

EMAIL AS A COMMUNICATION CHANNEL IN HIGHER EDUCATION: RELEVANCE AND FREQUENCY IN THE HEI SELECTION PROCESS

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Email remains one of the most commonly used communication tools across various contexts, including higher education. This study examines the importance of email as a communication channel from the perspective of prospective students during their higher education institution (HEI) selection process, and compares it with other HEI-owned communication media. A survey was conducted among 181 Croatian students, and descriptive statistical analysis was applied to evaluate the frequency of use and perceived relevance of eight HEI communication channels. The findings show that email is among the least frequently used and least relevant channels, ranking significantly below HEI websites. This suggests that email functions primarily as a tool for direct contact rather than for information gathering. The study contributes to understanding the specific role of email relative to other HEI-owned channels and highlights the need for institutions to adapt their communication strategies to reflect how students actually seek and engage with information during the selection process.

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1 Introduction

Technology is like a "fast horse"—accelerating changes in behaviors and daily habits. As Henry Ford famously stated when building his car for the masses, "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses." Instead of giving customers what they thought they needed, he provided a simpler, more effective solution to their problem—a car. The automobile reshaped the way people live, and no one considers returning to less practical solutions like "faster horses." The same applies to digital technologies. People no longer use carrier pigeons to communicate; today, people rely on smartphones—one of the many gifts of scientific progress to humanity. Instead of slow methods of sending and receiving messages, people use SMS, email, and the Internet, enabling access to information almost instantly, precisely when it is needed.

Digital communication technologies, devices, and media have enabled the rapid growth of digital information consumption (Shukla and Pande, 2023), and have inevitably become an intrinsic part of humanity (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Large portions of the world's population have become users of such technologies, thanks to the availability of affordable smartphones and tablets (Shukla and Pande, 2023), to the extent that these digital channels have become a fundamental means of communication (Goic, Rojas and Saavedra, 2016). As predicted, by 2021, more than half of the global population—and over 80% in developed countries—were expected to be users of email as a form of digital media (Chaparro-Peláez, Hernández-García and Lorente-Páramo, 2022). As consumers, most users spend a significant amount of time online, with one of the primary purposes being to access various types of information, especially during the buying decision process (Faruk, Rahman and Hasan, 2021). It is evident that digitalization has reshaped the way information is conveyed and perceived by users (Rajkumar et al., 2022), and how it is used.

As society evolves due to technological advancements, so do businesses. Companies adapt to consumer needs, habits, and behaviors—not the other way around. The development of digital technologies is continuously and inevitably advancing (Goic et al., 2016), and accordingly, consumer habits are shifting as more time is spent on online activities and social media engagement (Tiago and Veríssimo, 2014). As consumers become increasingly active in digital environments, marketers must

adjust their strategies to align with these behaviors (Tiago and Veríssimo, 2014). This shift calls for the creation of new, interactive, targeted, and measurable approaches to reach consumers through emerging digital media (Fierro, Cardona Arbelaez and Gavilanez, 2017), prompting businesses to rely heavily on digital marketing to promote and sell their products and services (Faruk et al., 2021).

Why focus on email? According to Kusumawati (2018), the majority of students prefer online channels to retrieve information and communicate with HEI staff, as opposed to offline media. Recognizing these behavioral patterns in prospective students, HEIs face the challenge of finding new ways to communicate with them—highlighting that higher education institutions are not immune to the shifting communication habits of their target audiences (Martin, 2015). Hanna, Swain, and Smith (2016) state that email is the most widespread and frequently used communication tool—not only among the general public but also among marketers. However, it remains one of the least researched digital tools within the context of higher education (Shukla, Mistri and Japee, 2025), which is the focus of this paper.

The goal of this research is to determine the extent to which email functions as a relevant and effective communication channel for prospective students in gathering information and influencing their higher education institution selection process, compared to other communication channels owned by HEIs.

2 Literature review

In today's age, technological innovation in the digital sphere has significantly shaped consumer behavior, influencing how they interact with sellers and make purchase decisions, thanks to the adoption of handheld devices (Dwivedi et al., 2021). The inevitable reality of adopting digital technologies has compelled firms to use these technologies through the internet to connect with their customers, giving rise to digital marketing (Shukla et al., 2025). Digital marketing provides new avenues to reach, inform, and engage with customers (Faruk et al., 2021) through digital channels such as email, social media, websites, and online advertising (Antczak, 2024), engaging with consumers anytime and anywhere (Sherief, 2024). Another significant advantage of digital marketing is the ability to personalize communication according to the specific needs of target audiences (Purcărea, 2023). Additionally, digital marketing allows firms to reach global audiences through targeted advertising;

it is cost-effective, flexible, and facilitates engagement with customers (Shukla et al., 2025). Acknowledging its benefits, marketers are investing significant resources in digital marketing (Faruk et al., 2021) in order to remain competitive in the market. The relevance of digital marketing today makes it essential to consider it as a fundamental and unavoidable part of marketing (Faruk et al., 2021).

Higher education is no exception. The approach to promotion has shifted from printed brochures to social media and the web to attract prospective students' attention (Kusumawati, 2018). The reason for this shift is that prospective students today primarily rely on the internet to gather information about HEIs (Al-Qazzaz, 2024). Digital marketing facilitates students' access to comprehensive information about institutions and study programs (Shukla et al., 2025). Its interactivity and two-way communication allow easier and more effective access and engagement with prospective students (Purcărea, 2023).

Kusumawati (2018) identified that the preferred digital media for students when selecting an HEI are social media and university websites, and that mobile phones are the most frequently used devices for accessing information relevant to their choice. Other relevant sources of information include HEI websites, HEI planning and ranking sites, online reviews, college emails (Harahap et al., 2017), and internet searches (Purcărea, 2023; Shukla et al., 2025). Moogan (2020) agrees that the majority of prospective students are influenced by the information on websites, as HEI websites represent primary sources of information due to their perceived credibility as well as the thoroughness of the information presented (Al-Qazzaz, 2024), serving as central information hubs (Shukla et al., 2025). Social media is used both for information dissemination and for direct student engagement (Martin, 2015), and has been found to be the most effective means of communication for students (Moogan, 2020). Therefore, HEIs are increasingly relying on the most popular social networks not only for communication but also for promotional purposes (Camilleri, 2019). To communicate directly with prospective students, HEIs use direct marketing, and one of the tools is email (Koku, 2022). One way to achieve personalized communication is through targeted emails tailored to students' interests (Purcărea, 2023). Email marketing nurtures leads and provides updates through personalized content, interactive experiences, and real-time interactions (Shukla et al., 2025). Additionally, emails are one of the best ways to contact potential students (Moogan, 2011), as they are significantly influenced by personal email

correspondence with the HEI, which allows for speedy replies and interactive dialogue (Moogan, 2020).

But what is email? Email can be defined as a communication tool that enables the exchange of messages and information between two entities—for example, between individuals and organizations (Ginn, 2024). It is flexible and allows for the instant exchange of information over the internet globally (Pagliaro, 2019). For that reason, it is very popular and widely used across various industries (Dawkins, 2019; Derks and Bakker, 2010).

Email is popular for multiple reasons: it is an inexpensive way of sending messages, requires less preparation and execution time, enables faster responses, and provides the opportunity for interactive communication with customers (Zhang, Kumar and Cosguner, 2017).

It can be used to disseminate different categories of information, such as commercial and non-commercial messages (Hudak, Kianičková and Madleňák, 2017)—in other words, messages related to financial incentives (e.g., promotions) and those that are informational or relationship-focused (Thomas, Chen and Iacobucci, 2022). Email can be considered one of the most recent and reliable tools in e-commerce (Sabbagh, 2021) and is also the most commonly used form of direct marketing (Hudak et al., 2017). As a marketing tool, it remains one of the most effective methods for online promotion (Jeshurun, 2018), with the potential to retain existing customers and attract new ones (Nuseir et al., 2023).

Email is not only widely used, but it also has the potential to maximize user experience (Nuseir et al., 2023), particularly through its ability to deliver personalized messages (Goic et al., 2016). However, as previously noted, research on the effectiveness of email in influencing student decision-making is limited (Chauhan, 2022).

The research presented in this paper focuses on comparing the relevance and influence of communication channels owned by HEIs in students' decision-making, with particular emphasis on email. Table 1 provides a list of HEI-owned communication channels that will be examined for the purposes of this study.

Table 1: List of HEI-owned Communication Channels

HEI's website	Presentation in high schools
Open days	Posters and flyers in high schools
HEI's email	HEI's social media
HEI's phone	Google search

Source: Adapted from Marjanović, B. and Košara, D. (2025), "Assessing the Impact of Paid Media on Student Enrollment Decisions in Croatian Higher Education: A Comparative Analysis of Media Types", in Conference on Organizational Science Development: Human Being, Artificial Intelligence, and Organization, pp. 569–582.

The eight communication channels presented in Table 1 represent the primary tools owned and used by HEIs to communicate with their target audiences. Google Search is a unique case, as it cannot be strictly categorized as paid or earned media. It is included under owned media because it primarily serves as a gateway to content owned by HEIs, such as their websites or social media pages. However, it also provides access to paid content (e.g., sponsored links) and earned content (e.g., review sites or independent informational sources). Notably, four of the eight channels are online and internet-based, highlighting the growing significance of digital media in today's communication landscape.

3 Methodology

The study was conducted on a sample of 181 students from five higher education institutions located in Istria County and the city of Rijeka. The participants represented 12 different academic programs and came from 17 Croatian counties, along with three international students. The research examined the influence of eight HEI-owned communication channels, with particular emphasis on email, by evaluating their frequency of use, perceived relevance, and aggregated impact across the student population.

To measure the significance of these channels in the decision-making process, a Likert scale ranging from 0 to 5 was applied, where 0 indicated "not significant" and 5 indicated "extremely significant." Although the study was structured according to the stages of the decision-making process, the results from all phases were averaged and presented as a single value for the sake of simplicity.

A survey was used as the data collection tool, descriptive statistics were applied for data analysis, and Microsoft Excel was used to process the data and generate graphical representations of the findings.

4 Analysis

The analysis presents key calculations for HEI-owned media, including mean values, frequency of usage, and impact scores, which are relevant for drawing conclusions about the significance of media in formulating promotional strategies for HEIs. This is particularly important with an emphasis on email as a digital medium.

Table 2: Key Metrics of HEI-owned Media in the Decision-making Process

	Presentation in high schools	Posters and flyers in high schools	HEI's website	Open days	HEI's phone	Google search	HEI's social media	HEI's email
Mean	0,74	0,56	2,97	0,74	0,48	2,52	1,44	0,77
Count	45	38	132	43	29	115	73	43
Count (%)	24%	20%	72%	23%	16%	63%	40%	24%
Impact	0,18	0,11	2,15	0,17	0,08	1,58	0,57	0,18

Source: Own

Table 2 provides a summary of the significance and frequency of use of HEI-owned media. The HEI website is consistently rated as the most relevant, used, and influential source of information for prospective students when choosing a HEI. This is likely due to the comprehensive and centralized nature of the information it offers, making it a convenient one-stop source for key details about both the institution and its study programs. As the internet has become an integral part of daily life, online searches are often the first step people take when seeking information—since almost everything can now be found online.

Why do presentations in high schools, flyers, posters, and open days rank so low in importance and use? One possible explanation is that prospective students often already have a clear idea of what they want to study, and most of the information they need is readily accessible online.

Email appears to be the least relevant and used digital communication channel among students. This may be because email doesn't typically offer pre-packaged or easily accessible content; instead, prospective students must formulate specific queries to obtain the information they're looking for—usually only after they've exhausted other mass communication channels.

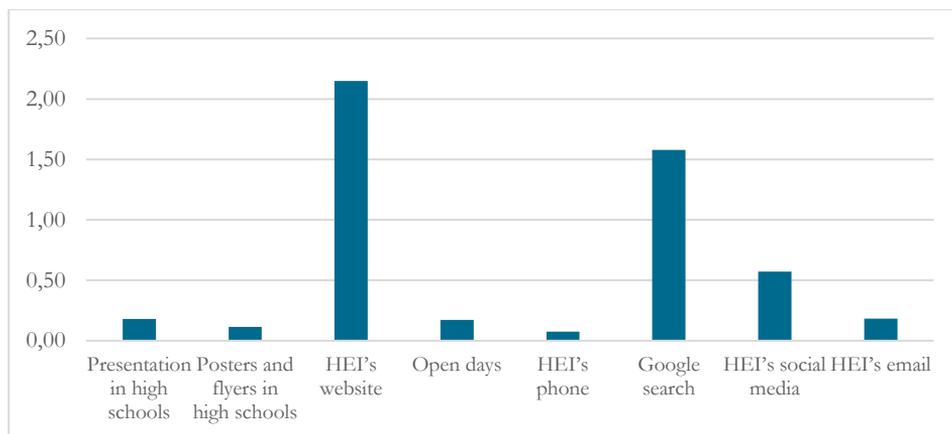


Chart 1: Graphical Representation of the Impact Score of HEI-owned Media in the Decision-making Process

Source: Own

Table 2 and Chart 1 present the impact scores of HEI-owned media. The impact score was calculated by multiplying the frequency of media use by the mean value. The mean value alone does not provide a complete picture of the relevance of a medium across the entire sample, as two media can have the same mean value while one is evaluated by only a few respondents and the other by the majority of the sample. This indicates that not all media have the same impact on the population of respondents, even when their mean values are identical.

Therefore, this score serves as a relevant indicator of which channels most effectively reach and influence the overall population of prospective students. It helps prioritize communication channels not only based on their perceived significance but also on their actual reach and influence on student decision-making. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the real impact of each communication medium in the decision-making process.

The media impact highlights how the HEI website, internet search, and HEI social media stand out in terms of their relative impact across the entire sample. This indicates both their high relevance and frequent use compared to other channels. Other media, on the other hand, have a relatively low influence on students' choices.

Email, as the least impactful digital medium, shows a relatively low influence, comparable to other traditional media. This suggests that prospective students still prefer non-personal, easily accessible forms of communication over more direct or formal channels such as email.

These results provide a clear direction for shaping communication strategies, emphasizing the need to prioritize digital and indirect communication channels, which align with the growing preference for such media.

5 Discussion and conclusion

Despite being a relevant communication tool in general, email is underused in the context of HEI choice. The following discussion will shed light on this issue.

Importance of HEI-owned media in marketing communication: Prospective students are an online generation; they primarily rely on information that is available online (Al-Qazzaz, 2024). HEI websites, social networks, and internet searches dominate in terms of influence (Kusumawati, 2018). However, this analysis showed that email is not considered a highly influential communication channel. Even media such as presentations in high schools, which were once considered highly influential (Cai et al., 2015), now seem to pale in comparison to online media. The ability to access information on demand and the widespread use of online platforms (Shukla and Pande, 2023) likely contribute to the growing trend of students turning to digital resources first, while traditional media are viewed as secondary. Prospective students appear to regard online sources as not only more influential but also more relevant and trustworthy. This highlights the shift from more institution-controlled communication to more student-driven, easily accessible sources of information. It is also possible that online media are perceived as more authentic and reliable. This may not just be a matter of preference but a reflection of the evolving landscape in how prospective students engage with information.

Prospective students' preferences in communication: Prospective students clearly prefer online media, with the majority using these channels to gather information (Kusumawati, 2018). It seems that relatively few prospective students attend open days, school presentations, or take home flyers distributed during such events. Not many contact the HEI by phone for additional information, and even email—although it enables

direct contact with HEI staff—is not widely used. This may be because, although email connects prospective students to HEI staff, it still avoids real-time or face-to-face interaction. All of the most highly rated media are impersonal, involving no direct or live contact with HEI staff. Email also does not provide immediate access to information, as it requires a certain effort to initiate communication. Immediate access to information is what is primarily sought and preferred. This likely reflects a defining trait of the digital age: a preference for convenient, self-directed, and low-pressure information sources.

Email medium characteristics and usage. The analysis revealed that email is the least relevant and least utilized digital communication channel among students. This could suggest that email serves a different purpose compared to websites, internet searches, or school presentations. Each communication channel has a specific function, providing different types of information. For example, websites are tailored to provide large volumes of information continuously (Sicilia and Ruiz, 2010), whereas email is more suitable for direct inquiries and specific requests (Antczak, 2024; Koku, 2022). Information transmitted through email is not as visible or readily accessible as the information available on a website, which is constantly present and accessible. Email, like telephone communication, may primarily be used for direct interaction (Ginn, 2024) during the decision-making process rather than for promotional purposes, as seen with school presentations, open days, or flyers. Websites, on the other hand, are likely used to gather detailed technical information about study programs and other relevant details about the HEI.

It can be concluded that although prospective students prefer digital media, email remains an underused medium. While email is a valuable tool for personalized communication, its role in influencing prospective students' decisions is secondary to more immediate and accessible digital resources, such as websites and internet searches.

5.1 Scientific and practical implications

Scientific implications: The study highlights the significant role and impact of digital media in communication between HEIs and prospective students in today's digital age, particularly in relation the decision-making process in choosing an HEI. It also reveals the underutilization of email as a communication channel and its limited influence on prospective students.

Practical implications: The outcomes of this analysis can assist HEIs in shaping strategies that focus on more impactful media, such as HEI websites, internet presence, and social media. It also emphasizes the need to rethink the use of email, reassess its purpose, and enhance its effectiveness in line with prospective students' communication preferences. HEIs should evaluate the role of email, either as a marketing tool or an information-sharing channel, and adapt its usage based on prospective students' preferences for communication.

5.2 Limitations and suggestions for future research

Limitations: The sample size of 181 participants, with the research localized to the areas of Istria and Rijeka, limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the number of institutions and study programs included in the study was limited. The research did not delve into the specifics of email usage—whether it was used as a marketing tool, a communication medium, or both.

Suggestions for future research: Future studies should explore how email is used, specifically whether it serves as a marketing tool or a communication medium, and investigate its impact on decision-making in accordance with its usage. Additionally, it would be valuable to explore why email is underused and identify strategies to increase the effectiveness of email as a communication channel.

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