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Factors influencing a student's decision to pursue a communications degree in Spain

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper analyzes the factors that influence secondary school students' choice of higher education options in Spain today and explores the implications and benefits of establishing provider-client relationships between universities and students.

Design/methodology/approach: A quantitative approach using questionnaires to demonstrate the hypothesis and achieve the objectives. We have prepared a questionnaire via telematic LimeSurvey application consisting of twenty-four closed questions.

Findings: Results depict that the leading criteria for Spanish students interested in pursuing studies in communication sciences were a university's reputation and excellence and the quality of its educational programmes. In terms of sources of information related to universities and their degree programmes, Spanish communication sciences students placed the highest value on direct and experiential sources. Spanish students interested in pursuing degrees in communication sciences preferred public universities over private universities.

Research limitations: It is a descriptive paper. The sample could have been larger and have covered the entire universe of communication schools in Spain.

Practical implications: Gain in-depth insight into the academic, cultural, and sociodemographic characteristics of students who choose to pursue an undergraduate degree in communications sciences in Spain. Ascertain which sources of information proved to be the most valuable to prospective students in choosing a university and degree programme and the other factors that influenced their choices by means of a survey involving first-year undergraduate communication sciences students. Use the results of this survey to rank the criteria used by students when choosing a university and degree programme. Gain a clearer picture of how parents and friends influence a student's choice of degree programmes and universities.

Social implications: Knowing the factors of choice and sources of information that define his choice of the University and the Faculty of Communication Sciences and analyze if there is an adequate marketing specifically university.

Originality/value: Today's universities must operate in much the same manner as businesses and corporations in order to survive. This new scenario pits one university against another in a race to attract the highest number of incoming students. Knowing the preferences of college-age students and the factors that influence their choice of a university has become increasingly crucial for institutions of higher education. This study sets out to determine not only the overall factors that determine a student's choice in Spain, but also specifically what students who have chosen to pursue a university career in communications science look for when deciding where they will earn a degree in that discipline.

Keywords: undergraduate studies, communication science, choice criteria, information sources, university marketing, higher education

Jel Codes: A22, M31

1. Introduction

The Spanish university system continues to undergo a process of change that began with its commitment to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) framework. The Bologna Plan named after the 1999 declaration that set the mechanics of EHEA in motion, proposed sweeping reforms in higher education throughout Europe, including the implementation of comparable degree programmes in all adherent countries based on a common three-cycle structure of bachelor, masters, and doctorate studies. Designed to promote the mobility of students, graduates, and education professionals throughout Europe, the plan also called for a closer alignment between university studies and the needs of the marketplace and society, more permeable frontiers between the worlds of higher education and industry, and a greater reconciliation between their management styles. This meant that twenty-first century university management in Europe would be based on quality assurance systems, competitiveness, and the optimization of available resources. Numerous reports have been published on this reform process, among the most important, the European Commission's COM reports (2002, 2003), the Spanish Ministry of Education's *Estrategia Universidad 2015* (2010), CYD (2009) by Fundación Conocimiento y Desarrollo, and *Tendencias Universidad 2020: Estudio de Prospectiva* issued by the Office for University Cooperation (OCU).

Concurrent with Spain's implementation of Bologna Plan reforms, its national government ceded greater administrative responsibility for higher education to the governments of its autonomous communities. Universities were granted a higher degree of managerial autonomy in exchange for assuming more responsibility for their economic sustainability. These changes have coincided with a decline in the national birth rate, a rise in the popularity of online degree programmes, and increased competition from a more globalized higher education market. After more than a decade of expansion and diversification of degree programmes, universities are now facing the simultaneous challenges of a decline in public funding, a shrinking pool of college-age prospects and rising expectations regarding the quality and economic value of a university education. As government funding to public universities is pegged to enrolment figures and private universities rely on student enrolment fees to cover the costs of their academic programmes, student enrolment is an increasingly important source of revenue for both. As Veloutsou, Lewis and Paton (2004) note, today's universities must operate in much the same manner as businesses and corporations in order to survive. This new scenario pits one university against another in a race to attract the highest number of incoming

students Comm and Labay (1996), Landrum, Turrisi and Harless (1998), and Luque and Del Barrio (2007).

Knowing the preferences of college-age students and the factors that influence their choice of a university has become increasingly crucial for institutions of higher education. This study sets out to determine not only the overall factors that determine a student's choice in Spain, but also specifically what students who have chosen to pursue a university career in communications science look for when deciding where they will earn a degree in that discipline.

2. Selling higher education: relationship and experiential marketing

There is an abundance of literature related to higher education marketing, beginning with studies carried out in Great Britain and the United States in the 1980s. Other pioneers in the field whose studies serve as references are Davies and Scribbins (1985), Keen and Warner (1989), Seymour and Collett (1991), Baldwin (1994), Aliff (1998), Lust (1998), Shupe (1999), Tierney (1999), Delmonico (2000), and Pitman (2000). Following the Bologna Declaration (1999), Spanish academics began to carry out research that focused on the student as a consumer, the most notable studies being those by Beerli and Díaz (2003), Luque and Del Barrio (2007), and Del Olmo (2009a, 2009b).

Viewed from a marketing perspective, a student's decision as to where to pursue a university career is a purchasing decision and the student is a consumer, although Driscoll and Wicks (1998: page 60) argue that lines should be drawn when applying marketing to higher education, and are quick to point out the inherent dangers of drawing a vender-client analogy between a university and its students. Chapman (1986) was the first to apply the psychology of consumer behaviour to a student's undergraduate or graduate experience, dividing it into three distinct stages: pre-purchase evaluation, the purchase process, and post-purchase assessment. Kotler and Fox (1995: page 6) offered the first definition of marketing applied to an educational context, describing it as "the analysis, planning, implementation, and control of carefully formulated programmes designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of value with target markets to achieve institutional objectives."

USA researchers like Soutar and Turner (2002), Maringe (2006), and Holsworth and Nind (2005), conclude in various empirical studies that the most important factors that students take into account when choosing a University and / or training offer (grade / Master's) are:

- the reputation with employers of the University / faculty / academic offer
- career opportunities
- the graduate employment rate
- the quality of teaching staff
- specific differential aspects (specialisms, timetables, services, etc.)
- cost or value for money.

In this empirical work, we try to test if those factors are the ones that are taken into consideration by Spanish students doing a first degree in Communication Sciences.

“Higher education marketing is fundamentally relationship and experiential marketing”, Helgesen (2008). According to Grönroos (1994: page 9), relationship marketing is “a process of identifying and establishing, maintaining, and enhancing relationships with customers and other stakeholders at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties involved are met. This is achieved through a mutual exchange and fulfilment of promises.” According to Trullas and Enache (2011: page 8), this definition attributes new elements to relationship marketing, such as the concept of creating new value for customers and subsequently sharing it with them and recognition of the key role customers play in the purchasing process and the definition of how the product or service purchasing will further their goals. Of the Grönroos concepts pointed out by Trullas and Enache as being innovative, universities seeking to consolidate their standing and enhance their attractiveness in the eyes of prospective students and faculty members, funders, ranking agencies, and their communities may find his claim that relationship marketing creates value for the customer by building a chain of relationships between organizations and other stakeholders, including providers, distribution channels, and intermediaries, to be the most interesting.

Trullas and Enache (2011: page 15) define marketing for higher education as “a process of investigation devoted to identifying social needs and developing and implementing programmes that fulfil them by means of commercial or non-commercial interchanges for the ultimate purpose of enhancing the wellbeing of the individuals and community involved,” adding, “The application of marketing to higher education will create an awareness that the demand is externally generated; programmes will be considered relevant when they satisfy an external need. This

implies a need for a systematic investigation of the demand and the generation of new products and services designed to satisfy it." For Spanish universities struggling to supplant an out-moded supply-side mentality with an effective demand-side philosophy, relationship marketing may provide a way of getting to know the needs and aspirations of their potential customers better, enhancing the quality and relevance of the educational programmes they offer, and raising the profile of their institutions in a surging tide of competition.

The first step in adapting university recruiting to the realities of a demand-side market is identifying the factors that influence students' decisions about their academic and professional future. According to Soutar and Turner (2002: page 40) factors that influence students' choices include a university's academic reputation, the quality of its teaching, the distance between students' homes and the university campus, and the opinions of friends and family members.

In her masters thesis "Hospitality and Tourism Management in China: the Analysis of Motives and Institution Choice Criteria of HTM Undergraduates," Wei Wei Chen (2009) cites many of the same factors as influencing student choice in China, a coincidence that suggests students worldwide develop similar criteria—information that should be of interest to international recruiters.

These studies show the need for universities and their faculties to develop marketing strategies that create enduring relationships between them and current and prospective students. According to Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne (1991), the objective of relationship marketing is making new clients identify with an organization and transforming them into promoters of their brands and products. Well-planned marketing strategies that foster students' identification with their universities and degree programmes have a double benefit: they not only boost recruitment, but also forge strong emotional ties with students who later go on to become effective promoters of their alma maters.

3. Hypothesis

Drawing upon this theoretical framework, we formulated three hypotheses to be tested during our study.

Hypothesis 1. The leading criteria for Spanish students interested in pursuing studies in communication sciences were the university's reputation and excellence and the quality of its educational programmes.

Hypothesis 2. In terms of sources of information related to universities and their degree programmes, Spanish communication sciences students placed the highest value on direct and experiential sources.

Hypothesis 3. Spanish students interested in pursuing degrees in communication sciences preferred public universities over private universities.

4. Research objectives

We established the following objectives for this study:

- Gain in-depth insight into the academic, cultural, and sociodemographic characteristics of students who choose to pursue an undergraduate degree in communications sciences in Spain.
- Ascertain which sources of information proved to be the most valuable to prospective students in choosing a university and degree programme and the other factors that influenced their choices by means of a survey involving first-year undergraduate communication sciences students.
- Use the results of this survey to rank the criteria used by students when choosing a university and degree programme.
- Gain a clearer picture of how parents and friends influence a student's choice of degree programmes and universities.

5. Research questions

Analyzing how students choose a university and degree programme entails understanding a complex process comprised of numerous personal and environmental variables.

For this study, we formulated the following six research questions:

- How do future university students go about choosing between the options available to them?
- What criteria do they use to evaluate these options?
- Where do they search for information concerning these options?
- How do they evaluate the information they have obtained?

- What factors exert the greatest influence in their decision concerning what they will study and which schools they will apply to?
- How well prepared are they to make a suitable decision concerning a product as complex as a university education?

6. Methodology

A thorough review of the related literature was carried out in order to refine the focus of our research and choose the best methods for arriving at valid answers to our research questions. To this end, we consulted the data bases of various digital research platforms such as Web of Knowledge, Scopus, ABI-INFORM, ECONLIT, and Publish or Perish, as well as those of the foremost journals in the fields of marketing and education, including the *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, *Studies in Higher Education*, the *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, the *International Journal of Educational Management*, the *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, the *Journal of Education for Business*, and the *Journal of Professional Services Marketing*.

To obtain the data needed to carry out this study, we used Limesurvey software to formulate an online questionnaire containing twenty-four closed format questions. This questionnaire was distributed to a target population of first-year undergraduate students enrolled in communication sciences programmes at public and private universities in Spain using a nonprobability sampling method based on quotas that respected the demography of the population. The responses received were processed at Abat Oliba CEU University's data processing centre. SPSS version 18 software was used to handle and extract the data. Of the 46 Spanish universities offering some kind of a communications sciences degree who were contacted, 9 private and 9 public universities and a total of 344 students participated in the survey.

Table 1 provides a breakdown of the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample used for this study. Every possible attempt was made to achieve a balanced distribution of students by geographic origin and between private and public institutions. Of the 344 students who participated in this study, 52.6% attended public universities and 47.4% attended private universities (see table 2). A gender-balanced sample was not achievable due to the greater enrolment of female students in these study programmes, a statistic confirmed by the *Informe Anual de la Profesión Periodística* (2010).

Variable	Sub-category	Number	Percentage
Type of university	Public	181	52.6%
	Private	163	47.4%
Gender	Men	113	32.8%
	Women	231	67.2%
Degree programme	Journalism	124	36.0%
	Advertising and Public Relations	140	40.7%
	Audiovisual Communication	59	17.2%
	Other	21	6.1%
Age/year of birth	1988	6	1.7%
	1989	15	4.4%
	1990	34	9.9%
	1991	61	17.7%
	1992	198	57.6%
	Other years	30	8.7%

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of Sample Population

Variable	Sub-category	Number	Percentage
Type of secondary school attended	Public school	177	51.5%
	Religiously-affiliated private or charter school	110	32.0%
	Secular private or charter school	57	16.6%

Table 2. Type of secondary school attended by sample population

The majority of survey participants had graduated from public schools (51.5%). Students who had attended religiously-affiliated private or charter schools represented 32% of the sample population. The remainder (16.6%) had received their secondary education from non-denominational private or charter schools.

7. Results: description and analysis

The majority of students surveyed (86.9%) had gained admission to a university degree programme on the basis of their university entrance examination scores. The remainder entered via special admission programmes for adult students, professional training programmes, or based on a secondary school diploma earned in a foreign country.

Spanish secondary school students wishing to enter to a university are required to take a general entrance examination (PAU). The score obtained on this exam is combined with their secondary school grade average to arrive at an overall university admissions score. Students taking the PAU have the opportunity to improve their overall admissions scores by taking additional subject-specific entrance exams. The majority of students participating in the survey had taken both rounds of entrance examinations (see table 3).

Variable	Sub-category	Number	Percentage
University entrance examinations	Took only general examination	70	20.3%
	Took both the general and optional subject-specific examinations	229	66.6%
	Other	45	13.1%

Table 3. Types of university entrance examinations taken by sample population

According to the *Informe Anual de la Profesión Periodística (2010)*, the cut-off score for admission to a public university communication sciences programme is between 7 and 8 on a scale of 1 to 10. The breakdown of the general university admissions examination scores obtained by students participating in the survey (see table 4) indicate that the majority of surveyed students had participated in the second round of optional examinations in order to improve their possibilities of qualifying for their chosen major.

Variable	Sub-category	Number	Percentage
General university entrance examination scores	5 to 6	76	22.1%
	6.1 to 8	166	48.3%
	8.1 to 10	57	16.6%

Table 4. General university entrance examination scores obtained by sample population

We sought to determine whether there were substantial differences between the university entrance examination scores achieved by students who had studied in public schools and by those who had attended private schools. Application of Levene's test for equality of variances confirmed that students who studied in public schools achieved higher test scores than their counterparts who studied at private schools, regardless of whether those schools had a religious affiliation.

The study also confirmed that tuition and expenses related to a university education are overwhelmingly borne by students' families (73.3%). Table 5 illustrates the distribution of other financial aid received by students in the sample group.

Variable	Sub-category	Number	Percentage
How students' educational costs are funded	Costs covered by student's family	252	73.3%
	University scholarship	7	2.0%
	Scholarship from autonomous community	5	1.5%
	Scholarship from Ministry of Education	54	15.7%
	Other type of scholarship or financial aid	5	1.5%
	Costs covered by the students themselves	21	6.1%

Table 5. Burden of higher education costs of sample population

Regarding students' choice between private and public universities, the study showed that more students preferred public institutions (69.8%) than private institutions (30.2%).

The following table shows how students participating in the survey ranked available sources of information on their higher education options.

Sources of information	Ranking by entire sample	Ranking by female students	Ranking by male students	Male students	Female students	Total
University web site	1	1	1	99	222	321
Other publications (Guides, catalogues)	2	2	4	65	170	235
Family	3	3	3	67	158	225
University students	4	4	2	68	149	217
schoolmates	5	5	5	63	139	202
Site visit to the university	6	6	7	60	137	197
Other friends	7	7	6	62	130	192
Family friends	8	8	8	55	122	177
Educational fairs	9	9	13	40	121	161
Information provided by teachers and guidance counsellors at school	10	10	9	49	111	160
University presentations made at secondary schools	11	11	12	44	108	152
University alumni	12	12	10	47	96	143
Other web sites	13	14	11	45	86	131
Social networks	14	13	14	37	87	124
Advertising in other media	15	16	15	31	79	110
University open house events	16	15	17	28	82	110
Audiovisual presentations (institutional videos, etc.)	17	17	16	30	69	99
Information Centers Public Administration	18	18	19	20	53	73
Press advertising	19	19	18	23	32	55
Television advertising	20	20	20	8	20	28
Radio advertising	21	21	21	8	19	27

Table 6. Ranking of information sources used by sample population to make higher education choices

Survey results indicated that students considered university websites to be their top source for information on higher education options, confirming findings on youth media consumption published in other reports (Barlovento Comunicación, 2010; GECA Consultores, 2011) that stress young peoples' preference for Internet over more traditional media such as radio, television, the press, or motion pictures. They ranked catalogues and brochures in second place. Family members, alumni, and friends ranked third, fourth, and fifth in importance.

Respondents were also asked to rank the relative weight of factors that influenced their choices of degree programmes and universities (see table 7).

Students ranked the quality of a university's teaching, its reputation, and the practicality of a degree as being the three factors that most swayed their decisions concerning what degree they should earn and where they should study, closely followed by a university's international projection. They showed mature judgement

in weighing the many academic, career, logistical, and economic factors they needed to consider.

Choice criteria and factors (ranked on a scale of 1 to 5)	Mean	Standard dev.	Ranking
Teaching quality	4.01	1.027	1
University's reputation	3.83	1.093	2
Practicality of degree offered	3.61	1.087	3
University's international projection	3.57	1.148	4
Variety of degrees offered	3.52	1.25	5
University's level of technology	3.1	1.222	6
Appealing curriculum	3.49	1.159	7
Test score required for admission	3.44	1.239	8
Appealing facilities	3.35	1.264	9
Public transport options	3.28	1.338	10
Appealing academic activities	3.25	1.08	11
University website	3.2	1.206	12
Annual costs	3.15	1.375	13
Friendliness of university personnel	3.15	1.181	14
Institution's humanist approach	3.12	1.095	15
Efficacy of university job bank	3.07	1.236	16
Student/teacher ratios	3.02	1.278	17
Recommendation of current students	2.99	1.277	18
Quality of guidance and student assistance services	2.98	1.148	19
Professors' research reputation	2.93	1.122	20
Proximity to place of residence	2.93	1.526	21
Nearest university that offered desired degree programme	2.88	1.584	22
Friends' recommendations	2.88	1.203	23
Family recommendations	2.85	1.255	24
Personal attention and tutoring	2.85	1.185	25
English language curriculum and activities	2.79	1.222	26
Direct marketing and contact (site visits, mailings)	2.62	1.135	27
Possibility of studying away from home	2.59	1.465	28
University's media presence	2.55	1.199	29
Difficulty in entering a public university	2.54	1.518	30
Sports activities	2.38	1.231	31
Difficulty in entering a private university	2.21	1.394	32

Table 7. Factors that influenced the higher education decisions of students surveyed

Regarding who made the final decisions concerning what and where they would study, 65.4% of the students surveyed stated that they alone had been responsible for their decisions and another 21.2% stated that they had made their decision after consulting with their parents (see table 8).

Variable	Sub-category	Number	Percentage
Who made the decision what and where the student would study	Students who decided on their own	225	65.4%
	Students who decided after consulting their parents	73	21.2%
	Students who decided jointly with their parents	30	8.7%
	Students whose parents made the decision after considering their opinion	2	0.6%
	Students whose parents made the decision for them	1	0.3%
	No opinion/no response	4	1.2%

Table 8. Who made decisions regarding the higher education of students surveyed

We asked respondents if their friends or family members had studied or were presently studying communication sciences in order to know if this might have been

a factor influencing their decision to choose this degree and found that although they had few family references (only 18% reported family members who had studied communication), almost half had friends who had chosen this major (see table 9). This observation points to need for further research concerning the influence friends exert on a student's decision to pursue a specific degree.

Question: Has any member of your family studied or is currently studying for a degree in communication sciences?		
Reply	Number	Percentage
Yes	62	18.0%
No	273	79.4%
Question: Have any of your friends studied or are currently studying for a degree in communication sciences?		
Reply	Number	Percentage
Yes	233	67.7%
No	102	29.7%

Table 9. History of communications studies among friends and family of survey group

8. Conclusions

The results of the study confirmed our first hypothesis that the primary factors determining a future communications sciences student's choice of a university were the quality of its teaching and its excellence and reputation.(5)

In this sense, we are in line with the results of studies done y the researchers Soutar and Turner (2002), Maringe (2006), and Holsworth and Nind (2005), work in which the factors of reputation, excellence, and quality of teaching staff were vital in for students who were choosing a University.

Our second hypothesis, that communication sciences students placed the highest value on direct and experiential sources, was also confirmed. Survey respondents stressed the importance of site visits, higher education fairs, and the direct input of friends and family members, and also stated their preference for using virtual tools such as Internet search, university websites, and social networks to research their options.

The study also provided empirical evidence confirming our third hypothesis that Spanish students preferred to study communication sciences at public universities rather than private universities.

Other conclusions from this study that have significant ramifications for university marketing and student recruitment in Spain include:

- Higher education marketing is a consolidated field of marketing that universities can use to develop more effective recruitment strategies and

nurture students' feelings of identification so that as graduates they will gladly promote their alma maters and their programmes.

- Of the communication sciences students surveyed for this study, those who received their secondary education in public schools scored higher on university entrance examinations than their colleagues who attended private secondary schools.
- A high percentage of the university communication sciences students who responded to the study survey indicated that they had made their own decisions concerning the degree they would study and the university they would attend. Furthermore, their responses concerning how they reached their decisions demonstrated their maturity and their preparedness for making an important life decision.

9. Future lines of research

This study has shown how reputation, excellence, and perceived quality are determining factors for choosing a University. Accordingly, the Communication and Marketing departments of Universities (public and private) work hard to project those attributes in all the communication that they produce. In future research, it will of interest to go deeper into how Universities project those intangibles onto various communication supports, and what are the intangible aspects upon which Universities rely to position those intangibles with future students. Another aspect of interest for future approaches to the subject would be to determine the extent to which the cost of registration has an effect on the Choice of a public or private University.

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Due to the length of the questionnaire, this was not included in the article. For to consult, please contact directly with the author.

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