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The Relation of Students' Choice of Private Higher Education and Marketing Strategies in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract

Severe market conditions and advancing technology demand a well-planned and a strategic marketing approach in all sectors as well as in education sector. This study examined the relationship between the students' choice and the marketing strategies of private higher education (HE) in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIH). To perceive this relation, we chose one of the private universities in Sarajevo. The study is based on a student survey which employed a questionnaire of 55 questions under 4 sub-groups and was done by 146 students. The first step of the questionnaire was determining the motives of the students to attend a private HE institution. The next part was to investigate the information sources of the students. These two steps followed the understanding of the evaluation criteria and the decision process of the students. Finally, the survey was concluded with the post enrollment observations of the students. The data obtained analyzed by SPSS software. The results revealed a strong consistency. The students were willing to have quality education and improve themselves via HE. They were using internet as a prior information source but would not make a final decision without parents' confirmation. The overall satisfaction of the students showed that our subject university communicates with the target groups efficiently and enjoys the benefits of positive 'word of mouth' marketing. Finally, we addressed the marketing strategies that we reaped throughout the study to suggest a course of action to private HEIs in the conclusion part.

Keywords: marketing, private higher education, marketing of higher education, social media, higher education in BIH.

Introduction

According to Kotler (1995), marketing is the analysis, planning, implementation and control of carefully formulated programs designed to bring about voluntary exchange of values with target markets to achieve intutional objectives. Marketing involves designing the institution's offerings to meet the target markets' needs and desires, and using effective pricing, communication and distribution to inform, motivate and service these markets (Kotler, 1995). Higher education has historically avoided marketing, because of the negative image of marketing techniques (Rowland, 1977). The subject is started to be questioned in 80's. According to Firoz (1982) an effective communication between the internal and external publics is needed to solve the problems of an institution and this could be done by a marketing approach. In 1990's marketing of higher education became crucial for the stabilization of an institution. Simmons and Laczniak (1992)

offered a 'Four Stage Model Reflecting the Acceptance of Marketing in Higher Education Institutions'. After 2000 and so, most of the universities in Western countries had their marketing departments and the traditional "four P's" of marketing approach (DePerro, 2006).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, higher education got under the state way by 2005. Despite the downturn of the demographic values (UN World Population Prospects, 2015), 37 private HEIs opened in the country within the last decade (Branković and Branković, 2013), (The centre for Information and Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education of BiH, 2015) and the number of students enrolled in HEIs raised from 91260 in 2005/2006 academic year to 108008 in 2014/2015 academic year (Agency of Statistics, BiH, 2015). The data shows that the private HEIs in Bosnia and Herzegovina will experience a more competitive market conditions in future and demand to do better marketing than the competitors.

The focus of this study is to investigate the relationship between the students' choice of private HEI and potential marketing strategies of these institutions in BiH. The study utilizes a student survey -described in the 'methodology'- and employs quantitative analysis. In conclusion part, we addressed some of the potential marketing strategies to suggest a course of action to private HEIs.

Research Methodology

The methodology of the study inspired from Al-Fattal (2010) and based on three questions (1) what are the expectations of prospective students from a private university in BiH? (2) How do they gather information and make a final decision? (3) What is the relationship between student choice of university and marketing strategies?

In order to meet the answers of these questions, one of the private universities in Sarajevo at the capital city of BiH was chosen. The major data source of the paper was a student survey. The function of the student survey was to establish the basis for generalizable patterns based on statistical analysis of student choice of private HEI in BiH. This phase has employed a questionnaire to measure attitudes of 146 freshmen students from 5 different departments as it generates data in a relatively convenient way.

Data and analyzes

The students answered 55 questions under four sub-sections. The participants are asked to rate each of the 55 items, ranging from (1) irrelevant to (7) relevant. These data then transferred and analyzed by using SPSS software, Statistical Packing for the Social Science. The findings are then presented in a simple descriptive statistics based on mean, variance, frequency and standard deviation to see the difference and weight of each factors.

Motives to Attend a University

The students' motives to attend a university categorized under 11 questions. A detailed data table obtained from the questionnaire is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Students' motives and factors to attend a university

Motives and Factors	N	Mean	Rank Order	Highly Positive Scores 6-7	Highly Negative Scores 1-2	Standard Deviation
Better future job	146	5.35	2	79	12	1.68
Secure future	145	5.01	6	68	15	1.70
Financial stability	145	4.75	9	55	15	1.71
Social position	146	5.13	3	70	10	1.60
Friends	145	3.71	11	33	47	2.04

Educated social environment	144	5.08	4	71	16	1.69
Parents' decision	146	3.82	10	40	49	2.13
Social networking	142	4.83	8	62	19	1.81
Experiencing university life	142	5.06	5	71	17	1.86
Personal development	145	5.61	1	96	15	1.63
Improving character	145	4.84	7	55	16	1.70

As seen in the Table 1, the highest ranked students' motives were the 'personal development' which follows a 'better future job' and a 'good social position'. These three motives had 5.61, 5.35 and 5.13 mean values. The fourth and fifth ranked motives for the contributor students were 'educated social environment' and 'experiencing university life' which had 5.08 and 5.06 mean values respectively.

A strong consistency among the first five motives are obvious. These data indicates that the students would like to "develop" themselves while experiencing university life, they wish to have a good job, a respectable position and an educated social environment after graduation.

As it may be noticed, a 'secure future' and 'financial stability' do not play a major role of students' choice, since they might not look at higher education as a way of reaping a secure future and financial stability.

'Friends' and 'social networking' played minor roles as social motives. The remarkable point here is that students would like to experience university life and have an educated social environment but their social network and friends do not motivate them to attend a university. Another remarkable point is, 'parents' decision' had highest standard deviation among the university motives which means that as for some students the point of view of their parents has a major importance for another group it does play a minor role.

Decision Making Process of University Selection

The information gathering process was important in order to understand what shapes the process of university choice. Such a choice would reflect and impact enormously on students' futures and therefore they needed to collect as much information as they could in the time and means they had. Participants' ratings about the significance and role of the sources they had used to obtain information about potential universities are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Information Sources

Information Sources	N	Mean	Rank Order	Highly positive scores 6-7	Highly negative scores 1-2	Standard Deviation
Friends	144	3.48	5	32	57	2.12
Relatives	146	3.93	2	51	51	2.22
Current Students	144	3.08	7	26	69	2.07
Newspaper ads	141	2.37	8	10	91	1.74
Street Billboards	144	2.33	9	8	93	1.75
Brochures / Fliers	144	3.33	6	28	60	2.05
University website	140	4.41	1	57	37	2.16

Admission tutor visit	142	3.8	4	53	63	2.59
Social media	142	3.93	3	55	57	2.15

The first three information sources are 'university website', 'relatives' and 'social media' with 4.41, 3.93 and 3.93 mean values, respectively. University website, social media and relatives also shared the highest positive scores (6-7) with 57, 55 and 51. These findings interpret that the students used internet when they need to gather information about universities and they discussed the related issues with their 'relatives'. It is also remarkable that all students (146 of 146) found their relatives as an information source by any means.

It is not surprising to find that internet is the leading source of information when students search for information about universities. The improvements in mobile networks (fast 3G and 4G internet) and mobile devices (smartphones, tablets) in the last five years allowed to be connected almost full time and anywhere so that people do not need to go to a computer for internet anymore, it is already in pockets. The "apps" in mobile devices provide easier and faster access to social media and the other internet tools.

The fourth major sources of information of the students was admission tutor visit but it had highest standard deviation as well (2.59). It means that some students like if a tutor comes to their high school and inform them about a particular university, they satisfy and trust the information source; on the other hand some other students do not like to be informed by this way.

According to the findings it is possible to say that the classical advertising methods such as 'street billboards', 'newspaper ads' and 'brochures and fliers' do not work anymore as an information source. They may work for brand recognition and public awareness of the institution.

University Evaluation and Selection Criteria

The issues under this title mattered most in the decision-making process, as they are the evaluation criteria on which university selection is based. The students were asked 25 questions and they are discussed under sub categories. The findings from this section are presented in the Table 3.

Table 3: Students' Evaluation and Selection Criteria

Evaluation and Selection	N	Mean	Rank order	Highly positive scores 6-7	Highly negative scores 1-2	Standard Deviation
Language of Instruction	146	6.19	1	112	4	1.11
High calibre teachers	145	5.92	2	105	5	1.42
Int'l accreditation	142	5.85	3	98	6	1.41
University reputation	145	5.75	4	98	7	1.56
Foreign teaching staff	146	5.72	5	95	8	1.58
Relationship with other universities	142	5.61	6	87	8	1.58
Student services	145	5.39	7	82	10	1.63
Local accreditation	142	5.37	8	83	16	1.9
Technology used	143	5.22	9	80	17	1.86
Number of students	145	5.21	10	80	22	2
Final year abroad	142	5.2	11	80	17	1.93

Entry requirements	131	5.05	12	62	14	1.78
Paying in Installments	144	4.99	13	72	19	1.97
Tuition Fees	145	4.94	14	66	21	1.9
Friendly staff	145	4.89	15	68	21	1.9
Discounts	143	4.87	16	68	24	2.01
Subjects thought	145	4.68	17	49	23	1.9
Accommodation	145	4.68	18	60	24	1.97
University Infrastructure	143	4.56	19	54	23	1.87
Student union	145	4.48	20	57	28	1.92
Class size	144	4.38	21	40	36	3.94
Transportation	144	4.38	22	44	31	2.02
Convenient timetable	145	4.37	23	51	31	2.01
Distance to home	145	3.88	24	44	49	2.23
My friends	143	3.45	25	30	57	2.15

A detailed information is gathered from the students through the survey for their university evaluation and selection criteria. A strong consistency among the first eleven criteria is remarkable. They are all about the education quality. It is also noticed that the first seven criteria had the lowest standard deviation.

This first major category of criteria followed a second category which are about the financial issues and the infrastructure of the university. The students care about the amount of tuition fees and the way of payment. While 'paying in installments' shares 4.99, amount of 'tuition fees' share 4.94 and 'discounts' share 4.87 mean values.

The convenience of the university is given minor importance as this category of criteria ranked lower than the others above. Accommodation, transportation, infrastructure and active student unions are given less importance by the students.

Post Enrolment Observations

The post-choice reflections section investigated students' views and attitudes about their decisions and the universities they enrolled at. This section investigated current state unlike earlier sections requiring respondents to recall past incidents. The findings about general satisfaction are summarized in Table 4.

When respondents were asked whether the university matched their expectations, their responses were almost neutral with a mean attitude rating of 4.3. Students' general satisfaction with the educational services scored above the neutral position, with a mean attitude rating of 4.78.

Table 4: Post Enrolment Reflections

Post Enrolment Observations	N	Mean	Rank order	Highly positive scores 6-7	Highly negative scores 1-2	Standard Deviation
My expectations matched	142	4.3	8	50	33	1.99
Educational services satisfy	142	4.78	4	58	17	1.76
Foreign language efficient	143	5.09	2	64	12	1.67

Individual student support	140	4.62	5	54	25	2
Academic staff qualified	141	4.55	6	57	30	2.05
Size of class is good	142	5.56	1	93	10	1.57
Student services satisfied	141	4.96	3	65	18	1.83
Active student clubs	141	4.23	9	49	39	2.12
Accommodation and transportation	140	4.22	10	40	33	1.96
Affordable tuition fees	141	4.54	7	46	19	1.78

It is remarkable that as a university selection criterion, 'class size' had a minor importance (21st of 25) and 4.38 mean values, but now it took the highest rank among the post enrolment observations with 5.56 mean value. High satisfaction on size of class can be a result of the small number of students in each class at this university and may point that the students were comparing their conditions to those at public universities with larger class sizes.

'Foreign language', namely English, also scored high with a mean attitude rating of 5.09, and ranked the second. High level of satisfaction showed that this university places a particular importance and effort on English teaching.

'Student services' and 'educational services' ranked third (4.96 mean value) and fourth (4.78 mean value) and comparably lower standard deviations (1.83 and 1.76 respectively) meant that students were happy and satisfied with those services.

It is also worth to notice that 'affordable tuition fees', 'active students clubs' and 'accommodation and transportation' were the lowest ranked reflections, they all had mean values above the average which were 4.54, 4.23 and 4.22 respectively.

Discussion and conclusion

University Motives and Information Sources of the Students

The motives and information sources of the students are deeply related to sociological and historical background of the country. Since BIH locates at an intersection point of cultures, it influenced both from East and West. The young Bosnians may wish to be as independent as their German peers but they would not make an important decision without the confirmation of their parents. They ranked relatives (including parents) at the 2nd of 9 as an information source for a HEI on the other hand they placed their parents at the 10th of the 11 "motives" (Table 1).

The first three motives (personal development, having a good job and a good social position) indicate that the students are self-motivated individuals who gather information primarily from internet, namely university websites (1st of 9) and social media (3rd of 9). They also do not motivate from their 'friends' (11th of 11) or 'social networks' (8th of 11) but would like to 'improve themselves' (7th of 11) via university education and would like to belong 'an educated social community' (4th of 11).

University Evaluation-Selection Phase and Post Enrolment Reflections

The most important evaluation criteria were the 'education quality' and 'the reputation of the university'. The students would like to attend a private university where the medium of instruction language (1st of 25) is English, and they would like to learn from 'highly qualified' (2nd of 25) and 'international teaching staff' (5th of 25). International and local accreditations of the university are two crucial concerns of the students. If the above criteria are all set, then the students consider the financial issues and the infrastructure of the university.

The contributor students reflect that their overall expectations are matched in *the university* with the mean value of 4.3 of 7 which is just above the average. This value is quite persuasive for an institution which is in service "business". The participant students also reflect that they satisfied with the education quality. A latest research (Abdullah et al., 2014) desserts that, students do not form an emotional attachment neither with academic or administrative staff (human / the service provider), but they can see and experience various tangible elements associated with the service. In our case, it is remarkable that all the post enrolment reflections of the students are above the

average. It means that the students are feeling good and happy with their choices and they are emotionally attached to the university.

Marketing Channels and Discussion

According to the students' remarks, internet is the prior information channel about HEIs, therefore should be placed as the first marketing channel of private HE. The latest dissertations on marketing of private HE confirm this evidence.

The website appearance of some of the HEIs in BIH is no different than a digital brochure and do not have any contribution to the marketing of the institution. The universities should have a functional, user-friendly websites. A website should be as if it is the online-campus of the HEI and should be planned to satisfy the needs of the users. Since *the first impression is the most lasting one*, a website plays a leading role to "attract" or "repel" the potential students. A quality website delivers a strong clue about the quality of the university. No university can present a facility that does not exist. A dynamic and user friendly website refers to a dynamic and well managed university. According to Peifer (2012) the design method, usability factors, visuals, aesthetics, and the marketing strategies need to be considered when building a college website.

Social media is the second information channel of the subject students and should be considered as the second major marketing channel. Pauwels and Weiss (2008) said that university websites can provide a basis for an engaging user environment and the social media is an ideal extension for relational marketing activities due to their collaborative and interactive nature. According to Luna (2014) social media has been linked to improved communication, brand loyalty and customer engagement, but it can make mistakes more likely and more visible. "A university's reputation is as valuable as ever, but because of the ubiquitous nature of social media, that reputation may be much more vulnerable." (Luna, 2014). Because the emergence of social media caused decentralized communication and has created a need for additional guidance to the communicators (Fuchs, 2010). All internal consumers (faculty/alumni/administration) need to perceive the "know how" of social media. Marketing departments should deliver briefings/presentations to all internal consumers to appraise the role of social media. According to Reuben (2008), the universities need to create strong and effective policies for the use of social media and assign staff members with specific monitoring and contribution tasks. Social media can provide a positive image as well as negative commentary for a university. Reuben (2008) also adds that negative commentary on social media is a resourceful, positive tool that helps more than they hurt. They can assist in clearing up misconceptions and promote unsolicited, genuine positive feedback. According to Solis (2008) social media provides the opportunity to humanize stories of students and alumni of the institutions, which can create loyalty and earn future students and ultimately their respect. Social media also allows faculty members to spread their work beyond the academic circles. By promoting across different platforms, researchers can bring their research to new audiences and can intentionally target specific readers.

Emotional attachment of students is a key factor for a private HEI. A university can enjoy the advantage of the 'word of mouth' marketing if the students are satisfied and emotionally attached to the institution. According to Shahid (2012), word of mouth is the most important factor when choosing a university. Ivy (2001), Beerli Palacio et al. (2002), Brown (2005), Ladhari (2007), De Matos and Vargas Rossi (2008) agreed that positive word of mouth communication creates a competitive advantage to higher education institutions' favorable image. Palmer et al. (2011) emphasized that if the students obtain the word of mouth information from a close friend or relative it would be highly credible.

Conclusion

This study showed that the most important marketing channels for private HE institutions are internet and the word of mouth. Internet even takes the word of mouth. In order to have an effective marketing of an HEI, the decision takers should have a master plan and this master plan should have headlines as follows:

a) **A user-friendly website:** Website management is no different than management of an institution. HEIs can have a positive first impression by a dynamic website and the website of an HEI is the most crucial element of its marketing strategy. According to McCoy (2011), a HEI website should be built and maintained by considering content techniques and search engine

optimization (SEO) to improve web page visibility on search engines. McCoy (2011) also adds that the content of a HEI website should include online applications, a cost calculator, online course information, admissions contact information, online visit requests, mail information requests, and student focused navigation.

A website should have easy-access buttons for all users and a user should be able to access the required information after a few clicks. HEI faculty/alumni/administration should be accessible via their emails, office phones or social media accounts through the website of HEI. The HEI faculty/alumni/administration should respond at most in a day when they receive an email, phone call or social media message. The information provided on a page should not contradict to another page of the HEI website. For instance, 'Graduate Studies' page of an *institute* provides *admission procedure* and says 'All non-native applicants must take the TOEFL test.', on the other hand the 'Graduate Studies' page of a *particular department* (of the same institute) may say 'TOEFL waivers are accepted if the applicant was graduated from a university where the medium of the instruction was English.' Obviously, this information contradicts one another and confuses the applicant. Unfortunately, there are many universities providing contradicted information on their websites. Another limitation regarding HEI websites is that the web sites provide multiple pages on the same web site to attract the prospective student and critical information is scattered across multiple pages (McCoy, 2011). A user-friendly and dynamics website should overcome such problems.

b) **Social media:** The most active social media in BIH is Facebook. YouTube, Instagram and Twitter follow it accordingly (Smajlović et al., 2015). A HEI should have official accounts on all these platforms and share new or past events, upcoming activities, sports, results, announcements etc. Social media accounts also should have a dynamic character. The HEIs can benefit the social media accounts of their current students and employers. According to leading smartphone manufacturer Samsung, 1 million selfies posted to social media accounts each day and selfies make up almost one-third of all photos taken by people aged 18-24, with Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter or Instagram (The Year Of The Selfie – Statistics, SocialTimes). Universities should turn these statistics into their advantage and may set up some selfie corners in the university. When there is a sports activity, an art event or a scientific seminar, most participants would like to share it from their social media accounts. The selfie corners -with a special hashtag of the event at the background- would popularize the event and also advertise the university "for free".

The HEIs can encourage students via student clubs to make funny/entertaining videos, cover-song-clips or the video of social events to publish them on popular video channel YouTube. Any video that is published on YouTube also can be shared via other social media accounts to increase the visibility.

HEIs should be keen to appear on social media and HEI administrations should not worry about negative mentions. A negative mention can be taken as a chance to express the point of view of the HEI and can benefit to the institution. The faculty/alumni/administration members should be informed and updated for such circumstances. The decision takers should determine and clarify the social media policy of the institution in their master marketing plan.

Since marketing is all about presentation, the HEIs should work with professionals for official video records or photo sessions.

c) **Word of mouth (WoM):** The WoM is one of the most effective ways of marketing and it is a combination of all efforts in a private HEI. WoM is a powerful marketing tool for a HEI as long as all the internal consumers (faculty/alumni/administration) try their best. Positive WoM can be delivered mostly via current students of a HEI. If students satisfy with the quality of education and the way of communication of the teachers, enjoy the services and the infrastructure, and finally if they are happy with their choices, they would reflect these feelings and their positive attitude to the others. These reflections can be in a family meeting, in a friend's party or can be a sharing on social media. Simply to say, all people desire to be happy and they share it when they are.

A higher percentage of employment after graduation will also benefit to a HEI and can contribute to the positive WoM. There are increasing numbers of blogs that allow students share information about universities and rank their professors. It is easy to say that the positive WoM will be more valuable in future.

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УДК 33

Отношение учащихся к выбору частного высшего образования и маркетинговые стратегии в Боснии и Герцеговине

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Аннотация. Жесткие рыночные условия и развивающиеся технологии требуют хорошо спланированного и стратегически разработанного маркетингового подхода во всех секторах, а особенно в сфере образования. Это исследование выявляет взаимосвязь между выбором студентов и маркетинговой стратегией частного высшего образования в Боснии и Герцеговине (БиГ). В качестве примера выбран один из частных университетов в Сараево. Исследование основано на материалах опроса, проводившегося в форме анкетирования и состоявшего из 55 вопросов в рамках 4 подгрупп, в котором принимало участие 146 студентов. Первый шаг вопросника было определение мотивов учеников посещать частные учреждения. Следующей частью было изучение источников информации для студентов. Эти два шага, отслеживали понимание критериев оценки и процесса принятия решения студентов. Полученные данные проанализированы с помощью пакета статистических программ SPSS. Результаты позволили выявить строгую закономерность. Студенты готовы получать качественное образование. Они использовали Интернет в качестве источника априорной информации, но не принимают окончательного решения без одобрения родителей. Степень общей удовлетворенности студентов показала, что представленный университет эффективно взаимодействует с целевыми группами и пользуется выгодами от использования маркетинговой стратегии «из уст в уста». В заключение авторы проанализировали маркетинговые стратегии, собранные на протяжении всего исследования, чтобы предложить порядок действий для частных вузов.

Ключевые слова: маркетинг, частное высшее образование, маркетинг высшего образования, социальные медиа, высшее образование в БиГ.