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The decision journey to apply for higher education abroad:

An exploratory study of the interactions between international students and online media communication channels

by

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to explore the consumer behavior of international students in the context of the choice for a higher education institution abroad in order to gain insights on their interactions with different online media communication channels during their decision journey. Previous research discussed the increased use of the internet during the application process for universities abroad. Furthermore, past research in consumer decision-making theory applied to international students is mainly quantitative, considering the factors influencing their choice and most accessed online marketing channels during the application process. This study pursued to explore the reasons and motivations of consumers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the international student behavior along their decision journey to apply for higher education overseas.

This research was conducted using a qualitative research design with an exploratory and inductive approach. This approach was adopted in order to gain a deeper understanding of the meanings and perceptions of international students along their decision journey to study abroad. The researchers conducted 17 interviews with international prospective students of different nationalities, between the ages 18 and 28 and gathered secondary data from Educations Media Group (EMG) during the ten weeks of collaboration. EMG is a market leader in online educational marketing with a distinct contribution to the marketization of higher education.

The findings suggested that international students in this research are empowered consumers who choose to interact with many different online media communication channels where they find relevant content to each stage in their decision journey. The prospective students' motivations and influences on their behavior are presented along with their doubts and fears identified to be part of their decision-making process in this research. Furthermore, their interactions with consumer-driven and company-driven marketing communications are observed to support the movement to the next stage in the decision journey to apply for higher education abroad.

Keywords: higher education, marketization of higher education, international student, consumer decision-making, empowered consumer, consumer decision journey, online marketing, online media communications

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1   Introduction

Higher education is recognized nowadays as a global market with growing competition for students and market share within universities worldwide. Globalization has changed the means in which education is perceived and lately it has been considered a service which can be marketed internationally (Melewar & Akel, 2005). Increased competition in the higher education sector has required higher education institutions (HEIs) to search for strategies to build competitive advantages and attract more international students as alternative to shrinking government funding (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Chapleo, 2010). In this context, HEIs have become increasingly marketing-oriented and students are gradually considered consumers (Nicholls, Harris, Morgan, Clarke & Sims, 1995; Naudé & Ivy, 1999; Mourad, Ennew & Kortam, 2011). The student today is empowered with market knowledge and seeks information on a global level to decide where to consume educational services (Nicholls et al. 1995; Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006).

Due to globalization and increased competition, HEIs required the essential marketing tools to face the challenges of such an international market for higher education (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003). In recent years, a number of studies have been published discussing the incorporation of concepts of branding and marketing in the field of higher education which are common in business settings (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Therefore, branding and marketing of HEIs have been subject of much research with an increasing focus on international student recruitment (Gray, Fam & Llanes, 2003; Melewar & Akel, 2005; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Chapleo, 2010, 2011; Priporas & Kamenidou, 2011; Joseph, Mullen & Spake, 2012; Alwi & Kitchen, 2014; Foroudi, Dinnie, Kitchen, Melewar & Foroudi, 2017). Moreover, with the advent of the internet, it became possible for HEIs to market their services to a broader range of students, reaching out to international markets worldwide. Accordingly, students are consistently placing emphasis on online searching tools when looking for information and ways to interact with HEIs (QS, 2018b).

According to Royo-Vela and Hünermund (2016), as the competition has risen in the higher education market, the need for new interactive marketing communication strategies has grown both for attracting domestic and international students. As internet use increases and students search for higher education information online (Gomes & Murphy, 2003), education portals such as StudyPortals.com, Educations.com, Masterstudies.com emerged in recent years. These online platforms list undergraduate, graduate and doctoral programs worldwide and provide information of HEIs, application requirements and procedures to potential students. Recently, in addition to these services, such portals became more focused on online marketing offering expertise in search engine optimization, content marketing and social media marketing (EMG 2017; HotCourses, 2018; StudyPortals, 2018).

1.1 Problematization

Consumer behavior and its understanding has been a research topic of paramount importance for organizations through the years (Noel, 2009). Higher education consumer choice has also been a widely researched topic (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016). After a review of decision-making (Bowers & Pugh, 1973; Lawson, 1997; Cubillo, Sánchez, & Cerviño, 2006; Kalimullin & Dobrotvorskaya, 2016) and consumer behavior research (Sander, 1992; Baldwin & James, 2000; Liefeld, 2004; Bartkute, 2017), we noticed that the majority of these have used quantitative methods to determine the factors that influence consumers' choices and more specifically students' choices. Thus, current literature is offering a very limited qualitative approach on students' behavior as consumers, and is giving a narrow and very specific point of view of their decision journey. Moreover, there are only a few researches to be found on international students' behavior. Most of them investigate domestic students (Baldwin & James, 2000; Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Jan & Ammari, 2016; Bartkute, 2017). Many studies were about the motives and university attributes influencing students when choosing a HEI. However, they were mainly focusing on factor analysis and not on the meanings behind the consumer decision journey.

Furthermore, little research has been done on discovering the stages of the consumer decision journey to international students. Accordingly, Gai, Xu and Pelton (2016) study a discussion forum used by Chinese students and how it influences their application process for graduate degree programs abroad. They propose a five-stage student application process model and analyze the stages where the forum has greater impact. Moreover, Galan, Lawley & Clements (2015) analyze the use of social media by international postgraduate students in an Australian university during their decision to apply for university. Their research demonstrates how social media is utilized by students in different stages of the decision journey. Therefore, regarding the use of online marketing channels by international students, few studies have focused on identifying the channels accessed by students (Gomes & Murphy, 2003) and how students interact with specific channels along their decision journey (Galan, Lawley & Clements, 2015; Gai, Xu & Pelton, 2016). However, there is limited research on the reasons for students to choose each online media communication channel and how each of these channels influence and support them along their decision journey.

1.2 Aim

The focus of this research is to gather and analyze qualitative data concerning behavioral patterns, decision-making steps and interactions with online media communication channels of international students along their decision journey to apply for higher education abroad. Thus, the aim of this research is to explore the consumer behavior of international prospective students when choosing a higher education institution abroad in order to gain insights on their experience with different online media communication channels during their decision journey. In order to explore this subject, a specific research question is addressed.

1.3　　　　Research Question

How do international students interact with online media communication channels along their decision journey to apply for higher education abroad?

1.4　　　　Contribution

This study contributes to the research literature on consumer behavior and on consumer decision journey with students as consumers of higher education services. This information will provide a theoretical framework for the understanding of the students' consumer behavior and consumer decision journey that organizations such as higher education institutions, education portals and international schools can use to design new online marketing strategies specifically aimed at the new generation of international prospective students. Additionally, insights can be used also by higher education institutions for managing their online presence, planning marketing strategies and building brand awareness. Providing organizations in the industry with valuable insights, which they can adopt and apply to customer centric marketing strategies (Khan, 2013) and build competitive advantage through these strategic decisions (Kotler & Keller, 2012), is an utmost ambition of any research on marketing and business.

1.5　　　　Context

This study will be developed in collaboration with a company that has a distinct presence in the marketization of higher education. This company has online marketing expertise for educational institutions from all over the world and its name is Educations Media Group (EMG). The organization was founded in 2001 in Stockholm, Sweden and has been intensely growing ever since. EMG is a market leader of educational marketing with its headquarters in Stockholm and offices in other Scandinavian capitals such as Copenhagen, Oslo and Helsinki and also a local office in Germany (EMG, 2017). They are working with 4000 education providers in 40 countries and have different national websites in various languages depending on the market, where potential students can find approximately 50000 programs every month (EMG, 2017). It is a convenient way to search for study programs abroad in one platform that includes all the information one may need to make a decision about the choice of the HEI.

Nowadays, consumers are in need of finding information faster and easier and are increasingly interacting with brands and other consumers online (Scott, 2015). As it was mentioned previously, online marketing is not only the future but also the present of communication strategies. Therefore, we considered it to be a contemporary topic to research while using EMG as the practical example.

1.6   Outline of the Thesis

The outline of the thesis is divided into five different parts. The chapters have been arranged in the following order:

Chapter 1 introduces the research topic by presenting a background of the rise of competition between higher education institutions and the rise of online marketing. Moreover, the research question, aim and context as well as the purpose of this study are presented.

Chapter 2 presents and discusses relevant past research, theoretical views and concepts on the marketization of higher education, consumer behavior and decision making, consumer decision journey and online media communications. Those literature streams are aiming to explore the research topic from the base of it.

Chapter 3 provides a methodological overview of this thesis. It includes a detailed presentation and argumentation of the methodological choices that have been made in this research study which are the following: research approach, research design, data collection methods, data handling and data analysis, trustworthiness and ethical considerations and lastly limitations.

Chapter 4 provides a presentation, analysis and discussion of the empirical findings from the interviews and the secondary data sources with a reflection to previous literature and theoretical concepts on the subject as they were presented in Chapter 2.

Chapter 5 includes overall conclusions of the study by summarizing and discussing the aim and the main points of this thesis, the outcome of the findings, contributions, practical implications and limitations as well as some recommendations for future research.

2 Literature and Theoretical Review

In this chapter we discuss the four themes which guide the theoretical background of this research: the marketization of higher education, elements in consumer decision-making, the consumer decision journey, and online media communications. The following figure (Figure 2.1) shows the theoretical framework of this study.
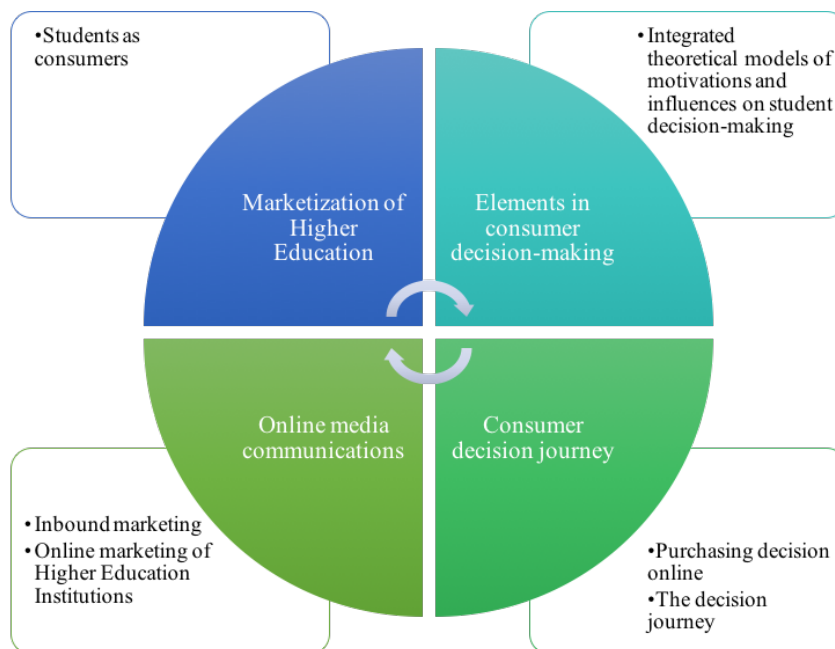
Figure 2.1 - Theoretical Framework (Own design)

Initially, the context of competition in the higher education market is introduced. It is particular interesting to note the increasing number of international students enrolling in universities worldwide and how higher education institutions became more marketing-oriented as they intensified the development of strategies for international recruitment (Nicholls et al., 1995; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). Furthermore, as the key focus of this research is to analyze the consumer behavior, it is essential to define the student as a consumer of higher education services. Accordingly, the concept of the empowered consumer (Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006) is paramount to this study once we discuss their preferred means of interactions with brands and the power relations which influence their behavior in the market (Sassatelli, 2007). The student in this research is a consumer empowered with market knowledge who seeks information to make their own purchase decisions online.

Regarding consumers' motivations and the process of choosing an international HEI, Cubillo, Sánchez and Cerviño's (2006) theoretical model is of particular relevance to this research. Their study presents an integrated view of elements which guide the purchase intention of international students applying for university abroad. Their study assists on providing insights to the investigation of students' motivations during their decision journey. The consumer behavior along this journey is the central topic of this research. In this subject, the circular consumer decision journey by Court, Elzinga, Mulder and Vetlik, (2009) considers the brand touch points which impact consumers in different stages of the journey. Although it is not specific to the decision journey of international students, their analysis of brands' interactions with consumers through company-driven marketing and consumer-driven marketing along the journey can be transferred to the reality of students deciding on a HEI abroad. Moreover, existing research (Galan, Lawley & Clements, 2015; Gai, Xu & Pelton, 2016; Jan & Ammari, 2016) analyzing the interactions of international students with a specific online marketing channel in different stages of the decision journey is reviewed to understand the knowledge background in this field of study. They identify the main online marketing channel accessed by students, however they do not explore the reasons to choose each channel or how the information they find assists them deciding which university to apply for studies overseas.

Finally, the evolution of online media communications is briefly introduced and a new practice is described as inbound marketing. In response to the information technology development and empowerment of the consumer, the inbound marketing strategy takes into account the need of consumers to find relevant content, to make their own choices on where to seek information and to interact with brands and other consumers when making purchasing decisions (Halligan & Shah, 2010). Additionally, previous research (Gomes & Murphy, 2003) acknowledging the increase use of online marketing communication channels by international students applying for university overseas is discussed. Their study provides information on which online marketing channels are accessed by students while they decide upon an institution abroad. However, the core of this research is to explore how and why students choose to access each online marketing channel and how these interactions support them along their decision journey to apply for a higher education institution abroad.

2.1   Marketization of Higher Education

In this section, the context of higher education competition and the increased focus on international recruitment marketing activities by HEIs is presented. This discussion is important to understand how higher education institutions are now perceived as brands and students as consumers of branded higher education services.

The higher education sector has become an important source of income for many countries with special focus on international student recruitment. The United Kingdom was one of the first nations to promote educational services internationally through British Council, their official government agency which influenced HEIs in the country to gradually adopt branding and marketing strategies (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Chapleo, 2010, 2011). For instance, higher education providers in the UK in year

2016/2017 generated an income of £35.7 billion, with £4.7 billion of income coming from non-EU students' tuition fees (HESA, 2018a). According to HESA (2018b) in the same academic year, one fifth of non-UK domiciled students came from China. The QS Applicant Survey Report (QS, 2018a) listed the current top five destinations of international students in 2017 which were United States, UK, Canada, Australia and Germany, respectively.

In these circumstances, HEIs worldwide face an intense competition and are actively looking for strategies to recruit international students. According to Nicholls et al. (1995), HEIs are increasingly becoming marketing oriented which they believe is the appropriate approach for the higher education competitive environment, particularly due to the intangibility of the service offering. They argue for a more proactive attitude to promotion and branding to reduce risk perception of students in their decision-making process.

According to Keller (1993), brands create an image in the minds of consumers. Additionally, he mentions that brands differentiate their goods or services offerings from other competitors. The author explains that the uniqueness of brand associations in the consumer memory affects consumer response to its marketing communications. Thus, a number of studies have been exploring the higher education segment from this perspective of consumer-based branding and service marketing due to the intangibility of its offerings (Naudé & Ivy, 1999; Gray, Fam & Llanes, 2003; Melewar & Akel, 2005; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Chapleo, 2010, 2011; Mourad, Ennew & Kortam, 2011; Priporas & Kamenidou, 2011; Joseph, Mullen & Spake, 2012; Alwi & Kitchen, 2014; Foroudi et al., 2017). Furthermore, the concept of corporate brand is relevant to this study when Urde (2013) explains that the organization along with its culture is an essential part of the corporate brand which has multiple stakeholders. In this context, Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana (2007) argue that university brands should be considered corporate brands "where the university expects all the departments and schools to align themselves more strongly with its central brand identity and brand values" (p.945). Thus, in this research we understand university brands as corporate brands which differentiate them from competitors and guides the communication with all stakeholders, as well as facilitating the choice of university for the consumer.

However, some authors are critical to the marketization of higher education and the consumerism of knowledge (Lowrie, 2007; Bunzel, 2007; Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009). Additionally, some studies identified that HEIs consider international branding challenging and usually lack specialized professionals responsible for marketing the institution internationally (Chapleo, 2010, 2011). Although Nicholls et al. (1995) recognize the fact that academics are usually uncomfortable to promote their services and see marketing as too commercial focused, they believe it is possible to find a balance between commercialism and professionalism in the implementation of a marketing orientation. Furthermore, Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown (2004) suggest relationship marketing as a compatible strategy considering the nature of higher education services, which involves students in the marketing and image-building of HEIs. Therefore, through this marketization of higher education, students assume the role of consumers (Mourad, Ennew & Kortam, 2011), interacting with university brands.

2.1.1 Students as consumers

Nowadays, in different contexts people are speaking of themselves as consumers and are being treated as consumers by a variety of institutions inside or outside the market. According to Sassatelli (2007), consumer culture is also producing consumers as it explores various ways in which people act as consumers. She argues that by being habituated with being called consumers, we contribute to the definition of the meaning of consumption in contemporary society. Additionally, she explains that with modern capitalism the promotion of goods and services is already targeted at a specific public, which are produced to a certain consumer. According to the author, in consumer culture theory, consumption is central to the maintenance of interpersonal connections, identities and power relations in society.

In this sense, Nicholls et al. (1995) categorize students as active users and user specified consumers as they can choose from a diverse range of HEIs and education programs. Furthermore, students act as consumers as they decide where to enroll for a course and their experience influences the university relationship with other stakeholders, such as companies which are future employers of these same students and consequently the university brand reputation (Nicholls et al., 1995). Therefore, the concept of students as consumers has been widely incorporated in recent research on the marketization of higher education, university choice, university branding and so forth.

Additionally, Sassatelli (2007) claims that contemporary consumers are increasingly becoming more critical. Furthermore, in the ethnography study of the Burning Man event by Kozinets (2002), the discussion around a community which is formed to resist the market influence empowers and educates consumers to create their own consumption meanings, shared practices and own roles and identities, as an attempt to escape the market logics. In this case, the consumer emancipation is temporal and local, as it occurs during the event. However, in contemporary consumer society it is not completely possible for consumers to distance themselves from the market. Consumption is a central activity of the contemporary society and "through our purchase decisions and through the way we use goods we not only shape ourselves as particular consumers but also express and stabilize our different identities and cultural orientations" (Sassatelli, 2007, p.84). It does not mean that consumers are passively incorporating roles and identities expected by the market in the consumption of brands. Consumers are also co-creators of brand meanings (Gustafsson, 2017) and the power relation between brands and consumers are more fragmented lately (Sassatelli, 2007).

The development of communication technologies and the rise of internet has enabled consumers to access more information, to exchange information with other consumers and become part of a global marketplace (Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006). Consumers can access, understand and share much more information nowadays, which according to Pires, Stanton and Rita (2006) represents a shift in the power relation between businesses and consumers. The authors argue that consumers are gaining control of the market knowledge and are increasingly empowered in their decision-making processes. Moreover, they explain the development of virtual communities is a consequence of this intensive connectivity and these communities allow consumers to exchange information about businesses and their value propositions with each other, creating their own expectations about quality of products and services and reducing their dependence on companies' communications. Empowered

consumers search for market information and "choose what they want, when they want it, on their own terms" (Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006, p.939).

In this research, we intend to explore the decision journey of this empowered consumer and understand how they choose to interact with different online marketing communication channels during the process of deciding to study abroad and applying for a university degree. Furthermore, students are considered consumers as universities are competing for their application by targeting marketing communications to recruit them worldwide. The international student creates his/her own brand meanings through the interactions with university brands which in this case is mostly online. Hence, we explore their decision journey to select a university abroad and their experience with online marketing communications of higher education institutions. In the following sections the concepts which guide the analysis of the motivations of students in the process of choice and the different stages of the consumer decision journey are discussed.

2.2 Elements in Consumer Decision-Making

The decision-making process to study overseas is of high involvement and high risk (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Galan, Lawley & Clements, 2015) and includes extensive information search. The decision of where to study is influenced by a variety of elements, from product attributes to price. For instance, Binsardi and Ekwulugo's (2003) study reveals that international students decide based on academic recognition, quality and follow-up services which are product characteristics; and tuition fee, scholarships, students' value perception, which are related to the price component. Therefore, their study reveals the importance of product and price elements in the marketing strategy of higher education institutions promoting international education.

Furthermore, the decision-making process of international students involves other elements, not only related to the HEI itself. In this sense, Cubillo, Sánchez and Cerviño (2006) propose an integrated theoretical model to the purchase intention of international students influenced by five main elements: personal reasons, the effect of country image, city effect, institution image and evaluation of the program of study (Figure 2.2). The authors analyze the existing literature on student decision and present an integrated framework to investigate the influence and interrelations of each element which impacts the final choice of students. Although most of the existing literature that they integrate are quantitative, based on factor analysis, the framework is relevant as it discusses diverse elements which guide the choices of international students and are explored more in-depth in this study.
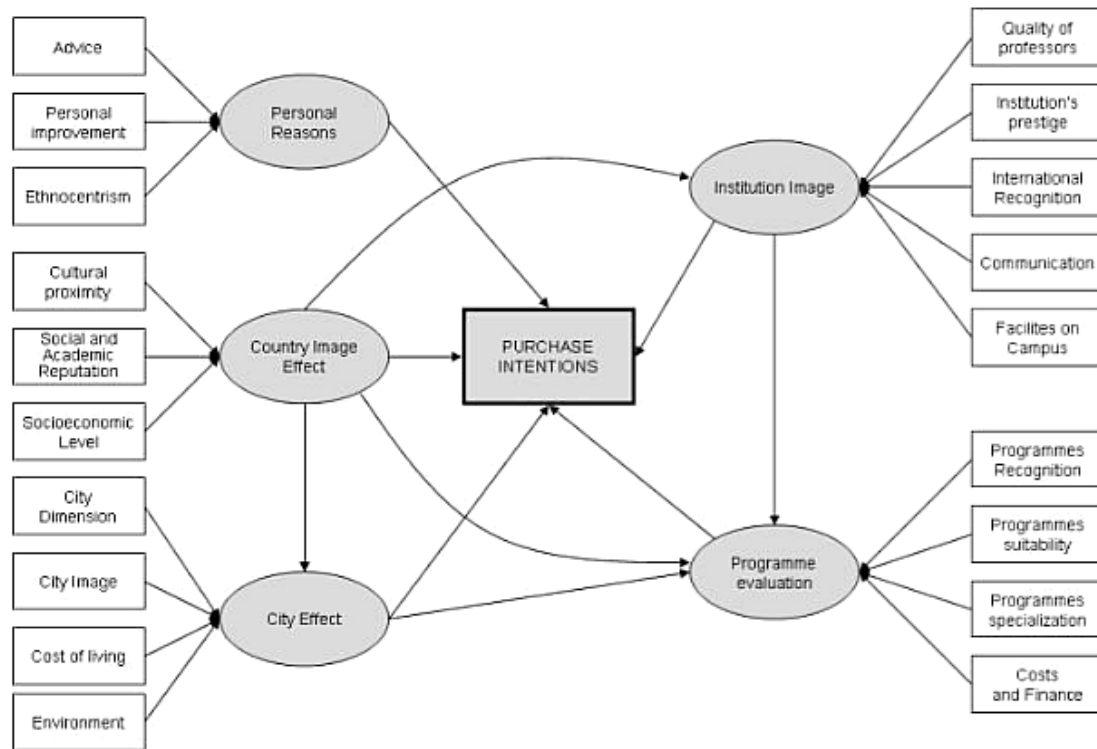
Figure 2.2 Model of international students' preferences (Cubillo, Sánchez, & Cerviño, 2006, p.107).

Regarding personal reasons, personal improvement elements such as employment opportunities and higher career status are considered important to international students deciding to study abroad (Cubillo, Sánchez, & Cerviño, 2006). As discussed by Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003), the advice from other students, recommendations from family and friends also play a role in influencing the purchase intention. Thus, Cubillo, Sánchez and Cerviño (2006) consider personal improvement and advice as items of personal reasons to choose an HEI overseas. Additionally, they analyze research of country effect on products and services purchase, suggesting that country image influences the student choice in terms of cultural distance, social reputation, academic reputation, development level, cost of living, immigration procedures, work opportunities during the course and time to get a degree. Other than the country, they consider that the city image also impacts students' decision processes regarding the city size, linguistic proximity or distance, safety and security, social facilities, international and university environment.

In terms of the institution image, Cubillo, Sánchez and Cerviño (2006) categorize three different items: (i) corporate image consisting of institution prestige, ranking position, brand reputation and researcher reputation; (ii) faculty which includes expertise of teaching staff, professional experience of staff and (iii) institution facilities comprehending campus atmosphere, social life, library facilities, sports facilities, availability of computers and self-study areas. In accordance to Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003), they consider that program evaluation consists of product characteristics such as international recognition, program suitability, specialization, quality, recognition by future employers and total cost and finance

aspects of the program. Thus, Cubillo, Sánchez and Cerviño's (2006) theoretical model is relevant to this study as it presents an integrated view of the purchase intention which can be used to explore the different motivations and influences on the decision-making process of international students applying for university abroad.

Furthermore, in this research we do not consider the decision-making as a rational or linear process. Accordingly, Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka's (2015) explain it is unlikely to exist a list of factors that influence all students as the higher education market is segmented. Most researches on student choice are focused on a particular university or country and even results from robust surveys cannot reveal a linear decision process and should be treated with caution, according to the authors. Moreover, they explain that the studies are usually done in two different stages: after students have been admitted to the university which has the issue of post rationalization of the decision-making or before, as high school students influenced by preconceptions and group or parents pressure. Accordingly, Chen (2008) suggests that exploring consumer behavior and choice patterns helps HEIs determine the role of students and their parents in the decision-making process. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) argue that responses can be very different depending on the stage the students are in their decision journey, which is one of the reasons not to consider it a rational process. Additionally, the authors identify some research gaps which are closely related to our study: (i) lack of research on the process of choice rather than the factors influencing the decision and (ii) limited research on international students' choice of university abroad.

Hence, in this research, we explore the motivations of the student as a consumer of higher education services, taking into account that there is most probably a range of elements which guide the process of choice of international students applying for university abroad. For this reason, we interview prospective students from different countries, before they have been admitted to the university to avoid post rationalization as Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) suggest.

2.3 Consumer Decision Journey

2.3.1 Purchasing Decision Online

As we explore the decision journey of international students which occurs mainly online, it is important to discuss the theories regarding the consumer behavior on the internet. Concerning the process of choice by consumers in the context of the internet, Butler and Peppard (1998) build on the traditional EKB model by Engel, Kollat and Blackwell from 1973. They propose a five-stage model of consumer behavior and purchase decision which comprehends the issues related to online marketing strategies in each stage (Figure 2.3).
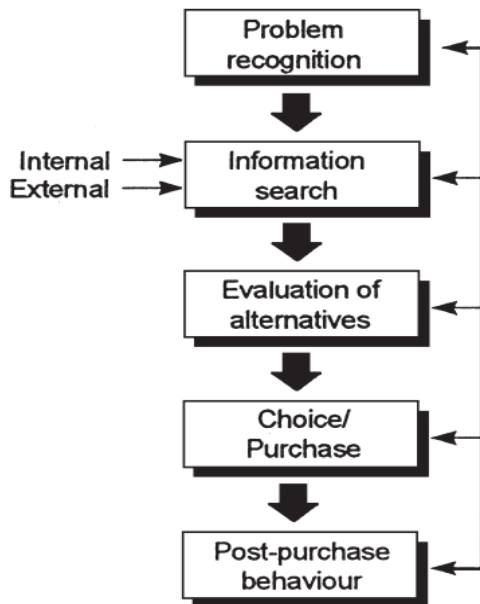
Figure 2.3: Consumer behavior and purchasing decision on the internet by Butler and Peppard (1998, p.604).

In the problem recognition stage, Butler and Peppard (1998) argue that with the recent use of tracking technology it is possible to anticipate the needs and wants of consumers so marketers are now able to trigger the consumer. Indeed, universities worldwide are investing in creating a relationship with potential students, mainly through social media channels, which can be used as a trigger to study abroad. Regarding the information search stage, they discuss the fact that marketers can now proactively provide the required information to each targeted consumer and the brand is of increasing importance to facilitate the search and decision process at the latest. In the context of international recruitment this is of particular interest because technology allows HEIs to target students from different countries, and provide specific information regarding admission requirements to each nationality, for example. Therefore, the internet allows for a more customized content and targeted marketing strategy.

The common sources of information for the next stage of evaluation of alternatives are: (i) word-of-mouth which nowadays includes and sometimes is replaced by electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), (ii) previous experience, (iii) marketing communications, (iv) consumer groups including virtual communities and (v) growing number of comparison websites with price and reviews (Butler & Peppard, 1998). In the case of higher education, different factors influence the student in the decision to apply for a university, as the equivalent of purchasing a product. For instance, Galan, Lawley and Clements (2015) suggest that international students are influenced by social factors, word-of-mouth and information from different media types, for example, the university website. However, we argue that more research is needed to understand the motives and interactions of students with different media communication options in this stage of the decision journey.

As Butler and Peppard (1998) consider mainly products and services which can be acquired online, the stage of purchase decision according to their study is related to the ease of ordering, payment and delivery which is not suitable to the process of application for a

university abroad. In the case of higher education, this stage comprehends the application submission to the university. Nevertheless, their model is relevant to our research as it considers the changes and opportunities in the context of the purchasing decision journey on the internet. Some of the concepts related especially to the stages one to three apply to the case of international students as their main source of information is online, due to the distance from universities and convenience of searching for information on the internet. Although the authors recognize the possibility of iteration during the process of choice, they prefer to simplify by adopting a linear and funnel view of the purchasing decision journey online where consumers move from a wide numbers of brands in the first stages to a selected brand they choose to purchase from at the end.

2.3.2   The Decision Journey

Recently, a model presented by Court, Elzinga, Mulder and Vetlik (2009) represents a change from the funnel metaphor of purchase decision where consumers consider a broad number of brands and reduce along the way in a linear process to a circular and more iterative approach. They call it the "consumer decision journey" in which brands have many touch points of interaction with consumers. This framework recognizes the circular characteristic of the consumer decision journey which we believe better represents the application process of students going abroad. They propose a four-stage consumer decision journey illustrated on Figure 2.4 below.
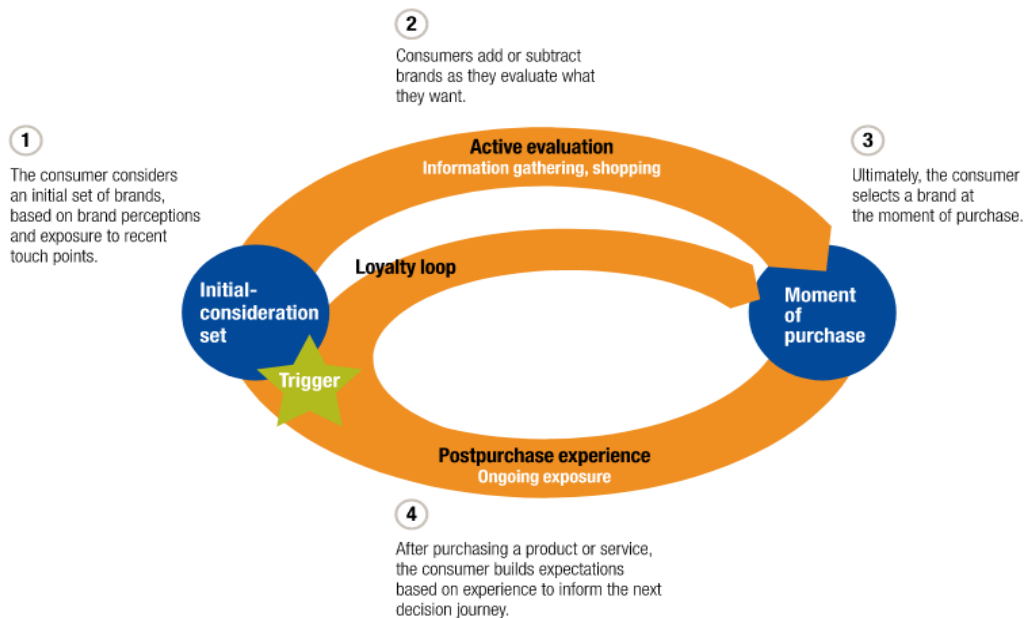

Figure 2.4: "Consumer decision journey" by Court, Elzinga, Mulder and Vetlik (2009)

The consumer decision journey model represents the important role of the brand, however the perspective of this research is on the consumer interaction with different media

communications in the process of choice along this journey. According to Court et al. (2009), brand touch points influence consumers in different stages of the consumer decision journey. For example, in the initial-consideration stage, company-driven marketing strategy, brand awareness and past experience with the brand seem to influence the most. The authors consider brand awareness important in the first stage as there are three times more chances of consumers to purchase from brands included in the initial consideration phase. They also argue that impressions of brands are formed every day from advertisements, conversations with friends and family and previous experience with branded products and services. Therefore, in this study we analyze the consumer impressions of brands, particularly through interactions with different online marketing channels and how the information that students gather assist on creating a perception of the university brand, supporting their movement to the next stage of the decision journey.

Opposite to the funnel metaphor, Court et al. (2009) explain the number of brands in the second stage of active evaluation in most cases now expands once consumers start to seek for information and recommendations. Additionally, they explain consumer-driven marketing, especially word of mouth, online research and internet reviews influence more the active-evaluation stage of the journey which is similar to Butler and Peppard's (1998) analysis. They also recognize different types of consumer to consumer interaction such as in virtual communities and peer reviews on the evaluation of alternatives stages which in their framework is the third. Likewise, existing research suggests a rise in consumer to consumer interactions and different media communication options which influence the consumer behavior along the decision journey, other than branded traditional advertisements (Keller, 2009; Mulhern, 2009; Patrutiu-Baltes, 2016). Therefore, Court et al. (2009) suggest brands must understand how to influence consumer-driven touch points in order to be considered in the decision journey of the empowered consumer of today.

After the consumer has made the decision and purchased from the selected brand, the post purchase experience is of extremely importance because it influences the decision journey of others (Court et al., 2009). The authors consider that the active loyal consumer recommends the brand and write about his/her experience online, which feeds the ongoing cycle of the decision journey with reviews, e-WOM and so forth. This is another argument presented by them to consider the consumer decision journey an interactive cycle instead of a linear purchasing funnel. Furthermore, they reinforce that marketers should prioritize active loyal consumers and invest in consumer-driven content generation to increase the chances of being considered by consumers at some point of their decision journey.

According to Batra and Keller (2016), consumers seek and process specific information in each stage of the decision journey which makes a certain media communication option more or less appropriate to satisfy consumers' need for information and facilitate the movement to the next stage of the journey. Additionally, they also recognize the dynamics of the decision journey as consumers can move forward or backward across stages or even drop out of the process at any moment. In this sense, Court et al., (2009) propose that companies need to rethink their marketing strategies to spend on the touch points that most influence the consumer in each stage. For example, they argue that mass media advertising may become obsolete if consumers are not getting the information they want, at the moment they need it, to make decisions themselves. Moreover, both Batra and Keller (2016) and Court et al. (2009)

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agree that digital marketing facilitates the targeting of content and advertising towards each consumer at the appropriate stage of their decision journey with the advantage of accuracy and increased cost efficiency.

Specifically analyzing the decision journey of international students Gai, Xu and Pelton (2016) propose a five-stage model from (i) predisposition – intention to study abroad, (ii) information seeking for targeting schools, (iii) application, (iv) evaluating admission offers and (v) final decision. Through a netnography method, the authors study a discussion forum used by Chinese students and how it influences their decision-making process to apply for graduate degree programs abroad. Their findings suggest that the forum is more concentrated with practical information associated with application processes such as exam preparation, application experience sharing, documents preparation and so forth. However, they also observe that prospective students interact with current students of the university to know about their experience in stages two, three and four which are associated with information seeking, application and evaluation of admission offers, respectively. Thus, once again the active role of the consumer in the decision process and the importance of consumer-driven marketing is emphasized.

Accordingly, Galan, Lawley and Clements (2015) analyze the use of social media by international postgraduate students in an Australian university during the five decision-making stages to choose a university abroad. In their study, Butler and Peppard's (1998) five stages model is applied. They identify that students use social media mainly on the stages two (information search) and three (evaluation of alternatives), mostly to look for information about student life and other students' reviews about the institutions and programs. Their research demonstrates how social media influence students in different stages of the decision-making journey. Additionally, Jan and Ammari (2016) propose that social media and university websites influence the decision-making process of students and excessive advertisements on HEIs websites can have a negative effect on the choice of the university by students as the consumer is increasingly critical to branded advertisement.

In conclusion, existing research has addressed specific online brand touch points such as social media, university websites, student online forums and the isolated influence of each of these communication channels on the decision-making process of students. However, there is limited research on the experience with different online media channels and motivations associated with their use by international students in each stage of their decision journey to study abroad. In this research, an integrated perspective is adopted to understand the overall experience of international students with these different online marketing communication channels and its influence in each stage of the consumer decision journey. In the next section, research related to current online media communication channels and the marketing strategies associated with their use by the empowered consumer are discussed.

2.4　　　Online Media Communications

2.4.1　　　Inbound Marketing

Regarding the effect of the internet on media, according to Mulhern (2009) there was a shift from mass media communication channels to a networked information system, which is more interactive and consumer-centric. He argues for the need of a new theoretical framework that incorporates the concepts of this new digital era, including at least four fundamentals: (i) demand-based as consumers are empowered to pull content to satisfy their needs, (ii) social to combine social networks and relationships, (iii) interactivity to account for the interactions between consumers and consumers with brands and (iv) metrics as it has become possible to track effectiveness of marketing communication investments more precisely. Accordingly, Keller (2009) recognizes the growth of interactive marketing communications, comprehending websites, search ads, blogs with user-generated content, online communities, email, mobile marketing, to name some. Ads for example were the main form of communication for many decades, but recently consumers feel they are not always trustworthy and, in many circumstances, they are invasive (Sassatelli, 2007; Keller, 2009).

In this context, businesses are investing in different marketing techniques and the implementation of inbound marketing has become a trend in online marketing. Inbound marketing involves providing relevant content to consumers, so they find and interact with brands, rather than pushing out advertising messages, as in traditional marketing (Halligan & Shah, 2010). The term inbound marketing was first used by the CEO of Hubspot, a sales and marketing software provider and it includes tools such as blogging, publishing content, search engine optimization and social media (Basu, 2011).

According to Halligan and Shah (2010), consumers look for information in three places online: (i) search engines such as Google, (ii) blogs with specific content they seek and (iii) social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn and others. They explain the company's website which was the most important form of online advertisement is no longer the main focus. Companies should invest on creating relevant content to potential customers and spreading it by for example, adding a blog in their website which is easier to update constantly, or interacting on their social media sites and partner blogs (Halligan & Shah, 2010). Additionally, most websites today are found through a search engine, such as Google, which is why it is extremely important to appear in the first pages of the search results. For Halligan and Shah (2010), this is one of the goals of search engine optimization (SEO) which is a technique adopted in inbound marketing strategies so that consumers can find the content they are seeking online. They also remind of the importance of measuring and tracking progress which is easier than ever today with the development of technology to control number of page views, clicks, time spent on each webpage, and so forth.

Therefore, we argue that inbound marketing takes into account the four fundamentals suggested by Mulhern (2009) to be incorporated in this new digital era and is increasingly being adopted by many businesses lately. First, regarding the demand-based element, consumers are actively searching for information on Google and from there, they chose which

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channel to access, either blogs, social media or the company's website. Hence, the importance of search engine optimization, so consumers can find the relevant content brands are providing on their websites and social media pages. Second, consumers seek recommendations on the internet, mainly via social media networks which leads to the third element of interaction as consumers communicate with each other and exchange information between them and with brands. Finally, the consumer online behavior is constantly monitored by companies which in real time adjust their online marketing strategy in response to consumer interactions and their communication target.

Moreover, inbound marketing is the strategy adopted by brands to be able to communicate with the consumer without being perceived as intrusive (Halligan & Shan, 2010). Therefore, the authors argue that inbound marketing is a response to the evolution of internet and the empowerment of consumers. As Batra and Keller (2016) describe, consumers are not passive receivers of brand information through mass media anymore. On the contrary, they explain consumers now actively look for information through search engines, mobile browsers, blogs, social media and corporate websites, when they need it. Therefore, they argue for an integrated marketing communication strategy that mixes and matches diverse online communication channels to explore the advantages of each option and generate content relevant to the targeted audience. Additionally, they discuss how marketers should pay attention to which experiences and interactions influence consumers the most in each stage of their decision journey in order to plan an effective online communication strategy.

2.4.2   Online Marketing of Higher Education Institutions

In the context of marketing higher education online, Gomes and Murphy (2003) investigate the role of the internet in communicating educational services internationally. The authors focus on two perspectives: (i) use of the internet by students to search for information and facilitate decision-making process and (ii) higher education institutions adoption and implementation of online marketing strategies. Their research explores through a survey questionnaire, how students seek for information online, mainly asking about their experiences with the university website and email when deciding on a HEI overseas. They also interview marketing executives of educational institutions to understand the role of the internet in their international recruitment strategy.

Their findings are particularly descriptive presenting the use of internet by international students in terms of where they looked for information (search engine, websites, educational portals), if they emailed the institution, which most students had done, and how many days it took for the institution to reply to students. They suggest international students are increasingly seeking information online, contacting institutions by email and accessing the university website. Meanwhile, universities are adapting their marketing strategy to strengthen their presence online by implementing email policies, online application forms and improving online customer service. However, their study does not explore the motivations of the surveyed students to use the internet, why and how they experience each online media channel and how is their interaction with these channels during their decision-making journey.

In the discussion of their findings they concentrate in advices for higher education institutions to market themselves online, rather than in the experience of international students with online communication channels and their process of choosing a university abroad. Therefore, Gomes and Murphy (2003) provide some interesting insights on the types of online media communication channels international students use and the increasingly adoption of the internet during their decision journey to study abroad. Nevertheless, in this research we focus in the motivations of the student, on how and why they choose to access each online marketing channel and the influences of these interactions along their decision journey to apply for a university abroad.

2.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the theoretical concepts and foundations of existing research in four themes relevant to this research which were: (i) Marketization of Higher Education, (ii) Elements in consumer decision-making, (iii) Consumer decision journey and (iv) Online media communications (Figure 2.1). Regarding the marketization of higher education, previous research considered the process of universities increasingly recognized as corporate brands (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Urde, 2013) and students perceived as consumers (Nicholls et al., 1995; Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). Moreover, the concept of the empowered consumer was introduced as it is paramount to this study (Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006). The second theme was discussed in order to understand the consumer behavior along the decision journey. Previous research investigating the elements of consumer decision-making was presented (Cubillo, Sánchez, & Cerviño, 2006 and Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015), which will guide the analysis of the motivations and influences in the students' process of choice of a HEI abroad.

The third theme presented a theoretical foundation to understand the consumer decision journey. In this section, the stages of purchasing decision online (Butler & Peppard, 1998) was introduced and a more recent definition of the consumer decision journey by Court et al. (2009) was detailed. They argued that the consumer decision journey is a cycle with many touch points between the consumer and the brand, including company-driven and consumer-driven marketing, considering the empowerment of the consumer which is central to this research. Finally, the forth theme explored the latest research concerning the changes in online media communications (Mulhern, 2009 and Batra & Keller, 2016) and the concept of inbound marketing (Halligan & Shah, 2010) was presented. Thus, the discussion in this chapter will guide the analysis of qualitative data regarding the consumer behavior and the interactions of international students with university brands overseas.

3 Methodology

The following chapter provides the outline of the research approach and the research design of this study. Further on, the different data collection methods are presented and discussed in detail as well as the data handling and data analysis methods. Next, the chapter puts forward the trustworthiness of the research, ethical considerations and limitations which leads us to the last part, the chapter summary.

3.1 Research Approach

When doing research, it is of major concern for its quality to identify the main philosophical positions of the researchers and how they will use them to get sufficient results in their study (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). Researchers already know what they want to achieve and are trying to solve a problem with existing knowledge and methods (Kuhn, 1970). What this research wants to achieve is to answer the question of how international prospective students interact with online media communication channels along their decision journey to apply for higher education abroad. In this section of the Methodology chapter, there is a brief description of the philosophy of science used in this study and its essence in order to understand the reasons it was selected.

There were many philosophical debates about the relationship of data and theory in the matters of ontology and epistemology (Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). Therefore, different paradigms exist in science that have diverse views of how we should see the world. By employing paradigms to solve research problems, one can reveal the nature of things (Kuhn, 1970). Thus, it is important to reflect upon the ontological and epistemological considerations that are followed in a research study. The ontological considerations start with the nature of "reality" and the epistemological with the nature of the relationship between the knower and the known, according to Guba (1990). In this study, we seek to explore how international students experience the online marketing of HEIs in different online media communication channels along their decision journey to study abroad and how they interact with it. The purpose is to examine possible relationships and perceptions.

Our ontological position is nominalism which means that we believe that there is no single truth and that facts are human creations (Guba, 1981, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Mason, 2002; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). We want to build an understanding around the perceptions, ideas and interactions of international students in their search for studies abroad. As we want to characterize them as consumers, it is the consumer behavior and consumer decision-making that we are looking to explore. Moreover, we want to shed light

upon their behavior in the different stages of their consumer decision journey. On account of our epistemological position as strong constructionists, our goal is to engage and reflect in our research and provide a sense-making as well as an understanding in our interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2003; Maxwell, 2009; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015).

The social constructionism paradigm is taken into consideration throughout the whole process. This includes the primary and secondary data collection methods, the data analysis and the conclusion of the study. In social constructionism "reality" exists only in the context of a mental construct and it is difficult to fully test any theory (Guba, 1990). This approach has a subjectivist point of view as well as interpretative (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). In this project, we want to acknowledge the difficulty of generalizing the data and having an objective view. The reality that we seek to explore in this paper shows only one of the dimensions of the specific topic in a given time and circumstance. This research was held in ten weeks by using particular research methods and having individual views of the world.

According to Creswell (2007), social constructionism is more commonly seen as an approach to qualitative research. The current research involves a qualitative approach to the topic of how international students interact with online marketing channels and the influence of these channels along their decision journey to study abroad. This type of research seeks to explore the nature of experiences and understandings through non-numerical data (Alshenqeeti, 2014). In this study, non-numerical data such as interview transcripts, images and reports give us the insights for the understanding of international students' interactions with online marketing communication channels and their influence along their decision journey to study abroad. As it is known in qualitative studies, the amount of data is not what matters the most but their quality and what they can bring to the analysis (Berg, 2009; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). The quality of the data and its value for the analysis of this study was more important than the number of interviews made.

3.2   Research Design

There are major differences between quantitative and qualitative research. One has to do with numerical data and assertive representations of the findings and the other one has to do with non-numerical data such as meanings, expressions, and understandings that cannot be counted and tested (Creswell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). It is all about perspective and how one wishes to interpret certain situations as a researcher. The ontological and epistemological positions in this research eliminate quantitative research design. The research design of this study is qualitative according to the social constructionist paradigm that was chosen and discussed in the previous section of this chapter. A quantitative research would not provide the kind of data we need to answer our research question. The 'how' in our research question pursues a descriptive and exploratory answer. We want to investigate how international students interact with online marketing channels of HEIs and what is their influence on their decision journey to study abroad. Thus, a qualitative research design can give us rich data and meaningful insights about the topic. In qualitative research one can gather in-depth descriptions, meanings, and understandings of the

research topic (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2009; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015).

The descriptive and exploratory style of this design can give us the fruitful data we need to answer the research question. In addition, this kind of research design allows us to be more flexible both in the data collection and afterwards in the categorization and analysis of the findings (Mason, 2002). Similar findings can be used as a reference point in future research on international or national students and their decision journey to study abroad. The dilemma of the approach brings the question of whether theory or data should come first. According to Easterby-Smith, Graca, Antonacopoulou, and Ferdinand (2008), there needs to be an ongoing interaction between data and theory. This approach was used in this specific research. For example, when we observed something interesting in EMG's company material, we went back to the literature and found out if there were any previous studies about it. A similar procedure was used also with the interview data. In some cases, we encountered some new interesting patterns in the data and started revising the literature and tried to discover if there was any past research documenting this behavior or interaction.

Although, we have started by writing the literature review first and finding relevant theories for our research question, we then paused the process in order to start our data collection. While doing so, we decided to proceed with the theory and the data simultaneously as it would not force us to pre-conceptions and would help us generate or develop a theory (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). Certainly, it raises awareness of the research topic when one first reads about it in existent literature. That is why theory must be used in order to give some guidance in the data collection process such as to which methods to use, how and when to conduct the data collection, how to do the sampling, and how to construct interview guides (Creswell, 2007). Yet, it should be an interactive process when handling theory and data (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). An example is the student perceptions of university branding, which was a theme included in the pilot interview guide and seemed too complicated for the interviewees to answer. They had a difficulty finding an answer to some of the 'university branding' questions and elaborating it. Therefore, this theme was excluded from this research. As the interviews were conducted by phone, there was no direct face-to-face interaction between interviewer and interviewee. Still, we took notes while having the interviews and also after the end of an interview in case there was something that drew our attention about the speech, language and behavior of the interviewee. In addition, we recorded the interviews with an audio recorder program so we could listen to them as many times as needed in order to observe the way the interviewee was responding to our questions. For example, if it was with enthusiasm, confusion or confidence.

As it was mentioned earlier in the 'Introduction' chapter, this research was done in collaboration with Educations Media Group (EMG), a fast-growing company situated in Stockholm, Sweden. The reason for choosing EMG was due to their privileged position in terms of its interactions with both the international student and universities worldwide. Their education portal (Educations.com) is accessed by approximately 2.5 million users from many different countries which interact with HEIs through information requests or click-throughs to their websites directly. Therefore, by collaborating with EMG we could access data about the consumer behavior online which they track and measure constantly, and collect the contact of prospective students for interviews.

During the collaboration with EMG it was possible to observe the type of information students require from universities, as we had access to the copies of information request messages sent through their platform to universities listed in their portal. Moreover, we were able to export from their system the list of recent interactions in their portal and contact the students who were in the process of search for information and decision to study abroad. EMG was also interested in the content of the interviews as they had done a massive online survey with 20,000 students but were not able to explore the meanings of the consumer behavior which they believe is important for a better understanding of their user. In the period of collaboration which lasted ten weeks, one of us was going to their head office twice per week. Most interviews were done in their office with resources provided by the company (phone credits, meeting room, physical cellphone). Summaries of the interviews' transcripts were shared with their Communications team and we participated in workshops assisting EMG in the creation of student personas to their portal. This gave insights to the analysis as it combined data from their survey and our interviews highlighting the differences and similarities of motivations, influences, preferred online media channels accessed and priorities in the choice process.

By collaborating with EMG it was possible not only to access valuable data to our research, but also to see how HEIs want to understand the consumer behavior and the consumer decision journey as we observed their sales calls with partner universities who list their programs in their portal. EMG also allowed us to participate in trainings regarding Inbound Marketing offered by HubSpot which is the software they use in the company and internal branding workshops with their marketing manager and content team which was helpful to understand how they communicate with their users, customers and stakeholders. Overall, the collaboration with EMG was of utmost help, providing the resources and information we needed while we had complete autonomy on the use of data and its analysis to the purpose of this research.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

In this section there is a presentation and discussion of the data collection methods used in this research. Identifying potential data sources that would answer our research question is only the first step (Mason, 2002). The researcher has to think which data collection methods would provide him/her with the information he/she needs to answer the research question (Maxwell, 2009). Using different methods enriches the research and gives a broader overview of the topic according to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson (2015). Therefore, both primary and secondary data have been gathered in order to gain an inclusive and deeper understanding of the different aspects of the research topic. The methods were chosen after a consideration of availability and appropriateness along with the prospect of getting data that will answer our research question (Mason, 2002).

According to the research design, the empirical data collected was interview transcripts from international prospective students who are in the process of applying for education abroad. The interviewees (Table 3.1) were chosen on account of their current status as prospective

students in the beginning of their decision journey and also because of their international background. The focus of this study is exploring the ways international students and not only national students experience and interact with the online media communication channels of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and education portals along their decision journey to study abroad. The sampling of the interviewees was done having the above in mind. Hence, we used purposive sampling as it is very common in qualitative studies (Shenton, 2004).

Following the sampling, email requests were sent to a list of international prospective students that was provided by EMG, in order to book a date for the interviews. These emails were sent in the beginning of April 2018. Though a major amount of emails was sent, the response rate was very low. Still, the final amount of accomplished interviews and gathered data was sufficient enough to stop the inquiries and start the coding and analysis of the findings. While waiting for the replies, we designed the interview guide which is presented in Appendix A. This guide was used during the interviews. However, the interview guide was edited during the period conducting the interviews and the pilot study, and the second version was used for the rest of the interviews. The process is explained in detail further on in this chapter.

During the interviews rough notes were taken in order to identify from early in which stage exactly each prospective student is in their consumer decision journey and also to have an overview of their sayings. After the end of each interview, we used the audio recordings to transcribe the interviews. A sample of quotes from a selected number of interview transcriptions can be found in Appendix B. We managed to start interviewing and gathering secondary data in the beginning of April 2018. Overall, the data collection lasted one month. To the extent of organizing the raw data into meaningful insights for analysis, we produced a coding system. This coding system included different themes based on our literature review as the core theories and further on divided into smaller groups of patterns. While going through the data new themes and patterns would appear and therefore the coding system was altered. The research approach was exploratory and inductive which suggests the ongoing process of coding and interpretation of the collected data (Mason, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, 2011). The final coding system is presented in section '3.4.1 Coding guide' and thoroughly described and discussed.

3.3.1 Primary Data: Semi-Structured Interviews

Primary data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with 17 international prospective students. The interviewees had different nationalities, living in many different continents of the world, and were between the age of 18 and 28. Their profiles are shown in Table 3.1 later in this section. The interviews were done by phone, Skype call and WhatsApp call depending on the case. This primary data collection method is explained in-detail below.

Interviewing has been broadly used in qualitative research as the main method for the collection of valuable data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, 2011; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). However, interviewing as a method has both value and limitations according to Alshenqeeti (2014). These will be further discussed in this section. In view of the fact that interviewing is less structured as a data collection tool, it seemingly broadens the understanding of the research topic (Alshenqeeti, 2014). When comparing to other types of

interviews such as structured interviews, unstructured interviews and focus group interviews, semi-structured interviews were found to be the most appropriate primary data collection method to use in this study. One reason for selecting this type was that in semi-structured interviews there is more freedom and flexibility, which means the interviewer can reorder the questions during the interview, can adjust the level of language and the wording of questions, and answer questions himself/herself (Berg, 2009).

As mentioned before, semi-structured interviewing was selected as the primary data collection method in this study in order to get in-depth points of view from the interviewees. The semi-structured interviews were to be conducted by phone and not face-to-face due to the different geographical locations of the interviewees. In this case, phone interviews were the only viable method considering the circumstances and in this way we could reach widespread geographic areas at a low cost (Berg, 2009). First, an interview guide (Appendix A) was prepared after taking in consideration different qualitative research guidelines (see Mason, 2002; Creswell, 2003; Berg, 2009; Maxwell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). Needless to say that the existing literature on interviewing is extensive and there are a number of guidelines to follow at the interviewing process (Berg, 2009). Second, we grouped questions into three themes based on our literature review. The themes were the following: consumer decision making and journey, online marketing, and university brand awareness and image. Each theme includes approximately 10 questions responding to each theme (Appendix A).

Next, an email was sent to international prospective students with a short description of the researchers and the topic, asking them to participate in this study. The interview inquiry email was sent to a list of people that was supplied to us by EMG. EMG provided us with the contact details of students who had sent enquiry forms through their platform. The company itself helped by giving an email list of international prospective students and already enrolled students to contact. We decided to use the first list only, the list with the international prospective students and we sent customized emails four times to mailing lists with around 500 email addresses each time. The reason for sending such a large amount of emails was not because we were aiming for a great number of interviews but because we knew how difficult it would be to convince people to participate in your research and share some of their free time answering our questions. The most effective time was when we got recent lists of students who had contacted EMG in the last 3 days. Possibly because they remembered that they had sent the enquiry through EMG's website as it was so recent and were waiting for a reply or contact from someone from EMG or the universities they were interested in. In some cases, they started asking for information about the interviewer's experience of studying abroad as an international student or about Sweden as a country, Swedish people and culture, or about universities and the education system in Sweden.

The reason for choosing the list with the prospective students was because in this way the students' experiences with finding education abroad were recent so they would remember more about the beginning of their decision journey and could elaborate better on their current stage. In this way it would not be just a distant memory for them. A link was provided at the end of the email to book the date of the interview. The actual number of emails sent was around 2000 and the actual participants were 20, out of which only 17 interviews could be

transcribed and used for the analysis. The interviewees' profile is shown in the table below (Table 3.1):

Name	Age	Gender	Country of origin	Level of application
Adéla	18	Female	Czech Republic	Undergraduate
Agurhan	28	Male	Turkey	Undergraduate
Aigerim	23	Female	Kazakhstan	Graduate
Ali	25	Male	Egypt	Graduate
Amin	23	Male	Iran	Undergraduate
Clarissa	18	Female	Austria	Undergraduate
Emil	21	Male	Sweden	Undergraduate
Gillian	21	Female	USA	Undergraduate
Hanna	22	Female	Finland	Undergraduate
Joao Marcos	18	Male	Brazil	Undergraduate
Losene	21	Female	Liberia	Undergraduate
Lovisa	22	Female	Australia	Undergraduate
Michen	18	Male	South Africa	Undergraduate
Narayan	28	Male	Bhutan	PhD
Reabetswe	18	Female	South Africa	Undergraduate
Saanya	18	Female	Australia	Undergraduate
Vitor	24	Male	Brazil	Graduate

Table 3.1: Interviewees' profile

At least 8 interviews were scheduled but at the end were cancelled or did not answer the call. The semi-structured interviews were conducted primarily by phone. The alternatives to making normal phone calls were Skype calls and WhatsApp calls depending on the situation. The reasons behind that decision to use also alternative ways to call students were because some telephone numbers in some African countries were blocked or because the network connection was not working properly.

Initially, a pilot study was conducted to test our interview guide. This pilot study included two interviews on the first day of the data collection. While conducting the interviews we realized that some of the interviewees were having a difficulty to answer some questions mostly at the last section of brand awareness and image. Therefore, we decided to revise our interview guide, alter some questions, add some questions and delete some others that did not seem to fit anymore. The final interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

In regard to the interview process, one researcher was asking the questions and the other one was taking notes and recording the session. The notes were taken for an early overview of the interviewee's sayings and additionally in case of an audio recorder setback. As these were semi-structured interviews, the interviewer had the freedom to ask additional questions that she thought fitting to the circumstances and to the interviewee's previous responses. Semi-structured interviews are more flexible than structured interviews or else their flexible version as one might say (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Furthermore, the interviewer should have the ability to identify what is relevant for the research and what is not (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). In some cases, the interviewer excluded some questions that were not relevant for the interviewee also depending on his/her previous responses.

Interviews in general are more interactive and there is the freedom to explore constructs and emerging topics as you go (Alshenqeeti, 2014). In other cases, the interviewer used probes in order to draw out more complete answers to the questions. When using phrases as "Could you tell me more about that?" or "What do you mean by that?" or "Can you give me an example?", it pushes the interviewee to elaborate on the matter and develop their thoughts (Berg, 2009). In all cases, the decision for adding and/or excluding questions was up to the interviewer's personal judgment and was made in a split second during the actual interview. Still, the interviewer tried not to project her own ideas and perceptions to the interviewee although it was difficult at times when you are trying to empathize with the interviewee (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015).

The semi-structured interviews had a duration between 15 and 35 minutes approximately. Moreover, there were some complications when conducting some of the interviews. For example, some interviews had to be interrupted due to network connection or internet connection problems, especially the ones with prospective students from African countries. Additionally, some interviews had to be interrupted due to language limitations. It was difficult for us to understand their accent in some cases and in some others the student was not able to express himself/herself properly in English. Therefore, we tried chatting with some of them through WhatsApp and Skype. Yet, the answers were too short and not slightly descriptive so we discontinued the interview. It was easy to notice that some of the interviewees did not have proficiency in English so it was hard to express themselves accordingly. This is one of the reasons that some of the interviews had a short duration of

approximately 15 minutes. As we interviewed students from different countries of the world (Table 3.1), we had to manage different time zones and sometimes call at night or very early in the morning which was to a certain extent challenging.

3.3.2 Secondary Data

As there are often certain throwbacks and constraints when it comes to conducting research, it is wiser to find extra possible relevant sources of data and broaden one's horizons (Mason, 2002). Thus, we started gathering secondary data before starting the interviews and the primary data collection. The reason for that was to get some initial introduction to the research topic through different lenses and perspectives before diving into our own exploration. We had access to some of the company's marketing related documents and full access to their online survey of approximately 20.000 participants. The highlights of this survey can be found in Appendix C. The material gathered from EMG included their annual reports (Educations.com, 2017; Educations.com, 2018), which contains marketing and recruitment trends for the year 2017 and 2018 as well as EMG's own design of the stages of the 'study abroad journey' (Appendix D). These stages are further discussed in the Analysis chapter and compared to the stages found in the literature review and the findings. What we want to investigate is whether there is any relation with the primary data and the literature review.

Furthermore, the survey that EMG conducted online is addressed to more than 20.000 individuals as it was mentioned earlier. These individuals are in different stages of their decision journey to study abroad. There are both prospective students that are still thinking of applying to universities abroad and present students who have just started their education abroad. Some are in the beginning of their journey, some have already applied and some are already studying. The aim of this survey was to find out what is more important to prospective and present students when studying abroad. It included in total 53 questions. This is a vast number of questions and a great amount of answers to go through and analyze. There were times that it was confusing to analyze quantitative data from the survey since the approach of this research study is qualitative. The challenge was how to interpret and use the results of this survey in a qualitative way as they seemed rather logical or superficial. Therefore, we decided to investigate only some of the questions. The ones that were closely related to our research problem. We separated them from the rest in a document and made a synopsis of the survey as a whole in order to have a general idea of the content and gain some insights (Appendix C). Those insights will be presented, discussed and analyzed in the Analysis chapter.

3.4 Data Handling and Data Analysis

Qualitative approaches are used in this paper when interpreting the findings. As the interviews were recorded, it was easy to review them more times when need in order to ensure the correctness of the transcriptions (Berg, 2009; Alshenqeeti, 2014). A sample of the interview transcripts can be found in Appendix B. The collected data are handled with content analytical

methods and interpreted into meanings, patterns and insights. Content analysis is used for the analysis of the interviews as it is considered to be the most appropriate when handling data from people's personal experiences, social norms and conclusions (Mason, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Creswell, 2007). Additionally, when conducting interpretive qualitative research, the focus is on the meanings, feelings and understandings of the people that are interviewed and not on the actual setting (Mason, 2002) as it is in this case. The spotlight falls on the interviewees' views of reality and their personal interpretations of it (Maxwell, 2009). Each of the interviewees (Table 3.1) talked about their own personal journey when deciding where to study abroad. They all had their individual struggles, fears and feelings when seeking information online for their preferable HEI, when searching for student accommodation and scholarships and so on.

The point of using this approach to interpret the data from the interviews is to focus on finding various constructs from these individuals about their consumer decision journey when searching for education abroad. Moreover, content analysis is also the approach used to analyze the documents provided by EMG such as their annual reports (Educations.com, 2017; Educations.com, 2018) along with their online survey (Appendix C) about what is important to students when studying abroad and what is important to potential students when searching for an education abroad. We want to investigate the concepts and relationships between the content of EMG's company material and our own findings from the primary data collection as it is the whole aim of doing content analysis (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015).

The analysis of interview data is not a fixed, dry and straightforward process (Berg, 2009). Thus, after collecting the secondary data and finishing with the interviews, we went through all the data and identified some recurring insights as well as interaction patterns and prominent feelings. Following this we started constructing our coding system for the data analysis. Firstly, we decided on the four core themes based on our literature review and named them accordingly (see Figure 2.1). Coding thematically is a fit approach when coding semi-structured data (Mason, 2002) such as the data from the 17 interviews. Secondly, the four core theoretical themes (see Chapter 2) included more specific elements in each one, based on the literature again. Thirdly, we started characterizing each pattern and recurring interaction found in the data when it was found insightful and valuable for the research analysis. Lastly, each code was given an appropriate name based on the findings.

The coding was an ongoing process as the codes were modified due to a connection in another theme or altered in terms of fitting the content or their names were changed. There was a continuous editing while reviewing the new data and going back to the literature review chapter again. The codes were finalized once starting writing the analysis chapter. This approach is one of the three main qualitative analysis strategies and is called categorizing strategy or else thematic analysis and coding (Maxwell, 2009). The intent of having open-ended questions in the interviews is for qualitative data to arise in order to generate specific themes (Creswell, 2003). This coding system with the themes was designed by us in order to guide the data analysis and lead to possible conclusions but not in any case to force insights and meanings to fit into definite and fixed groups.

3.4.1   Coding Guide

As mentioned in the previous section a coding system was generated based on the 'Literature and Theoretical Review' (Chapter 2) and the findings. These codes were made to give a structure and guidance when analyzing the data and separate them into themes. However, as it was an ongoing process and there was a constant editing in the beginning of the coding system design, it is focusing on finding recurring and connective patterns as well as valuable insights and not just to limit the findings themselves. That is to say, this thematic approach was chosen to manage the data and make sense of it rather than trying to fit it into the given themes (Mason, 2002). New categories and new interactions between the categories may emerge while processing the data (Maxwell, 2009). Thus, the coding system was frequently updated and edited. Through this coding system, insightful findings were categorized into four different code themes according to the 'Literature and Theoretical Review' (see chapter 2). These codes are presented in the table below, Table 3.1, which is a summary of the coding guide (Appendix E):

Marketization of knowledge	Consumer decision-making
- Independence of consumer - Commercialization of knowledge	- Motivations - Influences - Doubts and fears
Consumer decision journey	**Online media communications**
- Intention to study abroad - Active evaluation - Comparison and decision	- Empowerment - Disbelief in advertisement - Consumer-driven marketing

Table 3.2: Coding guide summary

Furthermore, these codes were developed to represent the most important arising patterns from students' consumer behavior, their consumer decision journey and their online interactions with the HEI online marketing communications. Simple and easily understandable names were followed by a short description of the meaning of each of the concepts. Yet, they still belong to the four big core theoretical considerations. The interpretations of the codes were made by us and our personal understanding of the reality of consumer behavior. The final coding guide is presented in Appendix E and it shows the categorization of the different theoretical considerations, prominent patterns and their meanings. The left column presents the name of the core theoretical theme, the middle one the name of the code and the right one their explanation in our own words. The descriptions give the reader a sense of why and how the researchers decided to organize the findings in this particular way and concepts.

3.5   Trustworthiness

Despite the fact that many have criticized the trustworthiness of qualitative research, there are specific concepts that can ensure it (Shenton, 2004). The concept of trustworthiness is used as a criterion to evaluate a social constructionist qualitative research (Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Shenton, 2004; Anney, 2014). Guba (1981) was the one to propose the four criteria of trustworthiness. As Guba (1981) and Guba and Lincoln (1982) have argued, the concepts of validity, reliability and objectivity should be replaced with the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability instead. According to them, these four proposed criteria can assure the trustworthiness of a research. These criteria can also be translated accordingly into easier terms to understand; the four aspects of trustworthiness which are the: truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality (Guba, 1981). Furthermore, the self-reflexivity of the researchers is essential in social constructionist research throughout the entire process (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015).

The most important criterion to address is the criterion of credibility, which responds to internal validity (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Shenton, 2004). According to that, the researchers have to ensure the compatibility of the findings with reality. This can happen through an examination of some provisions that Shenton (2004) discusses in his paper and go as follows. First, there is a need to use research methods that are well established in qualitative research. In our case, we have used interviewing as our primary data collection method and gathered company material from EMG as our secondary data. Both methods are approved and established in qualitative research. Second, the researchers need to establish some kind of early familiarity with the organization they are going to collaborate with (Shenton, 2004) and immerse themselves in the interviewees' world (Bitsch, 2005). We as researchers contacted EMG first with a research proposal. After the company accepted our offer and we decided to collaborate and start the research, we had an introduction meet-up in their head office in Stockholm in order to get to know each other. In addition, an early familiarity was also developed with the interviewees as there was an introduction of us and the research topic on the first email we sent them before scheduling the interviews.

Additionally, triangulation has been used by the selection of different methods such as semi-structured interviews and gathering company material in the form of a report and an online survey. According to Anney (2014), triangulation is a good way to cross examine the integrity of the interviewees' sayings with other collected data. In like manner, we did not miss the opportunity to investigate some education portals that our interviewees referred to when interviewing them and this is also part of the triangulation, using any possible data sources (Shenton, 2004; Anney, 2014; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). In accordance to Shenton's (2004) provisions, we ensured honesty and trust in the participants and gave them the options to refuse to participate in our study or to stop the interview at any time if they wanted to. In this way, we can ensure that the participants want genuinely to contribute and take part in our study. The last part of ensuring the credibility of this project was to examine past studies and previous research findings of the same or closely related research topic. An excessively thorough review of the existing literature in the topic was done before and during the data collection.

Since this is a small scale qualitative study and its findings are specific to particular individuals and settings, it is hard to prove the generalizability of the conclusions and if they can be used in other settings (Shenton, 2004). Each study is unique in its own way. Some authors as Denscombe (1998) and Stake (1994) argue that despite the uniqueness of each research study, transferability should still be considered as possible. In this case, the individuals that are participating in this research are international students and the organization that we are collaborating with is a market leader of education online marketing. Perceptions and interactions between these international students and the online marketing of HEIs are the focal point of this study. The same research strategy can be implemented by other organizations or HEIs and instead of using international students as participants it can also be national students or a categorization of the students into different cultural and/or subcultural groups. Thus, there is transferability in this project and the given methodological framework can be used by new studies in this field as well. Notwithstanding, the results of this particular qualitative study should be understood in the given framework and circumstances (Shenton, 2004).

The ties between credibility and dependability are very close according to Lincoln and Guba (1982, 1994). Considering the dependability of a project, there is a process to assess and show the reliability of it and if it can be repeated in the future by other researchers (Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1982). A researcher must go through this process and give the reader a clear understanding of the research design and its implementation, the data collection methods and the operational details, and lastly an evaluation of the process through self-reflexivity (Shenton, 2004). What is more, transparency should be established about the data collection and interpretation (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). Following this process, we have completed all the above steps to ensure the dependability of this project. In detail, descriptions of the data collection methods and the research design can be found in this chapter. Furthermore, a reflective appraisal of the whole process and the results can be found in the last chapter of this project.

It is hard for a qualitative researcher to avoid being biased and subjective in a research where he/she is the one that is deciding about the approach, the methods and the sampling (Creswell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, 2011; Shenton, 2004). As in qualitative research the informants are human beings and the findings are their ideas and experiences, it is challenging but not unachievable to prove the confirmability of a project (Shenton, 2004). As researchers we had the same concerns about our project and its credibility. In this manner, we have presented the methodological framework of this study and its limitations.

3.5.1 Ethical Considerations

There are ethical issues that need to be considered when doing research and even more when collecting qualitative data (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). Key principles in research ethics include among others: giving proper information, being honest and transparent in communication, avoiding deception, guaranteeing confidentiality and protecting the privacy of the research participants (Bell & Bryman, 2007; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). In this research study we acknowledged all the possible ethical issues we could recognize and acted upon them to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. The first

ethical issue we encountered as researchers was our involvement with EMG and our access to their company data. It can often be troublesome to define the limits of involvement in one organization and the reassurance of the privacy of their data (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). Hence, in order to secure a smooth collaboration we signed a research confidentiality agreement with EMG. This agreement gave us the access to specific company internal data such as their ongoing online survey.

The next ethical issues for consideration were the notification of the research participants and the assurance of the confidentiality of the research data. There are several ethical issues to be considered during the interview process according to Alshenqeeti (2014). When carrying out a research with human participants, it is always necessary to follow ethical considerations (Maxwell, 2009; Alshenqeeti, 2014). Trust is very important when dealing with people in your research (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). For this reason, we had an honest and transparent communication with the participants, ensured they were all in legal age to participate, informed them about our research topic, its aim and what the interview would be about and lastly we asked their consent to participate. We informed the interviewees briefly in our first contact with them through the interview inquiry email about our research topic, ourselves as students and the process of the interviews. At the end of the email there was a link which they could click and book a time for an interview with us.

Moreover, when calling them after their consent and before the actual interviews began we gave again a short introduction about the research, informed them that they could withdraw from the interview at any time if they did not feel comfortable continuing, ensured the confidentiality of the data and also asked for their consent to record the interviews. We assured them that the audio recordings would only be used for the transcription of the interviews within the academic environment of Lund University for this specific thesis purposes and a summary of it with EMG.

Normally, in marketing and management research there are no ethical issues such as risking lives or unrevealing the identity of people that are in danger or exposing sensitive subjects (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). Hence, in this research no ethical issues of this type arose. The research topic is of no sensitive nature and there is no matter of protecting the anonymity of the participants only in case they asked us to. By any means, only their first name is mentioned and used in the analysis. Additional information may include their age and their country of origin and residency.

3.5.2   Limitations

One of the limitations of this research comes from the given timeframe of this project. As our time for this study was limited to ten weeks only, the short timeframe made it hard to get a greater amount of in-depth data by conducting more interviews. Conducting interviews can be to a high degree time-consuming (Berg, 2009) and we realized that ourselves while doing them. Starting from the initial stage of the first contact with the interviewee until reaching the last stage of the transcription of the actual interview and the beginning of the coding was a time-consuming process. Nevertheless, the researchers focused on gathering relevant data for analysis from different trustworthy sources and methods for a more robust research with a

triangulation of data. Some of those trustworthy sources came from EMG's material. Collaborating with a company for a project has its own limitations. For example, always having in mind the sensitivity of sharing company material and taking their permission first, as well as considering the extent in which the obtained data can be used.

Moreover, the country of residence of the interviewees did not only affect the time schedule of the interviews itself but also the way of interviewing them. To have a fuller understanding of international students' decision journey, the research would include face-to-face interviews instead of phone interviews. In this way, the interviews would be more intimate and straightforward which would probably result in more descriptive meanings and therefore richer data. In two of the cases it was very challenging to make sense of the interviewee's sayings due to accent and language peculiarities. Additionally, there were a few times that the communication on the phone during the interviews was interrupted by external noise or there was a poor quality network connection.

3.6   Chapter Summary

This chapter offered a presentation and discussion of the research approach and research methods of this study. The social constructionism paradigm was selected as the philosophical research approach in order to explore the research problem as a construct of the interviewees' sayings and have a more interactive approach to the topic in question. Thus, an inductive approach was adopted because as researchers we wanted to explore new theoretical themes and new insights from the obtained data. Normally, the research design is in line with the social constructionist approach which means in this case it is qualitative. The qualitative research design was selected due to the richness of the data, the descriptions, the meanings behind the data and the different understandings one can obtain about the research topic. Twenty international prospective students from different countries and continents of the world were selected and interviewed; out of which seventeen were successful and valid to use. Furthermore, secondary data was gathered from the organization itself. EMG provided us with an online survey and the last two annual reports of the company. Therefore, the data gathered did not only consist of the interviewees' meanings and opinions but also from company documents and sources. A coding system was created to categorize the concepts and guide us through the analysis. Additionally, it was an ongoing process where we would go back to theory then findings or the other way round. The analysis of the data took place after the end of all interviews and after all the data was gathered.

4   Findings, Analysis and Discussion

This chapter presents the findings of this research and their analysis. The observations are presented and discussed together with the analysis. The discussion is related to the previous research which was presented in the 'Literature and Theoretical Review' chapter. Therefore, this chapter covers the four core themes that were discussed in chapter 2 and formed the coding guide. A summary is presented at the end of this chapter.

Furthermore, the analysis shows how these findings apply on the theoretical framework of this study. The analysis of the data leads to the answer of the research question of this paper: "How do international students interact with online media communication channels along their decision journey to apply for higher education abroad?". The argumentation elaborated in this chapter is based on different theoretical considerations that were presented and discussed in the 'Literature and Theoretical Review' chapter about the marketization of higher education, elements in consumer decision-making, the consumer decision journey, and online media communications. Moreover, the analysis takes under consideration the above theoretical concepts and how they apply or not to the findings of this research. The analytical framework uses both the primary and secondary data obtained in this study. The findings derive from the 17 semi-structured interviews with international prospective students from all over the world (see sample in Appendix B), from EMG's online survey (Appendix C) and annual report for 2017 with the 'study abroad journey' (Appendix D) as well as their student trends report from this year (Educations.com, 2018). The number of interviews with students from the same country in this research were not enough to gain insights on possible differences on student behavior according to their nationalities. Therefore, the findings reflect the interesting behavior similarities of students from several continents in the world.

This chapter is divided into four major sections: Commercialization of Knowledge, Students as Decision-Makers, The Interplay between Students and Online Media Communications, and The Consumer Decision Journey of International Students. Each part consists of one or more sub-sections. The data analysis process is based on the coding system which was discussed in Chapter 3 and can be found in Appendix E. The codes were grouped into the four major theoretical themes discussed in the 'Literature and Theoretical Review' chapter. Through the coding system, the interview data was categorized into 11 codes, which were the following:

- Independence of consumer
- Commercialization of knowledge
- Motivations
- Influences
- Doubts and fears

- Intention to study abroad
- Active evaluation
- Comparison and decision
- Empowerment
- Disbelief in advertisement
- Consumer-driven marketing

In addition, uncategorized insights that emerged from the data and found to be interesting for further discussion, were also used throughout this chapter. An analysis of the insights of each theme is presented with a constant reflection on previous research from the 'Literature and Theoretical Review' (Chapter 2). First, the codes from the coding guide (Appendix E) are presented in the beginning of each section. Second, there is a presentation and discussion of the main insights of each theme. Finally, there is a discussion and elaboration of a theoretical framework for the consumer decision journey of international students applying for higher education abroad.

4.1　　Commercialization of Knowledge

The analysis of the data gathered from the interviews with the international prospective students (Appendix B) supports the perception that many of them have about the marketization of higher education and more specifically the commercialization of knowledge. This perception follows the notion that the promotion of universities has become normal as the promotion of any regular business. It seems that the rules have changed and HEIs have adopted relevant branding and marketing strategies to attract new students (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Chapleo, 2010, 2011). Although, characterizing students as consumers has received a lot of criticism (Lowrie, 2007; Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009), they are rather identified as such by themselves according to our data and by the HEIs as well. As there is an intense competition between HEIs nowadays (Chapleo, 2010, 2011), branding strategies that will attract more students are being implemented by an increasing number of HEIs (Bisnardi & Ekwulugo, 2005).

The above insight is based upon the code 'Commercialization of knowledge'. According to that, international students have a specific perception of the various HEIs and how they promote their study programs and the institution as a brand. They perceive the choice of a HEI as consumption and higher education as the service. For example, when Aigerim from Kazakhstan was talking about her experience with finding study programs and universities abroad she mentions the tactics HEIs from all over the world use to promote their study programs in her country:

> Also Kazakhstan offers some conference, seminar and people from…Official managers from universities from all over the world. They come to Kazakhstan twice a year to describe the university, to show how is to study in these universities, which programs they have in the university...

According to Aigerim, there is a direct approach of the HEIs to prospective students in her country. In this way HEIs attempt to intervene in the decision-making process of students

who want to study abroad by offering them tempting study programs, scholarship opportunities and limitless opportunities after graduation.

The decision-making of students has seen a change in the many different ways they can gather information about universities and from the universities. HEIs are trying to build a bond between their brand and the consumers through relationship marketing (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003), which is considered to be a compatible marketing strategy for higher education services (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004). The easy online access of information by the students have given them the power as consumers to gain market knowledge (Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006) and find the best possible university brands for them. Students perceive the price element of higher education services as any other product they purchase. According to Adéla from the Czech Republic: "The money and the price of the university are really important and most of the times really high". Agurhan from Turkey and Clarissa from Austria also refer to the price element on their decision-making:

> …And of course I cannot choose the private ones. In Australia there should be like out of my budget so I don't know what kind of international student programs they have so I just look for the best and more comprehensive university… (Agurhan from Turkey)

> ...I decided on Medicine last year I think and then it was just that here in Austria... If you want to enter the Medicine university you have to write a very very hard exam so most people study 1 year for that exam so I was just looking for alternative... And the problem is the money... because in Austria university is free for everyone and abroad is just expensive and it won't be easy to pay that much money. (Clarissa from Austria)

The economic element plays a big role in their decision. As in any other business the price of the product is significant to the purchase decision. According to our interviewees, higher education can be considered as a market that 'sells' services such as courses and study programs. In another question, Clarissa from Austria continues with her thought of choosing an education and a university according to the total price standard. As she explains:

> ...I just decided on universities which look very good and which are not too expensive. You know... If I have decided on Lithuania, I would have paid a lot for the dormitory and that is a problem too…I was looking for the whole package…Universities, dormitories…The cost...

In conclusion, the findings from the primary data show that the students perceive HEIs as normal businesses and perceive the promoting practices of HEIs as logical. The students are used to be considered consumers of higher education services and respond to the marketing communication strategies of HEIs, as presented and discussed earlier. Finally, they recognize the price attribute (tuition fees) of HE services and it seems that this is one of the elements which influence their decision.

4.1.1 Independence of Consumer Decision

The data from the interviews suggest that not only students behave as consumers but also they are proud of their independent decision-making and the power they have acquired as consumers. The majority of them believes that the decision to study abroad was solely theirs with no pressure from others. This insight is based on the code 'Independence of consumer'

which means students' strength and independence on making a consumer decision by themselves.

As discussed in the 'Literature and Theoretical Review' (Chapter 2), the concept of students as consumers has a certain connection to the marketization of higher education in recent research. Students are categorized as consumers as they are able to choose from various study programs and HEIs and have the power of their decision (Nicholls et al., 1995). A decision that will give a university a new student/consumer. Education portals such as EMG provide all the needed information about university or program choices in just one click. Information about products such as study programs are out there alluring new students/consumers. At the end it seems that even the students cannot escape the market as consumers as this is the purpose of it (Kozinets, 2002). Consumption is a central activity in our society (Sassatelli, 2007) and the consumers are increasingly empowered in their decision-making process (Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006).

The prospective students in our study feel empowered to take their own decision to study abroad. As Joao Marcos from Brazil explains: "Actually I decided myself. Not that my parents or family don't support me... They do. But it is something that I decided myself". Just as Joao Marcos, most of the interviewees answered rather fast and firm at the question of whether they made the decision to study abroad on their own or with the help of others. They felt more independent and secure about their own choice to live and study abroad. Clarissa from Austria has the same notion of independence in her consumer decision as she says:

> I [was] always keen on that idea that I would go somewhere with international students from everywhere and you have a completely different life than here and I don't think no one [sic] influenced me on that. It was my own decision kind of.

Oddly enough, there were some of these same interviewees that mentioned their family or partner influencing their decision to leave the country and go abroad to study. For example, Joao Marcos who mentioned before that the decision was all his, explains later on about his next step in the decision journey: "Well… probably for my parents to see if there is any interest in scholarships and so I can actually apply". His behavior towards the decision to apply for education abroad is influenced by his parents' approval in relation to a possible scholarship which indicates a focus not only on the family's opinion but on the economic element as well.

The influence of family and friends is observed in secondary data, specifically in the EMG's online survey (Appendix C) when current and prospective students marked the elements which helped them to decide to study abroad. The results show that the most selected option was family and friends' recommendations with 45.09%, followed by students' stories of studying abroad with 30.26%. The above is also supported from the insights about influences in the primary data and is showing a paradox found in some of the international students' statements about their decision. Although the students in this research are very affirmative of the independence of their decision, it is suggested that they are not entirely aware of the effect external individuals have in their initial decision to study abroad. They strongly believe that the final decision to study abroad was not influenced by anyone and anything other than themselves. However, there are many ways to interpret their consumer behavior because

people perceive things and situations in their own way as facts are human creations (Guba, 1981, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Mason, 2002; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015).

4.2   Students as Decision-Makers

4.2.1   Motivations of Students to Study Abroad

There are various motivations in the decision-making process of international prospective students who want to study abroad as it was argued in the Literature and Theoretical Review (chapter 2). In this section, there will be a discussion of only the motivations found in the obtained primary and secondary data using the code 'Motivations'. The reasons to decide to study abroad will be discussed and analyzed in this section. A connection to previous research will be made to support the insights.

According to the model of international students' preferences (Figure 2.2) of Cubillo, Sánchez, and Cerviño (2006), the main elements to be proposed are the following: personal reasons, the country image effect, city effect, institution image, evaluation of the program of study, and their respective sub elements. In this section, mainly insights about the 'personal reasons' element are presented. The findings show that the students have their own individual motivations to study abroad. For some of the interviewees, such as Ali from Egypt, studying abroad is an opportunity for higher level studies, gaining more experience and being more independent. As he says: "I have finished my degree here and I decided to have more advanced studies abroad to get more experience and to try to live abroad, far from family and friends, everything". The motivation in this case is interpreted as personal improvement. In addition, the same insight was found in the secondary data in EMG's online survey (Appendix C). The participants had to choose their top five motivations of taking the decision to study abroad. In this survey, the data showed that the number one motivation of all international students was 'to develop myself personally' with 64.74%. All the above support the insight that personal improvement in its many forms is the major motivation of international students to go abroad.

Moreover, similar answers representing 'personal reasons' as the main motivation come from other interviewees as well. One of those is Saanya from Australia, who emphasizes the fun side of moving abroad and gaining new experiences when she says: "…I was just looking at the degrees that I wanted to do and I thought it might be just more fun to go overseas and try something new". The above can be discussed as a type of personal reason in a new concept, not identified by Cubillo, Sánchez, and Cerviño (2006). This type of motivation is also found in the secondary data and in particular in EMG's online survey (Appendix C) where the participants have chosen 'to experience a new culture or lifestyle' and 'to have an adventure' as their second and fourth main motivation to study abroad. In particular, data from EMG's online survey show that North American students are more excited than ever to experience a new culture. They name this as their top motivator for studying abroad. The prospect of international adventure, making new friends and improving one's proficiency in the English language are beginning to take precedence over career-related objectives.

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Trying something new sometimes can lead to changing your way of thinking and therefore take different paths in your decision-making. An example is Aigerim from Kazakhstan that took a semester in Slovakia as an Erasmus student and after this experience she decided to study abroad again and apply for a full-time graduate program. As she explains: "After this trip to Slovakia which was for one semester I decided to change my life". Notions of personal motivation and inner desire to experience new things are found throughout the primary and secondary data. Finding a job after the completion of the degree is another personal reason that the interviewees mentioned. As Adéla from the Czech Republic explains: "For me is really important how many percent of the students can find a job after studying in the university". In EMG's online survey (Appendix C), achieving one's career goals is the third major motivation listed by the participants as to why they decided to study abroad.

4.2.2   Influences on Student Decision-Making

The data also show some common influencing elements in students' decision-making. This insight is coded with the name 'Influences'. At the end, what influences the choice of a university, location or degree depends on forces from the external environment. Influencing elements found in the data relate to the 'country image effect' and in specific the academic reputation and the socioeconomic level as it was presented in the theoretical model of Cubillo, Sánchez, and Cerviño (2006). For Lovisa from Australia, who has also Swedish roots, the socioeconomic level of a country plays an important role in her decision-making. As she says: "…I wanted to study in Sweden because they have the most study support from the government.". A country's student support and organization, such as in this case Sweden's, affects the choice of the country.

Another influencing element that some of the interviewees mentioned, is the 'city effect' and more specifically the city image, cost of living and friendliness of the environment. This element is interconnected in a way with the 'country image effect' as the city is a part of the country. Students in our research perceive it sometimes as the same and what is more important to them is the overall image of the place their preferred HEI is situated. As Vitor from Brazil explains when asked about the most important thing for him when looking for a Master's program abroad: "I'd say looking for a place where you feel safe, that has good education, that people are educated and a place that can provide you a good quality of life and welfare.". According to Vitor, the place (city or country) of the HEI plays an important role in his decision. It must reflect a sense of safety and friendliness as well as a good socioeconomic level. This insight shows the relevance of the 'country image effect' and the 'city effect' in the minds of the international students that participated in this study.

In addition, two more elements were found in the data. Those are the 'institution image' and in specific the institution's prestige, international recognition, ranking and institution facilities, and the 'program evaluation' of the studies and in particular the programs specialization, costs and financial aid. Students tend to be influenced by the recognition of an institution. As Adéla from the Czech Republic explains about the institutions in her country of origin: "…in Czech Republic there are no schools in good qualification like in England", she makes a comparison of her home country's HEIs and UK's HEIs. She is influenced by the HEIs prestigious image in the UK and the low reputation of her own country's institutions.

Thus, her decision to apply for a study program in the UK is highly related to her perception of the different institutions' images. Moreover, the ranking of the university is a major influencing factor as well according to the obtained data. Lovisa from Australia explains how Swedish higher education and "the universities have like [world]wide reputation, they rank within the top 100, like in the top of the top 100…" and how it affects her decision to choose the country she wants to study in.

Recommendations from other students or friends and family also play a significant role in the decision-making. On the one hand the data from EMG's online survey show that family and friends remain the key influence on the decision to study abroad. On the other hand, following the general global trend prospective international students are looking less to their family and friends comparing to their survey from the previous year (Educations.com, 2018). Secondary data shows that they are more interested in engaging with the stories of students already living abroad (Educations.com, 2018). For example, Agurhan from Turkey, who currently lives in South Asia, mentions how recommendations for other students influence his decision of the country of the HEI. As he says:

> …there are many students in Taiwan and Australia that recommended to me that it's pretty good and I also heard many Asian people who are going to Australia studying there, graduating, they also get aid, funds from the university or their university.

It can be assumed based on the findings and the literature review that students consider it to be a safer decision to apply for education in a country that has positive reputation and excellent recommendation from former and current students. According to Binsardi and Ekwulugo's (2003) research, the above is supported as the recommendations and advice from other students can influence the decision-making in a great extent and affect the final purchase decision. The purchase decision in this case being the application to a study program abroad. Furthermore, the secondary data from EMG's online survey show that 'family/friends recommendations' together with 'student stories of studying abroad' are the top two influences that helped them to decide to study abroad.

4.2.3   Doubts and Fears of Students in their Decision Journey

There is a pattern found in the data of a strong indication of worry in the interviewees' sayings that was not found in the relevant literature to consumer decision-making and was not discussed in the 'Literature and Theoretical Review'. However, as it is interesting and insightful for the understanding of the consumer behavior and consumer decision-making, it is presented, discussed and analyzed in this section. It can be assumed that the reason it is not mentioned in the reviewed literature about decision-making is because most studies have a quantitative research design and are aiming on numerical data. This insight is based on the code 'Doubts and fears' of studying abroad. What is found intriguing in the data from the interviews is this repeating pattern of the students' doubts and fears of going abroad. First it starts from the fear of the unknown and being away from your loved ones as Clarissa from Austria explains:

> I would go alone so I have no friends with me. I have no family with me...And it is another country. It is really far away. That is one of my biggest fears. I just cannot go home for 5 minutes and say hi to my parents or something. I need to take plane… And

that is really… I don't know how to describe it. It is just really one of my biggest fears. Just to be such far away from my friends and family and being completely alone…

She concludes by saying:

I am… I mean it's very hard just to go abroad without any friends and without family. So it's really something… You need a check you really want to make otherwise you won't have fun wherever you are.

The above discusses the difficult times a young person may have when going abroad alone for a longer time. It also suggests a thorough gathering of information, preparation, and organization before taking the step to move to another country by yourself. Interviewees, such as Clarissa, in the beginning of their adult life talked with hesitation about the big step to choose an education abroad. Moreover, it is not only the fear of living alone away from family and friends that is observed. It relates also to the first time of independence and getting used to the new place or new country. Culture, weather conditions and the local people are some of the reasons for the concerns of interviewees. Amin from Iran says: "I would say trying to live alone and trying to be independent. That's scary. Trying to get used to the new environment. And of course to have no idea that's the scary part". The interviewees, like Amin, were worried about adjusting to a new country with different norms and different cultures. Ali from Egypt was worried about something similar. He felt awkward when expressing his fear but he went on saying:

I am afraid of something else, maybe it is funny or stupid but… I am afraid I would be accepted like in a country like Finland and Sweden. I know the weather is really really cold. I am not used to this weather at all...

It was observed throughout the interviews that in the beginning the interviewees felt slightly shy to talk about their fears and worries but they become very quickly eager to express all their concerns and causes of anxiety and explain them further. After the fear of the unknown and the doubt of making it alone abroad follows the worry of figuring everything out in a proper way. This worry appears after one finally makes the decision to apply and go abroad for studies. Most of the interviewees from countries such as Australia, Turkey, and USA had a difficulty finding the right information about visas, scholarships, and application paperwork in the websites of the universities. What they were expecting was to have an easy access to country-of-origin specialized information. As Gillian from the USA mentions: "There a lot of things to get done so I am just worried that I won't be able to figure out how to do it or get the right papers to do it". This shows that even after the big decision to go abroad, there are new concerns such as succeeding with the application process and the paperwork. Saanya from Australia has a similar worry. Her confusion and worry is about the grading system in other countries she wants to apply for education. Saanya struggles with finding proper information about the international grade equivalencies. As she explains:

...in Australia you get a final mark, what degree is going to depend on your final mark so I'm just studying right now to get a high mark and you can pick whichever degree you want but it has to fit into that. For example, if I had to do medicine I would have to have a 99 but if I wanted to do engineering that's a 94 so I just have to get that mark and then I could pick which one.

And she continues her thought later in the interview by explaining that:

> ...if we are talking about Europe or South America or Asia they have kind of like Europeans have one tab and Americans have one tab but because Australia is so far away it doesn't fit with anything so it's never an easy cut so like I have, I got a 95 so that's gonna translate to 95 there? I have to take so many other tests for my 95 to, if it's equivalent to 95 and what they are looking for as well...

Amin, who is originally from Iran but has been living in Singapore for the past 10 years, also mentions the difficulty he had when trying to understand the education system in other countries he wants to apply for education. As he says: "...we have different education system in Singapore so it's kind of hard to understand both educations...". Worries about the application process are various. According to Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003), and Galan, Lawley, and Clements (2015), the decision to study abroad is of high risk and high involvement. Thus, being involved in the whole application process and taking risks to live abroad for some time may have a worrying effect on young students in the beginning of their decision journey.

4.3   The Interplay Between Students and Online Media Communications

4.3.1   Empowerment

According to Pires, Stanton and Rita (2006), the consumer has gained power with the increase use of the internet and availability of information online. They argue that the consumer does not need to rely only on the communication from brands to be informed about their products and services. Therefore, consumers are empowered in their purchasing decision, choosing where and when to look for information. This insight is further explored through the analysis on the code 'Empowerment' which means empowered consumers searching for information online on their own.

In this research, many students explain their process deciding upon a university abroad and how they believe they can make their own choices and find all the information on their own. In this matter, Hanna from Finland explains how she keeps herself informed: "I subscribe to my email, so I get the news and stuff like that and then I just go and check on the internet more likely by myself". Here the student takes the action and selects the content which is interesting to her and will assist her on the decision-making process. Moreover, the findings suggest that the behavior of students is a demonstration of the change in power relations explained by Pires, Stanton and Rita (2006), where the consumer is in control of the marketing knowledge. Amin from Iran explains how he feels about information he collects from other students:

> They give you an actual feeling... rather than getting information from the teacher which is kind of ok but students have the actual knowledge. You have a better understanding and what to expect.

In this case, he perceives the opinion of other students as closest to reality which is a better source of information about the university, so he can make his decision. Many other students

share the same feeling about information they collect from stories of current or former students of the university. In addition, the student is empowered by information technology and has the conscience that he/she can make his/her own research and purchase decisions. For example, Ali from Egypt explains how he can take action to even find information that is not easily available online and does not need to depend on anyone else:

> We have some offices here in Egypt but they take lots of money for helping you and I think I can do it myself. I can search… I can contact the universities, and I can talk with them, and send them email, and they respond really good and quickly with all needed details. So I can't see these centers can offer something more, something I don't have.

Besides relying more on information from other consumers, the students interviewed in this research are aware of their power and prefers to be in control of the information gathering and posterior use of it to assist their decision-making. In line with Pires, Stanton and Rita (2006) arguments, the students in this research are creating their own expectations and assumptions about the quality of higher education services and are less dependent on company-driven marketing communications. This will be further discussed on consumer-driven marketing (4.3.3).

4.3.2   Advertising Skepticism

The code used to guide the analysis in this section is 'Disbelief in advertisement', meaning that consumers do not engage with mass media advertisements anymore. It is presented in the 'Literature and Theoretical Review' the argument that there was a shift from mass media communication channels to a networked information system, which is more interactive and consumer-centric (Mulhern, 2009). Accordingly, in this research students seem not to trust or rely on mass media communications. When asked about her opinion about university advertisement on social media for example, Saanya from Australia explains:

> I see the ads on Facebook and Instagram but I never really… I never click on the Instagram. Sometimes I click on the Facebook ones, yeah mostly Facebook to pick one social media. I think that with social media… personally I don't think I find them very useful because they don't really... it's just easier to Google it because when you go to Facebook stuff I just see general things that don't apply to me very much.

It appears that Saanya does not relate to the content of mass media advertisements of universities, finding it too general. She prefers to look for the content which interests her, usually starting from a search engine such as Google, cited by many interviewees. In this sense, the behavior of the interviewed students resembles Halligan and Shah's (2010) description of consumers' preference for relevant content and the way they interact with brands to find this content, which is the foundation for inbound marketing.

In addition, Ali from Egypt seems not to trust ads on social media when he mentions: "I don't trust social media posts and things like this. It is always like dreamy, and easy to do it and not really serious, so I prefer official websites". Indeed, Sassatelli (2007) and Keller (2009) have discussed this lack of trust in ads recently. In this case, the student perceives ads as showing an overestimated reality. Adéla from the Czech Republic expresses a similar thought when she says: "Most of the times the universities… they make videos so people like it and most of

it for students to go to their universities". Therefore, these students apparently think mass media advertisements of universities are not representative of the reality. They seem to prefer to look for information on their own and make their own investigation and assumptions about the quality of higher education services. This is consistent with Mulhern's (2009) digital media fundamental of demand-based in which consumers are empowered to pull content to satisfy their needs.

Regarding the consumer centric element of the proposed networked information system argued by Mulhern (2009), it is observed in this research the preference for other students' experience with universities abroad as source of information, rather than general, stereotyped advertisements. This is represented in Saanya's comment regarding university ads:

> Because it's a very like what the universities are trying to promote. I think for me to have a better understanding I have to talk to students other than the university... cause maybe the website makes it sound very good, very safe and very proficient but if that's not what's really happening I want to know. I just need to look at students' comments or call the school and get a better understanding.

Therefore, the findings show that students do not relate with advertisements promoting this ideal image of universities. This is also supported by the comment of Clarissa from Austria: "...I only see pictures of some happy students...That is it actually...". Accordingly, Vitor from Brazil suggests how universities could promote their brands, incorporating student stories:

> ...seeing these institutional videos and students telling their experiences especially international students, that you can related to them and see what their experiences were. I think that is a very good way to promote the universities image.

Meanwhile, findings suggest that targeted advertisements have more acceptance and are perceived as helpful by international students. For instance, Joao Marcos from Brazil clarifies: "I have used YouTube and Instagram. Because Instagram popped up something about Canadian immigration and then I opened the website and it was actually helpful". Since he was looking for educational programs in Canada, when he saw a targeted advertising with information about immigration and visas in this country, he clicked on it. In this case, he considers the information helpful to assist in his preparation for studies abroad. Accordingly, Losene from Liberia explains how he engages with an advertising on his Facebook messenger which ended up being interesting to him:

> Firstly, I started with this link on Facebook... On my messenger site and I decided to go in depth because I got really really interested in the system because there was so much information about the school on the internet.

Therefore, the insights from the analysis of primary data in this research are representative of Batra and Keller's (2016) and Court et al.'s (2009) arguments that digital media facilitates the targeting of content and advertising towards each consumer. The international students that were interviewed seem to agree on the perception of mass media advertisements from HEIs as unreliable and unhelpful, however it is observed that they perceive targeted advertisements to provide useful information and support their decision-making process.

An interesting and unexpected insight emerged from primary data which represents some students' preference for short promotional videos. For example, Clarissa from Austria states

her opinion when she is asked if she uses social media channels to look for information about universities abroad: "I watched some YouTube clips about universities if I remember correctly… if I remember they were not too long and that is good". Likewise, Saanya from Australia mentions:

> Some universities on their page have YouTube videos and has like a little two-minute video of the degree news. I watch them if they are short. I never watch them if they are long… Not more than two minutes cause it's just a waste of time cause otherwise if I'm really interested in it then I will watch but then I'm wasting information that I would watch any time of the year.

It suggests that some students engage with short videos when they are gathering information about the university and they have a preference over long videos, perceived as time waste by Saanya. These students are from different continents (Oceania and Europe), but have the same age (18 years old) which might explain a similar behavior of their generation. This insight has to be further investigated for conclusions to be discussed in more details, but it was an interesting pattern observed in the primary data.

4.3.3 Consumer-Driven Marketing

The code 'Consumer-driven marketing' guides the analysis of data meaning that student reviews and other user-generated content are sources of HEIs' information. This research finds that students are influenced by other students' stories online and are actively engaging with consumer-driven marketing in the form of student reviews, recommendations, testimonials and shared videos and photos. Adéla from the Czech Republic expresses how she interacts with such consumer-driven initiatives on social media: "I think I like Facebook that there is like how you like the university and what are the opinions of people so you can read what they think about these universities". Narayan from Bhutan has a similar thought: "Yeah I try to… firstly I check the websites then I go to some reviews found from students, what kind of experience and how they rate it and all these things". These observations correspond to Butler and Peppard's (1998) analysis in which they recognize the growing number of review websites and consumer virtual communities as sources of information influencing the purchase decision online.

Students in this research look for other consumer's information in many channels, including virtual communities such as social media groups, university website, forums and student posts in blogs and social media platforms. Michen from South Africa describes: "on the official websites they have a testimonial or blog posts of students about their subjects and what they did during the summer, how they enjoy this course or why they like this" referring to the university website as well as blogs. Aigerim from Kazakhstan shares her experience with YouTube as she engages with consumer-driven marketing:

> I like the video about studying, about accommodation, international students, how they study in the university. I also type names of university on YouTube and I saw how is student life on campus, about their accommodations… how they spend their day. YouTube is also useful.

It seems that Aigerim is accessing the content from a personal profile and from YouTube's official page of the university as she describes the experience of other students in the

university. Another way in which students engage with this type of content is through forums as explained by Michen from South Africa:

> I google the websites, go to the actual university website and look through there and the forums where people speak about their experiences of these places, comments on educations like Quora. You know that app? It's like a question, if you go ask questions then many people can answer. About their experience.

Clarissa from Austria has a similar experience when looking for students' impressions about the university abroad:

> One here which is called *What to do* in Austria and there are many students and even people who already work they are interviewed and they tell you something about university, their study, the subject and of course the work too and that's really informative, specially for young people like us.

Similarly to Butler and Peppard (1998), Court et al. (2009) considers consumer-driven marketing, particularly word of mouth, online research and internet reviews to influence the consumer today. This increased search for consumer to consumer interactions and user-generated content was evident in the findings of this study and were also identified in Mulhern's (2009) analysis of the networked information system. The author explains how mass media communications have been replaced by a more interactive and consumer-centric digital media. Two of the fundamentals he discusses can be found in the primary and secondary data from the students' interviews: use of social networks and the interactions between consumers. In EMG's online survey (Appendix C), the second and third elements which most assisted their decision to study abroad were respectively: student stories of studying abroad (30.26%) and social media (27.10%). Hence, students in this research constantly mention their experience with user-generated content on social media and other interactive online channels to support their decision-making.

When asked about their opinion about students helping the university to promote their services online, all interviewees were positive to this trend. For example, Narayan from Bhutan shares his opinion: "I am more comfortable talking to a student like me for the university rather than an official". While Hanna from Finland explains: "It shows the feeling in the university. It shows that they actually do care about where they are studying and they are proud of it and they like it. It gives that kind of image". Accordingly, Keller (2009) recognizes the growth of blogs with user-generated content and interactive marketing communications in general. Although students were positive to this initiative, only few students said they have seen user-generated content incorporated in the university official marketing channels. Most times when they mentioned student reviews, videos or posts, it was found on question-and-answer websites like Quora, social media user profiles or personal blogs. Therefore, HEIs could increase their focus on consumer-driven marketing as part of their online media strategy as the findings suggest it is of growing relevance to students and positively accepted by them.

4.4 The Consumer Decision Journey of International Students

Students interviewed in this study were in the beginning of their consumer decision journey to study abroad, from thinking on applying to a degree program overseas through the phase of gathering information about universities and comparing, to recently sent applications. Because the aim of this research is to understand the interactions of students with online media communications along their decision journey, it was important to address the student behavior comprehensively and not rely on memories. Therefore, the following section of this chapter discusses the three codes which were used to identify the first three stages of the student decision journey (Figure 4.1). The codes are: (i) intention to study abroad meaning the behavior patterns when first deciding to study abroad, (ii) active evaluation which is related to the information search and gathering and (iii) comparison and decision when students are organizing information and comparing universities.
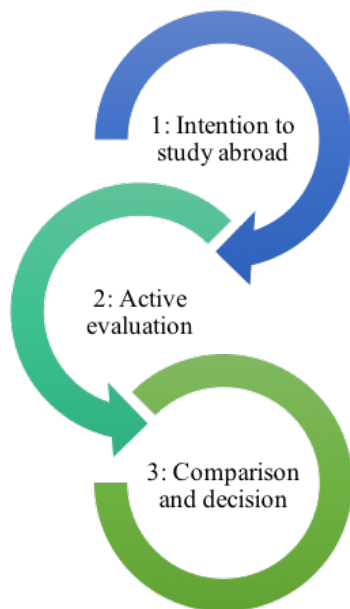
Figure 4.1: The three initial stages of the student decision journey (own design).

4.4.1 First Stage: Intention to Study Abroad

This code identifies on the primary data the behavior patterns when first deciding to study abroad. Through the coding and analysis of the interviews it is possible to observe some triggers to the start of the consumer decision journey including conversations with family and friends as well as previous experience abroad. In this phase, findings suggest that individuals

who have studied abroad before recall their past experience and decide to look for more information to possibly pursue a degree at a university overseas. For example, Joao Marcos from Brazil explains why he is considering a degree abroad, after his experience in Canada for one semester as a high school student: "I have always considered that option… But now that I have felt the experience… I can tell that it has been stronger… That I actually wanna do this".

Some other students have participated in exchange programs during their bachelor degrees and decided to apply for a master program in another country, as they had a positive experience abroad before:

> I have traveled before once, three years ago, it was an exchange program…It was in Brazil in 2015…I think this program has eliminated my worries and fears about travelling abroad. (Ali from Egypt)

Another trigger identified in this stage of the journey is the opinion and experience of friends and family. Students in this research rely on the information they hear from these people to start their search on a specific country or university they recommend. For instance, Amin from Iran mentions:

> I had a few basic information like what my parents and my teacher have told me and so. Like maybe you can try this and this country and I have this information and I used that information to start my research.

In some cases, they had basic information about certain countries and universities from word-of-mouth as some students mentioned that they heard about a specific country which had a good education system or affordable university tuition fees. In other cases, they actively asked for the opinion of friends on the internet to get recommendations as Gillian from USA explains: "On Instagram I posted like a little thing asking just my friends what countries they thought were good for universities and I got a lot of responses there". This quote also suggests that the priority is to decide the country first and then search for universities in the specific country. Many students mention similar priorities such as Aigerim from Kazakhstan: "I am looking for Sweden and Italy and I searched some programs in Sweden, so especially in civil engineering they have 3 or 2 universities with this program". She elaborates explaining the choice for Sweden is due to its weather similarities with her home country and the good things she heard about the Swedish society. This exemplifies the influence of word-of-mouth, besides the decision about the location guiding the search for universities and education programs.

Similarly, Hanna from Finland explains "I just started to find the universities. I kind of knew the cities I was going to look for but I didn't have any specific university in mind". In many interviews they mention the choice of country as initial step but in some cases the same student is contradictory when explaining more details about his/her search. For example, when the same student Hanna replies about which countries she is looking for information: "I was looking for Ireland and Scotland at first but now I'm looking for in the Netherlands and Czech Republic". She further explains that she was looking for international degrees, taught in English and in a student friendly city. Therefore, it seems that both the location and the characteristics of the degree are equally important elements in this stage of the consumer journey. Thus, regarding students' behavior patterns, the findings suggest that in the first

stage of the consumer decision journey they either start searching from the countries or where to find the degree they are interested in applying. In some situations, they search for international programs which are targeted at students from different countries, or specific degrees with the specialization they are looking for or by the language of the degree, as mentioned by some interviewees.

Gillian from USA finds interesting programs in the countries she has been recommended or pre-selected from previous experience, then the next step for her is to actively seek information about different universities as she describes:

> I just basically started super broad. I just looked up universities in Europe that teach in English and then it led me to couple different websites where you could choose more specifically so I chose Spain and Italy. From there I just looked up if they had the animal sciences degrees that I wanted to do. And then I chose a couple of the universities from that list and then I emailed them for more information.

The behaviors identified in the primary data have some similarities to the 'study abroad journey' (Appendix D) developed by Educations Media Group (EMG) through data from user interaction patterns in their education portal. For instance, EMG identifies that students in the first stage of the journey usually read content about the countries of study and the educational programs available, interacting with quizzes recommending locations and subjects of study. Additionally, regarding the priority when deciding to study abroad EMG's online survey (Appendix C) results show that 41.65% chose the country first while 41,16% selected that the study program got all their attention. Accordingly, in this research, it is observed that students usually concentrate their search on country and options of degree programs during this first stage. Therefore, the analysis of the interviews and the secondary data from EMG suggests that students in this stage search for information about both elements guiding their choice: location which can be a continent, country or city and the study program itself.

Since EMG's report is only based on the data from user behavior in their platform, they have not mentioned the influence of family and friends in this phase. Hence, this qualitative study is important to identify the motivations and reasons which influence the student behavior online. This study observes that students are triggered by family and friend as well as their own previous experiences studying abroad to start looking for universities selecting either locations or degrees overseas. The source of information in this stage seems to be social media interactions with friends, family recommendations, besides word-of-mouth and previous experiences abroad.

Regarding the literature in this subject, Court et al. (2009) explain that conversations with family and friends as well as previous experience with branded products and services influence consumers to select brands in the initial consideration set which is the first stage in their consumer decision journey framework. These influences were observed in this study as presented above. Nevertheless, the authors also mention company-driven marketing such as advertisements to be an influential aspect. Likewise, Butler and Peppard (1998) argue that companies can trigger the consumer and anticipate their needs and wants through targeted marketing in the problem recognition phase which is the first stage in their model. However, in this study, these company marketing efforts were not observed to impact students in the first stage of their journey to study abroad. Apparently, the decision to start looking for information about universities abroad is not a consequence of company-driven marketing

efforts and is more related to students' own motivations and previous experiences besides influence of family and friends to search for specific locations.

4.4.2   Second Stage: Active Evaluation

The code guiding the analysis of the second stage in the consumer decision journey is active evaluation which is related to the information search and gathering. According to insights from the interviewees, students in this stage mainly look for information about (i) application requirements, (ii) student reviews, (iii) university structure, (iv) details of educational program and (v) specifics of country and city such as safety and, public transport. Students mention that once they have an idea on the country or degree they actively look for information about universities. At this point, it is also noticed that they gather a large amount of information and pre-select many universities to read about. Hanna from Finland explains:

> I basically Googled universities, Europe and psychology bachelors and then it gave me a bunch of sites that had all the universities listed... Like good universities... So I just watched first every single one of them with the bachelors and after that I just started to drop them out one by one.

In terms of which channels they access in this stage, they mentioned many times websites with list of universities according to their choice of country and study program. They usually do not remember the name of these websites but from their description and a couple of students who actually recalled the name, it indicates they were navigating in education portals. For instance, Ali from Egypt describes his search starting from these portals:

> I have found some websites, like *Masterportal* I think… and some other websites. First I use them to know the programs and universities offering international programs. Then when I like the title of some program, I search for it on Google, then I find the website of the university itself, then find the program.

These steps are described by many students who start from a simple Google search, then use filter functionalities in education portals to discover which universities are offering the programs they are willing to read more about. Besides education portals, they also access country specific websites such as StudyinSweden.se and StudyinHungary.hu which were mentioned in some interviews. For example, when Vitor from Brazil explains his search as he was deciding to study in Hungary: "Actually I was looking at a website, it is called StudyinHungary that describes most of Hungarian universities and their fields of study, programs and curricula." In these platforms, they find information about different cities, safety, public transportation, cultural facts and the list of universities in the country. Sometimes, they have information about scholarships or government funding which some of the students mention is important in their criteria of selection.

After this general overview, they access the university's official website in which they believe the information is more accurate and updated. Moreover, they explain that the university's website usually has more details such as application requirements, list of courses offered in each degree and infrastructure of the university. For instance, Amin from Iran states: "I rather go to the official website for more information". Narayan from Bhutan expresses the same

when asked where he found the most relevant information: "In other ways I just find basic information. The more we find is the university website.".

In this stage, they also read student reviews which they find either in the university website or on social media channels as Narayan from Bhutan suggests: "Firstly I check the websites then I go to some reviews found from students, what kind of experience and how they rate it...". About YouTube it is mentioned that they look for videos of universities, so they can get a sense of the environment, as Clarissa from Austria says: "I watched some YouTube clips about universities if I remember correctly... And of course Facebook.".

Finally, Vitor from Brazil gives a descriptive summary of the most common actions in this stage of the decision journey:

> I think it is like, go to Google and type in study abroad in the country I'm living. I think it is easier if you narrow it down before choosing... like doing this kind of search. So, if you want to study in Germany, for example, just do some research on German universities first and what are their major, bachelor degrees, masters, and then you can look more precisely on the university that you are looking for.

Comparing to the stage two in EMG's 'study abroad journey' (Appendix D), which they call information gathering, some similarities are observed. EMG identifies that users click on the filters of the country and the degree level or program. After they have a list of universities which match their choice of location and program offered, they send enquiries to universities to ask for more details such as start dates, entry requirements and cost. EMG's journey also detects that they read reviews and social media feeds. These behaviors are all very similar to the experience students have shared during the interviews in this study. Additionally, in EMG's analysis of which stage users are when they access Educations.com platform, stage two has the largest number of users, followed by the third stage which will be described in the next section of this chapter. Indeed, in this research students mention access to education portals mainly when describing their activities in stage two of their decision journey.

The use of education portals in this stage of the journey is equivalent to what Butler and Peppard (1998) refer to about comparison websites with price and reviews. The authors mention the growing number of these platforms and their use in the 'evaluation of alternatives' phase which is the third stage in their model. Education portals usually list programs with their price information and reviews from previous students. In addition, regarding the access to the university website in this phase, Galan, Lawley and Clements (2015) discuss how students access different media types including the official HEI website. However, they fail to identify which information they look for in each channel and why they access the university website. This research finds that university websites are accessed to gather information about application requirements, courses offered in each program and campus infrastructure, which is cited by the interviewees. Furthermore, students perceive the university website information as more reliable and up to date, besides having access to the study program details which, as they explain, cannot be found in other channels.

In terms of the addition or subtraction of brands along the consumer decision journey, this research recognizes that most students include more universities to consider for application in the second stage of active evaluation. This is in fact pointed out by Court et al. (2009) in their opposition to the funnel metaphor of the purchase decision. As the authors discuss, most

consumers today add more brands in this phase. Accordingly, it is observed in this study that students start with a larger number of universities and start to narrow it down to fewer universities to look for more details in the next stage. Therefore, the consumer decision journey as Court et al. (2009) explain is not a linear process and may not follow a funnel metaphor, which is similarly identified in this research.

4.4.3   Third Stage: Comparison and Decision

The code guiding the analysis of the third stage of the consumer decision journey is named comparison and decision. It identifies the behavioral patterns in organizing information and comparing universities. Most students have a comprehensive list of universities which they have investigated in the previous stage and search for specific details to start comparing their characteristics as Ali from Egypt suggests:

> When I started searching about the programs, I wrote everything I saw about this university... I wrote in another file. So I can compare among all the universities and then I choose between them to apply.

The type of information students look for in this stage according to insights from analyzed data are (i) application process including deadline and how to prepare and send academic documents, (ii) cost information, (iii) scholarship information, (iv) pictures and videos of the university facilities and (v) basic information about accommodation. Agurhan from Turkey explains what he is looking for at this moment of his journey "How do I sign up, what are the documents required and what do I need to be eligible to be a university student in the university". Furthermore, regarding the organization of the information gathered about the universities Joao Marcos describes in details:

> I made a list of them that I wanted to check it out. First, I started with Winnipeg of course. Then I went checking online. First I went to the website of University of Winnipeg and then I went to University of Manitoba or actually I have a login in the Canadian website for scholarships...If that is the name... I subscribed there and I always check it out for scholarships and everything else.

Therefore, in the third stage findings suggest that students are looking for more specific information about the university so they can start to compare and narrow down the list of possible HEIs to apply. Concerning where they find this information, most students in this research describe that they contact the university by email to be able to receive the admission procedures, deadlines, scholarship options and costs. They emphasize how infrequent it is to find this information online, even in the university's official website. Many students complain they cannot find complete instructions online, particularly regarding cost, scholarships and deadline for application. This is one of the reasons why they justify contacting the university directly by email. When asked to give an example of the type of questions sent to the university by email, Ali from Egypt describes: "For example, when I looked for some universities, I found that they didn't write anything about the scholarships so I asked if they had available scholarships for me or not.".

Another reason to contact the university directly is insecurity as Gillian, from the USA declares:

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I think it is enough to make my decision on where to go... But I would like to contact somebody directly from the university before I start applying just so I know that I am heading on the right direction and I have the necessary things and requirements.

Some students also mention external consultants, for instance in their host university as cited by Emil from Sweden: "I started talking with the international coordinator with what would be fitting and I went from that point. I went to look out the different universities that were fitting...". Similarly, Ali from Egypt mentions a study abroad government agency in Cairo who assists students by providing information about scholarship opportunities and application procedures, but he argues it was not necessary in his case, as he prefers to search for information on his own. Therefore, it seems that the reasons to contact these consultants are similar to the motives to contact the university directly: finding missing information and having support to feel more confident during the process of application.

Other than contacting the university and accessing their website, in this stage some students access social media channels mainly to look for information on pictures and videos of the facilities in order to have more details about the infrastructure of the campus. For instance: "I look at some of the videos that they have or pictures… yeah I will look at those but those are the last thing I will look", explains Amin from Iran. The findings suggest that the interviewees access social media if they do not find visual information such as videos and photos about the HEI facilities on the university website.

Another interesting fact is that on the previous stage of active evaluation, social media channels are used mainly to access consumer-driven marketing such as reviews and recommendations from other students. In this stage of comparison and decision, they also access the official channels of universities on social media looking for more detailed information and visual material of the higher education institutions. Clarissa from Austria explains where she found the most relevant information online: "...from social medias of the universities too: Facebook and YouTube… I must admit I have never checked their Instagram but maybe I should do that too". In some cases, social media is used also as means of direct contact with the HEI, as Lovisa from Australia mentions: "They have a Facebook page and literally I wrote my questions in the messenger and they replied to me within like a few hours".

Regarding EMG's 'study abroad journey' (Appendix D), in the third stage which they call comparison and decision-making, students use a comparison tool to highlight the differences between programs and engage with university profiles and contact information of the institutions. This is very much in line with the findings of this research as the main behavior observed in this stage is the comparison of universities and active contact with HEIs directly. Additionally, this research finds the reasons why they contact the universities directly as they have more trust on the information from the institution and are not able to find all the details on websites in the internet.

In this stage, analyzed data suggests company-driven marketing, such as email communications and social media channels, seems to have more influence which is the opposite from Court et al.'s (2009) theoretical model. They consider that consumers engage with company-driven marketing mainly in the initial consideration stage as it creates brand awareness. However, in this study the first stages are characterized by consumer-driven

marketing interactions instead, as students seek information online on their own, mostly checking websites with reviews and students' stories on social media. In this third stage, they actively engage with the university recruitment and admissions department to clarify their doubts and access official marketing channels of HEIs to gather missing information which facilitates the comparison and decision process.

In this sense, it is important to notice that consumers are looking for specific information and are not engaging with mass media advertising, which is discussed by Court et al. (2009) and Batra and Keller (2016). These authors agree on the fact that digital media facilitates the targeting of content to each consumer. Indeed, students want specific content, which is why they contact the universities and check their social media channels for visual and interactive content that they consider relevant in this stage. Furthermore, regarding the use of social media, both Galan, Lawley and Clements (2015) and Gai, Xu and Pelton (2016) argue for its use mainly for consumer to consumer interactions and access to student reviews along the consumer decision journey. However, in this study, it is observed that students also engage with company communications, either interacting with visual media or direct contact through social media official channels of the university, as presented earlier in this section.

4.4.4 Discussion

The previous analysis describes the international student behavior along the consumer decision journey, illuminating what students do in each of the first 3 stages, where and how they gather information and the reasons to seek this information. Many touch points with university brands are evident in their journey to decide on a HEI abroad, including search engines such as Google, education portals, university website, social media channels, blogs and specialty websites such as StudyinSweden.se, email communications and education consultants. Most of the touch points are used more than once for different purposes during the process which shows the dynamics of the consumer decision journey, also suggested by Batra and Keller (2016).

Furthermore, it is observed what type of information is searched in each phase and which decision is done in each stage of the decision journey to study abroad. In the first stage, usually students decide on the country where they want to study and start looking for some information of recommended universities in this country. Or they start from the search of study programs that interest them and from there they identify the locations offering such degree. The second stage involves an intensive search for universities offering the specific study program they are interested in applying. At this point, the number of university brands considered is broad and they start to narrow down generally based on the program information, city characteristics and student reviews. In the third stage of the consumer decision journey, they reduce the number of universities brands and contact the selected ones for detailed information particularly about the application process, cost and scholarships.

In this study, the findings from primary data analysis are related to the first three stages of the consumer decision journey because we interview students who are in the process of applying for a university abroad. Only three students had already sent applications and were waiting for admission results and they briefly explain what the next steps would be. It is mentioned that

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they typically apply for more than two universities and have to wait for the admission results, so they can start preparing their visa documents, accommodation booking and flight tickets. According to EMG's 'study abroad journey' (Appendix D), in the fourth stage which is the application, students read about required documents, start dates and scholarships, and select several programs to apply. The following stages according to their model are post-application/pre-acceptance (fifth stage) and the acceptance to enrollment (sixth stage). In each of these stages students engage with specific content in their platform. In the post-application/pre-acceptance they read location and internship guides, respond to targeted emails, read student reviews and sometimes even apply to additional universities. In the sixth stage and last stage in their model, they analyze which offer of admission to accept, participate in student forums, engage with highly specific location content and read more university profiles to support their decision.

The table below summarizes the findings from the primary and secondary data analysis concerning the behavior of international students, content they search and touch points with universities brands along their decision journey. The first three stages represent the findings from analysis of interviews content in this study and the last three stages rely on secondary data from EMG's 'study abroad journey' (Appendix D).

Stages of decision journey	Intention to study abroad	Active evaluation	Comparison and decision	Application	Post-application Pre-acceptance	Acceptance of admission offer
Behavior	Start searching for country or study program	Search for broad number of universities	Contact selected universities	Apply for selected study programs	Choose which admission offer to accept and submit additional applications	Accept admission offer
Content	Country information Program information Opinion of friends and family	Application requirements Student reviews University structure Program information City and country specific information	Application process Scholarship information Cost information Visual content of university facilities Basic accommodation information	Start dates Application period Scholarship information	Location information Internship information Student reviews Accommodation information	University profiles Student forum posts Specific location details
Touch points	Word-of-mouth Social media	Google Education portals University website Social media Country specific websites (e.g. StudyinSweden.se)	Email to universities University website Social media Scholarship websites Education Consultants	Education portals University website Application submission websites	Education portals Social media University website	Education portals Social media University website

Table 4.1: Summary of the findings about the decision journey of international students.

Although primary data is not sufficient to draw conclusions on student behavior and touch points in the last stages of the student decision journey, the information from the secondary data (EMG's study abroad journey- Appendix D) give interesting insights and therefore are also included in the proposed theoretical framework illustrating the decision journey of international students, presented in Figure 4.2. The following figure shows a journey that ends for an individual student in the post enrollment experience stage, but at the same time continues for another student who is in the intention to study abroad phase and engages with content shared by the student who is currently at university. It is represented by an open circle with an arrow that leads back to the beginning, but this time for another student. Therefore, this proposed framework is not representing an individual student's journey but a collective decision journey of international students.
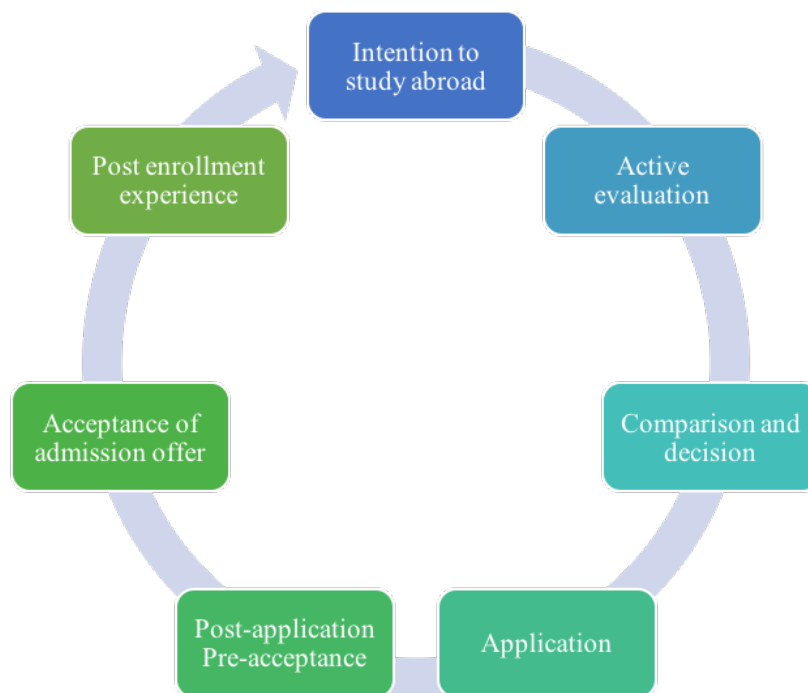
Figure 4.2: The decision journey of international students (own design).

The opinion of students who had studied or are currently studying in the university seem to hold an influence on almost every stage as discussed in the findings. Hence, as Court et al. (2009) affirm the post purchase experience is becoming increasingly important in which satisfied consumers share their experience online. Therefore, students' stories influence the consumer who is looking for universities abroad from the first stage of the journey. It is represented above as a circular path, with a re-initiation of the journey for other students deciding on higher education overseas.

Additionally, some insights which were not coded appeared on primary data. Many interviewed students mention their perception of the decision journey as a long process, involving a lot of research. For instance, Adéla from Czech Republic comments: "It's a lot of research and what information you have to find and it's a really long way". Accordingly, Agurhan from Turkey says: "It took a long time for me to decide where to do what". The

entire process of information gathering, comparison and decision seems overwhelming to students. Thus, this study finds that the decision to apply for higher education abroad is of high risk and high involvement for the student.

In conclusion, the findings of this research suggest that international students choose to interact with many online media communication channels along their decision journey and these interactions support the movement to the next stage in the journey. The same channel is used more than once but for different purposes sometimes, and social media seems to provide relevant content for the students in every stage. In some cases, social media allows the interaction with other students or user-generated content, while in other situations it is used to access HEI's marketing content. Finally, it is observed in this research that the international student chooses which channels to access, according to the information he/she are seeking and how relevant it is to support his/her decision of applying for higher education abroad.

4.5   Chapter Summary

This chapter offered an analysis and discussion of the findings of this research. The findings from the primary and secondary data were presented and analyzed in order to show behavioral patterns and new insights on the topic of the consumer decision journey of international prospective students who want to study abroad. The analysis followed a categorization deriving from the four main theoretical themes presented in the 'Literature and Theoretical Review' chapter and based on the 11 codes from the coding guide explained in the 'Methodology' chapter and presented in Appendix E. The insights found in the primary and secondary data were divided in four main groups: Commercialization of Knowledge, Students as Decision-Makers, The Interplay of Students and Online Media Communications, and The Consumer Decision Journey of International Students. These groups included the following sub-groups: Independence of Consumer Decision, Motivations of Students to Study Abroad, Influences on Student Decision-Making, Doubts and Fears of Students in their Decision Journey, Empowerment, Advertising skepticism, Consumer-Driven Marketing, First Stage: Intention to Study Abroad, Second Stage: Active Evaluation, and Third Stage: Comparison and Decision. Lastly, there is a discussion of the the decision journey of international students as identified in the obtained data from the interviews with international prospective students and company material from EMG. A summary of the findings regarding the behavior of students in each stage of the decision journey, the information they searched for online and the touch points with university brands is presented in the last section. Furthermore, this chapter ends with a proposed theoretical framework for the collective consumer decision journey of international students applying for higher education abroad.

5   Conclusion

This last chapter presents the main conclusions of this research and reflects on the entire study. It includes a review of the research aim as well as the contributions of this research. Finally, limitations and recommendations about future research are provided after a reflection of this specific study.

5.1   Research Aim

The aim of this research was to explore the consumer behavior of international students in the context of the international higher education institution choice in order to gain insights on their interaction with different online marketing communication channels during their decision journey. This aim is directed towards achieving a better understanding on consumer decision-making through the investigation of the interactions between international students and online media communication channels of HEIs and education portals. In these interactions, the students are considered empowered consumers and the HEIs together with the education portals are the representatives of the marketization of knowledge. The research aim was successfully fulfilled and the analysis of the findings have answered the research question. Insights gathered from this research provided a descriptive amount of meanings of how and why international students interact with online marketing channels while applying for higher education abroad. The research also succeeded to provide insights on consumer behavior by examining the different stages of the decision journey of international students which resulted in a theoretical framework of this journey.

5.2   Main Findings and Conclusions

The research was conducted by using a qualitative research design with an exploratory and inductive approach. This approach was adapted in order to gain a deeper understanding of the meanings and understandings of international students along their decision journey to study abroad. The obtained data came from both primary and secondary sources. The researchers conducted in total 20 interviews with international prospective students from all over the world, from which 17 could be transcribed and used in the analysis. Moreover, the secondary data that was gathered included EMG's annual report 2017, online survey and student trends report 2018. The researchers had a very close collaboration with EMG which helped with the data collection as well as gaining insights to the research problem not only from the

consumer's point of view but also from the company's point of view. The data gathering followed an ongoing process of coding, interpreting, analyzing and discussing the insights risen from both the primary and secondary data.

The insights from the findings show students as empowered consumers and HEIs as brands that are promoting their services online to engage with consumers. In relation to that, the students are active decision-makers with an independent style of searching information about higher education by themselves. The above is conflicting in some of the cases. This is due to the fact that some of the international students mentioned the influence of a family member, a friend, or a former student that in a way affected their decision to study abroad. This insight suggested a paradox of the independence of the consumer decision. Nevertheless, the research identifies that the consumer is empowered with market knowledge and the international students interviewed were in control of their choices of where, when and how to look for information to support their decision to apply for higher education abroad. Furthermore, the findings identified that besides common motivations and influences on consumer decision-making, international prospective students also have some common doubts and fears about going abroad for studies. Many of the interviewed students mentioned the fear of the unknown, the doubt of making it alone in another country, and the worry of figuring everything out in a proper way during the application process. Although, the above was not found while reviewing previous literature on student decision-making, it was found interesting to present as a finding to further analyze and discuss as it had a connection to the research question. Additionally, it provided a wider understanding of the consumer behavior of international prospective students in their decision journey.

This study also revealed insights into how the international students as empowered consumers choose not to engage with mass media communications. The findings suggest that they no longer relate to advertisements promoting the ideal image of university brands or to ads with general information. Moreover, it is observed that they perceive mass media communications as unreliable and unhelpful, with some skepticism towards advertisements. However, targeted ads with content that they consider relevant and supportive were perceived as useful by the students in this research. Regarding this relevant content, the findings reveal the increased importance international prospective students place on other students' stories and reviews, and how they interact with other students and positively respond to consumer-driven marketing.

The analysis of the student behavior to understand their interactions with online media communication channels along the decision journey to apply for higher education abroad is based on primary and secondary data. Primary data is used to gain insights on the three initial stages of the decision journey: (i) intention to study abroad, (ii) active evaluation and (iii) comparison and decision. While secondary data is the source of information for the findings presented on the last three stages: (iv) application, (v) post-application/pre-acceptance and (vi) acceptance of admission offer. A table containing the main insights on the student behavior, content they seek online and touch points with the university brand in each stage of the decision journey is presented in the analysis chapter (Table 4.1). It was observed that the international students interact with many online media communication channels along the decision journey, including search engines, university website, country specific websites, blogs, scholarship websites, social media and education portals. The same channels are used

more than once for different reasons. Social media channels, for instance, are accessed in almost all stages of the decision journey and students sometimes use it to interact with other students or with the higher education institution. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that social media enables the interaction with consumers and with brands, and according to the findings of this research both interactions support the decision to study abroad.

The major influence identified along the decision journey was the opinion of other students which the interviewees from many different countries trust as a reliable source of information. Therefore, the theoretical framework proposed in this research takes into account the growing influence of user-generated content and student reviews in the decision-making of international students. The decision journey of international students proposed in this research included the last stage of post enrollment experience in which the content that current students share online influence the decision of prospective students from the intention to study abroad through the other stages, as observed in the findings. Thus, Figure 4.2 in the 'Findings, Analysis and Discussion' is a representation of a collective decision journey of international students applying for higher education abroad.

In conclusion, the findings of this research suggest that international students choose to interact with many online media communication channels along their decision journey and these interactions support the movement to the next stage in the journey. They interact with the channels they find most relevant in each stage of their decision journey, according to the information they are looking for and how supportive they perceive the content available in each channel. International students in this research pull content according to their needs. Additionally, interactions with other students and university brands through consumer-driven marketing and company-driven marketing communications support their movement along the decision journey to apply for higher education abroad.

5.3 Contributions

This research contributed to the theory field of consumer behavior and consumer decision-making and more specifically to international student behavior. Students in this research were considered consumers of higher education services. A qualitative approach to the understanding of the interactions between international students and online marketing channels resulted in a theoretical framework. This represents the analysis of the student behavior along the decision journey to apply for higher education abroad. Moreover, the insights provided a comprehensive view of the motivations and influences on the student behavior, and how they choose to interact with each online media channel. Previous research has identified the channels accessed by international students when deciding to study abroad, but failed to reveal the reasons behind their consumer behavior. In this research, the findings suggest why, how and when international students interact with these channels and the means in which each interaction supports their decision journey. Therefore, this exploratory research contributes with a broader and more in-depth comprehension of the international student behavior when deciding to apply for higher education overseas.

5.4 Practical Implications

The findings of this research contribute to the field of higher education marketing and online marketing of service providers in general. The consumer behavior identified in this research is of value for practitioners in the higher education market as well as marketers who are engaged in the promotion of services online. Specifically for higher education institutions, the findings suggest the increased preference for consumer-driven marketing communications in many different countries from where students were interviewed. Therefore, the incorporation of user-generated content and student reviews seems to represent relevant content to their targeted students when recruiting internationally. This could be further explored in the marketing strategy of HEIs and education portals.

Concerning the interactions of international students with online media communication channels along their decision journey, it assists marketers to understand which content should be targeted at the student in each stage. Furthermore, it allows the understanding of the use of each channels along the journey. Marketers can use this knowledge to allocate their marketing budget in different channels and plan the content which is relevant for the international student in each channel. The understanding of the consumer decision journey is of interest for any organization, specially the mapping of interactions with the many online marketing channels available nowadays. This research contributes especially to practitioners involved in the planning of online marketing strategies to higher education institutions promoting their services worldwide.

5.5 Limitations and Future Research

One of the limitations of this research was the given timeframe of the project. This study had to be conducted in ten weeks, therefore the researchers chose to conduct interviews only with prospective student. This influenced the findings of this research as the first stages of the consumer decision journey could be explored in-depth. The other stages were described based on secondary data provided by EMG. If more time was available it would be possible to have a comprehensive understanding of the complete decision journey, by interviewing current and previous international students. Therefore, future research can further explore the stages of application, post-application/pre-acceptance, acceptance of enrollment offer, and post enrollment experience with a qualitative approach. Also due to time constraints, it was not possible to make more interviews with students of each nationality to possibly find insights of different behavior according to the country of origin. Future research can address this differences and reveal insights on how HEIs can promote their services in each country.

Another limitation was the insufficient previous qualitative research in consumer behavior of prospective students. Most past research had a quantitative approach and the researchers had to gather insights from factor analysis which was not aligned with the purpose of this study. Thus, future qualitative research in student behavior is recommended to develop a foundation for the understanding of the motivations of the students and the reasons for their behavior.

Furthermore, research with students from one nationality could be of value for higher education institutions recruiting domestic students, as the sources of information would probably involve offline touch points with university brands, which were not explored in this research.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Theme 1: Consumer decision journey

- Why did you decide to study overseas?
- Is it a decision you have done yourself (where to study) or used the help of others?
- What is the most important to you when searching for a study program abroad? And why?
- What do you look for when searching for a university abroad?
- Did you have a list of possible universities to attend before starting the research online?
- If yes, why did you choose these universities (criteria)?
- If not, did you have a list of countries/destinations?
- Can you describe your process to organize the information gathered about the universities?
- Can you tell us if you have been in contact with any educational consultant? Why was that? When did you/will you contact a consultant?
- In which stage are you now in terms of the process to decide and apply to universities?
- Which do you think is the next stage/step for you (of the decision process)?
- What worries you when deciding to study abroad, any fears you have?

Theme 2: Online marketing

- Where do you look for information about possible universities to apply? Why?
- Have you accessed any education portal such as Educations.com website? Is yes, how did you get to know about these portals?
- Can you tell us more about your experience with education portals so far?
- Are you in contact with other students from the universities you are considering to apply? Why? How?
- Do you use social media channels to look for information about universities? how/why?
- Have you watched videos about the university? Where did you find these videos? What is your opinion about the content of these videos?
- Can you tell us about any other ways in which you keep yourself informed about universities? Where are you normally finding this information?
- Is there any information that you would like to find online but you are not able to find?

Theme 3: Brand awareness and image

- What kind of information about the universities did you have before doing online search?
- Where on the internet you think you found the most relevant information so far?
- What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of a good university (brand)?
- What is your attitude/feeling towards the promotion of a university brand online?
- How can a university build a good image online?
- What is your opinion about students (or potential students) sharing university content and helping to build a university's brand image?
- Do you think the information found online is sufficient for you to decide on your university abroad?
- Is there anything else you would like to share with us, any particular thing you are struggling with now?

Appendix B: Interview Transcript Samples

Aigerim, 23, Kazakhstan, Central Asia

- Why did you decide to study abroad?

The reason was... in 2017 autumn semester my university chose me to Erasmus program in Slovakia. After this trip to Slovakia which was for one semester I decided to change my life.

- What was the most important thing to you when looking for a program abroad?

Sorry, I don't understand. Can you repeat?

- When you were deciding on the program abroad, what was the most important thing for you?

Pause... (She didn't know)

- For example, the country, program, the university?

First is that it is fully funded program...I got every month scholarship, they cover my transport costs and accommodation. I have been in Slovakia from September to December.

- And do you have plans to go abroad to study again?

Yes, because now I am master student in Civil engineering so I saw that civil engineering abroad in other programs they teach in other direction than us. It will be more convenient for me to get new knowledges in this field. Also I like to trip, to meet new people from other countries, other nationalities, for example.

- When you are deciding for the next step, what worries you the most?

I am looking for Sweden and Italy and I searched some programs in Sweden, so especially in civil engineering they have 3 or 2 universities with this program. And they also have big scholarships for master international students.

- Is that how you found out about Sweden? How did you make this decision?

I am also looking for Europe... Sweden, Italy, maybe France. I am still searching.

- From the universities you are searching what do you think is the most important attribute for you?

Ah... the new knowledges about civil engineering, they teach me how to explore things, to use some programs which I didn't use in Kazakhstan. I got more information in Slovakia than I get here in Kazakhstan. So I studied hard in Slovakia, it was amazing.

- Now that you are looking for new programs, are you organizing this information that you are checking online?

I am looking to apply for maybe in the end of this year because I know most applications start in November or December. So in this year I will graduate in my university and I will get my Master degree. So I want to take again a Master degree but abroad. Because I did not satisfy with the knowledge in Kazakhstan. It is so less for me. I want to get more knowledge.

- Have you been in contact with any educational consultant to help you find these programs?

No, I have just started to search and I just downloaded some PDFs about university, about program which they describe. And also I searched universities site. I am looking for information about international students. So... Sweden I think is more comfortable for me.

- Why?

Because Sweden is one of the most happy countries in the world, I know. The climate... Weather is convenient for me...because I know in Sweden it is cold. In Kazakhstan is the same situation so no problem for me. So... this is the main...

- And do you have any fears about studying abroad? Anything that worries you?

Yes, I saw about accommodation because many people said it is so hard to find accommodations. Not so many universities provide students with accommodation and you should search for yourself. I think this is the main problem.

- You mentioned universities websites during your search. Have you also accessed any education portals?

Yes, I have. In russian portals because it is my second native language. Most of all I am looking on these russian sites.

- Can you give me an example?

Grankistdaburu (I did not understand). I can send you some links of these sites if you want.

- Yes, that would be great.

Also Kazakhstan offer some conference, seminar and people from.. Official managers from universities from all over the world. They come to Kazakhstan twice a year to describe the university, to show how is to study in these universities, which programs they have in the university. So I think this is a nice opportunity to know more of the universities from first view (directly she means). And I always participated in these conferences because it is interesting to know something new for me.

- About the education portals, what do think is most appealing for you on these websites?

My opinion about the site?

- Yes, what do you like about these portals?

First of all, I would like to say that these portals are very useful because it describes all the countries in the world, about internship, application, bachelor program, PhD, masters program.
For example, you can click for Austria and you will get some internship for Austria, Bachelor programs, universities for Austria...

- Are you in contact with other students from universities you are planning to apply?

No because I did not apply yet. If I start this year, I will also contact the universities.

- Do you use social media to look for information about universities?

Yes, I am using Instagram. For Instagram I follow Chalmers University and KTH. For example, Instagram has many pages of universities. I also follow universities from America, for example. Not only from Europe.

- What do you like the most about their Instagram?

I like the video about studying, about accommodation, international students, how they study in the university. I also type names of university on YouTube and I saw how is student life on campus, about their accommodations...how they spend their day. YouTube is also useful.

- Have you interacted with any students on Facebook, Instagram or YouTube?

Ahn… no I did not.

- About your online search...are you looking for information anywhere that I have not mentioned? Maybe blogs?

No... that is all...Not anymore.

- When you are doing you search online, what kind of information you had before looking online?

Before... ah...I searched country... About how people live in this country... Economy, political situation... How is the weather... About the city... Historical city or modern city. Because I like historical city, with history.

- Did you find the information online sufficient enough to understand this?

Yes... I saw special websites for people who want to study in Sweden... I don't remember how it is called... It did describe everything...about new student, universities, scholarships in Sweden, culture news in Sweden.

- On the internet, where did you find most relevant information so far?

Yes, on the internet. Because we didn't have magazines in English about Sweden and other countries. We have books but in Russian... But to read in English is more interesting for me.

- What is the first thing that come to your mind when you think about university brand?

Yes, also...the spaces of universities... How many students find job after graduation... Ahn... that's all.

- How do you normally perceive the university brand (name, logo, website)?

The website is not so important for me. The most important for me is the campus... Learning rooms... About campus... Where they study, which tools they use... Is they have some laboratories...

- About study portals, what is image of this in your mind... What should it include?

First of all, I think it should have the common information about university. Also about studying in Sweden...Also about Sweden country and then it should be about programs... Like how many programs have bachelor, how many masters, and PhD… also all requirements for these programs. For example, what the applicant needs to have to go to theses universities. For example, some certificates, IELTS, copy of transcripts, diploma...This... I think this is the main thing.

- Did you noticed any change on your perception of universities brands after you have done this research?

Ahn... I did not understand.

- (I repeated)

No it is not important for me.

-   Is there any information that you are trying to find and are still not able to find online?

Ahn... Yes... I didn't find information about accommodations in Swedish universities... about the picture of rooms, common pictures of dormitories in Sweden. They did not provide this information.

-   Did you find this for other countries?

Yes, for example some universities from Germany provided the pictures of accommodations, of rooms... And in 360 degrees, you can see everything in the room.

-   Is there anything else you would like to share, anything you are struggling with?

I am interested in how the citizens of Sweden contact with students from abroad...if domestic students interact with internationals.
In Scandinavia maybe they are not so friendly... No... I mean... Not too much contact with people... Like people think about Russians...not too much contact.

Follow Up email - she sent us the links of the websites she checked:
http://grantist.com/
https://www.heysuccess.com/
https://www.masterstudies.ru/Magistratura/
https://oncampus.ru/application/magistratura-za-rubezhom-stoimost-granty-i-postuplenie/

Ali, 25, Egypt, North Africa-Middle East

-   Why did you decide to study abroad?

I have finished my degree here and I decided to have more advanced studies abroad to get more experience and to try to live abroad, far from family and friends, everything. And learning because I am graduated as a mechanical engineer ok? But here in Egypt it is so general to study mechanical engineering so I want to study more specialized studies, you know? I did not like the options in my college and it is only available for me to study Masters in my university, you know? So the options were not so good for me so I started looking on the internet to find something and maybe interested me. And I have applied to some programs until now and I am waiting for the response.

-   Which countries have you applied for?

I have applied for Finland, Italy and France. I was very interested in studying in Germany because it is really good for my career as a mechanical engineer but I found that they demanded to have a certification in German language and I don't have this. I have studied German for one year but it was not enough for them so I have applied for other countries.

-   So are you going to study in English then?

Yes, all of them are international programs, all of them are in English.

-   When you are searching for these study programs abroad, what is more important to you?

(asked for pause and to repeat the question twice)

-   You are asking what is important about the programs I am looking for?

Yes, exactly. First, the most important thing is that this program would be in the field of mechanical engineering that I am interested in, like automotive or ...industrial. The most important thing is the field of the program... Nhum... Second, is the university itself but it is not so important to be in a really

good university, not a ranked one but I prefer if it was in a good university that has history. Third, is about the country itself. I want to live in a good atmosphere, like no racism or something discriminative because you know I am a Muslim and Arab, so I hear that some countries in Europe have things like this. I think more... It would be about the fees of the university. I don't know... I have some budget for this master at university but I am not so sure if it is enough for paying for a Master degree but if it is not, I will look for a scholarship or something like this.

- You mentioned that you look for a good university, but not necessarily a ranked one. So what would be a good university for you? What do you look for in the university?

Well, I am looking for a university that is really really specialized in this field, not to be a general university, you know... Not teaching all the... Nhum... like to be specialized in engineering and to be good, really good in mechanical engineering especially.

- Is this decision to go abroad, you have done yourself or used the help of others like family or friends?

I have decided this alone, since I was last year in college while I was working on my graduation project. Family was not really interested in this decision, they didn't like it at all. They prefer if I look for a job here and start my career but I have talked to them and convinced them that this will be really good for me and will be really good for my career too. And they now kind of agree with it but I know they don't want me to be out of the country, to be far from them… That's the reason they don't want me to leave.

- In this process of going abroad, what worries you more, what are the fears you have about the decision to study abroad?

Sorry, you are talking about my fears of going abroad?

- Yes, what worries you?

I have traveled before once, three years ago, it was an exchange program... It was in Brazil in 2015… I think this program has eliminated my worries and fears about travelling abroad. I stayed there for 2 months so I don't have so much in my mind now about travelling... But you know... nhum...I maybe worry about the studies itself, if it is going to be hard for me, more advanced than the studies I am used to here. And I am afraid of something else, maybe it is funny or stupid but... I am afraid I would be accepted like in a country like Finland and Sweden... I know the weather is really really cold. I am not used to this weather at all... So I don't know what I'm going to do if this happen. And maybe I... this is going to happen anyway, homesick... You miss your friends, you family, your country. I have some worries about this but I think it is going to be worthy to travel for a master degree. I will have some difficulties and problems but overall it will be worthy.

- What do you think is the next step for you in your decision process?

I am now working more on searching on the internet, more programs and reading about it. I am saving the links of the programs I like and I consider some of it to apply for it in the next few months. But I wanted to be not too... Nhum... I wanted to be concentrated in few programs so I can do my best in writing motivation letter or anything needed for applying for the program. I am looking for the requirements needed for the programs and I will work more on it, work on myself. As I told you before, I was interested in Germany but the problem was the demand to have a certification in German, so I maybe learn German if it is going to help me to do it. I think that is all.

- How do you organize the information that you are gathering about the universities?

What? Can you repeat?

- … like do you make a list with pros and cons, for example?

Yes, I have a Google sheet but a really small one. I write the name of the university, the country and the name of the program. And deadline of the application form. When I started searching about the programs, I wrote everything I saw about this university... I wrote in another file. So I can compare among all the universities and then I choose between them to apply.

- Where do you look for information about the universities?

Because to choose which one is better for me... As I told you before I am looking for universities that are specialized in engineering or only mechanical engineering. So I found that some universities are like a general university, like big ones in countries like France and Italy… and Hungary too…

- But I mean where do you find information?

Where? You mean what is the tool I am using to find this information?

- Yes...where do you look for this information, websites, social media?

Ah ok! I have found some websites, like *Masterportal* I think...and some other websites. I can't remember the names because they are lots of them. First I use them to know the programs and universities offering international programs. Then when I like the title of some program, I search for it on Google, then I find the website of the university itself, then find the program. I kind of want to depend on myself to find the programs, not depending on these websites only. And in some countries like Finland, they use a website for all the universities to apply for international program. I used. I can find all the programs in all the universities so it was easier to find programs and apply for it.

- What is your experience with those education portals so far, like the Masterportal that you mentioned?

I think it was good, I didn't have problems. I thought they maybe have some wrong information about the program or something but when I look for this information on the university itself.. website, I think it was good, it was not so bad. But Masterportal if I remember.. Some of the programs they posted about, they don't have full information about the programs so I found only few better information about the programs.. So they need to work more on this.. To have all the details about the program and I really like the way they present the information. Like the country is... The university and the name.. Then the tuition fees, then everything. I like how they organize everything. I think it helps, it helped me but unfortunately I have used these websites late, not in the beginning of my search about the programs.

- So what did you use in the beginning?

I was only using Google. First I wasn't really keen on using these websites…because I thought there would be fees for this websites... So I didn't use it in the beginning.

- Are you contact with any education consultant?

No, just by myself. We have some offices here in Egypt but they take lots of money for helping you and I think I can do it myself. I can search... I can contact the universities, and I can talk with them, and send them email, and they respond really good and quickly with all needed details. So I can't see these centers can offer something more, something I don't have.

- In this contact with the university, what kind of question did you have?

It depends on the program itself. When I had something that I can't understand in details I can ask about it. For example, when I looked for some universities, I found that they didn't write anything about the scholarships so I asked if they had available scholarships for me or not.

- Are you in contact with other students from these universities that you are applying for?

No, I don't have any friends in these universities.

- But have you looked for information about other students' experience?

Ah yes, I have read one with the student experience in the university, it was in Finland.

I have checked this. But the moral of his post was that everything is changing frequently you know? You can't only depend on some old information or details. Everything is updated every years and is changing, especially about the international programs. For example, when this friend travelled to Finland 3 years ago, there were no fees for the Master, once you were accepted in the program, you didn't have to pay for it. Now the same university have fees for the master programs and you apply for it and you have to pay or you can get accepted in a scholarship.

- Do you also use social media to get information about the universities?

I do, but a little bit. I prefer to use the official website because I don't trust social media posts and things like this. It is always like dreamy, and easy to do it and not really serious so I prefer official websites.

- Have you watched videos of universities?

No... no videos. Just some photos.

- Is there any information that you are looking for online and you can not find?

Sometimes, yes, I can't find. But as I told you, I can find the contacts of the administration office. So I use emails to ask them and they are really helpful about it.

- What is this usually about, that you can't find?

I think...The most unfound information is always about scholarships. But some universities are clear about it. But you can ask them...Maybe they have a different application to apply for the scholarship, not one application for the program and the scholarship together.

- Is there any other way that you keep informed about universities that is not online?

Yes, in my university I can find that they announce that they can help with some programs. And we have here an office for studying abroad, in the capital. You can go two, three times, ask about the international offers and all of it, scholarships. But they are kind of... Need lots of qualifications, need really really high grades, because few seats are offered for Egyptian government to send students to it, especially in the Master programs. If I was looking for bachelor degree it would be easier to get accepted through Egyptian government but in the Master degree it is not that easy.

- Are you now struggling with any step of the process?

I think so, yes. I think now it is not easy to get accepted. Maybe I need to get a better score in the IELTS exam... To get better qualifications to apply for the programs. It is not that hard to do it.

- Do you find information online sufficient to apply for studies abroad?

Yes, I think it was enough for me. I would be better if I were in these countries to go myself inside. But that's the available option to do it.

- Anything else you would like to add about this process to go abroad that I have not mentioned?

I think… hum... I don't know... I don't have any specific thing I my mind…

Clarissa, 18, Austria, Europe

- Why did you decide to study abroad?

I'm actually not sure if I want to study abroad. Just I... To be honest I don't know...if whether I should study because I live in Austria... And I'm just looking for a good university and I hear that Uppsala is a great university city and I just want to be informed. I haven't decided that yet.

- What do you think is more important for you in terms of the program, the degree you are looking for?

I think the price is very essential because studying abroad is very expensive and that is a big problem if it is too expensive and also the university should have a good reputation...I guess... it is important to... (pause)...I am mean is very hard just to go abroad without any friends and without family. So it's really something...You need a check you really want to make otherwise you won't have fun wherever you are.

- And this decision to think about going abroad, did you start thinking yourself or anyone influenced you on that?

I am in economy school kind of... And every year we travel somewhere and this year we were in France and so I just...fell in love with foreign countries... It sounds crazy but it is true actually and nhum...to be honest I don't really like my home country. It is a little... I don't like the mentality here... I always keen on that idea that I would go somewhere with international students from everywhere and you have a completely different life than here and I don't think no one influenced me on that... It was my own decision kind of.

- Do you have a list of possible universities that you want to go?

Yes, Sweden... the Uppsala University and maybe there is one in Lithuania which I heard is good too but I'm not sure. Otherwise I stay here in Austria in *Tairo* there is a good university too.

- How did you come up with this list? Where did you find information?

It is just research... A lot of research... I never really knew what I wanted to study... I decided on Medicine last year I think and then it was just that here in Austria... If you want to enter the Medicine university you have to write a very very hard exam so most people study 1 year for that exam so I was just looking for alternative... And the problem is the money... because in Austria university is free for everyone and abroad is just expensive and it won't be easy to pay that much money.

- Are you looking for a Bachelor or a Master program abroad?

I don't know if Medicine is bachelor or master study... I don't know... I think it is something in between.

-   Can you describe your process to organize this information of your search?

I was just looking... That's hard... Nhum... I was looking everywhere in the web... And I just decided on universities which look very good and which are not too expensive. You know... If I have decided on Lithuania, I would have paid a lot for the dormitory and that is a problem too... And I heard Sweden is not as expensive when it comes to living there and all the food and stuff. I was looking for the whole package... Universities, dormitories... The cost... Yes.

-   Have you been in contact with any educational consultant to help you in this search? Not yet.

Do you want to contact one? Yes... maybe later... At the moment I have a lot to do... I have final exams in 3 weeks so I want to start contacting people in about one month... Yeah...

-   In which stage do you think you are now in terms of the process to decide?

Nhum... I don't know... In which stage?

-   Yes... if you think about it... Am I ready to send the application, am I still searching or I have decided already?

I understand... I think I'm still searching... I have not sent any applications yet... I am still searching.

-   What worries you more about going abroad and this whole application process? Do you have any fears?

I would go alone so I have no friends with me... I have no family with me... And it is another country…It is really far away... That is one of my biggest fears... I just cannot go home for 5 minutes and say hi to my parents or something... I need to take plane... And that is really... I don't know how to describe it... It is just really one of my biggest fears... Just to be such far away from my friends and family and being completely alone...

-   And now I'm gonna move to another topic regarding more about your online search… Where do you look for information on universities?

On the website of universities itself. If you want, I can search that… (pause)

We have a... How is it called? Ahhhh… A ¨messe¨ here in Vienna once a year where you see all the universities from Austria and from other countries... Where you can inform you... And there is a information point of Swedish universities and I went and talked to students there and that is one of my information...you know...

-   Have you accessed any education portal like Educations.com, Masterportal.com, etc.?

No...

-   You said you were in contact with students in this fair... Are you still in contact with these students?

No… it was just small talk...There was not friendship or something... It was just some questions and answers and goodbye.

-   Do you plan to contact students to get more information from them?

Yes... I'm really looking... I am searching someone to talk to about that but not yet... I am still in my final exams and I want to concentrate in other things at the moment... But at the end of May I want to concentrate on that more.

- Did you use also social media channels to look for information about the universities like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube?

Yes, indeed...I watched some YouTube clips about universities if I remember correctly...And of course Facebook.

- What is opinion about those videos, do you like the content?

Yes...if I remember they were not too long and that is good.

- Is there any info that you are looking for online and you are not able to find?

It is always hard to find the costs...And yeah...I don't know...

- Have you emailed any uni to get the info?

Yes, sure...

- From those websites... On the internet... Where do you think you found the most relevant information?

I think from the internet... From the web...

- From the university website?

Yes... and from social medias of the universities too: Facebook and YouTube…I must admit I have never checked their Instagram but maybe I should do that too.

- What is the first that come to your mind when you think about university brand?

Nhum...Brand??

- The name, logo, the feeling that you have about a university?

I think about a typical brand I think about the most famous ones like Harvard, Stanford, Yale... this I guess... Because they are worldwide known and the universities here in Vienna... Because we have lots of students here and they wear these university sweaters and I see the logo every time when I am in the subway.

- What is your feeling about universities promoting their brand and advertising online?

I don't know... Promoting online? I only see pictures of some happy students... That is it actually... I don't know if they were promoting but...I mean I saw...You know I saw advertising about university I clicked on it... Just for to inform myself... But that was all...

- What is your opinions about the students sharing uni info and helping them to do their promotion online?

That's a great idea actually because it helps other students...I think...Nhum... that's good.

- Have you seen anything like this?

Nhum...yeah...Sure…We have a lot of websites here...One here which is called *what to do* in Austria and there are many students and even people who already work they are interviewed and they tell you something about university, their study, the subject and of course the work too and that's really informative, specially for young people like us.

- Is anything in particular that you struggling with right now?

I'm just at the moment not... Because I'm just very stressed with finals exams... And because lately I was not sure if Medicine was the right thing for me...What can I say... I have doubts.

Gillian, 21, USA, North America

- Why did you decide to study abroad?

I want to go to university... But I don't really want to live at home... I have been travelling for a while and I have not seen much of Europe. So I thought it would be a unique experience to study while in a different place.

- Is this decision you made yourself or were you influenced by others?

No I decided on my own.

- In terms of the degree, what is more important for you?

I want to study veterinary sciences... Yes...

- What info do you look for regarding the degree then?

I just want to get a degree that is valid anywhere in the world... Or at least the US…Because I want to be a veterinarian. Most important thing is that I can have choice of different jobs but also that the degree is transferable to other places.

- What do you look for info when searching for university abroad?

Location is important... The degrees they offer in English because I don't know any other languages until I go to the country... And price.

- Do you have a list of possible unis you want to attend?

I have a couple... The university of Barcelona and I was looking at the University of Pavia... In Italy. And couple more in Venice, Italy but I have not looked it into that much.

- Did you come up with this list after you search or before?

After my search.

- Can you describe a little how do you organize this information that you are gathering?

I just basically started super broad. I just looked up universities in Europe that teach in English and then it lead me to couple different websites where you could choose more specifically so I chose Spain and Italy. From there I just looked up if they had the animal sciences degrees that I wanted to do. And then I chose a couple of the universities from that list and then I emailed them for more information.

- Have you been in contact with any education consultant as well?

Yes... I emailed yes... The university of Pavia and the university of Barcelona and they both got back to me and gave me like a step by step list what to do next if I'm going to apply for these schools.

- In which stage do you think you are now in the process of deciding?

Well... for the Spain one...Like the very beginning I would say. I just need to look that if I would be able to work in either Italy or Spain because if I can't get a job there then I can't study there... Because I have no money. I need to look more into the visas and transfer my high school diploma to the Spanish or Italian equivalent of that... So the very beginning.

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- What worries you more in this process to study abroad?

I think mostly it is a lot of paperwork and it is a bit overwhelming when you try to research online. There a lot of things to get done so I am just worried that I won't be able to figure out how to do it or get the right papers to do it.

- Where did you look for information online about uni?

Let me look... I just started with google... Let me see if I can find the name of websites...
I forget the names... I can not find now... Basically I just checked and there were a couple of websites that gave a list of a bunch of different universities. You could just click on a location and it gave a list of all the universities that taught classes in English or that gave degrees in your field of study. Mostly platforms that had the website of the schools from there.

- Did you find that helpful?

Yes, definitely.

- Do you use social media to get info about universities?

I haven't actually... Well... on Instagram, I posted like a little thing asking just my friends what countries they thought were good for universities and I got a lot of responses there. But other than that I have not looked up for anything on social media.

- Have you been in contact with any students that are studying abroad?

I have not.

- Have you watched any videos of the universities?

I think I watched one for the Barcelona one... Just a short introduction about the school.

- Was it relevant?

Yes, it was cool. It showed everything... so Spanish students as well.. it was not specified to international students. But it kind of gave a feeling of the school in general.

- Can you tell me any other ways that you keep informed about universities abroad?

Not really... Just talking to people...my friends... I have been travelling so I know a lot of people from Europe so I have just been talking to them and asking their opinions and doing a little bit more research online.

- So far... Is there any info that you are looking for and you are not able to find?

Well. In Indonesia they block a couple of the websites that I need to go to so that is kind of inconvenient. So I am going to Thailand in couple days and I think that maybe I will be able to access it from there.

- Where on the internet do you think you found the most relevant information?

From those portals probably... On Google...that's been the most helpful. But then the university of Barcelona sent me a email with a link to their actual website. Their website is pretty helpful as well... Like the actual website of the university.

- What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think about a good university?

The professors, probably... I think... Just able to adapt to living there as well as getting a clear structure in my classes. I guess just organization and structure is really important to me. Not making things really confusing.

- What is your feeling about universities promoting their brand online?

I think it is fine... I think more people will find it that way. And yeah... It is good to get the name out there.

- What is your opinion about students that are helping the university to promote online?

Yes, that is really cool. It makes more relatable to younger people I think. If an actual student is posting on behalf of the school so I think that it is a good idea.

- Have seen anything like this so far?

Kind of... A little bit like from my friends and stuff. I know that their schools have websites and such and I have seen them posting things and I have seen like links to schools and stuff but I have not really clicked on too many of them.

- Do you think the information that you finding online is sufficient to make your decision?

I think it is enough to make my decision on where to go.. But I would like to contact somebody directly from the university before I start applying just so I know that I am heading on the right direction and I have the necessary things and requirements.

- Is there anything in particular that you are struggling with now?

I don't think so...I guess just actually beginning all of it...is kind of the most difficult part... Because it is difficult to know where to start and what to do first but I think once I get the ball rolling then it will be a little bit easier.

Saanya, 18, Australia, Oceania

- Why did you decide to study abroad?

Well, mostly because I was just looking at the degrees that I wanted to do and I thought it might be just more fun to go overseas and try something new. And the ones that I was applying for or just looking at, I think they are more English degrees and they are universities that had the courses primary in English which I can't speak any other European languages so I thought that would be...

- Is this decision to go study overseas something you have done yourself or were you influenced by others? Like family or friends…

So this one is just by myself. This is cause I wanted to architecture so I thought that it would be just more interesting to do overseas.

- What is more important to you when you are looking for the study program for the degree? What do you look for?

Well, I've been looking for mostly for just that it's not too expensive so that money plays a big deal and also just the length of the degree cause I don't want it to be super long. You're just cutting up a little bit. One second. Sorry my dog was barking.

- No problem. Ok now I understand and what do you look for when you're searching for the university?

I just went to top 20 universities and went through the list. Nothing in particular.

- Ah ok. Do you have a list of possible universities that you are considering now?

Excuse me what? (repeat)

Not really, no. I'm just emailing random, like just emailing a bunch and what do I do. If I don't do international, I really... to like local universities so I just have information on those two mostly.

- Ah ok, I see. Can you describe a little bit your process to organize this information that you are getting from emails and everything?

Sorry what's that? (repeat)

Oh I just…because I emailed I just have a folder 'University information' and I just put it all into this folder.

- So you haven't started to see like pros and cons yet?

Ah no no, not yet.

- Ok ok. In which stage do you think you are now in terms of the process to decide to apply?

For me my family doesn't want me to go overseas so it's just, I just have to get…in Australia you get a final mark, what degree is going to depend on your final mark so I'm just studying right now to get a high mark and you can pick whichever degree you want but it has to into that. For example, if I had to do medicine I would have to have a 99 but if I wanted to engineering that's a 94 so I just have to get that mark and then I could pick which one.

- So what do you think is the next step for you?

For me right now I think I should just start applying for universities and start doing up the application forms and really just finalizing my top 10 so that I can just focus on those.

- Aha yes. And in this process what worries you more? Do you have any fears about this decision to study abroad?

So the question was 'what comes into my mind when I make this decision?'

- Yes, yes.

Mostly, I think it's…when I'm going through it's…I don't know. Still a bit confused, I don't know what I'm gonna do when I'm older. I don't have like a direct plan yet but very still like yeah we'll see, don't know what's happening, have it a go and everything.

- Ok ok. Now I'm gonna ask you more specifically where do you look for information or your process online so can you give me examples of how and where do you look for information about the universities and the degrees?

For international or everything?

- For international.

For international I went through the website you found me through, through that. Also if I go to specific universities I go through their websites and the international tabs and they have like ...brochures on their websites so I just download them, have a read through them.

- Ok. Through these educational portals as the one that I found you what is your experience with these portals? Do you find it useful?

Yeah I found that very useful because I think that on the website when you are looking for something that it gave you recommendation on the side so if I just clicked on one chat I would end up having so many more because I would keep on going on and on on the recommendation section aside.

- Are in contact with any other students from these universities or students that are abroad now?

No not really. Just one of my cousin studies in England so I just ask her about how she is finding but that's it. I think nothing else.

- Do you use also social media channels to find information as well? Like for example, Facebook, Instagram or LinkedIn?

I see the ads on Facebook and Instagram but I never really, I never click on the Instagram. Sometimes I click on the Facebook ones, yeah mostly Facebook to pick one social media.

- Ok. What is your opinion about those ads? How do you feel about it, universities promoting online?

I think that with social media...personally I don't think I find them very useful because they don't really, it's just easier to Google it because when you go to Facebook stuff I just see general things that don't apply to me very much.

- Have you watched any videos about those universities already?

Some universities on their page have YouTube videos and has like a little two-minute video of the degree news. I watch them if they're short. I never watch them if they are long.

- So would you say that you prefer the short movies then? The short videos?

Yes, definitely. Not more than two minutes cause it's just a waste of time cause otherwise if I'm really interested in it then I will watch but then I'm wasting information that I would watch any time of the year.

- Ok. Can you tell me about any other ways that you keep [yourself] informed about the universities overseas?

Yeah like I told you before our school has a career advisor and she, every week she emails us links to websites and she also like booklets from universities and I think she also organizes lectures so I think in the next two weeks she has organized like someone from America to come and talk to us about universities in America and if there is anything you want you can just ask her that and she will try to organize it for you. So I would say that she, just from my school mostly I get the most information.

- Ok interesting. So these links she emails you, is this the direct link to the university website?

Most of the times no. there are just news out of schools that have like the links within them so news about what are the top 10, what is...and yes never, not directly to the school.

- Ah ok and how did you find out about this portal, educations.com that I found you through? Do you remember how you end up there?

Oh I googled for, like I told you about the architecture I just googled top 20 best architecture schools in Europe and then I think I landed on that website and I think I just went through that.

- Ok ok interesting. Is there any information that you are trying to find online but you are not able to find online so far?

For me I think the…for some universities they don't have the direct application form for me. Like they have a lot of application forms for European and ...and like for me because I'm from Australia I don't know how to apply, what marks are they looking for, are they looking for what interviews... I just find that a little bit hard of what I need to do to get in.

- Ok interesting. Did you had any information about the universities abroad before starting to look online?

No, not much because like mostly in over here in Australia they just assume that you would go to an Australian university so finding someone, especially finding a person that knows about international stuff is hard. You have to do it online.

- Where on the internet do you think you found the most relevant information so far?

Ah so where? I think the website that I emailed, like the one you found me through that one. It was really helpful and emailing me a lot of like packages with information but I think the most valuable stuff was when I go through the actual university websites. If you like search really inside the website, you find the information but you have to search for it. I think that was probably where I found the most.

- Ok. What do you think is the first thing that comes into your mind when it comes to a good university or a university brand? Just some words that you connect to a good university.

Sorry can you repeat that one more time? (repeat)

Ok, so I would say ... of an almost intimate setting where it's like all classrooms, you get more one on one time with the teachers. Especially once they have more job opportunities afterwards and they have like internships directly with the school, I think those ones and even the ranking of the school is very important. Yeah if you and also these ones apply for me but also the general price. If it's like very expensive I automatically don't look at it that much even if it's really good like I won't be able to afford it so it's just has to fit in the middle.

- Ok and how do you think a university can build a good image online?

I think universities are very important because it's what, it gives you…like it allows you to experiment. You just get to excel in one subject or one degree. I don't know. I think it's just, you just have to do it if you want to excel in a career. I feel like it's an important step...

- What is your opinion about students that are helping the universities share content on the internet?

So the people that don't go to the university?

- Like the students at the university helping them to promote their university online. When for example a student taking an Instagram account of a university to talk about his experience there. What do you think about this?

Sorry I think you're just cutting through. Can you say that one more time? (repeat)

So like students promoting the university?

- Aha yeah.

I haven't really seen students promoting universities. I think if they're maybe important figures then it works. I think it is good cause it ensures that the skills they are learning are actually relevant to real life people... you as an example to look at I guess. So yeah I think it's good.

- Do you think that the information you found online so far is sufficient to decide?

The information I think so far not yet because I think…cause it's a very like what the universities are trying to promote. I think for me to have a better understanding I have to talk to students that to the university to…cause maybe the website makes it sound very good very safe and very proficient but if that's not what's really happening I want to know. I just need to look at students' comments or call the school and get a better understanding but so far no not yet.

- Is there anything in particular that you are struggling with right now?

I think for me to study internationally I haven't really, I don't have a destination I want to go to. It's not like I really want to study in this country, this region, the degree so I think I am struggling right now is to find a degree that matches exactly what I'm searching for and then once I have that down I can make the decision.

- Ok interesting, very good. Ok I think that covers it all. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Ehm…I think I briefly mentioned this before but just when universities they say that they have English degrees I think that's very important and also just if they can provide accommodation and if everything, if they have good packages and I think those universities I am looking at when I click on the international tab they have an Australia tab within that and that told me what mark I needed, what like documentation I needed so I found that really helpful. What I am struggling with the most right now is just like I said finding out the exact words of what I need to get into that school but everything has been helpful and I don't know if this is what you're looking for.

- Yes, yes it is! It's very helpful, I understand so you think, about this last comment of yours, you think that like customized tab for your nationality specifically what you need is very helpful. Ok very interesting.

Yeah because with most continents like for example if we are talking about Europe or South America or Asia they have kind of like Europeans have one tab and Americans have one tab... but because Australia is so far away it doesn't fit with anything so it's never an easy cut so like I have, I got a 95 so that's gonna translate to 95 there? I have to take so many other tests for my 95 to, if it's equivalent to 95 and what they are looking for as well so I think yeah…just like you said it needs to be costumed ...in order to be helpful.

Vitor, 24, Brazil, South America

- Why did you decide to study abroad?

Actually I have studies overseas for one year. I was an exchange student in Hungary through the *Science without borders program* so I had that first experience. I would say it was very enriching both culturally and personally. So I'd say that is one of the reasons I looked for applying for a Masters.

- Is this decision to go abroad again something you decided yourself or were you influenced by others?

No. It was decided by myself. I want to seek something different from what I would see here in Brazil and I feel like Hungary is a good place for me to go to because I've also known the people and the culture a little bit better. So I think I would fit in there.

- So you are looking for Masters there (In Hungary)?

Aha.

- What is the most important thing for you when you are looking for a Master program abroad?

I'd say looking for a place where you feel safe, that has good education, that people are educated and a place that can provide you a good quality of life and welfare.

- In terms of the university specifically, what do you look for?

I think that the university has to offer something that the universities here in Brazil don't offer, like well known professionals. I think one of the things that makes me wanna go there is that they have educated many people that are now producing important articles and scientific research.

- Which area of study are you looking for?

My bachelor is in environmental engineering so the master that I'm looking for is also in environmental engineering.

- Did you have a list of possible universities you want to attend before starting to search online?

I started looking for universities that had nice program environmental engineering or environmental sciences and the ones I found were BME in Budapest, also (XX) university and (XX) university that was my former university at the bachelor level.

- How do you organize the information that you collecting from the universities? Any method?

Ah ok. Actually I was looking at a website, it is called *studyinhungary* that describes most of Hungarian universities and their fields of study and their programs and curricula. I think there was a good way for me to find the ones that fitted the most to me.

- So this information that you collecting, do you make a list of pros and cons or how do differentiate it?

Ahn… I get it. To be honest I didn't do much of a list. It was kind of organized in a way that I could understand... Whether one program fitted better than the other.

- Have you been in contact with any education consultant?

Ahn... not yet. Because I'm still graduating. I am going to graduate this year so I'm planning on applying for it next year.

- Ah, that is very connected to my next questions. In which stage are you now in the process of deciding and applying?

I would say the final stage, because that is still whether I'm going to get a job here in Brazil or not after graduating. But I'd say... If I don't get a job right away, I'll definitely apply for it.

- Have you made your mind regarding the universities? And considering personal matters to see if you are going to apply or not?

Yeah... sort of... I'm still like in between universities but I'm leaning to one of them.

- What do think worries you more in this process of deciding to study abroad? Do you have any fears?

I think that because I have spent a year outside of Brazil and didn't have too much family or friends around… I that was my biggest fear, the first time going away. And now I think I have a little bit of experience in that matter so I think this was the most trouble part when I was abroad... Being away from my family. But I think that in a way, since I have lived this experience once…being away let's say for two years wouldn't be the worst part. I'm not like... Scared of it, but I think it is something that concerns me.

- Where do you look for information about universities to apply? Like, you mentioned studyinhungary website, is there any other?

I think people are looking for university abroad, they usually look for scholarship programs and it is not that easy to find information related to the countries you are looking for inside these websites. They are usually just about the programs itself so I think the only platform I used was this one. But I think it would better…it would be good to have different options.

- Do you remember if you have accessed any education portals like those websites that you select the country that you want and then it shows a list of universities and a list of programs?

Ah, aham. Yes, this was actually the one you contact me through. Is it Education? Something like that?

- Educations.com?

Yes, that one.

- What can you tell me about the experience with this portal?

I think it was pretty straight forward and when people are looking for university abroad, they are kind of expecting something like... They want a program to tell them to go to a good place... I feel like. Or the place that they wanna be. It can also *bun out* people if they get like a place where they haven't heard before. But I think my experience overall was good, it was fine.

- Are you contact with students from these universities or students that are abroad?

Yes, so there is a Facebook group with the scholarship applicants. They are always making comments whether they receive an email from a university or not. And it is still in the early stages from the best programs, actually, from the next program. So they are very anxious whether they got the emails from the university or not. But that is the only platform I'm using to get in touch with them, it is this Facebook group.

- Is this Facebook group only for students in Hungary or other countries as well?

No, the one I'm in is only specific for this scholarship program, only Hungary.

- And do you also use social media to get information about the universities, like in their pages?

Yes, and actually this was one of the things I missed when looking for universities. I went to YouTube to look for some demonstrational videos or to see the infrastructure in the classrooms and such and I found that this was missing in most universities. It didn't have an explanatory video about the university itself.

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-   But have you found any relevant videos there? Anything interesting?

Ah, yes, yes. I did found one about one of the universities I was looking for.

-   Can you tell me about other ways that you keep informed about universities abroad, other than online?

Nhum… I don't think I had a way other than online to find out about university. I mean you can talk to people, of course. But it's really rare to find someone who has been abroad to, let's say, 2, 3 or 4 years that can give you relevant information about specific programs. So I think online is the best way to find information.

-   Is there any information so far that you are looking for and are not able to find?

Nhum,., let me think about it. (long pause).

As I said before, the demonstrational videos or something that can give you an insight on the place and ah! There is another thing! Since you are going to study abroad, you are gonna have to live somewhere right? And finding dormitories, pictures, accommodation in general is kind of difficult. So if you are looking for a place to live in, either inside the university or outside, to look for a place to rent is not that easy.

-   And what kind of information about the universities did you have before you looked online?

I had some information because I had some friends that went to these universities so I knew a little bit about it.. But nothing very relevant I'd say. Just like what courses they offered and I mean, just a few of them. And most of the information I gathered was through this online search.

-   So where on the internet do you think you found the most relevant information?

I'd say.. I think it is harder if you are looking for something very general. I think it is like, go to Google and type in study abroad in the country I'm living. I think it is easier if you narrow it down before choosing .. like doing this kind of search. So, if you want to study in Germany, for example, just do some research on German universities first and what are their major, bachelor degrees, masters, and then you can look more precisely on the university that you are looking for.

-   On the university website you mean?

Yes.

-   What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think about a good university?

I think the first thing they should offer is a quality education, that has been.. I wouldn't say renowned but that people have highly respected degrees, in that way. Do you get what I mean? This is very common here in Brazil that some universities they are more accepted, or people think highly of them than the others. So I think that universities should also graduate people that have been doing good research projects and that have good, not good jobs, but open mind and that are good for the world.

-   What do think about universities promoting and advertising online? How do you feel about that?

Ah! I feel this would be a good way to show their programs and their university, their students. It would be very good, seeing things like…I think this would also be extra information for the ones who are interested in study abroad and this might start a spark on them to go seek for something.

-   How do you think a university can build a good image online?

I think nowadays through social media would be the most effective way. People spend like hours just randomly on Facebook or Instagram, this kind of social platforms. And I think this would light some

kind of spark in them to need to go and go search: Oh! I found this university so I am gonna see what it looks like. Or I'm gonna check the programs they have, or where are they located... Stuff like that.

- What is opinion about students helping the universities to promote?

oh, seeing these institutional videos and students telling their experiences especially international students, that you can related to them and see what their experiences were. I think that is a very good way to promote the universities image.

- Have you seen anything like that?

Yes, I did. The same one I've seen that other video. They also had the video about the facilities of the university and the students talking about the facilities, the courses, their experiences, where they have lived, inside the university and out. So I think it was a good way to promote their image.

- Do you think the information online is sufficient enough for you to decide?

Nhum...that's a good question. I'd say people tend to get a place where they feel it is a bit more experience enriching for them. Or a place they will feel better, but it is really hard making decision just out of online research. Because in fact you are not leaving in there, or studying in there. So... it is really hard but I wouldn't say there is an easier way.. I mean the easiest way would be going to the place you wanna study and spend like a week there and then have this time to decide. But since that is not possible. So online research and talking to people that are also there or have been studying there is the best way as of right now.

- So right now, are you struggling with anything in particular?

Nhum... I am still trying to decide, which one to apply to. But since this scholarship program you can choose 3 options of study or 3 master programs. I can still apply for the 3 of them in order of preference. But I'm still struggling whether I'm going to choose the first option this one or that one.

Appendix C: EMG's survey sample

Customize Export ▼

Which of the following helped you to decide to study abroad?

Answered: 2,697   Skipped: 18,078

ANSWER CHOICES	▼	RESPONSES
▼ Family / friends recommendations		45.09%
▼ Student stories of studying abroad		30.26%
▼ Social media		27.10%
▼ Study abroad websites		26.14%
▼ Scholarships and funding information		24.14%
▼ Study abroad guides for students		19.65%
▼ Articles about the benefits of studying abroad		17.83%
▼ Photos of destinations		17.09%
▼ Career and personality tests		16.46%
▼ Ranking lists of top countries to study in		14.46%
▼ Ranking lists of top schools in the world		14.20%
▼ Student forums		14.16%
▼ Study abroad agents		12.90%
▼ Ranking lists of the top programs in the world		12.35%
▼ Advertisements		12.16%
▼ Study abroad fairs		11.64%
▼ Videos of destinations		10.64%
▼ Other (please specify)	Responses	6.04%

Q8

Customize Export ▼

Why did you decide to study abroad? Choose your top 5 motivations from this list:

Answered: 2,697   Skipped: 18,078

ANSWER CHOICES		RESPONSES
To develop myself personally		64.74%
To experience a new culture or lifestyle		60.10%
To achieve my career goals		44.75%
To have an adventure		41.82%
To access higher quality teaching		36.04%
To learn a new language		33.33%
To make new friends / widen my professional network		30.44%
To have more options for studying		28.55%
To add value to my resume		28.18%
To get out of / away from my country		23.17%
To attend a top ranked university		18.28%
It was recommended to me by family / friends		17.09%
To study for free		10.53%
To get a visa to work in another country after graduating		7.12%
Other (please specify)	Responses	3.78%

Q12   Customize   Export ▼

What was your priority when choosing to study abroad?

Answered: 2,658   Skipped: 18,117

ANSWER CHOICES		RESPONSES
I chose the country first		41.65%
The school and it's reputation was my focus		17.19%
The study program got all my attention		41.16%

Appendix D: EMG's Student Decision Journey

WHERE WE FIT IN THE STUDY ABROAD PROCESS

Every education portal is different. In order to understand where educations.com fits into the study abroad journey, we have mapped our member cycle through their pathways and interactions with content, tools, and services. The timeline below assesses which stage of the process students are in when they interact with educations.com. We hope that by sharing these insights about our audience, universities can better understand our services and role in the study abroad process.

AWARENESS:
17.32% OF USERS

Students who have completed or nearly completed their last phase of education, typically engage with generic study abroad content or tools which delve into one or two variables of the study abroad process such as degree level, country of study, or program type. They often engage with quizzes recommending locations and fields of study, in addition to country, program, and scholarship guides.

INFORMATION GATHERING:
28.35% OF USERS

Students gathering information use educations.com to find more detailed information on countries of study as well as specific programs and universities. They are likely to use our search engine with two filters such as program and degree level, or degree level and location. They begin using educations.com to send inquiries to universities asking for start dates, entry requirements, cost, and degree conferred. They look more closely at university profiles on educations.com and read social media feeds, reviews, emails, and targeted emails.

COMPARISON & DECISION-MAKING:
22.83% OF USERS

At this point, prospective students have made decisions on several variables such as country, program type, and degree level and are equipped with the information to make an informed decision. Students in this stage use the highest degree of filters on our search engine and also utilize our comparison tool to quickly highlight the differences between programs. They engage more deeply with university profiles, interacting with the map and contact information at the bottom of the page. Highly engaged in our forum at this point, students ask for peer feedback on specific universities, programs, and admission processes in different locations.

POST-APPLICATION / PRE-ACCEPTANCE:
13.39% OF USERS

As students wait to learn about their admissions decision, they use educations.com to seek out various specific details regarding the city and university. They often make a more thorough journey through location guides and engage with internship guides more deeply than before. They begin to re-engage in the forum and respond well to newsletters and targeted emails, read student reviews, and sometimes apply to additional universities.

APPLICATION:
7.09% OF USERS

Prospective students have selected several programs and are certain that they meet the necessary requirements and hold the required documentation. They are ready to start studies within a year and begin a more in-depth look at scholarships. They are most likely to check or inquire about start dates and application period and frequently visit university profiles to reveal contact information or click-through directly to the university's website.

ACCEPTANCE TO ENROLLMENT:
11.02% OF USERS

In this final decision-making stage, educations.com users often rediscover our site through organic search as they look for details that will help them choose one institution over another. University profiles, niched forum posts, and highly specific location details become a focus. Attention has shifted dramatically from program pages to university profiles.

PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS TYPICALLY REQUEST THE FOLLOWING FROM UNIVERSITIES BEFORE PROCEEDING FROM THE AWARENESS PHASE TO THE COMPARISON + DECISION-MAKING PHASE:

- Specific program information
- Application instructions
- Admissions requirements
- Scholarship information
- Application form
- Other

Appendix E: Coding Guide

Marketization of knowledge	Independence of consumer	Strength and independence of making a consumer decision alone
	Commercialization of knowledge	Promotion of universities as any regular business
Consumer decision-making	Motivations	Reasons to decide to study abroad
	Influences	What influences the choice of the university, place and degree to apply
	Doubts	Fears and worries about going abroad
Consumer decision journey	Intention to study abroad	Behavior patterns when first deciding to study abroad
	Active evaluation	Information search and gathering
	Comparison and decision	Organizing information and comparing universities
Online media communications	Empowerment	Empowered consumers searching for information online on their own
	Disbelief in advertisement	Consumer does not engage with advertisement anymore
	Consumer-driven marketing	Student reviews and other user-generated content as source of HEIs' information