Effects of textual and visual information in social media on international students’ choice of study destination

A qualitative study on how forms of information in social media affect international students’ decision-making with regards to the choice of study destination

Niloofar Moltaji
Abstract

Social media has become an important tool for communication and marketing, and proper use of visual and textual information is very influential in social media marketing. Research has gone a long way explaining how information content significantly influences decision-making; however, it still lacks the knowledge about how different forms of information (such as textual, visual and audio-visual) in social media affects decision-making. The aim of this study was to identify the use of social media by international students for choosing study abroad destinations, as well as the forms of information content that have a greater influence in their decision-making process. To achieve the aim, a qualitative approach was applied to collect data through semi-structured interviews with fourteen international master students at Stockholm Business School in Sweden. This study shows that social media has a low influence on international students’ decision-making with regards to the choice of study destination; however, they use social media as a search tool to conceptualise and justify their choice, feel stronger about their decision, and to increase their confidence. This study suggests that social media could indirectly or subconsciously play a part in students’ choice of study destination as the students could be subconsciously affected by social media information, in particular, by visual and audio-visual information. Moreover, information contents such as videos that are more provocative, based on multisensory and emotional cues, could have a greater influence on the international student. Additionally, international students experience higher levels of trust when they feel that the content is authentic. Finally, the thesis concludes with theoretical implications and recommendations for further research.

Keywords:
Social media, international students, visual and textual information, conscious and subconscious, decision-making
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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Social media as a relatively new but rapidly growing phenomenon (Chen 2018, Saravanakumar and SuganthaLakshmi 2012, Akar and Topçu 2011, Kaplan and Haenlein 2010) has become an important tool for education (Tess, 2013), communication and social interaction (Constantinides and Stagno 2011, Cheung, Chiu and Lee 2010), and marketing (Forbes Business Development Council, 2018). Having had 2.307 billion active users on social media in 2016 (Chaffey, 2016), the constantly growing number of social media users is attracting various industries and companies to engage with social media (Arnold, 2017). Many companies are considering social media as part of their marketing strategy (Constantinides and Stagno, 2011) and many businesses have reported that social media positively affected their revenue and sales (Mangles, 2017). Marketers are beginning to understand the use of social media as a component in their marketing strategies (Akar and Topçu, 2011: 36). However, according to a study on more than 5,700 marketers (Stelzner, 2017), many are unsure about their social media marketing and want to know the best ways to engage with their audience through social media. Industries such as universities and portals for international student recruitment are showing interest in the use of social media as a marketing recruitment tool (Galan, Lawley and Clements, 2015) but at the same time are facing challenges and want to know whether it is worth allocating resources on developing social media strategies and keeping all their social media channels up-to-date. According to the world’s largest survey of pre-enrolment international students (Hubsons, 2017), there is a positive correlation between the popularity of a university’s social media channels, and the number of international students they recruit. This indicates that engaging with social media is crucial for higher education institutes and portals for student recruitment. In order to attract the students via social media channels however, they need to know about the student behaviour towards usage of social media and what they need. Regarding this issue, previous literature indicates that there has been a gap between the printed information provided by universities (such as prospectus, booklet and student guides) and the information prospective students need (Gatfield, Barker and Graham, 1999). This communication gap has been due to the difference between students’ perceptions of what is important and the perceptions of those who produce the print communications (Gatfield et al., 1999). Although a previous study shows that students still have a tendency to use traditional print communications (Constantinides and Stango, 2011), researchers revealed that students use social media for information search and social interactions when choosing universities or programs, (Galan, Lawley and Clements, 2015 and Constantinides and Stango, 2011). However, no research has addressed what forms of information on social media seems interesting to international students and that attracts their attention when they research higher education. Therefore, the lack of knowledge in the literature leads this study to identify the effects the forms of information (visual and textual) in social media has on students’ decision-making process. The focus is on the use of social media among international university students for choosing study abroad destinations.
1.2 Statement of the problem

Several studies have been debating the marketing strategies in higher education, effectiveness of social media as an educational tool and the use of social media for education purposes (Tess 2013, Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown 2006 and Cheung, Chiu and Lee 2010). Only a few studies however, have focussed on the role of social media in students’ decision-making. Previous literature has shown that students tend to rely primarily on information sources developed by the university, and the university website is one of the most used sources of information by students (Simoes and Soares, 2010). In a study on the role of social media in the students’ decision-making process for choosing a study program or a university, Constantinides and Stagno (2011) found that social media plays a secondary role in the student’s choice as they prefer traditional communication channels. However, their study revealed that future students are mostly interested in social interaction and information seeking when using social media. Therefore, the impact of social media in the choice of study and institution seemed to be relatively low. Furthermore, in the study of social media’s use in postgraduate students’ decision-making journey, Galan, Lawley and Clements (2015) explored how and why potential postgraduate business students looking to study internationally, use social media in their educational decision-making process. Their findings indicate that in the decision-making process, social media is mostly used in the information search and evaluation stages. In addition, the most used social media networks for study searches were Facebook, YouTube, and blogs, respectively. Last but not least, the two most common reasons for social media usage are finding out about student life and reading reviews from former students.

Since social media changes over time (Constantinides and Stagno 2011, Stelzner 2017) and students’ use of social media varies across countries (Galan et al., 2015), there is a room to examine the phenomena cross-culturally and over time. More importantly, since the effects of forms of information in social media (visual and textual) on students’ choice of study destination have not been taken into consideration by previous theories, there is a need for this issue to be addressed. As the forms of information could influence the consumer’s recognition and knowledge, as well as their decision-making (Blanco, Sarasa and Sanclemente, 2010), knowing about the effectiveness of forms of information in social media could help higher education institutes and portals for international student recruitment. They could use social media strategically by choosing the most effective content to present their services and products, to attract international students and increase enrolment number. Consequently, this study adds to the literature by showing that the forms of information on social media have a potential to affect international students with regards to the choice of study destination.

1.3 Aim of the study

The aim is to contribute to a better understanding of how international students use social media and how different forms of information on social media affect their choice of study abroad destinations. In order to achieve the aim, a qualitative approach is applied to collect data through semi-structured interviews with international master students at Stockholm Business School. The study aims to contribute to the knowledge of the effects of visual and textual information in social media on students’ decision-making. Therefore, the aim is to identify:
• The use of social media by international students for choosing study abroad destinations
• The forms of information (visual and textual) that have a greater influence on the international student’s decision-making when choosing to study abroad.

The research question that guides this study is:

*How forms of information (visual vs. textual) in social media affect international students’ choice of study destination?*

### 1.4 Expected contributions

The study may contribute to the field of social media marketing in higher education. It could potentially add to the existing knowledge by addressing how forms of information on social media could affect students’ choice of study destination. Since strategic marketing approaches that are tactical and driven by knowledge of consumer behaviour are extremely important for marketers (Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown, 2006), the result of this study could be of use to higher education institutes and portals for international student recruitment, as it could help them understand students’ behavior toward the use of social media for choosing study destinations, as well as to understand the higher education market structure for improving and developing tactical social media marketing strategies.

### 1.5 Structure of the work

This study consists of six chapters. First, the introduction to the study including the theoretical problem and the aim of the study was presented. Next, a review of the relevant literature will be presented to develop a framework based on what is already known and what is going to be added to the existing knowledge by this research. Then, the method of data collection and mode of data analysis will be explained. Afterwards, the results of the study will be presented and categorized and after that the findings will be analysed. Finally, a conclusion and summary that includes the implications, suggestions for further research, and limitations of the study will bring this study to an end.

### 2 Literature review and theoretical framework

In order to examine, understand and discuss the effects of forms of information in social media on students’ choice of study destination and in the field of marketing, a review of the literature is essential. The body of the literature review will begin by a definition of social media from the marketing perspective and how social media affects consumers’ decision-making. Afterwards, the previously conducted research on the effects of social media on students’ education and decision-
making will be reviewed followed by the study of conscious and subconscious influences on decision-making. Later, previous literature related to the effects of forms of information as visual and textual, will be evaluated. Finally, after elaborating on what we know about the topic and what are the factors that affect it, a theoretical framework that will guide this research will be presented.

2.1 Social media and consumer decision-making

‘Social media’ or ‘consumer-generated media’ (Mangold and Faulds, 2009) has been defined in several studies from the marketing perspective; however, the most relevant concept to this study is “the activity that is based on the notion of influence” (Evans, 2008). In other words, social media is a tool that can be used to influence consumers through participation to achieve business and marketing objectives. Participation could be done through genuine and transparent conversations with people about something of mutual interest and giving people an opportunity to talk about what they want and share their experience (Evans, 2008). Social media can also be used to gather information about products, services and brands, and how they are perceived by consumers and in the marketplace (Evans, 2008). Thus, social media is regarded as a measurable, trackable feedback point that reveals the acceptance and performance of products and services. Furthermore, social media can be considered as a consideration stage tool in the buyer’s journey, which connects the consumers from the post-decision stage to potential customers in the awareness stage, to share their post-purchase experiences with prospective customers (Evans, 2008). In other words, since social media is customer-driven, the social-feedback loop that is driven by word-of-mouth is the most trusted source of information, as it is based on the relationship between the customer’s expectations and the actual performance of the product or service (Evans, 2008). Electronic word-of-mouth communication (e-WOM), which refers to “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company”, has become a dominating channel that influences buying decisions of consumers (Akar and Topçu, 2011: 40). Several researchers discussed the influence of social media on consumer behavior and decision-making. Sema (2013) conducted a study on 1,048 respondents and discussed how social media affects buying behavior. The study reveals that social media as a platform for sharing travel experiences has a positive influence on people, and its use for travel planning is growing. Travelers use social media as a guide for their trips and use social media for choosing destinations. On the other hand, Arnold (2017) reports that the purchasing decision can be significantly influenced by user-generated content on social media and people are more likely to make a purchase online if the product or service is recommended by others (Arnold, 2017). Likewise, Akar and Topçu (2011) claim that when it comes to making purchasing decisions, people ask for advice from others and their decision is affected by social influence. This indicates that consumers are increasingly inclined to use various social media networks for information search and purchasing decisions (Mangold and Faulds 2009: Lempert, 2006; Vollmer and Precourt 2008 ). A similar trend has been seen among students as well. It was discovered that students use social media for information-seeking (Galan et al., 2015), collaborative activities and social interaction (Al-Rahmi and Shahizan 2013). It is proposed by the previous literature that due to the high adoption rate of social media by the younger generation (Constantinides and Stango 2011; Boyd 2008), as well as the positive effect of social media marketing in the business sector, it is reasonable to engage with social media as a marketing tool (Constantinides and Stango 2011) to affect the student’s decision-making. In order to do that, it is essential to know how and in what ways social media can affect students’ decision-making.
2.2 Effects of social media on students’ decision-making

Social media can affect students in positive ways. A study on “the impact of social media use on academic performance among university students” (Al-Rahmi and Shahizan, 2013) indicates that students use social media for education purposes and that has a positive impact on their academic performance as it allows them to interact with peers and teachers, as well as take advantage of a collaborative learning. However, there has been a debate about whether social media has an influence on students’ decision-making or not. Simoes and Soares (2010) researched on students’ decision-making process for higher education institutions, focusing on the factors that affects students’ decision-making when selecting a higher education institution. They highlighted the following choice factors: academic reputation, costs, degree offer variety, distance from home/proximity and location, employability/job prospects, facilities, influence of others (e.g. friends, parents), potential marketability of the degree, programme availability, quality of education and teaching quality (Simoes and Soares 2010: 377). Additionally, they emphasised that students’ decisions are based on a combination of information available, word of mouth (WOM), perceptions and reputation (Simoes and Soares 2010, Briggs and Wilson, 2007: 61). Nevertheless, in spite of all the formal sources, prospective students engage in information search and seek advice from social networks such as friends and acquaintances (Simoes and Soares, 2010). Regarding the use of social networks, researchers examined the impact of social media on the choice of a higher education program and institution and found that the impact is relatively low as students prefer traditional communication channels, however, future students are mostly interested in social interaction and information-seeking when using social media (Constantinides and Stango, 2011). On the other hand, some researchers argue that social media has the potential of influencing decision-making (Al-Rahmi and Shahizan, 2013) and students’ decision-making gets affected by information and reviews on social media (Galan et al., 2015). Al-Rahmi and Shahizan (2013) claim that social media is becoming one of the most important communication tools among students, especially at the higher level of education. Regarding this issue, although the most popular social media channels vary by level of usage in various countries and with demographics (Chaffey, 2016), many studies has shown that Facebook is the most used and favorite social network among university students (Galan et al. 2015, Hew 2011, Aydin 2012), which makes it the top communication tool to reach the students (Al-Rahmi and Shahizan 2013). Facebook is used as an educational environment, as it improves classroom practices and student involvement, and improves foreign and second language learning skills in reading and writing (Aydin, 2012: 1101). In addition, students use Facebook to contact other students concerning course assignments and group projects, or to be in touch with teachers and receive useful links about courses (Hew, 2011: 663). Furthermore, a study shows that students use Facebook, YouTube, and blogs in their study search to find out about student life and reading reviews from former students (Galan et al., 2015). Since social media encompasses a wide range of online word-of-mouth forums including blogs, consumer product or service ratings’ websites and forums (Mangold and Faulds, 2009), it is perceived a trustworthier source of information than corporate-sponsored communications transmitted via traditional marketing tools (Mangold and Faulds 2009: Foux 2006). This highlights the relationship between social media and trust. In a study by Hew (2011, 668) students reported that they experienced a higher level of teacher trust, when they saw the teacher provided more information about herself on social media. Since ‘Education’ refers to an evolutionary process that emerge where trust is offered (Gibbs, 2002), it is important to build trust among students and teachers and universities. Thus, engaging with social media could be a suitable way to build trust.
Last but not least, a study on the use of social media in postgraduate students’ decision-making journey argued that social media is mostly used in the information search, as well as evaluation stages (Galan et al., 2015). ‘Information search’, covers the process consumers undertake to acquire information and identify possible solutions to their problem (Simoes and Soares 2010; Blackwell, Minardi and Engel 2006). Considering the study of marketing in education, there are two main categories: problem identification (including image research, sales forecasting and market potential) and problem solving research (including pricing, segmentation and product research) (Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown 2006; Malhotra and Birks 2000). Regarding these categories, information search has been characterised as a problem-solving process (Blanco et al. 2010; Bettman 1979; Engel et al. 1995). Regarding this issue, if students use social media when searching for education, it could be said that they use it for information search. Additionally, if their decision is affected by information in social media, it could be said that social media is used in the evaluation stage of students’ decision-making journey.

2.3 Conscious and subconscious decision-making

Research has shown that decision-making can be ‘conscious’ and ‘subconscious’ as it can be influenced by factors unknown to the decision-makers (Fitzsimons, Hutchinson and Williams, 2002). Fitzsimons et al. (2002) discussed that consumers’ memory could be affected by a variety of information and that could lead them to make conscious or non-conscious decisions. Since ‘non-conscious’ sounds too categorical, henceforth the word ‘subconscious’ will be used instead. Social environments automatically activate goals in the human brain and pursuing these goals can occur outside of awareness, intent and even control (Fitzsimons et al., 2002: 3). Therefore, social media as a social environment that allows communication through sharing different forms of information such as pictures and files (Al-Rahmi and Shahizan, 2013), may subconsciously activate goals in the human brain. Long-term memory may drive subconscious selection at various stages of preconscious analysis (Fitzsimons et al. 2002; Bruner and Postman 1947; Erdelyi 1974; Greenwald 1992) and salient visual cues can strongly influence consumer decisions in, for instance, choice of the package (Fitzsimons et al., 2002: 2). Since the evaluation of choice of information can be automatic (Fitzsimons et al., 2002), decision-making could be automatically affected by visuals and textual information on social media. Could this mean that the subconscious memory of students can be affected by the information shared by universities and student recruitment portals on social media?

2.4 Effects of visual and textual information on decision-making

Information content significantly influences decision-making (Blanco et al. 2010; Lurie and Mason 2007). Prior literature recognises two types of information in product presentation: visual and textual (Blanco et al. 2010; Chau et al. 2000: 670). Visual information refers to pictures of the products, which may even feature movement or animation. On the other hand, textual information describes the products and their characteristics in words (Blanco et al., 2010). Since online marketing is all about providing customers with interesting, informative content, including visuals (Saravanakumar and SuganthaLakshmi, 2012), online firms and virtual stores use visual and/or textual information to present their products on their sites. Both visual and textual information on the Websites has an
influence on recognition and knowledge about the products (Blanco, Sarasa and Sanclemente, 2010), as well as decision-making (Blanco et al. 2010; Chau et al. 2000; Schlosser 2003a; Hong et al. 2004; Kim and Lennon, 2008). Thus, proper use of visual and textual information is a challenge for site designers and online firms because the Website’s design affects consumer’s attitudes in a way that can increase their trust (Blanco et al. 2010; Flavian et al. 2006; Schlosser et al. 2006) and satisfaction (Blanco et al. 2010; Liu and Arnett 2000; Zviran et al. 2016).

Furthermore, several theories discuss the effect of types of information. For instance, dual coding theory suggest that humans perceive, recognize and remember visual and textual information using a verbal code, to process language, and an imagery code for non-linguistic objects and events (Blanco et al. 2010; Sadoski and Paivio 2004; Paivio 1986). According to this theory, visual information may be more effective than textual information as visual aspects increase the sensory experience and information-processing, as well as encouraging the purchasing decision by increasing confidence in the choice of purchase (Blanco et al., 2010). Some evidence indicate that textual information with no picture are the least effective for facilitating information recall and positive attitude towards the products (Blanco et al. 2010; Liu and Stout 1987). In a similar way, some theories holds that processing information of a paragraph with no picture takes more effort for users (Blanco et al., 2010). In fact, reading text in a paragraph requires more attention and concentration than scanning text format that allows the consumers to quickly browse the information. Furthermore, it is argued that a combination of visual and textual information with a moderate level of complexity has a greater influence on the purchase intention and attitude than high or low level of complexity (Blanco et al. 2010; Martin et al. 2005). However, researchers claim that different effects of the information vary across industries and product categories, and depend on several factors such as the type of product, context and user’s motivation (Blanco et al., 2010). For example, electronic products have relatively high complexity with many attributes and detailed information, therefore, these products demand more product information and more analytical processing. For these products, a simple presentation with adequate visual support could be appropriate to provide all the information (Blanco et al., 2010). On the other hand, when it comes to choosing a travel destination, visual and textual contents remarkably aid in the conceptualisation of a place (Govers and Go, 2005).

Regarding the types of information, in advertising research, there is a distinction between rational and emotional attraction as the former includes factual information and focuses on product attributes, while the latter refers to subjective emotion-arousing information (Blanco et al. 2010; Liu and Stout 1987). Some evidence support the idea that factual information has more positive attitudes toward the product than emotional (Blanco et al. 2010; Liu and Stout 1987; Drossos et al. 2007), although the effectiveness of the appeals depend on consumer’s goals and motivations (Blanco et al., 2010). For example, in marketing material for tourism destination, narratives should represent a rich tourism experience and reflect multisensory, fantasy and emotional cues (Govers and Go, 2005). Therefore, rational and emotional appeals could affect the consumers’ decision-making.

2.5 Theoretical framework

Concluding from the previous literature and previous theories, a theoretical framework is developed to guide this thesis to understand “How forms of information (visual vs. textual) in social media affect
international students’ choice of study destination?” The framework shows the relationship between visual and textual information in social media and their potential impact on international students’ choice of study destination (see figure 1). Having discussed the effect of visual and textual forms of information on online platforms, it is reasonable to assume that the type of information also plays an important role in social media where universities and portals for student recruitment could influence on students’ recognition and knowledge about their services and products. It is known that using visual assets, as well as live videos in social media marketing is crucial to a large percentage of marketers (Stelzner, 2017). Yet, we do not know if using visual assets and videos in social media are more effective than textual information. Thus, since no research has been done on the effect of visual vs. textual information in social media on students’ decision making, this study will go beyond the literature to borrow theories for understanding the phenomena. The rationale behind this argument is that the evaluation of choice of information can be automatic, as long-term memory may drive subconscious selection at various stages of preconscious analysis (Fitzsimons et al. 2002; Bruner and Postman 1947; Erdelyi 1974; Greenwald 1992) and salient visual cues can strongly have an influence on decision-making (Fitzsimons et al., 2002). Thus, drawing from the theory of effects of visual and textual information, effects of social media on consumers and students’ decision-making, and conscious and subconscious influences on decision-making, the perception forms of information in social media from the literature review construct as the pillars that the theoretical framework is built on.

Figure 1. Tentative Theoretical Framework
# 3 Methodology

## 3.1 Scientific approach

One predominant approach to gaining knowledge in the social sciences is the interpretive approach (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988), which guides this research with its own philosophical assumptions including ontological, axiological, and epistemological assumptions. “Philosophical assumptions are statements accepted without direct empirical support and are based on different views of reality, social beings, and knowledge” (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988: 508). As all research approaches in the social sciences make ontological assumptions about the nature of reality and social beings, the interpretive approach assumes that reality is essentially mental and perceived (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Reality is also socially constructed and the goal is to understand the reality from the perspective of those experiencing it (Belk, 2006); therefore, multiple realities exist because of different individual perspectives (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). In addition, the fundamental axiology of interpretive approach is understanding behaviour, although the process of understanding is a never-ending process (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Furthermore, interpretivists take a particularistic approach to research, and study a specific phenomenon in a particular place and time to understand the motives and reasons in that particular time. Having defined the interpretivist philosophical assumptions, it could be said that the philosophy underpinning this research is the assumption that reality is socially constructed and the primary goal is to understand the reality. Since this study aims to gather deep insight into effects of forms of social media on students’ choice of study destination from the international student’s point of view, this approach seems to be suitable for this study mainly because it aims to understand the phenomena from the student’s perspective within a particular time.

## 3.2 A qualitative research technique using semi-structured interviews

In order to understand the effects of social media’s forms of information on international students’ choice of study destination, a qualitative method with semi-structured interviews is adapted. Qualitative research is a subfield of a small field that involves socializing with the subject with the aim of explaining the nature of situation (Levy, 2005). The interpretive approach and qualitative method of study is chosen for this study for several reasons. First, a qualitative research method thought to be the most suitable to answer the question of ‘how’ (Galan et al. 2015; Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2011), therefore, it could answer the research question of this study. Second, interviews provide an understanding of the contextual settings of the study and suit the studies of small groups behaviour (Ritson et al., 1999). Thus, the method allows this research to study the behaviour of a small group of students in a short period of time (one academic semester). As Belk (2006) refers to a research metaphor as “interview as a human encounter”, this research implements interview as a human encounter which means that the approach is focussed on understanding the world as the participant in an interview sees it, and emphasizes an understanding of social reality gained through sharing information between interviewer and participant. Finally, as Elliott and Elliott (2003) mention, asking people why they are doing what they are doing is a necessary component in developing an understanding of their situated behaviour. Thus, asking international students how they used social media when choosing study destination and what forms of information affected their choice could
contribute to the understanding of their behaviour towards usage of social media with regards to choice of study destination.

### 3.3 Data collection and sampling

This study includes 14 individual semi-structured interviews with current postgraduate international students at Stockholm Business School, which is one of the largest academic departments at Stockholm University of Sweden. In order to reduce the bias, respondents were recruited based on gender, age, and degree level. Therefore, the sample contains equal numbers of each gender including 7 male and 7 female between the age of 23 and 30 (see table 1). The age of the respondents was taken into consideration because same generation of social media users could potentially have the same behaviour towards the use of social media.

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Additionally, in order to collect the data across cultures, participants were selected from different countries including United States, Australia, Germany, Netherlands, Greece, South Africa, China, Iceland, Japan, Moldova, Romania, Bosnia, Lithuania and India. The selection of the nationalities was a matter of availability and accessibility of the students. Moreover, the size of the sample was due to the limitation of time for this research. Each interview took approximately 20 minutes and before and during the interview the participants were asked if any part of the interview was confusing. A questionnaire was used in the interview sessions as a loose guide, which consisted of 10 questions related to the use of social media in choosing study destination (see appendix 1.). As semi-structured interviews should be designed in a way to accommodate contextual adaptation and flexibility for developing open-ended and follow-up questions (Bryman, 2012), the interview questions were designed in a way that allowed the participant to talk freely and elaborate on their thoughts. The empirical data was collected during March and April 2018.
3.4 Anonymity and ethical considerations

Since anonymity and confidentiality of participants are central to ethical research practice in social research (Crow and Wiles, 2008), the participants were informed about the nature of this study and promised anonymity. Furthermore, as the evaluative criteria of qualitative work make the study moral and ethical, as well as enables the researcher to benefit from discourse of the study (Denzin, 2001), it could be said that this study meets the required ethical criteria. A qualitative consumer research involves a give-and-take dialogue that enacts an ethic of care and communal responsibility. In addition, it presumes that a community has shared moral values by highlighting the value of human life and truth-telling. Moreover, since it is a collaborative project between the researcher and participants in a give-and-take dialogue, it has roots in human rights (Denzin, 2001). As a result, a qualitative approach was a useful tool for this study as it made it possible to understand the effects of social media on international students with a clear set of moral goals.

3.5 Mode of analysis

There are different approaches to analyse the data, including inductive and deductive approaches (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). While the inductive approach refers to building a theory that is grounded in the data, the deductive approach refers to the use of existing theory to formulate the research question and objectives, as well as to organise and direct the data analysis (Saunders et al. 2012; Yin 2009). This study has used the existing theories to formulate the research question, objectives and framework, as well as to organise and direct the data analysis. Therefore, a deductively generated framework is used in this study to analyse the data that is inductively generated. In other words, the empirical material was analysed in light of a theoretical framework and the main themes and issues in the research, as well as the predicted or presumed relationships between them, was identified and presented in the analysis (Saunders et al. 2012; Yin 2009).

Moreover, the empirical data was analysed through thematic analysis, which is a foundational method for qualitative analysis and involves identifying, analysing and reporting themes within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In order to perform the thematic analysis, the 6-phase of analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006: 87) was used as a guide. In phase one, the empirical data was transcribed and read to gain a structure of the data. In phase two, the interesting features of the data related to the research question was identified and coded, and in phase three the codes were collated into main themes. In phase four the themes were reviewed and a thematic map of the analysis was generated. Clear definitions and names for each theme was generated in the next phase and finally, a scholarly report of analysis was produced by extracting examples from the empirical data, final analysis of themes, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature.
4 Material Evidence

4.1 Emerging themes

The following chapter presents the findings from fourteen participant’s responses regarding how forms of information in social media affected their decision with regards to the choice of destination. Derived from a thematic analysis of the empirical material, the emerging themes will be presented.

4.2 Social media has a low impact on students’ choice of destination

The findings indicate that social media has a low influence on international student’s decision-making with regards to the choice of study destination. When the participants were asked if social media played any role in their choice of study destination, nine out of fourteen mentioned that their decision was made before they started using social media. Three participants stated that social media played a small role on their decision-making and only one participant claimed that social media had a significant influence on his decision. According to the interviews, this is due to the fact that their decision was already made based on some logical reasons (see table 2). For example, free education and family ties were the most common reasons that brought participant’s attention to Sweden. Therefore, these reasons made them decide to come to Sweden and after their decision was made, some of them decided to look for information about Sweden or Stockholm University on social media. When respondents were asked why they chose Sweden they said:

“The main reason to choose Sweden, or actually looking into Scandinavia, is because of my Norwegian background. I grew up in the Netherlands, but I have family in Norway so we visited them often. So I wanted to study someplace in Scandinavia. Since both my girlfriend and I had interesting possibilities in Stockholm, we decided to go ahead and study in Stockholm” (Ke, Male, 25).

“I was living in Taiwan, when my mother sent me a website link detailing bursaries and scholarships for universities in Sweden. This is probably what brought my attention to Sweden, but the main desire to study in Sweden is because of its developed video game industry. Studying here is hopefully my opportunity to improve my skills while also creating contacts within the industry. I had one contact within a video game studio that helped me with decisions, such as choosing Stockholm over other cities” (Sc, Male, 24).
Furthermore, twelve out of fourteen participants said that they used social media in the research process (only two participants did not use social media at all) but six of those twelve participants mentioned that they used social media only after their decision was made or they were admitted at the school. These students chose the school first and social media’s information did not affect their decision, however, after the admission they used social media to search for information about the country, city, school, environment, etc. So once the students decided where to go, they started looking into social media for more information about the destination to justify their choices. Thus, it could be said that international students use social media to justify their choice and feel stronger about their decision.

“Only after I got accepted into Stockholm University I started looking at social media pages, to get to know how the environment that I was going into would be like” (He, Female, 26).

“Once I had decided where I wanted to go, I did use Facebook and YouTube to follow some pages that was studying in Sweden related…” (Sc, Male, 24).

In addition, the findings indicate that the use of social media varies by country. While most participants claimed that they used Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter (respectively) in their research process, a participant from China mentioned that he used WeChat and Weibo as those are the popular social media channels used in China. This result suggests that there is no universal trend for usage of social media among international students. Other social media channels used in the research process or after university admission were Snapchat, LinkedIn and Blogs; nevertheless, Facebook was the most used social media channel (see table 3).
“... We use different social media in China but both Stockholm University and Study in Sweden have official pages on Chinese social media (Weibo and WeChat). They have hired Chinese employees to make the content” (Al, Male, 23).

Table 3. The most used social media channels, respectively

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>social media channels used by international students</th>
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<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
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<td>Snapchat</td>
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<td>WeChat</td>
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<td>Weibo</td>
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<tr>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
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<td>Blogs</td>
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4.3 Social media indirectly or subconsciously plays a part in the student’s choice

Another aspect mentioned by the participants was the indirect impact of social media on their decision-making. In this study fourteen international students were asked if social media had any role in their choice of study destination and if visuals had any role in their decision-making. Two participants mentioned that they may have been affected indirectly or subconsciously. A participant from Germany mentioned that pictures in social media probably subconsciously played a role in his choice (Jo, Male, 26). Likewise, a participant from South Africa mentioned that his decision could have been affected by social media indirectly. When the participant was asked if social media had played any role in his choice of study destination, he stated that he read and watched videos about the video game industry in Sweden and that could have played a part indirectly in his choice of destination:

“Not directly. Maybe Twitter and YouTube can be seen to have played a part indirectly owing to this is where I view and connect with video game related content...” (Sc, Male, 24).
Furthermore, when the participants were asked if they could recall any information that was associated with the school or Sweden, ten out of fourteen participants recalled visual information (mainly videos). Only two participants could not recall any information from social media. This indicates that salient visual cues could indirectly affect international students’ decision-making. This finding will be further explained in the next section.

4.4 Visuals are the most effective form of information in social media

Out of fourteen participants, four participants said that they were not affected by information in social media at all, however, five participants reported that videos affected their decision or attracted their attention in social media. Statistics and ranking of school, articles, picture, blog posts were also reported effective or attractive respectively. For instance, when a participant was asked what forms of information on social media affected her or attracted her attention the most, she said:

“I would say that videos of the school affected me the most as I got a better sense for the environment as well as getting to hear stories from previous students. Articles and statistics were also important as to see how well the school stood compared to others. One thing that I valued the most was the Snapchat account for Study in Sweden where they had a different student take over the Snapchat for a day or two (student ambassador) where they showed their life in various parts of Sweden and different types of schools” (He, Female, 26).

In addition, ten out of fourteen participants recalled visual information (mostly videos) when they were asked if they can recall any visual or textual information that was associated with Sweden or Stockholm Business School in their mind. Five participants said that they could recall textual information including articles, statistics, blog posts or news about Sweden. However, it appears that audio-visuals have more influence on international students’ memory as the participants mentioned
they watched videos of students talking about the school or living in Sweden. Since the participants still remember the videos even after at least one year, it shows that audio-visuals last in the their memory for a longer period of time, thus, it has a greater influence on them.

“Pictures of Kräftriket and Brunnsviken left an impression on me. It gave almost an Ivy League vibe, which positively influenced my image of the institution. Nevertheless, it did not affect my decision to enrol at SU but rather made me feel stronger about it” (Ro, Male, 26).

“... Textual information that I would associate with Sweden would also be in the form of maybe news articles about things that happened in Sweden. Good and bad things. Things such as the situation regarding refugees and other foreign immigrants. The truck that crashed into the shopping mall at Ahlens...” (Ke, Male, 25).

The participants were asked if they would have read articles without images. Four out of fourteen participants stated that they would not read articles without visuals, four participants said they would read the articles, and five participants mentioned that they would read the articles depending on the title, reputation of the website, relevance of the article to their interest and the quality of the text. Some of the participants specifically mentioned that pictures definitely spike their interest. Therefore, it seemed that a combination of visual and textual is more favoured among the international students than a wall of text.

“I would say the combination of all forms of information affected me. I started studying at KTH when I first came to Sweden and its campus pictures are really awesome and played a big role in my decision-making since I always wanted to study in such university environment. Then rankings were really high too which supported my decision” (Ha, Male, 24).

“I would hope I would have read articles without visuals as it is the quality of the what is in the text that is important. However, I do think the initial choice to start reading is based on the presentation of the text. So, I guess pictures and well displayed text, which is not too long, would increase my chances to begin reading” (Sc, Male, 24).

**4.5 Trust in social media’s information affects students’ decision-making**

It is identified that some of the participants’ choice of study destination was influenced by word of mouth (WOM), as they were affected by contacts, friends, family, and reviews from other students. This indicates that WOM plays a role when it comes to making a decision for choosing study destination. An example would be that when a participant was asked if social media had any role in her choice, she said:

“... I used social media such as Facebook to search for more information but I was persuaded mostly by people I know, friends and classmates that already lived in Sweden and shared their experiences with me...” (Zo, Female, 30).
Furthermore, the findings indicate that international students still use traditional communication channels such as study guides or school’s websites. It seems that traditional communication is a trustworthy source of information as two international students from Japan and Bosnia mentioned that they mainly used traditional communication channels in their research process.

“I only checked Stockholm Business School’s web page when I chose school. After I applied for the school, I checked social media channels” (Sh, Female, 27).

Last but not least, the findings indicate that social media presence of the university appeared to be important for the international students and seemed to increase their trust. For example, the participant from China mentioned that social media played an important role in his decision and he used Weibo and WeChat to gather information. He showed that he was impressed to see that although those social media channels were popular only in China, Stockholm Business School had official pages there to share information with prospective Chinese students.

“We use different social media in China but both Stockholm University and Study in Sweden have official pages on Chinese social media (Weibo and WeChat). They have hired Chinese employees to make the content” (Al, male, 24).

Last but not least, the results indicate that international students trust audio-visuals mainly because it feels authentic. During the interviews, one participant found videos more trustworthy and mentioned that universities can have nice pictures but pictures can be easily edited, so he preferred videos to pictures. He also mentioned that he could remember some videos in social media because they felt authentic.

“I remember some videos where the University staff interviewed some students who were studying in Stockholm University. It felt very authentic” (Al, Male, 23).

To conclude, the following table presents the descriptive evidence from empirical material of the emerging themes in a nutshell.
In this chapter, the empirical material presented in the previous section will be interpreted and discussed in the light of the tentative theoretical framework. The results of this study support the previous theories, as well as add new knowledge to the phenomenon of effects of forms of information in social media on students' decision-making with regard to the choice of study destination.

5.1 Low impact of social media on students’ choice of destination

The results of this study indicate that social media has a low impact on students’ choice of destination. Previous literature has already declared that students’ choice of a higher education institution is influenced by a variety of choice factors (Simoes and Soares, 2010). Similarly, this study showed that the decisions of most of the international students were influenced by a variety of factors (such as costs and job prospects) and made before using social media. Therefore, the result of this study is consistent with the previous study by Constantinides and Stagno (2011) arguing that the impact of social media in the choice of study and institution is relatively low on the students.

"Once I had decided where I wanted to go, I did use Facebook and YouTube to follow some pages that was studying in Sweden related..." (Sc, Male, 24).

Additionally, the findings are in line with the study of Galan et al. (2015) as social media is used for the information search in the decision-making process. Twelve out of fourteen participants stated that they used social media for information about the school, country, environment, etc. As previous research showed that there was a gap between the information provided by universities through traditional communications and the information prospective students need (Gatfield et al. 1999,
Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown 2006; Hesketh and knight 1999), it seems that international students use social media as a complementary tool to find the missing information in traditional communications. According to media richness theory (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Daft and Lengel 1986) the goal of any communication is the resolution of ambiguity and the reduction of uncertainty. Considering that theory, this study shows that social media seems to be a complementary platform which provides important information for international students to reduce the uncertainty when making study abroad decision.

“Only after I got accepted into Stockholm University I started looking at social media pages, to get to know how the environment that I was going into would be like” (He, Female, 26).

Nevertheless, the findings are in contrast with Galan et al. (2015) claiming that social media affects student’s decision-making, because in this study only one out of fourteen participants mentioned that social media considerably influenced his decision.

“Pictures of Kräftriket and Brunsviken left an impression on me. It gave almost an Ivy League vibe, which positively influenced my image of the institution. Nevertheless, it did not affect my decision to enrol at SU but rather made me feel stronger about it” (Ro, Male, 26).

5.2 Subconscious influence of social media and audio/visuals on students

The findings suggest that students could be subconsciously affected by the social media information. According to Fitzsimons et al. (2002), decision-making can be conscious and subconscious as it can be influenced by factors unknown to the decision makers. Considering this issue, the results indicates that there is a potential for students being subconsciously affected by the information in social media. In other words, since the evaluation of choice of information can be automatic (Fitzsimons et al., 2002), international students’ decision-making could be automatically affected by information on social media. As it could be seen in the following statement, social media information such as YouTube videos about the game industry in Sweden indirectly affected the decision-making of this participant. This shows that long-term memory could drive subconscious selection at various stages of preconscious analysis (Fitzsimons et al. 2002; Bruner and Postman 1947; Erdelyi 1974; Greenwald 1992) and salient visual cues can influence on decision-making (Fitzsimons et al., 2002). Additionally, when the participants were asked if they can recall any information that was associated with the school or Sweden, they mostly recalled visual information. This shows that salient visual cues, more specifically audio-visuals are more likely to ‘indirectly’ affect international students’ decision-making.

“...Maybe Twitter and YouTube can be seen to have played a part indirectly owing to this is where I view and connect with video game related content...” (Sc, Male, 24).

Moreover, since social media users are supposed to be goal-directed in their behaviour and are aware of their needs (Cheung, Chiu and Lee, 2012), it could be said that international students are goal directed and aware of their needs. Regarding this issue, the findings show that they used social media...
in the research process (either before application or after) because they needed certain information. For instance, the participants said:

“... I started looking at social media pages to get to know how the environment that I was going into would be like...” (He, female, 26).

“...I wanted to know how the student life was, what support they offered for international students, and how students or the community interacted with the university...” (Ol, female, 26).

Considering those statements, it could be said that students looking for information even after decision-making could be interpreted as that students were affected by the information in social media subconsciously. In other words, students were goal-oriented, as they knew what information they were looking for in social media, and they were searching for specific information even though their decisions were made. This implies that the information must have been important to them since they were looking for it even after decision-making. Therefore, the evidence suggests that international students were affected by the information in social media as it made them feel stronger about their decision.

“... it did not affect my decision to enrol at SU but rather made me feel stronger about it” (Ro, Male, 26).

5.3 Effectiveness of visual information in social media

As mentioned earlier, the findings show that visual information, as well as the combination of visual and textual information are more attractive and effective than only textual information. Since prior literature recognises visual information as pictures, which may even feature movement or animation (Blanco et al., 2010), in this study visuals refers to not only pictures, but also videos. Firstly, the evidence indicates that adding pictures to texts on social media increases the interest of international students in reading the texts. When the participants were asked if they would have read articles without images, while some of them mentioned that they would not, a lot of them said that whether they read the text or not, they thought pictures spike the interest.

“If the information is important to me, it doesn’t matter if there are pictures or not, but pictures probably draw attention to a text that I would otherwise would not have read” (Jo, male, 26).

“I would hope I would as it is the quality of the what is in the text that is important. However, I do think the initial choice to start reading is based on the presentation of the text. So, I guess pictures and well displayed text, which is not too long, would increase my chances to begin reading” (Sc, Male, 24).
Therefore, it seemed that a combination of visual and textual information is more favoured among the international students rather than only textual. This is in line with previous study in which it is argued that a combination of visual and textual information with a moderate level of complexity has a greater influence on attitude than high or low level of complexity (Blanco et al. 2010; Martin et al. 2005). Combination of visual and textual contents remarkably aid in a conceptualisation of a place (Govers and Go, 2005) and international students can benefit from the combination of information to conceptualise their study destination.

“I would say the combination of all forms of information affected me. I started studying at KTH when I first came to Sweden and its campus pictures are really awesome and played a big role in my decision-making since I always wanted to study in such university environment. Then rankings were really high too which supported my decision” (Ha, Male, 24).

The results also support the dual coding theory, which suggests that humans perceive, recognise and remember visual and textual information, using a verbal code to process language, and an imagery code for non-linguistic objects and events (Blanco et al. 2010; Sadoski and Paivio 2004; Paivio 1986). Blanco et al. (2010) suggested that visual information may be more effective than textual information as visual aspects increase the sensory experience and information processing, as well as encourage purchase decision by increasing confidence in the choice of purchase. This is in line with the results of this study as it seems that visual information are more effective than textual information because visual aspects increase the sensory experience and confidence in choice of study destination. Moreover, the findings are consistent with the theory that textual information with no picture is the least effective for facilitating information recall (Blanco et al. 2010; Liu and Stout 1987). As mentioned earlier, when the participants were asked if they can recall any information that was associated with the school or Sweden they mostly recalled visuals, mainly videos. As a result, it could be said that visual information is more provoking than textual (Blanco et al., 2010). As it was proposed by Govers and Go (2005), the information content should represent a rich experience and reflect multisensory and emotional cues. This study suggests that when it comes to choosing study abroad destinations, creating contents that are more provoking and reflect multisensory and emotional cues could have a higher influence on the international students’ decision-making.

5.4 Trust in social media’s information and its effects on students’ decision-making

The findings indicate that trust is an important issue in decision-making, which could be achieved through offering transparency, genuine and authentic content on social media. The evidence shows that international students find audio-visuals more trustworthy than texts or even pictures, because audio-visuals give the viewer a sense of authenticity and let the viewer experience the reality in the virtual world. For instance, a participant mentioned that since pictures can be edited or filtered easily, he thought videos felt more authentic. Therefore, it could be said that many international students use social media in their research process because they are looking for trustworthy information including audio-visuals that would feel authentic.
“Every university can have very nice pictures but pictures can be easily edited... I remember some videos where the University staff interviewed some students who were studying in Stockholm University. It felt very authentic” (Al, Male, 23).

“...I would say that videos of the school affected me the most as I got a better sense for the environment as well as getting to hear stories from previous students” (He, female, 26).

Evans (2008) claims that social media can influence people through genuine and transparent conversations about something of mutual interest and giving people an opportunity to talk and share their experience. Regarding this issue, the videos of students on social media and their transparent conversations about the student’s life, the school and its facilities, as well as the possible opportunities seem to have an influence on international students as they find it authentic and trustworthy.

“I recall SBS’s video that students talked about the school, although I don’t remember what exactly they were talking about, I am sure they mentioned good things about SBS. In the video, there was beautiful scenery in the campus and Stockholm...” (Sh, female, 27).

This finding is similar to the study by Hew (2011) in which students reported that they experienced a higher level of trust, when they saw information about their teachers on social media. In this study, the students paid attention to the authenticity of the information. In other words, students experience higher levels of trust when they see the information and feel that the content is authentic, and they usually experience that feeling with watching videos from current students sharing their experiences on social media. One explanation for this could be ‘seeing is being’. To put it another way, students experience a higher level of trust when they see authentic information on social media with their own eyes.

Furthermore, as Evans (2008) suggested, it seems that the social-feedback loop that is driven by WOM, is the most trusted source of information. The videos of students talking about the school are a social-feedback that provides positive information through WOM. When students’ expectations are met by the school, they share their experience and since that information is genuine and authentic, it becomes trustworthy. For example, the findings show that recommended destinations by other students or acquaintances are more trustworthy among international students. The recommendations could be through videos of students on social media, reviews or contacts on social media. Social media lacks credibility but if people could endorse the social media with WOM, they could trust it. This result is consistent with Simoes and Soares (2010) that mentioned, students’ decisions are based on several factors including WOM. Thus, it could be said that WOM acts as a voucher and adds support to the truthfulness of information.

“... I was persuaded mostly by people I know, friends and classmates that already lived in Sweden and shared their experiences with me...” (Zo, female, 30).

Furthermore, the findings indicate that international students still use traditional communication channels such as the school’s website. This finding is consistent with the statement of Simoes and
Soares (2010) that students tend to rely primarily on information sources developed by the university. This trend could be due to trust issues as traditional communication has a longer history and are more trustworthy among students. It might also be due to the Internet infrastructure being less well-established or cultural differences where usage of social media could differ cross-culturally. Nevertheless, this result emphasises the importance of trust in the decision-making process.

The result of the study is in line with the definition of ‘Education’ which refers to an evolutionary process that emerges where trust is offered (Gibbs, 2001). It is important to consider building trust when engaging with social media to attract or affect international students. Therefore, as mentioned by previous literature, it is important to properly use the information content as it could affect the attitude in a way that it can increase trust (Blanco et al. 2010; Flavian et al. 2006; Schlosser et al. 2006).

Finally, as mentioned earlier, although most of the participants mentioned that social media did not affect their decision, they did use social media to gather information and social media presence of the university appeared to be important. For example, the participant from China mentioned that he used Weibo and WeChat to gather information and he was impressed to see that although those social media channels are popular only in China, Stockholm Business School had official pages there. Since that participant specifically mentioned that social media played an important role in his decision, it could be said that students could judge the schools by their social media presence (Hubsons, 2017) and social media presence could increase the trust in international students. Additionally, this result suggests that schools can attract more international students through supporting a broad range of services and channels in social media (Hubsons, 2017).

6 Conclusions

In conclusion, the aim of this study was to add to theory on the phenomena of effects of forms of information in social media on students’ decision-making with regard to the choice of study destination, by answering the research question “How forms of information (visual vs. textual) in social media affect international students’ choice of study destination?” Thus, the aim was to identify the use of social media by international students for choosing study abroad destination, and the forms of information that have higher influence on international student’s decision-making when choosing to study abroad.

The result of this study showed that international students use social media for information search, but usually after they decided where to study. Thus, social media has a low influence on international student’s decision-making with regards to the choice of study destination. This study showed that the decisions of the majority of international students were made before using social media and were influenced by a variety of factors such as costs and job prospects. Once the students decided where to go, they started looking into social media for more information about the destination to justify their choices and feel stronger about their decision. In other words, international students use social media to conceptualise their choice of study destination and increases their confidence in their choice of
study destination. Furthermore, this study showed that visual information, as well as the combination of visual and textual information are more attractive and effective than only textual information. It appeared that visual information is more provoking than textual. Also adding pictures to texts on social media increases the interest of international students in reading the content. The participants of this study mentioned that they might read the articles without visuals depending on the title, reputation of the website, relevance of the article to their interest, and the quality of the text. They also emphasized that pictures draw attention to the content and spike their interest in reading the text. It was also identified that recommended destinations by other students or acquaintances are exceptionally trustworthy among international students. The recommendations could be through videos of students shared on social media, reviews or contacts on social media. Therefore, although students’ decisions could be based on several factors, WOM acts as a voucher that adds support to the truthfulness of information and affects students’ decision-making. Last but not least, although the majority of the participants mentioned that social media did not affect their decision, they did use social media to gather information and social media presence of the university appeared to be important to them. Therefore, it seems that international students may judge schools by their social media presence and this could increase their trust. Finally, it could be said that the result of this study was in line with the definition of ‘education’, which refers to “an evolutionary process that emerges where trust is offered” (Gibbs, 2001). Thus, it is important to consider building trust when engaging with social media to attract or affect international students.

6.1 Contributions

One prominent contribution of this study is the subconscious influence of visuals, mainly audio-visuals on students’ choice of study destination. This study suggests that social media could indirectly or subconsciously play a part in students’ choice of study destination and they could be subconsciously affected by the social media information. Since social media information such as YouTube videos indirectly affected the decision-making of a participant in this study, it could be interpreted that audio-visuals are more likely to ‘indirectly’ affect international students’ decision-making. Furthermore, this research identified that visuals, mainly audio-visuals are the most effective form of information in social media because visual aspects increase the sensory experience and confidence in student’s choice of study destination. When it comes to choosing study abroad destination, contents such as videos that are more provoking and reflect multisensory and emotional cues could have a higher influence on international students. Additionally, it is identified that international students may find audio-visuals more trustworthy than texts or even pictures, because audio-visuals give them a sense of authenticity. International students experience higher level of trust when they feel that the content is authentic, and they usually experience that feeling with watching videos. Finally, this study suggests that the use of social media among international students is due to the gap between the information students’ need and the information provided by universities on traditional communication. As previous research indicated, there was a gap between the information provided by universities through traditional communications and the information prospective students need (Gatfield et al. 1999, Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown 2006; Hesketh and knight 1999). This study suggests that international students still use traditional communication channels such as study guides or the school’s website as it is a trustworthy source of information, however, they use social media as a complimentary research tool to find the missing information in traditional communications.
6.2 Practical implications

This research has sought to develop an insight into the interests and behaviours of international master students. Higher education plays an important role in the economy of some countries such as UK (Hubsons, 2017) and thus, has a competitive market. By globalisation of higher education, higher educational institutions such as universities recognised the need to market themselves in the competitive international market and concentrate on students who search for higher education outside of their homeland (Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown, 2006). Therefore, in order to attract prospective students in this competitive market and increase the international student recruitment, it is necessary to have an understanding of their interests and behaviours towards usage of social media by listening to them. In other words, research on the use of social media by international students and the effects of social media on their decision-making could help higher education institutes and portals for student recruitments to understand students’ needs and behaviours towards usage of social media so they can make a strategic plan for their social media marketing. Although there is no unique formula for managing information content to positively affect international students, it is widely accepted that information content has a significant influence on decision-making (Blanco et al. 2010; Lurie and Mason 2007). Regarding this issue, this research identified that audio-visuals in social media are the most effective content that positively affects international students. Moreover, it is identified that there is no universal trend among international students for usage of social media as social media channel preferences vary by nationality. In other words, the most popular social media channels vary by level of usage in various countries and with demographics (Chaffey, 2016). Due to this diversity, the higher education institutes may need to support a broad range of channels to target students from various countries. Nevertheless, since firms should be active wherever their customers are present (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), higher education institutes could consider Facebook as a platform in which their future students are present because this study identified that Facebook is the most popular and used social media channel among students. Therefore, higher education institutes can use it as the main communication channel to reach out and target international students. Finally, engaging with social media may not seem to be easy and may require new ways of thinking, but the potential gains cannot be neglected (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). For instance, the top two benefits of social media marketing are increasing exposure and traffic of the firm’s website (Stelzner, 2017). Since the Internet has become a mass media vehicle for communications, social media seems to be the best way to reach consumers around the world (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). Finally, no standard formula exists for determining how much a firm should invest in social media (Tiago and Verissimo, 2014). Social media can be effective and cost-efficient in student recruitment; nevertheless, it requires a long-term investment to engage the international student. Also since “being active” is one key requirement of success in social media marketing (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), allocating time and resources to keep the social media channels active and up-to-date seem to be crucial. Thus, in order to have effective social media marketing, having informative, creative, authentic and up-to-date content is a must.

6.3 Suggestions for future studies

Since social media changes over time (Constantinides and Stagno 2011, Stelzner 2017), the results of this study might not be reliable in a future. For example, 25 years ago there was no social media like Facebook and students usually relied on the information in traditional communication such as study guides or catalogues. However, today using social media is growing among students, so a few years from now there might be new social media channels or trends among students. Therefore, conducting
research on different aspects of the phenomenon is suggested for future research to see if the results hold over time. Moreover, implementing a quantitative study to further test the effects of visual and textual information, as well as replicating this study on other universities in various countries could be beneficial in adding support to the validity of the results of this study.

6.4 Limitations of study

It is important to recognise that no study is without methodological shortcomings (Summers, 2001). Although this study is done on fourteen participants, a larger sample of participants would have been more beneficial as it could have helped a deeper understanding of the phenomena. In addition, considering that there are weaknesses in every approach, in an interpretive approach, focusing on the individual’s intention makes the understanding of small features of the society difficult (Hudson et al., 1988). Interview bias is also worth mentioning as the interviewer’s contextual and cultural background, education, skill, mood, and personality may have influenced the answers of the participants, as well as the interpretation of the data and analysis (Saunders et al., 2009). However, in spite of all these difficult-to-avoid limitations, the results of this study have been in line with previous literature, which indicates the results are reliable. Additionally, this study added to the existing knowledge by going beyond the literature and showing how visual and audio-visuals subconsciously influence people’s decision-making.
References


Appendix 1. Interview Guide

1- Psychographic features: Age, gender, nationality and current level of study of the international students?

2- What made you choose Sweden?

3- Did social media (such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, LinkedIn, YouTube) have any role in your choice?

4- Which social media channels did you use?

5- Have you ever followed any university or education-related page on social media? If yes, please specify.

6- What kinds of information were important to you when choosing to study at Stockholm Business School/in Sweden? Why do you think it is important?

7- What forms of information on social media affected you or attracted your attention the most (pictures or videos of schools, articles, reports, statistics, etc.)? Please give an example of the piece of information that affected you when choosing Sweden/Stockholm Business School.

8- Did pictures play any role in your choice?

9- Would you have read articles that had no picture and was only a wall of text?

10- Can you recall any visual (such as videos/pictures) or textual information (such as articles/reports/statistics) that has been associated with Sweden/Stockholm Business School in your mind?