

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF PAID MEDIA ON STUDENT ENROLLMENT DECISIONS IN CROATIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MEDIA TYPES

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Communication is essential in marketing, connecting organizations with their target audiences. However, not all media types hold equal value in customer decision-making. This exploratory study examines the relevance and frequency of use of paid, owned, and earned media in higher education from students' perspectives. The focus is on paid media due to its high costs and its role in influencing prospective students' choices. The findings show that owned media are the primary source of information, while paid and earned media play lesser roles. These insights can guide higher education institutions in optimizing communication expenses and improving audience engagement.

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1 Introduction

As a peacock displays its beautiful tail to impress its mate, companies use promotional tools to capture the attention of their target audiences. A fair deduction would be that those who fail in their promotional efforts risk fading into obscurity in the eyes of their customers. However, promotion is an expensive activity. Even in the past, reaching customers was neither easy nor inexpensive, as John Wanamaker famously attested, saying, “I know that half of my advertising is wasted, but I don’t know which half” (Kotler et al., 2022, p. 293).

Recent studies reveal a declining trend in the quality of consumer attention, leading companies to intensify their efforts to capture the interest of their audiences by ramping up advertising, resulting in costs rising by as much as nine times (Teixeira, 2014). Statistics also indicate that advertising spending continues to grow year by year. It is projected that global advertising spending will increase by 2.37 times by 2029 compared to 2017 (Statista, 2023). Therefore, promotion will remain a cost-driven issue in the future.

The problem organizations face in the market is how to communicate effectively with consumers, as marketing communication becomes increasingly demanding and challenging. Organizations must focus on quality communication and find creative ways to communicate efficiently, while also balancing business costs.

This paper aims to identify the importance and usage of different types of media—namely, paid, owned, and earned media—in higher education from students’ perspectives. The results will shed light on how to balance these types of media to effectively communicate with prospective students and influence their decision-making process in a cost-effective manner.

2 Literature review

Marketing is a relevant and essential tool for achieving a competitive advantage in the market, and it requires a deep understanding of consumer behavior to be effective. Achieving effectiveness is particularly challenging for higher education institutions (HEIs) because their services are classified as high credence services, students are perceived as both consumers and co-creators of these services, and

student choice is influenced by numerous variables (Chauhan, 2022). As HEIs increasingly adopt business-like strategies to attract diverse student populations, including domestic and international students, the need for effective marketing also arises. Consequently, the importance of promotion for HEIs in a competitive and globalized marketplace continues to grow (Camilleri, 2020). Competition and the ongoing decline in the number of university-aged students, particularly in developed countries, have led, and will continue to lead, to decreased enrollment, driving many HEIs to adopt aggressive marketing and promotional strategies (Wu & Naidoo, 2016).

Promotion, as an organization's communication tool, is an expensive resource that needs to be wisely planned and implemented. Fill and Turnbull (2016) identify three key elements of planned marketing communication: tools, media, and content (messages). The main communication tools include advertising, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing, personal selling, and value-added approaches such as sponsorships, exhibitions, and field marketing. Content can be primarily informational or emotional but is typically a subtle blend of both. Examples of media include magazines, websites, and television programs.

When classifying media by sources, Fill and Turnbull (2016) introduce the POEM classification, which includes three types of media:

1. **Paid Media:** Involves renting time or space on external platforms to deliver targeted messages, with a planned and measured approach to audience reach, costs, and scheduling.
2. **Owned Media:** Leverages an organization's assets, such as websites, vehicle branding, and other branded displays, to convey messages and foster conversations without incurring rental costs.
3. **Earned Media:** Encompasses unplanned, organic discussions and mentions about a brand, both online and offline, which may arise naturally or be stimulated by marketing efforts.

The media relevant to this research are those most commonly used by prospective students in their decision-making process.

1. **Paid Media:** Includes TV, radio, web ads/banners, paid advertisements on social media, and articles in the media about higher education.
2. **Owned Media:** Encompasses HEI websites, open days, HEI emails, HEI telephone contact, presentations in schools, posters and flyers in schools, posters in public places, and posts on platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. It also includes visibility through Google search.
3. **Earned Media:** Covers recommendations from high school teachers/HEI professors, family recommendations, and good reputation or word-of-mouth endorsements from colleagues, friends, and others.

In Table 1, a list of communication channels along with relevant supporting sources is presented.

Table 1: Communication channels with sources

Media type	Media	Country	Authors
Paid media	TV	N/A	(Hossler, 1990, as cited in Mehboob et al., 2012)
		Italy	(Pinna et al., 2018)
	Radio	N/A	(Hossler, 1990, as cited in Mehboob et al., 2012)
		Italy	(Pinna et al., 2018)
	Web advertisements/ banners	Canada	(Angulo-Ruiz et al., 2016)
		Cameroon	(Noël, 2023)
	Paid advertisements on social media	N/A	(Huebner, 2021)
		Lebanon	(Ismail, 2021)
Media articles about the HEI	UK	(McNicholas & Marcella, 2022)	
	Uganda	(Muhangi, 2020)	
Owned media	HEI's website	Portugal	(Soares & Simões, 2015)
		Croatia	(Meštrović et al., 2019)
		USA	(Burdett, 2013)
	Open days	Hong Kong	(Ho & Law, 2022)
		Scotland	(Briggs & Wilson, 2007)
	HEI's email	UK	(Moogan, 2020)
		UK, EU,	(Towers & Towers, 2020)
N/A		(Harahap et al., 2017)	

Media type	Media	Country	Authors
	HEI's phone	UK	(Šola & Zia, 2021)
		Italy	(Pinna et al., 2018)
	Presentation in high schools	Bosnia	(Babović, 2014)
		USA	(Cai et al., 2015)
	Posters and flyers in high schools	Portugal	(Dias & Meneses, 2022)
		Portugal	(Simões & Soares, 2010)
	Posters in public places	N/A	(Chauhan, 2022).
		N/A	(Ziyadin & Serikbek, 2020)
	HEI's social media	Portugal	(Dias & Meneses, 2022)
		N/A	(Kusumawati, 2014)
		Vietnam	(Le et al., 2020)
	Google search	UK	(McNicholas & Marcella, 2022)
UK		(Šola & Zia, 2021)	
Earned media	High school teacher recommendations	Finland	(Herold et al., 2016)
		Kyrgyzstan	(Najimudinova et al., 2022)
		Canada	(Pizarro Milian & Rizk, 2018)
	HEI professor recommendations	UK	(McNicholas & Marcella, 2022)
		Kenya, India	(Nyaribo et al., 2012)
	Family recommendations	USA	(Dial, 2014).
		Indonesia	(Kusumawati, 2013)
		China	(Liu & Zhu, 2019)
	Recommendations from other relevant persons (colleagues, friends, employers)	Germany	(Dumitrașcu & Șerban, 2013)
		Vietnam	(Le et al., 2020)
		Poland	(Sojkin et al., 2012)

Source: Authors from multiple sources

Table 1 presents a comprehensive list of all the media channels utilized in this analysis, each accompanied by relevant research findings that demonstrate the significance and impact of these media in the context of HEIs.

However, communication should also be considered from the perspective of the decision-making process. For complex decision-making—particularly applicable to the purchase of expensive or high-risk products—communication must align with each phase of that process. The complex decision-making model identifies the stages

consumers go through as follows: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, final purchase, and post-purchase behavior (Kotler et al., 2022).

This paper analyzes the three types of media in relation to the student decision-making phases, aiming to provide valuable insights specifically relevant to HEI communication managers in their efforts to effectively engage with target audiences.

3 Methodology

The aim of this study is to assess the relevance and frequency of use of different types of media employed by higher education institutions in their communication with target audiences. The three types of media analyzed are paid, owned, and earned media.

The analysis was conducted with respect to the decision-making phases of prospective students. The survey included a list of 20 communication channels/media that respondents utilized when deciding where to study. Among these, five channels were classified as paid media, twelve as owned media, and three as earned media. To calculate the percentage distribution of media usage, the total usage across all media types was summed, and the proportion of each type (paid, owned, or earned) was calculated relative to this total.

The research sample consisted of 50 respondents, both undergraduate and graduate students, from various Croatian higher education institutions. Data analysis was performed using MS Excel.

4 Data analysis and results

The analysis explores how prospective students engage with three types of media—paid, owned, and earned—during each phase of their decision-making process when selecting a HEI. The focus is on the first four phases of the decision-making process: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, and final purchase. The study presents the percentage distribution of each media type within its respective category across the entire sample. The findings are summarized in Table 2, which offers a detailed breakdown in percentage points, and visually represented in Figure 1 for a clearer comparison of media usage patterns.

Table 2: Frequency of media types across decision-making phases

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
Owned media	55%	69%	56%	61%
Paid media	24%	19%	18%	14%
Earned media	20%	11%	27%	25%

Source: authors

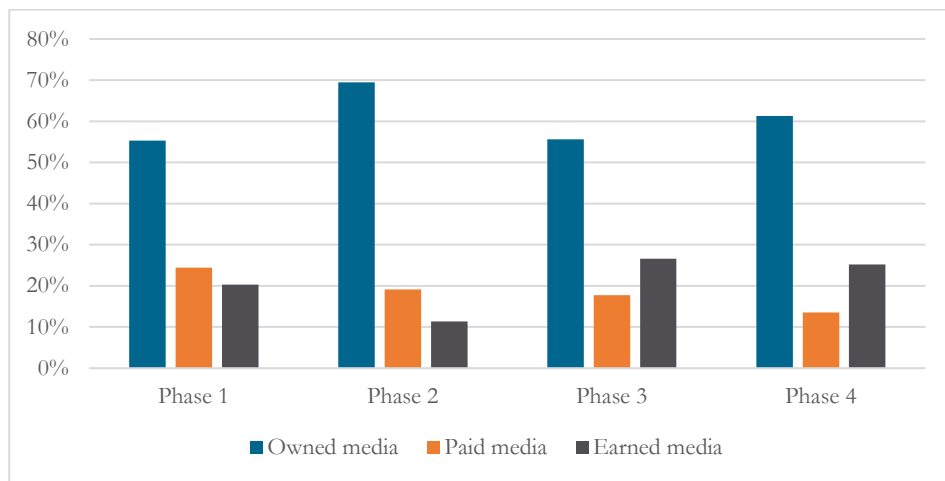


Figure 1: Graphical representation of the frequency of media types across decision-making phases

Source: Authors

The data in the table highlights the varying importance of media types across the four decision-making phases when prospective students choose a higher education institution. Owned media consistently dominates throughout all phases, reaching its peak influence in Phase 2 (Information Search) at 69%. Paid media demonstrates a declining trend, starting at 24% in Phase 1 (Need Recognition) and gradually decreasing to 14% by Phase 4 (Final Purchase), indicating its diminishing impact as students move closer to their final decision. Conversely, earned media shows a notable rise in significance from 20% in Phase 1 to 27% in Phase 3 (Evaluation of Alternatives) and maintains a strong presence at 25% in Phase 4, emphasizing the growing importance of recommendations as students finalize their choices. This distribution underscores the importance of strategic focus on owned and earned media throughout the decision-making process.

The most frequently used specific media across each group and decision-making phase reveal distinct patterns. In Phase 1 (Need Recognition), owned media is evenly distributed, with a particular emphasis on presentations in high schools, while paid media is evenly spread across channels. Earned media is also evenly distributed but highlights teacher recommendations as a key source. During Phase 2 (Information Search), owned media dominates with HEI websites, open days, and internet searches being the most prominent. Paid media in this phase focuses more on media articles about the HEI, whereas earned media remains evenly distributed. In Phase 3 (Evaluation of Alternatives), owned media continues to dominate, particularly through HEI websites and internet searches. Paid media maintains an even distribution, while earned media is also evenly spread but places emphasis on recommendations from other relevant individuals. Finally, in Phase 4 (Final Purchase), owned media is strongly led by HEI websites, paid media primarily features media articles, and earned media is dominated by recommendations from other relevant individuals.

5 Discussion and conclusion

This exploratory study highlights several key points worth considering. These findings provide valuable insights into the decision-making process of prospective students and the role of media in influencing their choices.

Media Allocation by Decision-Making Phases: The key question arises: why is there a difference in the media types used across decision-making phases, and what accounts for this distribution? At the beginning of the process, the consumer does not have established criteria for evaluating specific brands. They require a significant amount of information to develop a set of criteria for assessing brands. Additionally, they need more information about the individual brands they will consider for evaluating alternatives (Mihart, 2012).

The most prominent media type used by prospective students in all decision-making phases is owned media. This may be because prospective students, as consumers of educational services, base their purchasing decisions primarily on information received from higher education institutions (Helmsley-Brown, 1999, cited in Maringe & Gibbs, 2009).

Paid media decreases across the phases. One possible explanation is that its purpose is to attract attention, and generate a positive attitude. Paid media is more focused on informing and creating awareness (Fill & Turnbull, 2016). Over the course of the phases, its role in attracting attention and creating awareness becomes less dominant as these goals are typically achieved in the early stages.

Advocacy and conversations often rely on earned media, with many campaigns aiming to generate strong word-of-mouth communication (Fill & Turnbull, 2016). Earned media becomes dominant in the later phases of decision-making, while it is weaker in the information-gathering phase. This is because, in the information-gathering phase, prospective students primarily seek technical information about offerings and are less likely to seek advice. However, in the final decision-making stage, the risk of purchasing is highest, and advice or positive word-of-mouth becomes crucial. Earned media is often seen as more reliable and trustworthy than paid media because it comes from independent sources (Jain & Pandey, 2023).

Most Prominent Specific Media Used: Each prospective student utilizes different communication channels. Therefore, to achieve optimal communication and reach potential students, it is necessary to use the appropriate communication channels (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009).

In the initial phases, owned media dominates, with HEI websites, open days, and internet searches being the most prominent sources. Websites and internet searches are particularly relevant for gathering technical information about the offerings. Presentations in high schools and open days represent personal contact with prospective students, which is most effective due to the role of personal selling. Personal selling is important for information dissemination and persuasion, as it helps inform, persuade, and provoke purchase decisions through tailored messages (Fill & Turnbull, 2016).

Paid media, such as advertising, can be used to raise awareness (Fill & Turnbull, 2016). Accordingly, paid media, through mass communication channels, is evenly distributed and consumed by prospective students, with an emphasis on media articles in phases 2 and 4. Newspapers and magazines play a key role in influencing students' higher education choices by providing essential information about education, facilities, and contact details (Muhangi, 2020).

Earned media, such as teacher recommendations and advice from other relevant individuals, becomes more prominent in the later phases of the decision-making process. As emphasized earlier, the final decision is riskier, so high school teachers, regarded as experts in the field, are considered reliable sources. Prospective students may follow recommendations from these expert sources because the information is perceived as relevant and consistent with their values (Herold et al., 2016).

Costs and time-based media allocation: Effective communication and optimal budget distribution are crucial, given the high costs of paid media (Teixeira, 2014). The process of purchasing higher education services is strictly defined, with decisions being made once a year. The phases of the decision-making process are clearly predetermined and follow a defined course. Strategically utilizing relevant media in each phase can significantly contribute to the efficient allocation of limited resources, as opposed to blindly investing in various media throughout the year. Blind investments often result in the use of unreliable or unattractive media sources, which fail to produce a positive effect, regardless of the message's content and validity (Veloutsou et al., 2005). The study indicates that specific phases of the process favor particular media.

In conclusion, this exploratory study provides valuable insights into the decision-making process of prospective students and the role of various media types in shaping their choices. Owned media plays a dominant role in the early phases, while paid media decreases as attention and awareness are already established. Earned media gains prominence in the later stages, especially when decision-making risks are higher, as students rely on recommendations from trusted sources. The study emphasizes the importance of strategically allocating resources across media types to optimize communication and effectively guide students through the decision-making process.

5.1 Scientific and practical contribution

This exploratory study contributes scientifically by exploring how different media types—owned, paid, and earned—affect prospective students' decision-making at various stages. It provides insights into effective media allocation strategies in higher education marketing. Practically, it offers recommendations for higher education institutions to optimize their communication channels and marketing budgets,

improving engagement and increasing enrollment rates by targeting the right media at each decision-making phase.

5.2 Limitations and future research

A limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size of 50 respondents. Future research could expand the sample size for more comprehensive findings and explore not only the frequency of media usage but also the significance and strength of the influence each media type has on prospective students' decision-making processes. This could provide deeper insights into how media affects students' choices beyond mere exposure.

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