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## **UNDERSTANDING STUDENT BEHAVIOR TO GUIDE FUTURE MARKETING COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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**Abstract:** This study aims to explore the influences of marketing communication strategies in the decision-making process about the Higher Education Institution (HEI) they will study to guide future strategies for attracting new students. To this end, a qualitative approach was chosen, having a public institution of Portuguese higher education and its students as a case study. Focus groups were applied and the results indicate that few marketing communication actions are being developed to retain students and this does not seem to be a strategic priority of the institution. The limitations are the fact that it is a case study and the number of focus groups. The contributions have practical implications for marketing and advertising professionals in future strategies aimed at attracting students.

**Keywords:** Marketing communication, higher education, consumer behaviors, decision-making process, student.

## INTRODUCTION

Defined as the way in which consumers are reminded, informed and persuaded about their services (Kotler & Keller, 2019), marketing communication strategies are central to HEI to attract new students. The mission of attracting new students is complex (Aydin, 2015) and should be a concern of HEIs (Cobra & Braga, 2004), especially for marketing and advertising professionals.

Thus, it is necessary to perceive students as consumers and understand the influences perceived by them during the decision-making process (Lomer et al., 2018). According to Kotler et al. (2017), these influences can be their own, from others and external, the latter being from sources outside the consumer. For the authors, they can come from different forms of marketing communication and from other interfaces between consumers and the media.

In addition, more traditional media such as television, radio, newspapers and magazines are no longer used as much (Kinzie et al., 2004), as are leaflets and other printed materials (Simões & Soares, 2010). And it is also clear that digital media can also work for students, especially social networks (Eder et al., 2010; Kim & Gasman, 2011) reinforces the importance of this problem. The issue is widely discussed in previous studies in which quantitative approaches predominated (e.g. Aydin & Bayir, 2016; Rika et al., 2016; Rughoobur-Seetah, 2019; Pawar et al., 220).

In this study, a qualitative approach is proposed, observing the reality of an HEI in Portugal. Therefore, the objective is to identify the influences of marketing communication strategies in the decision-making process about the HEI they will study to guide future strategies for attracting new students. This is justified due to the competitiveness in the education sector and the scarcity of studies with this approach. In addition to theoretical reflection, this study has practical implications for marketing and advertising professionals working in higher education.

The sequence is organized as follows: methodology, presenting instruments and methods, as well as the model used; Results and discussion; and conclusions, with implications, limitations and future lines of investigation.

## MÉTODOS

To explore the influences perceived by students in the decision-making process about the HEI they will study, a case study was chosen with master's students from an institution of the portuguese public higher education system, the Polytechnic of Guarda. The institution is inland and faces difficulties to reach the minimum number of students inscribed in some courses. Therefore, and to understand this unique context, the

qualitative method was chosen (Creswell, 2013) and the data were collected through two focus groups, one with six and the other with four participants. A semi-structured guide was prepared.

The participants were selected for convenience and comprised students of the master's degree in marketing and communication offered by the institution. This group was chosen for its ability to reflect on the problem posed in the current reality of the institution. The number of sessions considered the homogeneity of the group (Freitas et al., 2013) and the saturation point was measured by the absence of new information (Thiry-Cherques, 2009).

The answers were submitted to content analysis, observing the steps proposed by Bardin (2015). The data were processed and transcribed, then decoded and, finally, validated in terms of causes and effects in relation to the study objective. The variables were defined considering the key words and their meanings, the context of exposition of ideas, the consistency, frequency and extent of observations, and the specificity of the responses (Campenhoudt et al., 2019).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Considering the objective and the specific context of the Politécnico da Guarda, two focus groups were applied with students of the master's degree in marketing and communication of that institution. The first group had six participants, three Portuguese and three foreigners; four graduates from the Politécnico da Guarda, one from another portuguese institution and one graduate from abroad. Except for one, from the field of design, all of them are graduated in courses in the areas of communication, specifically in public relations and multimedia. In the second group, which had four participants, all are portuguese and graduated from the

Polytechnic of Guarda, two in marketing, one in management and another in public relations.

Participants were asked if they perceived the existence of marketing communication actions carried out by the institution and oriented to master's students during their decision-making process. The answers were mostly negative, only three reported having perceived some action in this direction. Two of them noticed leaflets and flyers spread by companies and entities in the region; the other, who is a foreigner, observed the broadcast on local radio and television in his home country. For these three, an additional question was asked to understand if these actions influenced their decision and the foreign participant said yes.

From these answers, it can be inferred that it still manages the traditional media in the process of attracting students these days, which contrasts with the perception of Palmer et al. (2004) and Simões & Soares (2010). Among the participants, three were mentioned whose answers are such actions by the institution for admission to the degree, but not for the master's degree. This also allows us to infer that there may be gaps in the Polytechnic of Guarda's strategies for attracting students to these specific courses.

Afterwards, the eight participants with a degree at the institution were asked if there were marketing communication actions to motivate them to take a master's degree at the same institution as the degree. All responded that they were motivated by teachers or colleagues, but not by marketing communication actions. Two of them mentioned that self-motivation was predominant and that they were proactive in seeking information about the master's degrees offered by the institution. This reinforces that, in addition to external influences, one's own and others' influences

also matter, as mentioned by Kotler et al. (2017).

Table 1 presents, in a summarized way, the results obtained on the influence of marketing communication strategies in the decision-making process about the HEI they will study from the perspective of the students of the master's degree in marketing and communication at the Politécnico da Guarda.

In addition, participants were also asked which communication channels they used during the decision-making process to consult information about the institution. All mentioned the use of at least one channel in digital media, with emphasis on social networks, mentioned by six; and the institution's website, mentioned by four of the ten participants. The social network cited was Facebook and these results corroborate the perception of Eder et al. (2010) and Kim and Gasman (2011), on the positive influence of

the internet, especially social networks and websites in the decision-making process of prospective students. Table 2 below gathers the results of this question.

Furthermore, the results also indicate mentions of more traditional channels. The same participant mentioned having made contact via telephone and in person. This may suggest the importance of integrating digital and traditional communication channels to meet the different needs of potential students.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Considering the objective of identifying the influences of marketing communication strategies in the decision-making process about the HEI they will study, this study contributed to clarify the problem considering the current reality and the specific context of the Politécnico da Guarda, in Portugal. The reflections made have practical implications

Question	Yes	No
Identified marketing communication actions carried out by the institution and aimed at future master's students.	3	7
Influenced by marketing communication actions in the decision-making process about where to do the marter's ddegree.*	1	2
There were marketing communication actions to motivate them to leave the dgreee and do the marter's degree at the institution itself.**	0	8

\*Only three noticed any marketing communication actions carried out by the institution and oriented towards future master's students.

\*\*Only two did not complete the degree in Polytechnic of Guarda.

Table 1 - Marketing Communication Actions.

Channel	Yes	No
Social Media	6	4
Website	4	6
E-mail	1	9
Face-to-face service	1	9
Phone	1	9

Table 2 – Communication Channels

and can potentially guide marketing and advertising professionals in future strategies aimed at attracting students.

Through the results obtained, it was observed that, from the students' perspective, few marketing communication actions are being developed, so that less than half were able to perceive any type of call when entering the master's degree. Therefore, there was still a low influence on the decision-making process. In addition, retaining undergraduate students to continue at the institution in the master's degree does not seem to be a strategic priority of marketing communications developed by the institution. Finally, given the students' inclination to use digital media, it seems convenient to guide actions in these communication channels.

However, despite the relevant contributions, the case study methodology is too restrictive, which makes more generalized conclusions difficult. Considering the difficulty to reach the minimum number of students enrolled in some courses, the number of focus groups carried out and the focus on students of a single course may not be enough to reflect the specific context of the Polytechnic of Guarda, which is why it is suggested for studies futures, increase the number of groups and expand to other courses.

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