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# STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND SATISFACTION IN EVALUATING COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

The research examines effective communication strategies in higher education, focusing on their role in improving the market positioning of higher education institutions (HEIs). The study explores key communication channels, such as social media, email marketing, and events, within comprehensive marketing strategies. The results highlight the importance of tailoring communication to specific target audiences, including prospective students, current students, and alumni. The research analyzes student perceptions and satisfaction with their academic experience at the College of Social Work in Belgrade, using the Net Promoter Score (NPS) as a key metric for service quality evaluation. Findings indicate that flexibility in study options and the quality of teaching staff are critical factors in student satisfaction, while the institution's website had a significant influence on student perceptions. In contrast, social media played a lesser role in student engagement. The conclusions emphasize the need for tailored communication strategies to attract and retain students.


**Key words:** communication; higher education; digital marketing; strategies; student perception; social media; student experience.

# 1. INTRODUCTION – STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION HEADING

Effective communication is the process of transmitting information or ideas in a manner that is understood and interpreted as intended. It involves clear and concise expression, fostering mutual understanding between the sender and the receiver. In the context of higher education, effective communication encompasses conveying the institution's values, offerings, and unique attributes to various stakeholders.

Effective communication plays a crucial role in conveying the mission, vision, and educational offerings of an institution. It extends to interactions with prospective students, current students, faculty members, alumni, and various stakeholders of higher education institutions (HEIs). Transparent communication helps build trust, foster engagement, and establish a positive reputation for the institution (Nguyen & Ha 2023). While this study primarily focuses on current students, it acknowledges the importance of tailored communication strategies for all stakeholders, including alumni, to meet their distinct needs and expectations.

Communication significantly impacts student recruitment, retention, and engagement (Lytle & Shin 2023). Clear communication establishes a strong institutional identity and enhances the overall student experience. Effective communication encourages collaboration, both internally among faculty and staff, and externally with the broader community (Thelen & Men 2023).

The higher education landscape is constantly evolving, presenting institutions with new challenges as they compete for students in an increasingly competitive marketplace (Barnawi 2023). The advent of technology and the growth of online education have also altered the higher education environment (Scherman et al. 2023), making it more essential than ever for institutions to effectively communicate their value to potential students. This study provides a novel contribution by examining the role of communication strategies in the context of an evolving educational environment, offering insights that differentiate it from similar research. Unlike previous studies, this research specifically investigates how effective communication can directly impact student engagement and recruitment. The study addresses gaps in existing literature by analyzing perceptions and attitudes toward communication practices within a higher education institution in Belgrade, utilizing a comprehensive approach to understand how these strategies influence student decision-making. Beyond traditional marketing methods, such as print and radio advertising, HEIs  are now employing

social media, email marketing, and events to connect with their target audiences (Al Husseiny & Youness 2023). However, to succeed in these endeavors, institutions must strategically employ communication channels and customize their messages for specific target audiences.

The paper is organized in a structured manner, starting with an analysis of communication in higher education marketing and highlighting various channels and their integration into comprehensive marketing strategies. It then explores the definition of target audiences and the importance of tailored communication strategies, emphasizing their role in successful marketing campaigns. The research further examines the evolving landscape through technology and digital communication in higher education marketing. The final sections of the paper present a detailed study on students' perceptions at the College of Social Work in Belgrade, offering an in-depth look into the research methodology and presenting the obtained results. The discussion section provides thoughtful reflections and context, and the study concludes with a comprehensive reference list that contributes to a holistic understanding of the research endeavor.

## 2. COMMUNICATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION MARKETING

The background and context of communication in higher education marketing are rooted in the increased competition that HEIs face in today's market. With the rise of online education and alternative educational options, traditional brick-and-mortar institutions encounter new challenges in attracting students. The advent of technology has significantly transformed the way students research and make decisions about their education.

One of the primary challenges that institutions face is effectively conveying their value proposition to potential students (Shaw et al. 2023). Given the multitude of choices available, it is important for institutions to communicate clearly and persuasively why they offer a superior option compared to their competitors. Strategic communication becomes vital in helping institutions establish a distinct identity and differentiate themselves within the competitive higher education landscape.

Another challenge is the shifting demographics of students. Today, a greater number of students come from diverse backgrounds and cultures, necessitating institutions to adjust their communication strategies accordingly. The aftermath of pandemics, economic downturns, and social movements can significantly influence enrollment patterns (Johnstone & Schexnider 2023), requiring institutions to adapt their communication to reflect these changing realities.

HEIs have a variety of communication channels at their disposal to reach their target audiences. The most commonly used channels include social media, email marketing, events, websites, advertisements, and public relations.

For these channels to be effective, they should be integrated into a comprehensive marketing strategy (Sudirjo 2023). This requires a strategic approach to identify the most effective channels for reaching specific target audiences and tailoring messages accordingly. It also involves measuring and evaluating the effectiveness of campaigns to make data-driven decisions (Al Adwan et al. 2023) for future communication efforts.

## 3. TARGET AUDIENCE AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Different target audiences have different needs and preferences (Story 2023). Achieving effective communication with each group requires a careful understanding and consideration of these specific requirements. Prospective students are most likely interested in details concerning the institution's academic programs, student life, and admissions requirements. Clear and accurate information in these areas helps them to understand what the institution offers and why it's a suitable fit for them. On the contrary, current students are inclined to seek details regarding class schedules, examination timings, and campus events. Offering insights into available resources and opportunities for engagement can foster a greater sense of commitment among current students towards their college journey. Alumni (former students or graduates of a school, college, or university) may be more interested in information about networking opportunities, career services, and giving back to the institution (Gallo 2013).

When an institution demonstrates an understanding of the needs and preferences of a specific target audience, it fosters trust and credibility within that audience (Sudirjo 2023). This, in turn, can lead to increased engagement and enrollment.

## 4. THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL COMMUNICATION ON HIGHER EDUCATION MARKETING

One of the main ways in which technology has impacted higher education marketing is through the rise of digital communication channels (Jakoet-Salie & Ramalobe 2023). Social media, email marketing and websites are now commonly used by HEIs to reach their target audiences. These digital channels allow institutions to connect

with potential students, current students, and alumni in new and more effective ways. The digital channels are cost-effective and have a wider reach than traditional marketing channels (Bellaaj 2023).

Another way in which technology has impacted higher education marketing is by data and analytics. Institutions can now collect and analyze data on how their target audiences interact with their digital communication channels (Al Adwan et al. 2023).

Technology allows institutions to deliver education in a flexible and personalized way (Alenezi 2023). The use of online learning platforms and mobile apps, for instance, enables students to access education from anywhere and at any time, making it more convenient and accessible (Shi 2023).

**Table 1.** Metrics for Measuring the Effectiveness of Communication Campaigns

| Metrics | Description |
|---|---|
| **Reach** | The number of people who were exposed to the campaign. |
| **Engagement** | The level of engagement with the campaign, such as likes, shares, comments, and clicks. |
| **Conversion** | The number of people who took a desired action as a result of the campaign, such as filling out a form or making a donation. |
| **Return on Investment (ROI)** | The relationship between the cost of the campaign and the revenue generated by the campaign. |
| **Net Promoter Score (NPS)** | Measures customer loyalty and satisfaction by evaluating the likelihood of users recommending the service or institution to others. |

*Source: Author's Research*

Table 1 provides metrics for institutions to measure the effectiveness of their communication campaigns, enabling them to identify trends and patterns for optimizing future efforts and achieving better results.


## 5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of the study, conducted during the data collection phase from December 2023 to January 2024, was to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of students at a private HEI in Belgrade, which has approximately 700 students, regarding their academic experiences.

The main research question guiding this study is: *How do different communication channels impact student perception and satisfaction in higher education institutions?*

Based on this research question, the study hypothesizes the following:
- **H1**: Flexibility in study options and the quality of teaching staff significantly impact student satisfaction.
- **H2**: Social media has a lesser impact on student engagement compared to other communication channels such as email marketing and the institution's website.

The research employed contemporary methodologies and included a carefully selected sample of 100 respondents, representing about 14.29% of the institution's total student population. The sample was chosen using a stratified random sampling technique to ensure that various demographic segments within the student population were adequately represented, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of their perspectives. The criteria for sample selection were designed to ensure representation of students from various fields of study, providing a balanced view of the academic experience. The sample characteristics, including year of study, gender, and field of study, were carefully considered and recorded, as these factors can influence the results. However, demographic characteristics such as age were not included in this analysis. All collected questionnaires were fully completed and deemed valid for analysis, ensuring the reliability of the data.

Descriptive statistics were employed to analyze and interpret the collected data, providing insights into the trends, patterns, and central tendencies observed in the respondents' perceptions and attitudes. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the study's findings and facilitated a clear presentation of the data. This approach ensured that the sample accurately reflected the diversity of the student body in terms of gender, year of study, and academic program.

A structured 17-item questionnaire, comprising both closed and open-ended questions, was designed to capture the intricacies of students' experiences and attitudes. The Computer-Assisted Self-Interviewing (CASI) method was used, allowing respondents to complete the survey independently using computer support, which aligns with the study's focus on modernizing communication in HEIs.

To enrich the analysis, the Net Promoter Score (NPS) metric was applied, assessing service quality based on user recommendations and sentiments (Alismail et al. 2020). This metric provided valuable insights into the overall satisfaction and likelihood of students recommending the institution to others. The study's emphasis on technology, digital communication, and personalized experiences reflects contemporary communication strategies in HEIs.

Within this methodological framework and set objectives, the study contributes valuable insights into the evolving landscape of communication strategies in modern HEIs.

## 6. RESEARCH RESULTS AND ANALYSIS – IMPACT OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES ON THE MARKET POSITIONING OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

The research outcomes are systematically presented, focusing on the specific elements tested and their corresponding tasks.

**Table 2.** Enrollment Reasons at a Higher Education Institution in Belgrade

| Reasons | Total | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Flexibility of study (possible to study and work simultaneously, online) | 60 | 60.0 |
| Institution is accredited | 56 | 56.0 |
| Quality of education | 37 | 37.0 |
| Professional teaching staff | 32 | 32.0 |
| Recommendation from friends | 16 | 16.0 |
| Affordable tuition fees | 16 | 16.0 |
| Easier enrollment compared to other schools and faculties | 12 | 12.0 |
| Easier completion within the expected timeframe | 10 | 10.0 |
| Image of a Higher Education Institution in Belgrade | 2 | 2.0 |
| Other reasons | 1 | 1.0 |

*Source: Author's Research*

Table 2 provides a comprehensive breakdown of the primary reasons influencing students to choose this HEI in Belgrade for their studies. Flexibility in study arrangements emerges as the leading factor, with 60% of respondents highlighting the ability to simultaneously work and study online. The result indicates that the flexibility of study options, especially the ability to combine work and online learning, is a critical factor for modern students, reflecting the growing trend toward work-study balance in higher education. The emphasis on accreditation (56%) and quality of education

(37%) demonstrates that students prioritize recognized and reputable institutions. The relatively low significance placed on the institution's image (2%) suggests a need for stronger branding and positioning efforts to enhance the institution's market perception. These findings align with global trends where students seek a combination of flexibility, quality, and official recognition in their educational journey. The institution's accreditation, quality of education, and a professional teaching staff also significantly contribute to the enrollment decision, as indicated by the corresponding percentages. Factors like recommendations from friends, affordable tuition fees, and the ease of enrollment and completion contribute to students' decision-making.

The findings from this study align with those of Shah, Nair, and Bennett (2013), who conducted research across five HEIs in Australia. Both studies identified flexibility in study arrangements as a critical factor influencing students' choice, with the Australian study highlighting 'access and opportunity' as an essential aspect, similar to the flexibility identified in this research. This suggests that the ability to balance study with other commitments is a universally important consideration for students in selecting an institution. The quality of teaching staff was recognized as a significant factor in both studies, demonstrating that the standard of education offered by an institution plays a important role in attracting students. These parallels suggest that certain aspects, such as flexibility and teaching quality, remain consistent determinants of student choice across different educational contexts.

Table 3 outlines the diverse sources students rely on for obtaining information.

**Table 3.** Information Sources for a Higher Education Institution in Belgrade

| Source | Total | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Website of the Institution | 41 | 41.0 |
| Recommendations from individuals outside the Institution | 21 | 21.0 |
| Social media | 19 | 19.0 |
| Recommendations from other students of the Institution | 16 | 16.0 |
| Personal recommendation from Institution professors | 2 | 2.0 |
| High school promotional events | 1 | 1.0 |
| TV advertisement | 0 | 0.0 |
| Total | **100** | **100.0** |

*Source: Author's Research*

The data from Table 3 provides that the website of the HEI in Belgrade has a main role, with 41% of students relying on it for information. This highlights the critical importance of maintaining a user-friendly, informative, and engaging website as it serves as the primary communication channel with prospective students. The fact that social media only accounted for 19% indicates a potential gap in the institution's digital marketing strategy, suggesting room for expanding outreach and engagement via these platforms. Interestingly, the absence of reliance on TV advertisements (0%) reinforces the shift toward digital sources of information among today's student population, indicating that traditional advertising methods may be less effective for this demographic. This underscores the significance of an effective and informative website, aligning with mentioned discussion on the integration of digital channels into comprehensive marketing plans. Recommendations from individuals outside the institution and social media also emerge as influential sources, emphasizing the broader impact of word-of-mouth and online platforms in shaping students' perceptions.

Given the substantial reliance on the institution's website, optimizing its content and user experience becomes the most important communication channel. This aligns with the overarching theme where digital channels, including websites, are the most important in conveying an institution's value proposition and influencing enrollment decisions.

Building upon the insights gained from analyzing the various channels through which students acquire information about the institution, the attention turns to the evaluation of specific elements on the website. Table 4, Evaluation of HEI Website Elements, delves into the students' perspectives on the website's key features, including contemporary design, content, clarity, information comprehensibility, and overall utility.

These findings align with the research conducted by Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2012) and Kisiołek, Karyy, and Halkiv (2021), which examined the role of digital marketing communication tools in higher education across different European contexts. Constantinides and Zinck Stagno's study, focusing on the Netherlands, demonstrated that social media is increasingly influencing the decision-making process of prospective students, complementing traditional marketing channels. Similarly, Kisiołek, Karyy, and Halkiv's research in Poland and Ukraine emphasized that websites remain the primary source of information, with both studies highlighting the importance of institutional websites in reaching prospective students. In line with these findings, 41% of students in this study indicated reliance on the institution's website for information, and 19% reported using social media, underscoring the grow-

ing importance of digital communication channels. Additionally, Kisiołek et al. (2021) found no significant differences in the use of simpler and more cost-effective online marketing tools between EU and non-EU institutions, suggesting a universal trend in the adoption of digital marketing strategies by higher education institutions. This aligns with the current study's findings, where digital communication channels, including websites and social media, play a crucial role in influencing student decisions.

**Table 4.** Information of Higher Education InstitutionWork Website Elements

| Rating | 1 (Very Poor) | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 (Excellent) | Mean±Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Modern Website Design | 2.0% | 5.1% | 11.1% | 33.3% | 48.5% | 4.21±0.97 |
| Website Content | 2.0% | 4.0% | 10.0% | 32.0% | 52.0% | 4.28±0.24 |
| Website Usability | 3.0% | 4.0% | 20.0% | 30.0% | 43.0% | 4.06±1.03 |
| Clarity of Information | 3.0% | 1.0% | 17.2% | 22.2% | 56.6% | 4.28±0.99 |
| Usefulness of Information | 1.0% | 1.0% | 8.2% | 32.7% | 57.1% | 4.44±0.77 |

*Source: Author's Research*

Table 4 evaluates the website elements of the HEI in Belgrade based on user ratings (1 – Very Poor to 5 – Excellent). The average ratings indicate overall satisfaction. The term "Mean ± Std. Deviation" refers to the average score (Mean) and the variability or spread of scores around the mean (Standard Deviation). A smaller standard deviation indicates that the responses were closer to the mean, while a larger deviation suggests greater variability in responses. The consistently high ratings, especially for 'Usefulness of Information' (mean = 4.44), suggest that the website successfully provides relevant and valuable content to students. However, 'Website Usability' received a slightly lower score (mean = 4.06), indicating that while the content is strong, there might be challenges in navigation or user experience that require attention. Improving usability could further enhance the overall digital engagement and support the website's role as a key source of information.

Modern Website Design received an excellent rating from 48.5% of users, averaging M = 4.21±0.97. Website Content had a high satisfaction rate, with 52.0% rating it excellent, with averaging M = 4.28±0.24. Website Usability showed variability, but 43.0% rated it excellent, with an average of M = 4.06±1.03. Clarity of Information,

with 56.6% giving an excellent rating, averaging M = 4.28±0.99. The most highly regarded element was the Usefulness of Information with 57.1% rating it excellent and achieving the highest average of M = 4.44±0.77. These detailed evaluations provide a profound understanding of user perspectives, guiding potential enhancements to elevate the overall user experience and satisfaction with the website of the HEI in Belgrade.

Although the questions in Table 4 assessed key aspects such as design, content, usability, and clarity of information, the questions were not sufficiently operationalized. Further refinement of the questions to include specific elements, such as navigation, loading speed, mobile optimization, and integration with other digital tools, could have provided more precise insights into areas requiring improvement.

Understanding students' satisfaction with various aspects of their academic experience directly impacts institutions seeking to enhance competitiveness in higher education. The presented Table 5 provides insights into strengths and areas for improvement. Satisfied students become advocates for their institution (Wong & Chapman 2023), positively impacting word-of-mouth recommendations and the institution's brand image. Analyzing satisfaction levels aims to reveal patterns that guide marketing strategies in alignment with student expectations and preferences.

The findings from this study align with the research conducted by Baroudi, Alia, and Marashdih (2020), which assessed the accessibility and usability of higher education institution websites in Jordan. Their study found that many university websites were not easily accessible and required significant improvements to enhance user experience, as they did not fully comply with the WCAG 2.0 (World Wide Web Consortium 2.0) guidelines. Similarly, while the average ratings for the website elements in this study were generally positive, with 'Website Usability' receiving a mean score of 4.06, there remains room for improvement. Both studies highlight the importance of continuously improving website design, information clarity, and navigation to meet student needs and expectations, reinforcing the need for higher education institutions to prioritize user-friendly and accessible digital platforms.

**Table 5.** Satisfaction with various aspects of studies at a Higher Education Institution in Belgrade

| Aspects of Study | 1 (Very Poor) | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 (Excellent) | Mean±Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Teaching Staff | 2.0% | 2.0% | 16.2% | 33.3% | 46.5% | 4.20±0.92 |
| Non-Teaching Staff | 4.0% | 4.0% | 12.0% | 21.0% | 59.0% | 4.27±1.08 |
| Environment | 3.1% | 2.1% | 15.5% | 32.0% | 47.4% | 4.19±0.98 |
| Study Organization | 4.0% | 6.1% | 15.2% | 32.3% | 42.4% | 4.03±1.09 |
| Overall Satisfaction | 1.0% | 6.1% | 14.1% | 32.3% | 46.5% | 4.17±0.95 |

*Source: Author's Research*

Table 5 illustrates student satisfaction with various aspects of their studies at a HEI in Belgrade, ranging from 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent). The highest satisfaction was observed in the 'Non-Teaching Staff' category (mean = 4.27), indicating strong approval of administrative support. This suggests the institution provides a supportive environment. Differences based on gender and year of study in relation to the academic experience were tested, but no statistically significant differences were found (p > 0.05). These findings indicate consistent perceptions across demographic groups, contributing to overall satisfaction. However, the relatively lower score for 'Study Organization' (mean = 4.03) suggests room for improvement in managing academic programs and schedules. The overall average rating for general satisfaction is positive (M = 4.17±0.95), with students expressing high satisfaction across all elements. This positive feedback can enhance the institution's appeal to prospective students through organic recommendations and advocacy.

The Net Promoter Score (NPS) presented in Table 6 serves as a metric for assessing the quality of a service by measuring the user experience based on a single, straightforward question: "How likely are you to recommend X to friends or colleagues?" User responses categorize them into three groups: promoters, passives, and detractors. Promoters express high satisfaction, speaking positively and readily recommending the service. Passives do not actively promote or criticize, while detractors are dissatisfied, often sharing negative feedback. The overall NPS score is derived by calculating the difference between the percentage of promoters and detractors (Baehre et al. 2022). A higher NPS score indicates higher service/product quality and customer loyalty, whereas a lower NPS suggests increased user dissatisfaction.

**Table 6.** Likelihood of recommending a Higher Education Institution in Belgrade

| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| 0,00% | 1,0% | 2,0% | 2,0% | 3,0% | 5,0% | 4,0% | 3,0% | 15,0% | 10,0% | 55,0% |

*Source: Author's Research*

The findings of this study align with the research conducted by Wong and Chapman (2022), which provided an in-depth analysis of how different forms of student interactions – both formal and informal – contribute to various aspects of student satisfaction. Wong and Chapman identified that student-instructor interactions and student-peer interactions play a significant role in influencing overall student satisfaction, mirroring the importance placed on teaching staff, non-teaching staff, and overall study organization in this study's findings. Similar to Wong and Chapman's results, this study demonstrates that multiple dimensions, such as teaching quality, administrative support, and the learning environment, contribute to a holistic measure of student satisfaction. Both studies emphasize that fostering meaningful interactions within HEIs is essential for enhancing student satisfaction and retention.

**Table 7.** Distribution of Promoters, Passives, and Detractors

| Category | Number | Percentage (%) |
|----------|--------|----------------|
| Detractors | 17 | 17.0 |
| Passives | 18 | 18.0 |
| Promoters | 65 | 65.0 |
| **Total** | **100** | **100.0** |

*Source: Author's Research*

Table 7 illustrates the distribution of respondents into categories based on their Net Promoter Scores (NPS), highlighting the proportion of detractors, passives, and promoters. The high percentage of Promoters (65%) is indicative of a generally positive student experience, suggesting that the majority of students are likely to recommend the institution to others, which is beneficial for word-of-mouth marketing. However, the presence of 17% Detractors should not be overlooked, as it represents a segment of students who are dissatisfied. Addressing the concerns of this group could significantly improve overall student satisfaction and further enhance the institution's reputation and recruitment potential. The majority, constituting 65%, fall

into the category of promoters, indicating a high level of satisfaction and a likelihood of recommending the institution to others. On the other hand, the presence of 17% detractors suggests a portion of students with less favorable experiences. The positive distribution of promoters aligns with the overarching goal of enhancing communication strategies. Satisfied students, acting as promoters, become essential advocates in the broader communication plan. This information underscores the importance of maintaining a positive student experience and leveraging it as a strategic asset in higher education marketing efforts.

The Total Net Promoter Score (NPS) serves as a quantitative representation of the overall satisfaction and loyalty among students at a HEI in Belgrade. The NPS, a widely recognized metric in gauging the quality of services, is derived from responses to a singular question: "How likely is it that you would recommend studying at this HEI in Belgrade to a friend or colleague?" The resulting percentage, in this case, is 48%. This metric is indicative not only of the current student satisfaction levels but also of their potential role as brand advocates. With a 48% Net Promoter Score (NPS), a positive sentiment prevails, signifying a substantial proportion of content students inclined to recommend the institution to others. In the broader context of higher education marketing, this resonates with the evolving approach of utilizing satisfied student experiences as influential communicative assets. In the pursuit of revolutionizing communication strategies, recognizing and capitalizing on the potential of these positive sentiments becomes paramount for cultivating brand loyalty and enticing prospective students.

The findings of this study align with research conducted by Kara and Zeren (2022), which investigated the relevance of the Net Promoter Score (NPS) in HEIs. Similar to the NPS analysis conducted in this study, Kara and Zeren found that NPS is a valuable metric for understanding students' likelihood to recommend their institution and academic programs. Their research revealed differences between the NPS scores of specific programs and the overall university experience, echoing this study's results where 48% of students were identified as promoters, suggesting that NPS can effectively capture nuances in student satisfaction. Both studies emphasize the importance of using NPS as a regular measure to inform strategies aimed at enhancing the student experience and ensuring that higher education institutions remain responsive to student needs and expectations.

The total NPS underscores the interconnectedness of student satisfaction, loyalty, and the broader communication strategies deployed by educational institutions.

The analysis of the data confirmed H1 and H2. Flexibility in study options and

the quality of teaching staff emerged as the most significant factors contributing to student satisfaction, confirming H1. The data showed that social media had a lesser impact on student engagement than other communication channels, supporting H2.

## 7. DISCUSSION − ENHANCING HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNICATION THROUGH STUDENT-CENTRIC STRATEGIES

The examination of research outcomes reveals important insights for enhancing communication strategies in higher education, particularly within a HEI in Belgrade, where the study was conducted. These findings are consistent with the study conducted by Shah, Nair, and Bennett (2013), which identified flexibility in study arrangements as a pivotal factor influencing student choice across multiple institutions. In both studies, flexibility emerged as a leading driver for student enrollment, confirming its universal relevance in higher education marketing. The discussion integrates key findings and identifies strategic opportunities to improve communication practices within the framework of higher education marketing.

The notable reliance on the website as a primary information source (41%) underscores the significance of cultivating an effective online presence. This is similar to the findings of Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2012), who demonstrated that social media and institutional websites significantly impact students' decision-making processes. The current study builds upon this by providing specific insights into how these digital channels function within the context of higher education in Belgrade. Aligning with the broader integration of digital channels into marketing plans, institutions should prioritize enhancing website content, usability, and accessibility to meet the evolving expectations of tech-savvy students.

The evaluation of the website elements reveals a positive trend, particularly in modern design (average rating: 4.21) and information usefulness (average rating: 4.44). These findings indicate that a well-designed and informative website can contribute significantly to user satisfaction, emphasizing the need for ongoing improvements in content presentation and relevance. However, the questions regarding the analyzed website elements (Table 4) were not thoroughly operationalized. This limited the ability to pinpoint specific factors that require improvement. More detailed questions, addressing areas such as navigation, mobile optimization, loading speed, and integration with other digital tools, could provide more precise insights for actionable recommendations.

The Net Promoter Score (NPS) of 48% signifies a substantial number of satisfied students willing to recommend this institutions. This aligns with the work of Kara and Zeren (2022), who found that NPS serves as a reliable indicator of student satisfaction and loyalty within higher education settings. Similar to our findings, their study demonstrated that a higher NPS correlates with increased student advocacy and engagement. In the context of higher education marketing, this positive sentiment serves as a potent tool for word-of-mouth promotion. Recognizing the potential of satisfied students as brand advocates helps in building a positive institutional reputation and attracting new enrollments.

The discussion culminates in the understanding that communication strategies in higher education should be reimagined with a student-centric approach. Fostering positive student experiences, both online and offline, becomes instrumental in not only retaining current students but also in attracting new ones through organic, word-of-mouth promotion.

By prioritizing digital channels, refining website elements, and leveraging positive sentiments, institutions can revolutionize their communication approaches to meet the dynamic needs and expectations of contemporary students (Gupta & Jain 2017). This shift towards student-centric strategies is integral for staying competitive in the ever-evolving landscape of higher education (Aithal & Maiya 2023).

By integrating these findings with existing literature, this study not only corroborates the established importance of communication channels and student perceptions but also extends our understanding of how these elements function within the specific context of higher education in Belgrade. This localized perspective offers valuable insights for institutions aiming to refine their marketing strategies and student engagement efforts.

The confirmation of H1 highlights the critical role of flexibility in study options and high-quality teaching in enhancing student satisfaction, which aligns with previous studies, such as Shah et al. (2013). The confirmation of H2, which suggested that social media would have a lesser impact on student engagement, indicates that students still rely more on traditional communication methods like institutional websites and email marketing, despite the increased use of social media in other sectors (Constantinides & Stagno 2012).

## 8. CONCLUSION

In the contemporary landscape of competitive higher education marketing, the significance of effective communication cannot be overstated (Tankosic et al. 2017). This encompasses a nuanced understanding of the intricacies and challenges inherent in the current market, marked by heightened competition and evolving student demographics.

The study emphasizes that effective marketing strategies for institutions of higher education in the digital era require a thorough examination of factors including market characteristics, the use of social media and online platforms, educator quality, and the needs of current students. Consequently, these institutions should carefully analyze the preferences and experiences of their existing student body, customizing communication strategies and educational content that enhance engagement and satisfaction. This implies that, through the optimization of technology and online platforms and consideration of market demands, HEI can improve their reputation, elevate the quality of education, and enhance community engagement in promoting education.

The future trajectory of communication in higher education marketing will be intricately linked to technological advancements and the continuous evolution of digital channels (Smajlović et al. 2015). Staying abreast of emerging trends and innovations will be imperative for institutions seeking to effectively reach and engage their target audiences. The orchestration of tailored communication strategies, coupled with technological integration and meticulous evaluation, positions HEIs to attract, retain, and foster a sense of community among their student body.

It is important to acknowledge that this study was conducted within a single institution and focused solely on current students' perspectives, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future studies might consider a broader scope to encompass multiple institutions and a more diverse range of stakeholders.

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# PERCEPCIJA I ZADOVOLJSTVO STUDENATA U EVALUACIJI KOMUNIKACIONIH KANALA

**Sažetak:**

Istraživanje ispituje efikasne strategije komunikacije u visokom obrazovanju, sa fokusom na njihovu ulogu u unapređenju tržišnog pozicioniranja visokoobrazovnih institucija (VOI). Studija analizira najvažnije komunikacione kanale poput društvenih mreža, imejl marketinga i događaja, u okviru sveobuhvatnih marketinških strategija. Rezultati ističu važnost prilagođavanja komunikacije specifičnim ciljnim grupama, uključujući buduće studente, trenutne studente i alumniste. Dodatno, istraživanje analizira percepciju i zadovoljstvo studenata njihovim akademskim iskustvom na Visokoj školi socijalnog rada u Beogradu, koristeći Net Promoter Score (NPS) kao glavnu metriku za evaluaciju kvaliteta usluga. Nalazi pokazuju da su fleksibilnost studijskih opcija i kvalitet nastavnog kadra najvažniji faktori zadovoljstva studenata, dok je internet stranica institucije imala značajan uticaj na percepciju studenata. Nasuprot tome, društvene mreže imale su manji uticaj na angažman studenata. Zaključci naglašavaju potrebu za prilagođenim komunikacionim strategijama kako bi se privukli i zadržali studenti.

**Ključne riječi:** komunikacija; visoko obrazovanje; digitalni marketing; strategije; percepcija studenata; društveni mediji; iskustvo studenata

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