendations made in blogs, social networks, online forums, and other forms of digital space are receiving increasing importance in students' decision making process, especially among young potential students.

Furthermore, social media is becoming more important in the recruitment and marketing functions for HEIs, and seems to correlate with their success. As expressed by Anyangwe (2011), online marketing activities are connected more closely to an institution's success. As aptly put by Richard Taylor from the University of Leicester, marketing considerations are currently being in tandem with the strategic decision making in most HEIs as it was discovered in a study about the utilization of social media networking system as marketing devices by HEIs, that there existed significant connection between prospective students that logged into the institution's social media networks and the eventual choice of applying to the institution (Hayes, Ruschman, & Walker, 2009).

Wootton (2011) further adds that digital marketing takes a growing and strategic role in reaching potential students, particularly among for-profit institutions. Another significant aspect of social media utilization, capable of affecting the educational strategies of HEIs is in the recruitment of international students. With the increment of tuition fees in numerous nations, HEIs now, more than ever before depend on the recruitment of international students that are capable of paying more fees and thereby reduce part of university financial success. In the opinion of Wheeler (2012), the recruiting of international students via the utilization of social media recruitment and marketing is becoming very important. Hence, the employment of social media and digital marketing strategies offer

HEIs more efficient and effective method of recruiting foreign students.

With regard to the recruitment of domestic or non-traditional or online students, there were suggestions that the social media network called Twitter could be more appropriate for this category of students and that HEIs ought to manage dedicated Twitter accounts for various consumer demographics (Mansfield, 2009). For instance, from the year 2012, more than three thousand higher institutions globally have operated official Facebook accounts, which are widely considered by potential students or stakeholder as a place where they can acquire relevant information about institutions that they are interested in. In addition, potential students that view an institution's page on Facebook could decide to become their 'fan'. This could produce a viral marketing effect, in which friends are also likely to become fans of the institution (Reuben, 2008).

Lastly, social media or digital marketing creates a very affordable alternative in an era where many HEIs cannot solely depend on public funding any longer as they are under intense pressure of discovering and adopting creative measures to regulate costs, while still sustaining high degrees of educational services.

2.2.2 Challenges of Social Media and Digital Marketing to HEIs

The utilization of social networking has witnessed immense growth in the last decade. However, its adoption and utilization is not without its peculiar challenges. Some of these challenges are that social media or digital marketing might not be completely functional or effective if an institution switches to predominantly one online marketing campaign. This is because it seems preferable to possess a robust set of promotional channels that could result to the reduction of costs, while offering better value for money. As aptly expressed by Merrill (2011, p. 41), there are also worries regarding the unclear feedback from social networking, marketing and the challenge of measuring its results. Furthermore, Griffiths and Wall (2011, p. 64) also add that careful examination and monitoring of social sites is necessary, while the procedures and standards of managing information on sites should be frequently reviewed and revised.

In addition, HEIs ought to recognize that social media marketing and digital marketing are only effective if they are built on firm foundations, some of which include innovative and high quality products, as well as market-oriented organizations (Contantinides,

2010). Similarly, Lewis (2010) also stated that social media require a completely different mindset and approach from the conventional media planning. This also entails being technologically savvy. Staff of higher education institutions have to understand and appreciate novel methods and mechanisms of marketing and the difference from the conventional media methods. In addition, potential students might seem interested in social media interaction and information seeking while utilizing social media.

On a final note, in the opinions of Constantinides & Zinck-Stagno, (2011), social media possess high impact in students, however, this impact on their selection of higher institutions seems low in comparison to conventional forms of HEIs marketing. Furthermore, in the midst of almost all-cultural change, staff of higher education institutions ought to pay attention to social media and digital marketing strategies for their institutions as they serve as a key factor in influencing students' selection of HEIs, which they eventually get to study in. This state of affairs therefore places social media and digital marketing as strategic communication tools for HEIs.

2.3 The rise of competition among Higher Education Institutions

Most universities commenced the development and update of their websites, with the goal of providing marketing information to students as well as other interested stakeholders (Klassen, 2002). Therefore, competition in the realm of higher education encountered huge increment, while at the moment the market is now saturated both at the local level and at the international level.

The spate of higher education marketing commenced in the middle of the 1980s. Later, universities began utilizing social media to engage in competition for funds through the increment of more students' enrolments. Many scholars have suggested that the insights gained in these efforts are helpful to universities in the planning of their market communication and responses to this era's market dynamics (Filip, 2012).

2.4 International market for students` recruitment utilizing Social Media

Recruitment of international students is so competitive today that most universities and institutions of higher learning are beginning to adapt and adopt novel mechanisms of digital marketing, although this poses challenges to them. There is an enormous pressure for these universities to maintain relevance in competition, as well as to be functional and efficient, while achieving their higher goals. A failure in this regard may lead them to lagging behind or losing momentum in comparison with their rivals and competitors. Besides this, the desire to maintain high rankings in the yearly global rankings of universities has proven more challenging due to decreasing budgets combined with increasing competition among institutions of higher learning.

Therefore, most universities spend and invest increasing amount of time and funds on conducting open days, and social media marketing campaigns, improving various forms of prospect as well as developing university web spaces (The Guardian, 2014). These days, it is not uncommon to find that universities utilize different tools in marketing their education, such as conducting exhibits, frequent open days, frequent school visits, sending direct mails, web pages and sites and the development of social networks (Filip, 2012).

There exist numerous forms of digital media and social media forums and platforms, which, tertiary education providers now utilize in the marketing of their institutions and the provision of relevant information to their prospective students. At the same time, it is pertinent to mention at this juncture that social networking is a form of digital media, where persons engage in online or virtual communities that are connected through the sharing of similar ideas or areas of interest.

Marketing in the higher education sector has existed for a long time. According to Gibbs & Maringe (2008), competition among institutions in the higher education field has resulted not only in the expansion of choices for students, but also led the institutions to become more focused on students' needs.

Traditional marketing is about processes “by which companies create value for customers and build strong customer relationships in order to capture value from customers in

return” (Kotler and Armstrong, 2010). “New marketing approaches emphasize doing things with customers, not just doing things to them” (Kazeroony, 2011).

2.4.1 General information about Russian students in Finland

According to the latest data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Finland is the fifth most popular country of academic mobility (Solovyova, 2019). Moreover, Russian students are one of the largest groups of international students in Finland. Furthermore, it appears as if an increasing number of Russian students are choosing to study abroad.

Finnish education system is known around the world for its quality, and it is consistently ranked as one of the best. Worldwide Educating for the Future Index (WEFFI, 2018) has recognized Finland as the leader globally in providing future skills education. In 2019, Finland was also ranked as the happiest country in the world for the second year running, which may add to Finland’s attractiveness as a place to study.

For Russian students, who choose to study abroad, Finland has certain advantages. There are many reasons for that. One is that universities of Finland have a good reputation. Moreover, Finland is located near to Russia, and thus it is inexpensive and not time-consuming for students to go home.

However, from 2017, Russian-speaking applicants can enter the Finnish university only on a paid basis, which has led to a decrease of Russians students applying to study in Finland, as there is no opportunity for scholarship either. According to the Head of Student Services and HR at Arcada, even though there was an increase in applicants to Arcada’s bachelor’s degree programmes in English during 2017 application period, the number of applicants from Russia has decreased slightly (Arcada, 2017).

2.5 Marketing funnel

Marketing funnel is a strategy (resembling a funnel) of building automated profit. It is one of the most powerful and effective marketing strategies. At the same time, it is constantly changing and evolving.

Usually, it starts with a cold contact with the audience with whom the business has never met, who have never heard of the business. First, the target audience that you wish to influence is selected. It is extremely important to understand the target audience, the end client.

After a “portrait” of the client is created, it is needed to create an advertising message that will “catch” the attention of this particular target audience. This will attract customers' attention and highlight the business among the abundance of other offers.

Next, the distribution channels of the advertising message are selected. When choosing distribution channels, it is necessary to focus on the main “points of accumulation” of potential customers, depending on the type of activity of the business.

After the target audience has been defined, a “working” advertising message is developed and delivered it in the right way. In other words, these are potential customers who have already learned about the business and were interested in the business offer.

At the second stage of the marketing funnel, calls start to arrive; the first arrival of the customer to the store is made. And here “heavy artillery” engages. There is direct work in people. Creation of interest, then persuasion through personal meetings, contacts, presentations, and business proposals further narrows the flow, bringing it closer to the sale event. Work at this stage takes a lot of time and effort. At this stage, only those people who are involved in the decision to purchase are targeted. Clients may have objections that need to be addressed and modified.

And finally, the last stage comes - the stage of purchase, which is the most awaited and enjoyable stage for the business. The funnel gives an important indicator - what is the “conversion”.

2.5.1 Customer-consumer, student as customer

In the context of higher education, students are more often perceived as customers. “Delivering an exceptional customer experience is no longer a choice for institutions” (González, 2016). Research that investigates what students want from HEIs suggests that students' expectations are rising for the services they receive - before, during and after enrolment. (Kuper, 2014)

It is important to define customer and consumer. The customer is the person who buys the goods or services, while the consumer is the end user the products or services.

2.5.2 Digital customer and consumer

Rapid developments in technology and educational innovations have expanded opportunities for students to study outside of their countries of origins. (Gibbs & Maringe, 2008) Nowadays, both prospective students and their parents are looking for information online. (Brand24 Blog, 2018) When potential students are searching for the information about universities through the Internet, it is considered to be as an example of digital customer experience (HBR, 2015)

2.6 Digital Marketing objectives

There are five main reasons for or objectives of digital marketing: grow sales, add value, get close to customers, save costs and extend the brand online.

A useful framework for developing digital marketing objectives can be summarized as the 5Ss – Sell, Serve, Speak, Save and Sizzle (Chaffey & Smith, 2017 p. 23).

“Sell” is a crucial aspect of digital marketing, which is achieved through distributing products and services online. “Serve” is reached through providing value to customers, giving additional benefits online. “Speak” is realized by engaging with outstanding content and creating a two-way dialogue. “Save” is achieved through saving customers time and money online. “Sizzle” is executed through building and enhancing a brand presence online, providing a new proposition and new experiences online while at the same time appearing familiar (Chaffey & Smith, 2017 p. 24).

2.7 Online consumer behaviour

The key to a successful digital strategy is understanding an audience. Defining the customer is based on the research or more creative techniques, for example creating personas. Identifying key personas and what motivates them helps to create a strategy that drives engagement and leads to a purchase. (Digital Marketing Institute, 2019)

“Understanding customer motivations is not an option, it is an absolute necessity for survival” (Chaffey & Smith, 2017 p. 170). The 6Cs of customer motivation help to define online value proposition (OVP) and respond to customer motivators: content, customization, community, convenience, choice, and cost reduction. (Chaffey, 2004)

Content. Personalized, “relevant, easy digestible, content is still king” (Chaffey & Smith, 2017 p. 175). By providing and sharing high-quality content on a regular basis, businesses can build trust and strong relationships with their target audiences.

Starting with the clear understanding of customer motivators, organizations can better meet their needs. (Chaffey, 2017 p. 174)

In this research, customer behaviour is also considered from the “digital consumer behaviour” perspective, and it includes knowledge of the “customer insight” variables, needs, characteristics, digital experiences or behaviours. (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019 p.175)

In the context of HEIs, “it is necessary to understand where students come from, what their backgrounds and values are, and on what basis they choose a HEI” (Kazeroony, 2011 p.126).

2.7.1 Customer-buying process models

High-involvement purchase model

When it comes to high-involvement purchase, customers go through a careful and rigorous buying process. It starts from the problem identification to information search to evaluation to decision to buy and action to post-purchase.

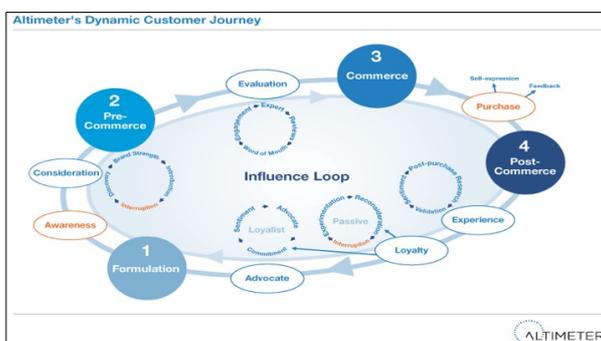


Figure 1. Altimeter’s Dynamic Customer Journey (Solis, 2016)

Source: (Dynamic Customer Journey Model, Solis Brian, 2016)

Brian Solis introduced Dynamic Customer Journey model, “which is similar to the traditional sales funnel as it moves through awareness, consideration and evaluation. However, this model allows for shallow and deep dives (when searching for information) and introduces “bridges between customers and shared experiences in every moment of truth”. At the heart of this model is the “influence loop”. This means that connected customers search for other people’s opinions about their customer experience (CX) from your product or service. They seek “validation from someone like them” (Chaffey & Smith, 2017 p. 133).

2.8 Content Marketing

Content marketing is “the management of text, rich media, audio and video content aimed at engaging customers and prospects to meet business goals, published through print and digital media –including web and mobile platforms – which are repurposed and syndicated of different forms of web presence such as publisher sites, blogs, social media and comparison sites” (Chaffey & Smith, 2017 p. 631).

Creating and distributing relevant and valuable content to attract, acquire, and engage a clearly defined and understood target audience – with the objective of driving profitable customer action” (Content Marketing Institute, 2012). It is “a device used by companies to educate, inform or entertain customers or prospects by creating attention or causing behaviour that results in leads, sales or advocacy” (Baer, 2019).

Valuable content is the key strategy of all successful marketing today, in a world with immense quantities of information available online. It is important to understand what makes content to be valuable? Valuable content always has a bigger purpose. It educates, informs and entertains. It is useful, relevant and meaningful, clear and compelling, interesting and genuine. (Jefferson & Tanton 2013 p. 24) Content is engaging and inspiring, it is interactive and helps to solve problems.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section examines the research technique utilized to direct this investigation. It presents the research design, sampling technique, sample size and study population. Other aspects of this chapter include research instruments, method of data collection, validity and reliability of instrument and method of data analysis.

3.1 Qualitative research & Research design

The main aim of this thesis is to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the factors that affected the choices of Higher Education Institutions in the current Russian students at Arcada?
2. What was the function of digital media in influencing students' choice of Arcada UAS as their choice of Higher Education Institution?
3. What kinds of digital contents are prospective Russian students interested in when making the choice of Higher Education Institutions?

As this research deals with human reality and how some certain unquantifiable variables affect their daily lives, the qualitative method of research was adopted. Qualitative research is defined as “an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018 p. 4). Qualitative research gives an opportunity to capture participants' own opinions, experiences and reflections.

There are different types of interviews that range from semi-structured through to less structured and very detailed. In this research, in-depth interviews also referred to, as qualitative or unstructured interviews, were utilized. Such interviews involve unstructured and open-ended questions “that are intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018 p. 187). Qualitative or unstructured interviews suit well to understand interviewees better and explore their attitudes, values, beliefs and motives. The methods employed were considered suitable to answer this study's research questions. In order to achieve deeper investigation, the interviews were con-

ducted with both potential future customers and present customers - potential Russian students and students that have already selected Arcada UAS.

3.2 Data collection

The population for this study comprised Russian students of the Arcada UAS in Finland. In all, a total of six (6) students of Russian origin, served as the total number of respondents and interviewee for the purpose of this study. There were two different groups of interviewed people: three (3) current students of Arcada UAS and (3) potential students.

The instruments of data gathering employed for this study are in-depth face-to-face interviews. Overall, six (6) individuals were interviewed in a nice, relaxed setting. The nature of the interview was told to the respondents in advance and the purpose of the study was explained in detail. The interviews lasted approximately for 20 or 30 minutes. Anonymity was guaranteed and participants were assured about confidentiality. Neither age nor gender of the interviewees is disclosed, the full consent to record as well as publish the comments made by each interviewee was acquired and signed by both parties. Each interview was audio-recorded to ensure that full transcripts are then available for analysis. Even though this research is written in English, the interviews were conducted in Russian to add trustworthiness to the study. Each interview was then fully transcribed and translated, all content is accessible by the author only. The translations of the interviews from Russian to English were conducted by the author. The interviewees were informed that their interviews are recorded and transcribed.

In the course of conducting this research, convenience sampling and purposive sampling techniques were used. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the six (6) interviewees who constituted Russian students out of the multi-racial population of students of the Arcada UAS, while the convenience sampling technique was used in selecting all of the interviewees based on their availability and willingness to be part of the research. The purpose of this was to gather authoritative information from Russian students themselves about the factors that influenced their decision in the choice of the Arcada UAS as their institution of higher learning.

3.3 Data analysis strategy

Once research has been carried out and the data was collected, the analysis were made. Data gathered from the in-depth interviews were analysed using the constant comparative technique of analysis to show the connection between digital media and its influence on the determination of the choices of the Russian students, especially as it regards the selection of the Arcada UAS as their choice of institution of higher learning.

The constant comparative method is an inductive data coding process utilized in categorizing and comparing qualitative data derived from the day-to-day experience of a selected group of people. This method of analysis is therefore selecting for analysing the responses provided by the respondents of the interviews conducting for the purpose of this research.

Data that has been collected was sorted, reviewed and organized by the author so that I can be analysed. Each sentence was examined one at a time to understand what interviewees were saying. The main findings were then grouped into relevant categories as similar themes were arising and recognized. The primary analysis of the translated transcripts was conducted by color-coding main findings and forming the main themes (Appendix 1).

3.4 Trustworthiness of the study

The qualitative research method examined the experiences, feelings, thoughts of the interviewees on a deeper level. Before the interview started, the author encouraged the interviewees to be honest and open, when sharing their personal stories, experiences and opinions. Even though the anonymity was guaranteed, it cannot be assured that the respondents were frank. Moreover, during the interviews the author avoided commenting own experiences and thoughts.

The number of interviews of this research is limited to six (6) interviews. This number of interviews meets the sampling criteria the researcher and the supervisor have determined.

4 RESULTS

The themes that were identified in the analysis of the transcribed data are: important factors, information obtained online, the usefulness of digital information availability for HEIs, and potential digital information that can capture potential students' interest.

4.1 Important factors for consideration

Interviewees shared what were the things they put into consideration when making a of higher education institution. All of the six interviewees stated various reasons and explanations. The main important factors that influenced the choices of higher education institutions are: (1) connection to Finland, (2) location, (3) atmosphere and friendliness, and (4) social validation.

4.1.1 Connection to Finland

A common variable that was discovered in the three interviews with the existing Arcada UAS students was that all three had some kind of a childhood connection to Finland. They had either previously lived in Finland or spent time in Finland in the past with their families. It was observed that among current students, none had searched higher education institutions outside of Finland.

Some of the comments made by current students revealed these about their connection to Finland:

“I lived in Finland for 3 years, while I was a school student. My mother was working in Helsinki and we lived together. After finishing high school, I left to Russia, and started my studies at the university there. I had a boyfriend who lived in Finland at that time.” (Interviewee 1)

“I always wanted to live and study in Finland. My family and I often spend time here. My brother is also studying in Finland.” “This country is very sympathetic to me and there is a good education system.” (Interviewee 2)

“Since childhood, I spent time with my family in Finland, in Savonlinna. We have our own house there. And I knew first-hand that Finland has a good educational system”. (Interviewee 3)

Moreover, one of the potential students also had previous connections to Finland:

“This country is very close to me. Since childhood, every summer we spend time in Kajaani with my family. From when I was 7-8 years old, I planned and wanted to study and live in Finland. Now I am almost 18 years old and all this time I was dreaming of moving to Finland”. (Interviewee 4)

On the other hand, the remaining two interviewees, prospective students had never been to Finland before and had different motivations to apply to study in Finland:

“I was still studying in Russia, but started looking for different opportunities to study abroad. Initially, I did not consider Finland at all. But once during my English classes at iClass, in Saint-Petersburg, someone mentioned that there is an opportunity to study in Finland. Previously I haven’t been to Finland”. (Interviewee 5)

“It was a long online research which led me to consider Finland as a country for my future studies, although I had never been here before. I checked a lot of different universities in different countries, but still decided to apply to Finland.” “I always wanted to study abroad, it was my dream.” (Interviewee 6)

4.1.2 Location

In the interviews with the existing Arcada UAS students and potential students, it was revealed that this location has greatly influenced the choice. The interviewees stated the following:

“I wanted to study only in Helsinki. For me it was important to have campus located near to the city centre. I was also looking for student apartments in the same area.” (Interviewee 1)

“I was only checking universities that are in Helsinki.” (Interviewee 3)

“For me location is not so important, but I would prefer to live and study in Helsinki.” (Interviewee 4)

“Together with my parents, we checked universities not only in Helsinki, but also in the eastern part of Finland. However, Helsinki is my priority.” (Interviewee 5)

“When I was looking for a place to study, it was very important for me that the campus was located in Helsinki.” (Interviewee 6)

4.1.3 Atmosphere & friendliness

Interviewees revealed that the atmosphere and friendliness are important factors that students put into consideration in making the choice of the higher learning institution that they want to attend. Some of the comments made by respondents:

“In spring, when I came to Finland for several entrance exams, I remember that I really liked the atmosphere at Arcada.” (Interviewee 1)

“The location was not important to me, I just looked at the atmosphere of the university. When visiting Arcada, I was impressed. I really liked Arcada, the atmosphere, the building, the organization, the very friendly teachers, everything is very modern and modernized. It just sunk into the soul. There is a “family”, good atmosphere.” (Interviewee 2)

“I can say that I immediately felt the difference, how different the atmosphere is, in Arcada you can feel a family atmosphere.” (Interviewee 3)

“I was also in Arcada once. Everything was very nice and friendly. During my visit, I had a chance to talk to people from Admissions, they explained everything to me. I felt supported.” (Interviewee 4)

“When I visited Arcada, from the very beginning it seemed to me that there was a very high-tech atmosphere and there was a very friendly atmosphere. There was a good impression, and a good impression, everything was very different from our Russian universities.” (Interviewee 5)

4.1.4 Social validation

One of the factors considered in the selection of the choice of higher learning institution was social validation. The respondents noted the following:

“I also had a friend who had already studied at Arcada, she always highly recommended Arcada and said only good things about it.” (Interviewee 3)

“What influenced my final choice is still my brother’s experience. He studied at one of the best universities in Moscow for two years before moving to Finland, and dropped it literally a year before his graduation. After his stories, how different the education is, how different the study approaches are, I finally made a decision.” (Interviewee 2)

“I was still studying in Russia, but started looking for different opportunities to study abroad. Initially, I did not consider Finland at all. But once during my English classes at iClass, in Saint-Petersburg, someone mentioned that there is an opportunity to study in Finland. Previously I haven’t been to Finland”. (Interviewee 5)

“I have heard many good things about Arcada and therefore I have decided to apply to Arcada.” (Interviewee 6)

4.2 Information obtained online

4.2.1 Specific information students looking for

Interviewees shared what were the information they are looking for and taking into consideration when making a of higher education institution. The following excerpts were gathered:

“When I was looking for information online, I have considered many different things. As far as I remember I have checked the descriptions of the study programs, mostly in Business, but also IT. It was also important to know the admission process and timetable, especially the dates of the entrance exams. Some universities had very inconvenient dates.” (Interviewee 1)

“My main search criteria... I was looking for Bachelor programs taught in English. I read the descriptions of all the programs, information about courses, prices and opportunities for scholarships.” (Interviewee 2)

“During my search, I have also checked opportunities to find work after graduation.” (Interviewee 3)

“Everything was important to me when I was searching for universities online. I checked all information about the programs, the submission of documents, prices and so on.” (Interviewee 4)

“What influenced the choice ... firstly, I looked at where there are business areas, because I wanted to do exactly that direction. I also examined how the schedule was being built, I wanted more freedom of choice: so you could choose the directions you like yourself, draw up your own schedule and training plan. And yet, I looked at the exams, what you need to take, when and how.” (Interviewee 5)

“The main factors that I paid attention to are the length of study, the availability of a suitable program, the cost of training, the possibility of a scholarship, and of course, the requirements for admission, the language of instruction and courses on the program.” (Interviewee 6)

4.2.2 Insufficient online information

This theme of either a lack of sufficient information about a higher learning institution, or even complete non-existence of information related to higher institutions of learning was a predominant theme that a large percentage of the interviewees experienced while making a selection of their choice of higher learning institution.

According to their responses, the interviewees revealed that in all of their various searches for institutions on the Internet, they could not access information that were helpful to their search. The following excerpts in the subsequent paragraphs depict some of the responses provided by all of the interviewees:

“Mainly, I was looking for information in Russian, I was afraid that I might not understand something correctly in English. Most of the information online in Russian was about Haaga-Helia UAS, there is a group in VK called “Haaga-Helia UAS”, where you could find answers to frequently asked questions, from the administration, as well as from other students, which is very helpful. The only place where I could find any useful information in Russian was just that group. The only thing is that most of the information there is already outdated, and there are very few updates and activity in recent years.” (Interviewee 1)

“In principle, there is not enough information for Russian-speaking students on the Internet. Therefore, it was a little risky, nothing to rely on. At the time of admission, I also searched for information in VK group called “Arcada University of Applied Life”, specifically about

my programme (Materials Processing Technology). All the information there is very outdated, literally from 2013-2015.” (Interviewee 2)

The interviewees revealed that once they came in contact with Arcada university’s website, they could relate with the site due to its beautiful design, ease of use and easy to find arrangement of information, which all combine to make the site easy to use. The following excerpts were gathered:

“If you compare the websites: what information is available, how easy this information is to read and understand: Arcada’s website seemed to me more reliable and easily described. There was a very beautiful design, everything was very positive. In general, it was the most understandable site, everything is very simple.” “When I had just started the process, almost everywhere, everything was very incomprehensible. Therefore, Arcada won this and aroused more trust, everything was easy and simple, like “black and white””. (Interviewee 1)

“I checked and really liked it, a very modern site.” (Interviewee 2)

“When searching, I came across Arcada’s website, it was easy enough to find relevant information and the instructions. Plus, everything was very well translated into English, the site was very user-friendly.” “I also want to note that I checked a lot of universities in other countries, for example, in Spain and Portugal, and so it was terribly difficult to find useful information there, to understand what is happening and in general, their sites are much worse. More than half have not even been translated into English.” (Interviewee 6)

Furthermore, some of the responses gave answers to questions in connection with the things that Higher Education Institution need to do digitally with their marketing campaigns, so as to get the attention of prospective students and influence their decision to select any Higher Education Institution, the excerpts below represent some of the responses provided by the interviewees during the interviews:

“It would be better if the information was provided in Russian, especially for parents who are ready to send their children to study abroad. Moreover, many who are just graduating from school and are still quite young, so parents need to read everything and understand everything, take part in decision-making. In addition, it is very important to have a separate subsection “For Parents”, it is also important since they pay in the end.” (Interviewee 1)

“At the time of admission, I also searched for information in VK, specifically about my programme. All information there is very outdated, literally from 2013-2015. Therefore, I believe that it would be very useful if this group continued to be re-developed and updated with relevant information. It would be very useful for Russian-speaking students since we use this platform a lot more.” (Interviewee 2)

“It would be very cool if more videos about the atmosphere inside Arcada were uploaded online about how the studies are in reality, the daily routine of the students and so on. You could also make an open day at Arcada, or maybe a video from open day.” (Interviewee 3)

Crossing to the interviews conducted on the potential students, Interviewee 4 explained that because the contents of the sites were in English Language, the parents asked him

to do everything independently because they did not understand English Language. Therefore, he opined that it would be of immense help if the site's content could be interpreted into the Russian language. This he claimed will lead to understanding the contents and facilitate the making of logical and insightful choice by the prospective students. Interviewee 5 added that frequent update of the websites to convey very up-to-date information to both students and prospective students are very necessary. He explained that his plans were slightly affected by information on a website since there was a very late update on the website that part of the requirement for admission was the IELTS examinations. This requirement was added very late and it affected the interviewee's plans to a slight degree.

4.2.3 Suggested digital information that can capture potential students' interest

This subtopic contains the presentation of this theme from the findings discovered from the series of interviews conducted on the interviewees for this study. Some of these findings are pieces of information; such as digital contents that both prospective student and current students of higher education institutions believe could possibly influence their choices of Higher Education Institutions. These opinions are different and are based on the individual opinions of each of the interviewees. The subsequent paragraphs contain some of the excerpts quoted from some of the interviewees in connection with the form of digital presence and contents that will most certainly capture their interest and possibly influence their choices of Higher Education Institutions.

“Now, when I am already a student, I understand that I would have liked to know more practical information about the studies, about integration, about Finnish and Swedish, how to find a job and so on. At the time of applying for studies, I did not particularly pay attention to this.” (Interviewee 1)

What this excerpt suggests is that students, especially Interviewee 1, who is currently a student of Arcada University wished that very detailed and practical information are contained in higher education institutions' digital media platforms. According to the interviewee, at the initial stages he was not very particular and paid no attention to detailed information, especially while he was applying, but as a current student now, he wished that higher education institutions' websites contained more information about integration into the institution's system; about how to attain success in ones academic

career in the institution; information about the Finnish and the Swedish cultures and more importantly, how to get a job after ones academic career in the school.

“I think that more Russian students would be interested in applying to Arcada, if you could still do your entrance exam in Russia, because not everyone has an opportunity to come to Helsinki.” “I believe that it would be very useful if “Arcada University of Applied Life” group in VK continued to be re-developed and updated with relevant information. It would be very useful for Russian-speaking students since we use this platform a lot more.” (Interviewee 2)

The implications of these two excerpts are the fact that most prospective Russian students who are interested in choosing Arcada UAS as their preferred choice of higher education institution usually get discouraged due to the fact that they have to travel over to Helsinki, Finland in order to write the qualification entrance examination. Therefore, Interviewee 2 was of the strong opinion that even more prospective students will be encouraged to choose Arcada as the preferred school if their entrance examination could be written in Russia and not all the way in Helsinki. In addition, with reference to the outdated information that exists in VK, Interviewee 2 further added that if this platform is up-dated and re-developed with relevant and the latest information, Russian-speaking students would be the set of students to benefit the most because they are the set of students that utilize the platform the most.

“It would be very cool if more videos about the atmosphere inside Arcada were uploaded online about how the studies are in reality, the daily routine of the students and so on.” “More videos to interest students: you could also make an open day at Arcada, or maybe a video from open day because, if you are a student who is in Russia, it is physically difficult for you to come and see the university. At a minimum, you need to get a visa, buy tickets and organize the trip.” (Interviewee 3)

The meaning of this quotation is that even though there exist some videos that contain certain information about Arcada UAS, Interviewee 3 is of the opinion that there ought to be even more videos available online about how various programs and studying in the institution truly looks like in real life. The interviewee also suggested the conduct of an Open Day at Arcada, or probably portray a video from the Open Day so that prospective students that are located far away in Russia and this physically unavailable can see the proceedings and probably get inspire to choose Arcada as their choice of higher education institution.

Away from the current students’ interviews to interviews conducted on the prospective students, the following excerpt and paragraph below depict the opinion of one of the

prospective students that were interviewed in the course of this study. It is important to note that only one of the three interviews conducted on the three prospective students contained information regarding the forms of digital presence and contents that will most certainly capture their interest and possibly influence their choices of Higher Education Institutions. This excerpt is discussed below:

“Since my parents do not know English at all, I had to do everything myself. It would be very useful if the site had information in Russian. For example, in XAMK (South-Eastern Finland UAS), there was a section in Russian language, and it is useful enough that parents can also read. I understand that many Russians are sent to Finland and all students certainly know English, but most parents do not.” (Interviewee 4)

This excerpt suggests that there is a language barrier between prospective Russian students’ parents and English language-based digital platforms or websites that belong to the higher education institutions. Therefore, parents are unable to participate in the decision-making process of their children’s choice of higher education institution due to their lack of understanding of contents of these websites. Hence, this interviewee revealed that if websites can also have their contents translated to Russian, it would create ease of reading and consequently lead to the full participation of parents in the selection of their children’s higher education institution.

4.3 The usefulness of digital information availability for HEIs

Based on the discovery from all of the interviews conducted, another finding that was resounding and repetitive among almost all of the interviewees were the need and importance of online searches for information about certain Higher Education Institutions, which could guide their choices of higher education institutions. This points to the importance and usefulness of the availability of digital or online information for the guidance of consumption of potential students. Therefore, higher educational institutions need to have strong digital presence, where prospective students from various parts of the world can easily go to acquire actual detailed information about any higher institution of learning. This makes such higher education institution able to compete with its contemporaries in this new age of information, where various forms of information are made available just by the click of buttons.

According to Interviewee 1:

“I started my online research in September. I found out what I needed to do in order to move to Finland for studies. One of the first things I did was the IELTS test. I got the desired score and only after I started to check universities.”

The quoted excerpt above revealed that before the student took any action, he started by conducting several online researches about the university that could fulfil his educational goal. This online research helped him know the appropriate steps to take towards getting admitted to Arcada. In addition, this student was able to learn about the universities that offered his course of choice, the prices of the courses, as well as the location of the institutions. Meanwhile, according to Interviewee 2:

“Well, basically, I searched everything on Studyinfo. My main criteria were only that the studies were in English and that it was a Bachelor programme. I read the descriptions of all the programs and then wrote down on paper the programs and universities I liked.”

The excerpt above revealed that in the case of Interviewee 2, the only source of information about any higher educational institutions was through digital information. This means that she did not have to go to many different institutions in order to acquire information that will guide her choice of the higher education institution to attend. Thus, as revealed by the interviewee, the only source of information that she acquired was through Studyinfo, where she got details of the description of all of the different programs and the universities where they are available, all of which she took note of by writing on a paper. Therefore, apart from serving as a pool of various information as created by different higher educational institutions, other roles of these digital media include providing guidance for potential students; keeping them up-to-date about activities that lead up to their admission to these institution; providing knowledge about the availability of certain courses and lastly, serving as a source of information dissemination platforms, where prospective students can learn about the dates of entrance examinations or the requirements for admission. Lastly, according to the responses provided by Interviewee 3:

“First, I checked online, which universities are located in Helsinki, since Helsinki was my priority. I read a lot, looked for information through Google, checked statistics and reviews, also read what universities are more popular and which universities are worth to be chosen. Also, I checked the statistics of the opportunity to find work after graduation. I looked at different types of relations between universities and companies with which they collaborate.”

From the excerpt provided by Interviewee 3, similar to Interviewee 1 and 2, all of whom

are current students of Arcada, all of them consulted the digital source of information while seeking information about various higher educational institutions. This therefore buttresses the fact that a major role of digital media in the determination of students' selection of institutions of higher learning is serving as a detailed pool of information where students are able to get information about the programs and educational institutions of their choice. Other important roles of digital media, based on the findings of this research include: serving as a platform where prospective students are able to ignite conversations about with either fellow students or admission personnel of the education institution that such a student aspires to attend.

With regards to the responses provided by the other set of interviewees, who are potential students of higher education institutions, Interviewee 4 revealed that:

“Basically, most of the things I checked online. And all my searches were done through Google and the Internet, because this is the only opportunity when you are thousands of kilometres away. I relied only on the websites; I have read all the information there.”

This excerpt confirms the responses offered by the initial interviewees who all reveal that their singular source of information and knowledge about their higher education institutions was through the digital media. This assertion brings us to the comments provided by Interviewee 5, who revealed that the roles of digital media in determining the choice of higher education institutions for students are significant. According to him, all of the processes for admission such as registration, submission of forms, and indication of interest are only possible through the aid of digital media. The interviewee also disclosed that websites, particularly that belonging to Arcada University was a perfect place where very accurate information about admission processes; programs and the requirements are made easily available.

Lastly, Interviewee 6 disclosed that:

“I began to search for universities via the Internet, Google everything at once in English. The main factors that I paid attention to are the length of study, the availability of a suitable program, the cost of training, the possibility of a scholarship, and of course, the requirements for admission, the language of instruction and courses on the program.”

Therefore, from the quoted statement above, the Internet, an arm, which digital media belong to contribute in different significant ways in the determination of students' choices of higher educational institutions. This assertion is made based on this interviewee's revelation that he began seeking information about universities with the aid of

digital media, which allowed him to acquire relevant information about various institutions' availability of program, duration of study, suitability of the program, cost of tuition, the possibility of obtaining a scholarship, language of instruction and most importantly the requirements for admission. In addition, digital media allowed for the exchange of timely correspondence between prospective students and institutions.

5 DISCUSSION

This chapter of the research presents the discussion of results to not only the research questions asked, but also to the recurring themes that were identified during the conduct of interviews for this research. Inferences are drawn from the information obtained through the interviews conducted in order to provide answers to the research questions. In addition, the relationship between the results of this research and their agreement with existing literatures are also discussed accordingly.

5.1 Research Question 1

What are the factors that affected the choices of Higher Education Institutions in the current Russian students at Arcada?

According to results from the interviews conducted on all of the respondents, most of them had at different times in their lives visited Finland and spent considerable amount of time in the country to learn how things operate in the country. In addition to also spending time in Finland, the prospective students in particular possessed deep interest in pursuing their academic careers in Finland, this spurred these prospective students into investigating and researching Higher Education Institutions located in Finland. This desire to study in Finland by Russian students could be attributed to the great quality of the country's educational system, which the Worldwide Educating for the Future Index (WEFFI, 2018) acknowledges Finland as one of the best in the world and also the global leader in the provision of future skills in education. Another attraction to the country could also be its ranking as one of the happiest nation in the world, for a second year running (WEFFI, 2018).

It is also important to note that according to data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Finland is recognized as the fifth most popular country of academic mobility. Solovyova, (2019), further disclosed that Russian students are one of the largest groups of international students in Finland. This could depict that an increasing number of Russian students are choosing to study abroad, especially in Finland. These are some of the factors that have attracted Russian students Arcada UAS.

In addition to the factors mentioned above, other factors that determined Russian students' choices of Arcada UAS as their favourite Higher Education Institutions included; campus location's closeness to the city centre, with accommodations within the same area; the institution's atmosphere, buildings and its organization, and also the university's very friendly teachers, and modern approach to education. Another important factor was good words of recommendation from a current student to any prospective student.

Another important theme that was discovered during the interviews, while attempting to answer this research question was "Insufficient online Information about Institutions". This theme of either insufficient information about a higher learning institution, or even total non-existence of information about higher institutions of learning is a predominant theme that most of the interviewees encountered while deciding their choice of higher learning institution. This is confirmed by five out of the six interviewees who revealed that apart from Arcada University's website that was comprehensive enough, most of other higher education institution's websites were filled with out-dated information that was not helpful to their search for higher education institutions. It is important to highlight that this situation is similar to the situation explained by Constantinides (2010), who argues that from a general perspective, comprehensive and full-scale social media strategies are non-existent in higher education marketing domains. Furthermore, based on the peculiar situation with Arcada, which provided a very rich and solid online or digital presence, it can be assumed that such marketing strategies is capable of providing Higher Education Institutions with new communication possibilities that give room for direct engagement with prospective students. This is probably which Russian students found Arcada UAS more attractive.

5.2 Research Question 2

What was the function of digital media in influencing students' choice of Arcada UAS as their choice of Higher Education Institution?

According to the results of all of the interviews conducted to answer this research question, it was discovered that all of the interviewees acknowledged the importance, significance and roles of the digital media, especially as employed by Arcada UAS in influencing their selection of higher institutions. This acknowledgment of the functions of

digital media is in tandem with Chaffey & Smith, (2017 pp. 13-14), who explain that with the introduction of digital marketing, increased opportunities are created for businesses and other organizations, because digital media allow getting closer to customers and understanding them even better. This means that with digital media, higher institutions of learning are able to reach and interact with their prospective students easily. Hence, because of the benefit highlighted above, most universities spend and invest increasing duration of time and resources on social media marketing campaigns, improving various forms of prospect as well as developing university web spaces (The Guardian, 2014). Therefore, it is now normal to find that universities utilize different tools in marketing their education, such as conducting online exhibits, sending direct mails, web pages and sites and the development of social networks (Filip, 2012).

The results thus suggest that in this digital age, Higher Educational Institutions require strong digital presence so that prospective students from across the world can simply access realistic and detailed information about any higher institution of learning. This position such higher education institution in a place where it is able to compete with its rivals in this new age of information, where many types of information are accessible by the click of buttons.

According to the responses offered by the current students of Arcada UAS, it can be inferred that digital media guided the current students in knowing the appropriate actions to take towards getting admitted to the university of their choice. In addition, with digital media, students could learn about the universities that offered their courses of choice, the prices of the courses, and the location of the institutions. Furthermore, digital media represent a repository of information created by various higher educational institutions, where both current and potential students are kept up-dated about the activities of their institution and also serving as a platform for information dissemination for higher institutions. Lastly, for prospective student, digital media can serve as a tool that informs them about the dates of their entrance examinations and other admission requirements. Apart from the functions of digital media discussed above, other functions of social media as briefly mentioned by the interviewees are; acting as a tool where potential students engage in conversations about admission processes with current students or admission staff of the higher education institution.

5.3 Research Question 3

What kinds of digital contents are prospective Russian students interested in when making the choice of Higher Education Institutions?

One of the results of the interviews revealed that certain students wished that the information contained in the websites and other digital media of higher education institutions was more detailed and more practical. For instance, these digital media ought to contain more information about how to integrate easily into the institution's system; how to attain success in academic career in the institution; details about the Finnish and the Swedish cultures and more importantly, how to get a job at the completion of academic pursuit. Furthermore, results revealed that students need these digital media platforms to be frequently updated and redesigned to include more relevant information, which is frequently brought up-to-date. In addition, results also revealed that more videos should be made available online, particularly about how different programs and studying in the institution appear in reality. Moreover, there should be more showcasing of videos from the Open Days, so that prospective students that are in distant locations either in Russia or other locations can see these proceedings and probably get inspired to pick Arcada UAS as their choice of higher education institution.

Finally, based on the interviews conducted on prospective students, the results concluded that digital media, especially higher education institutions' websites ought to have their contents translated into Russian and other languages. The rationale for this is to bridge the gap that exists in parents' inability to participate in their children's admission processes due to language barrier. Therefore, if website information is translated to other languages, there would be ease of reading and consequently, the full participation of parents in the selection of their children's institution of higher learning.

5.4 Limitations of the study

This qualitative study examined the experiences, feelings, thoughts and opinions of the interviewees of six students. It is important to take into consideration the fact that it is a qualitative study that the results and findings cannot be generalized. The respondents were encouraged to be open, when sharing their personal stories, however, it cannot be assured that they were honest.

Another factor that may have influenced the interpretation of the interviewees' comments is that the author is also a Russian student studying at Arcada UAS and could have own subjective opinions and views. Even though during the interviews the researcher avoided commenting own experiences and thoughts, this might have influenced the results and findings of the study.

6 CONCLUSION

From the findings made in this research, it can be concluded that apart from the fact that Finland possesses a system of education that has great quality, which is the main determinant factors that inspired Russian students to choose Arcada as their preferred choice of higher education institution. Other factors that determined Russian students' choices of Arcada UAS as their favourite Higher Education Institutions are the university's closeness to the heart of the city; the institution's atmosphere, buildings and its organization, and also the university's very friendly teachers, and modern approach to education. Another important determinant was great recommendation from a current student to any prospective student.

Furthermore, the functions of digital media as discovered by this research are the guidance of students in recognizing the right actions to take while seeking admission into any university of their choice; learning about the institutions that offer their preferred courses, the financial cost of the courses, and the location of the institutions. Moreover, digital media is a repository of information formulated by different higher educational institutions, where current and potential students are kept up-dated about the activities of their institution; serving as a platform for information dissemination for higher institutions. In addition, for prospective student, digital media can serve as a tool that informs them about the dates of their entrance examinations and other admission requirements. Moreover, other functions of digital media include; acting as a tool where potential students engage in conversations about admission processes with current students or admission staff of the higher education institution.

In conclusion, based on the results of this research, information contained in the websites and other digital media of higher education institutions should be more detailed and more practical. For example, the information should contain details about the processes of integration into the institution's system; the processes of attaining success in academic career in the institution; information about the Finnish cultures and more importantly, how to get a job at the completion of academic pursuit. In addition, these digital media platforms need to be frequently updated and redesigned to include more relevant information that is constantly brought up-to-date. Moreover, there should be more videos made available online, particularly about how different programs and studying in

the institution appear in reality. Lastly, higher education institutions' websites ought to have their contents translated into Russian and other languages. This will permit the inclusion of parents and other caregivers in the decision of deciding the appropriate higher education institution for their children.

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