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# The impact of Social Media on International Student Recruitment: The case of Lebanon

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**Abstract**

*Purpose*

The purpose of this research is to understand and accentuate the value of social media in international student recruitment in Lebanese higher education institutions (HEIs). This study analyses the significance of social media and the changes occurring in the means of communicating with the potential international students, with an aim to understand how the HEis could adapt with the changes, in order to implement a model of engagement to include social media as a fundamental constituent of the Lebanese HEIs' international student recruitment strategy.

*Design/methodology/approach*

The researchers carried out a study through quantitative descriptive approach using a probabilistic simple random sample and a self-administered questionnaire on 230 international students - from several universities and colleges in Lebanon as a data collection method.

*Findings*

The findings demonstrated a certain level of engagement in social media networks from the part of the students during their search for college or university and course information. Research showed that international students still prefer the traditional sources, apart from social media during their search. Among traditional media sources, friend, family and university website were the highest in ranking. Among social media sources, Facebook, Instagram, Google+ and YouTube showed the highest ranks. Most students have, indeed, contacted a friend or a university staff for university course information using social media sites.

Practical implications

For managerial practice, this is an incentive for institutions of higher education to re-evaluate and assess the effective impact of social media on the recruitment of international students, and to regulate their social media marketing strategies. For research in international education, the insights of this study are useful to explore further research avenues in the area of capacity building for business innovation, marketing, and quality assurance in higher education in the cross-cultural context.

Originality/value

This study offers insights on the implications of social media for international student recruitment strategies from the particular Lebanese context of higher education institutions.

**Keywords**:  Social media, international student, higher education institutions, international student recruitment, Lebanon, Middle-East.

Article classification: research paper.


## Introduction

The Middle East region currently has a high demand for higher education, which is mainly due to the significant growth of young population and, as a matter of fact that the economic growth in the entire region. In Lebanon, the percentage of students, who pursue their studies abroad, is relatively low (ICEF Inc., 2016). Local higher education institutions are working hard to achieve competitive advantages over one another, with an aim to attracting, recruiting and retaining high-quality international students. The scope of international student recruitment is fluctuating constantly (Chouhada, 2013). Therefore, the universities need to adjust to these continuous changes, in order to accomplish their student recruitment goals. Universities and colleges aim to be competitive, which is causing them a lot of pressure, in general, especially with reduced budgets. From this context, universities need to improve their recruitment strategies, and this is a challenging task in the fast-paced world.

Following the discussion thus far, it can be argued that the higher education institutions (HEIs) need to be proactive, in order to explore alternative options, channels and marketing strategies, with an aim to achieve and exceed their student recruitment goal(s), based on recruiting students from different global markets, including the local and international students. Social media nowadays impact on people's perceptions, behaviour, beliefs, and most importantly, decision making (Nicoli and Papadopoulou, 2017). Consequently, the spread of social networking websites has empowered students, which not only brings higher competition among HEIs, but also brings opportunities for HEIs to achieve competitive advantage in student recruitment through proactive and improved social media marketing. In one hand, social media is generally, being used by international students for searching information, in support of their decision-making process to choose a particular HEI. On the other hand, HEIs are also, generally, being highly involved in social media to adapt with the changing business environment, in order to reinforce their branding and marketing strategies to achieve their international student recruitment goals (Franco and Haase, 2017). From this context, the aim of this study is to understand how the HEis in Lebanon could implement a model of engagement in social media, as a fundamental constituent of their international student recruitment strategy, in order to adapt with the changing business environment. The underlying purpose of setting this aim is to understand and accentuate the value of social media in international student recruitment for the Lebanese HEIs, in order to explore insights on how the Lebanese HEIs can proactively utilise the social media marketing strategies effectively to achieve their international student recruitment goal.

In order to pursue this research aim, the researcher carried out a study through quantitative descriptive approach using a probabilistic simple random sample and a self-administered questionnaire on 230 international students - from several universities and colleges in Lebanon as the data collection and analysis method. The findings demonstrated a certain level of engagement in social media networks from the part of the students during their search for college or university and course information. The findings showed that international students still prefer the traditional sources, apart from social media during their search. Among traditional media sources, friend, family and university website were the highest in ranking. Among social media sources, Facebook, Instagram, Google+ and YouTube showed the highest ranks. Most students have, indeed, contacted a friend or a university staff for university course information using social media sites.

The remainder of this article includes a comprehensive literature review starting with a discussion on the extant scholarly views on the significance of social media to recruit international students, in order to structure the research questions and research hypotheses, along with an overview on the higher education system in Lebanon, factors driving international students' mobility, the process of university decision making, traditional marketing tools used by universities, social media characteristics and types, social media marketing strategies, and finally, international students' engagement in social media. The next section covers the research methodology and describes the data collection method and the study limitations. Next, the forth section discusses the findings and results. It first specifies the data analysis method used, then dives into the factual results of the conducted tests. The last and fifth section discusses the results, implications and proposes recommendations accordingly.

## Literature review

*Research questions and hypotheses development*

Different online business platforms, including the contemporary social media enable "marketers…to obtain additional information about their target markets through the online businesses, (as well as enable) customers and other stakeholders (to) have an enormous flow of information to compare between competitive value propositions" (Shams, 2016a, p. 1). As a result, both the practice and research on online marketing have received increased interest from the managers and researchers (Thrassou and Vrontis, 2008; Shams, 2011; Trequattrini et al., 2016). From this context, recent studies highlight "the importance of utilizing SNSs (social networking sites) to improve educational communications, sharing of information, student-student and student-educator interaction, efficiency, polyphony and more. The research also stressed the need for SNS adoption" (Vrontis et al., 2015, p. 55), because, the contemporary Internet-enhanced information-technology (and the subsequent SNS platforms) enhance the "internal knowledge management capacity, which in turn increases innovation capacity" (Santoro et al., 2017, p. 1) in overall business management process. However, alongside the online business platforms, proactive stakeholder engagement strategies are instrumental for business innovation management, focusing on the key stakeholders (Shams, 2016b; Shams and Kaufmann, 2016; Shams, 2017a). Furthermore, adaptation strategies are common to implement in international business

management (Vrontis and Kitchen, 2005; Vrontis and Thrassou, 2007). Such importance on social media and SNS, adaptation in international management and stakeholder engagement in business innovation in the extant literature drive us to set the following research questions, from the context of this study, in order to explore how the Lebanese HEIs could design, implement and enhance innovative international student (as the key stakeholder) recruitment strategies, using the contemporary social media:

RQ1: Are the Lebanese international students use social media for their university and course selection processes?
RQ 2: Is social media influences the university course selection processes of the Lebanese international students?
RQ 3: What are the Lebanese international students' social media usage preferences?
RQ 4: How the Lebanese HEIs could identify the appropriate social media sites and features to attract and recruit international students?

In one hand, "the social-media marketing tools, such as social networks…and societal marketing strategies, can increase the knowledge of consumer's expectations" (Fiore et al., 2016, p. 268). On the other hand, it is acknowledged that a proactive stakeholder relationship management process using the online business platforms positively impact on the customers' and other stakeholders' decision making process (Shams, 2013a; 2013b; 2013c; Gide and Shams, 2011). These arguments from the relevant literature enable us to set the following hypothesis 1 (H1) for this study:

H1: Social media marketing can effectively influence international students' university selection process.

A "2012 ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology noted a significant increase in use of social networking sites for academic purposes from 2011 to 2012" (Saw et al., 2013, p. 11). Therefore, we presume that international students use social media sites for their university selection decision-making process (hypothesis 2 – H2), alongside using the social media for other academic purposes, e.g. study, exchange of views and so forth:

H2: International students use social media for their university selection decision- making process.

The rest of the sub-sections of this current section discuss the study context, focusing on the Lebanese HEIs, types social media, international students' mobility and other relevant factors, in order to unify the all relevant issues toward the aim of this study.


*International students in Lebanon*

In Lebanon, the percentage of international students who are non-Lebanese sums for 14%, while Lebanese students account for 86% (BankMed s.a.l., 2014).

*Familiarity with the study destination*

Familiarity with the study destination is also of big importance. Mazzarol and Soutar, (2002) indicate the importance of personal recommendations, especially when provided by close family, relative or friend.

Push and pull factors

Parents usually have a big influence on their children when it comes to studying abroad.  As Jenkins, (2001) states, many study destinations depend on families or relatives that reside in these destinations, as is mostly the case of United States, Australia and Canada, and where parents usually connect with their relatives there for a better understanding of the destination country they are sending their children to. The choice of major is among the push factors. Pull factors include geographic proximity, language, reputation of the higher education institution or university, credentials of the teaching personnel, programs and program availability and, of course, the effectiveness of the recruitment process – including both the traditional and the digital processes – of the college or university. The university's marketing campaign also plays an essential role (El Nemar & Vrontis, 2016).

Traditional sources

Chen and Zimitat, (2006) highlight the importance of the traditional information sources in the decision-making of international students. Therefore, family, relatives, friends, instructors, and advisors are influential when it comes to word-of-mouth recommendations and referrals. Moreover, when these word-of-mouth referrals come from previous international students who are sharing their life experience with others, international students are even more motivated, in general.

*The process of university decision-making*

The five constituents of the university selection process model refer to the phases through which international students proceed during the selection of a specific university or college. The five phases are: 1-Pre-Search Behaviour; 2- Search Behaviour; 3-Application Decision; 4-Choice Decision; and, 5-Matriculation Decision, as defined by Chapman, (1986).

*Decision making*

Students weigh the benefits of each enlisted university and finally select a specific university to attend (Vrontis et al., 2007). This calls the choice decision to an end.

*Traditional marketing & recruitment methods used by universities*

Universities use a diversity of marketing approaches to attract and recruit and retain students. These approaches include media advertising, outreach activities (like school visits), exhibitions, and recruitment agents and public relations activities. A major feature of these long-established methods is the *'face-to-face contact'* with potential students. The Internet impact consequently guided universities to design and integrate websites for marketing and recruitment of students. These methods are identified as traditional marketing methods (El Nemar & Vrontis, 2015).

*Social Media methods used by universities*

Social media has changed the way most industries run their business, including universities, Qualman, (2010). Facebook today is the world's most prevalent social network counting over a billion users in 2016. Moreover, Facebook counts more than 1.7 million active users worldwide as of September 2016. Facebook demographic stats show that its' users who are between the age of 13 and 29 account for 36% of total users, Statista Inc., (2016a). Universities therefore will need to optimize their Facebook marketing strategy so as to attract more international students. Moreover, the use of mobile Internet is increasing, and Facebook daily users account for 200 million users. Along with Facebook, a number of social media websites are also influential nowadays: LinkedIn, Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram. The total number of social media users' counts to 2.34 billion users in 2016, a number forecasted to reach 2.95 billion users in 2020, Statista Inc., (2016b).  The main characteristics of social media are engagement, collaboration and communities.

*Online customer engagement*

Customer engagement is defined as a concept mainly emphasizing customer loyalty, and therefore the extent to which customers do upholds a long-term loyalty to a specific service brand, Bowden, (2009). Engagement is also discussed by Patterson et al., (2006) who define engagement as the extent of a customer's physical, rational and emotional manifestation when it comes to connection to a specific service organization. With the growth of mobile technologies and social media networks, customers are now more influential than any other time. They are constantly connected via Wi-Fi, 3G or 4G, and they can find information they need usually in seconds, thus they indeed manage of their own experience and capabilities. This development has forced marketers reconsider how they engage their customers.

*Collaboration*

Collaboration, as defined by Chrislip, & Larson, (1994), is a reciprocal and advantageous connection between two or more persons or groups who have common objectives or work together. People or teams collaborate when they share expertise and authority, and a responsibility for attaining a specific outcome. Online communication supplements traditional communication. Nowadays, people communication via email and instant messaging. Recently, the social media has become quite influential on mass collaboration and has a very low or no cost to organizations and individuals alike.

*Online communities and exchanges*

Communities and exchanges evolved as a consequence of customer engagement and collaboration (Kavoura and Stavrianeas, 2015). Along with the advent of social media networks, customer-to-customer (C2C) communication and exchange are really significant that companies nowadays need to take into full consideration. Gruen, (2005) has developed a C2C exchange model based on motivation, opportunity and ability (referred to as the MOA theory). Keeping in mind that communities had developed to become extensively influential and powerful, this model therefore focuses on maintaining communities so that these communities will create customer value. Communities and exchanges evolved as a consequence of the Internet that many companies are nowadays creating C2C brand communities.

*Social media marketing strategies implementation*

Social media marketing is regarded as a general term that includes the divers marketing concepts and theories that emphasize the value and use of social networking and other social media sites Zarella, (2010). Currently, Facebook, LinkedIn and MySpace are among the most important social networks, while Twitter is the most used micro-blogging site. Other social media marketing tools include video sharing websites, YouTube and Vimeo being among the most used; photo sharing websites including Instagram and Flickr among the mostly used photo-sharing applications; and finally, university or college websites. Review sites, news and magazine sites, social bookmarking and voting sites, file-sharing sites, gaming sites and forums, were also social media marketing sites used by potential international students. In order to establish and manage a better relationship with their target market audience, universities and colleges are therefore turning to social media; this way, institutions of higher education are working on improving both their marketing and communication strategies as well as improving their brand name and brand image, (Taylor, 2008). Using social media sites, universities and colleges also make sure to link to their official websites, which increases traffic to it.

*International students' engagement in social media*

The current potential international students joining universities and colleges are aged seventeen-eighteen years old and older, which means they belong to the Millennium or Generation Y generation. They grew up in a digital environment, and live in a world where computer and technology are widely spread and available (Thompson, 2007). Millennials socialize using the Internet (Joly, 2007), and are extensively engaged in social media networking (Schroeder & Greenbowe, 2009). With technology advent, they want fast processing. They are assertive and confident with strong views, knowing that they have unlimited access to information. The world's economic crisis, and the high competition it leads to when it comes to career opportunities, causes an enormous academic pressure on students. Millennials forecast a better job opportunity for which they prepare in advance, and schedule everything. Engagement for Millennials is an important concept, and they believe that the use of social media by institutions of higher education will make them feel more engaged in their university educational experience.

## Research methodology

The previous section introduced the article and covered an extensive literature review regarding social media in general, and social media as used by international students planning to pursue their studies abroad in specific. The theoretical part also covers the use of social media by universities and colleges and its effectiveness. The current section discusses first the research methodology used and then discusses findings. This section specifies why the use of a quantitative approach is more suitable for the study being conducted, as well as the sampling method.

*Data collection method*

Survey is the method of collecting information for statistical analysis to subsidy a group of individuals so that answers are collected to make a conclusion. McKee (2015), and Bryman & Bell (2007) specify that the self-administered technique is helpful and is more appropriate in relation to cost, time and geographic diffusion of the researcher and the potential respondents. Self-administered questionnaires have few limitations. For example, they do not necessarily provide the opportunity for explanation in case it is required.

The survey questionnaire for this study is self-administered, and contains two key sections: 1) a demographic section that consists of four questions, and 2) the main survey that consists of twenty-four questions organized as follow: Five questions regarding the use of traditional media sources; Eight questions regarding the use of social media information sources; Seven questions regarding the general use of social media information sources; Four questions regarding the university course information on social media.

*Sampling*

Data collected should be specific, pertinent and representative of the whole population. Hence accurate sampling is a crucial step in any research methodology. In this survey a probabilistic simple random sample is used so as to generalize the endings and suggest later the suitable solutions. 230 Non-Lebanese Students from different Lebanese universities were surveyed.

*Study limitations*

With the fact that social media is widely common and widely used in Lebanon, social media in international students' recruitment in higher education institutions is still a novel topic in Lebanon. Most of the theoretical framework part is gathered from outside of Lebanon. The survey was primarily designed to be filled online, and sent as a link by email to many international students with a note from the researcher explaining the purpose of the study. The researcher also printed hard copies and distributed them among several universities to be filled. All answers were then entered in the predesigned online questionnaire. This incident proved, though unintentionally, that although "technology-savvy", most students preferred the traditional approach. Some respondents gave their recommendations in question 27 in regard to social media sites they recommend universities to use.

**Findings and results**

The current section first specifies the data analysis method used, then it lists all the findings collected via the self-administered questionnaire that was filled by 230 respondents. Findings regarding the demographics are first shown, then different regressions and mean comparisons conducted on IBM SPSS are displayed and analysed as per the objectives set previously.

*Data analysis*

The main program used to statistically analyse the data is IBM SPSS Statistics, a software package used for logical batched and non-batched statistical analysis. Along with SPSS, Google forms were used. In SPSS, percentages are displayed in frequency tables in the demographic section, a brief section of the questionnaire consisting of the first four questions. One-way ANOVA is used to provide descriptive regarding means, and the significance or not of the test that is being conducted. Nonparametric tests (K Related samples) are used to provide mean ranks. Estimating the presence of a specific probability presence is measured using a binary logistic regression. The online questionnaire is available on Google forms. Respondents were sent the self-administered questionnaire as a link to their email address. Respondents filled the questionnaire online, and the results promptly showed on screen. Google forms were therefore used for ease of access and ease of use, for they provide individual responses as well as summaries displayed in bar graphs and pie charts. Google forms were used prior to SPSS to get a broad understanding of the collected data. It guided the researcher in the survey and in manipulating the needed variables using SPSS.

*Fact finding results*

Demographics: Gender

50.6% of the respondents are Males
49.4% of the respondents are Females

University level of studies

56.7% of respondents are pursuing a Bachelor Degree
16.0% of respondents are pursuing a Master Degree
8.7% of respondents are pursuing an English Level Program
18.6% of respondents are pursuing a Diploma

First search for course information

29.9% of respondents first looked for course information when still in high school
61.5% of respondents first looked for course information after finishing high school
8.7% of respondents first looked for course information at another time

*Important percentages*

The way respondents first heard about university course

33.2% of respondents heard about the university course from the university website
27.2% of respondents heard about the university course from a friend
15.9% of respondents heard about the university course from a family member
11.2% of respondents heard about the university course from an internet search

Traditional information sources used when looking for a university course

65.8% of the respondents used the university's website
41.6% of the respondents made an Internet search
16.9% of the respondents were referred by a friend
13% of the respondents were referred by a family member

Traditional information sources that influenced the decision-making

59.3% of the respondents were influenced by the university's website
38.4% of the respondents were influenced by family
37.7% of the respondents were influenced by internet search
36.2% of the respondents were influenced by a friend
15.4% of the respondents were influenced by a university representative


Social media information that influenced most in university course selection

69.4% Facebook
11.2% Other
8.6% Google+

**Table 1 - Which of the following social media information sources influenced you most in your university course selection?**

| Which of the following social media information sources influenced you most in your university course selection? | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
| Valid | Facebook | 161 | 69.4 | 70.6 | 70.6 |
| | MySpace | 3 | 1.3 | 1.3 | 71.9 |
| | LinkedIn | 4 | 1.7 | 1.8 | 73.7 |
| | Twitter | 1 | .4 | .4 | 74.1 |
| | Google | 20 | 8.6 | 8.8 | 82.9 |
| | YouTube | 4 | 1.7 | 1.8 | 84.6 |
| | Pinterest | 6 | 2.6 | 2.6 | 87.3 |
| | Instagram | 2 | .9 | .9 | 88.2 |
| | Other | 26 | 11.2 | 11.4 | 99.6 |
| | 13 | 1 | .4 | .4 | 100.0 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total | 228 | 98.3 | 100.0 | |
| Missing | System | 2 | 1.7 | | |
| Total | | 230 | 100.0 | | |

Social media profile

97% of the respondents currently have a social media account.

*Dependence on Traditional Media versus Social Media when making a university course decision*

46.9% of respondents claim Social Media has a high impact on their university course decision
51.7% of respondents claim Traditional Media has a high impact on their university course decision
33.0% of respondents claim Social Media has a moderate impact on their university course decision
33.2% of respondents claim Traditional Media has a moderate impact on their university course decision
20.1% of respondents claim Social Media has a low impact on their university course decision
15.1% of respondents claim Traditional Media has a low impact on their university course decision

**Table 2 - Which information sources you depended on most when making your university course decision?**

| Social media sources | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
| Valid | Low Impact | 42 | 18.1 | 20.1 | 20.1 |
| | Moderate Impact | 69 | 29.7 | 33.0 | 53.1 |
| | High Impact | 98 | 42.2 | 46.9 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 209 | 90.1 | 100.0 | |
| Missing | System | 21 | 9.9 | | |
| Total | | 230 | 100.0 | | |
| **Traditional sources** | | | | | |
| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
| Valid | Low Impact | 31 | 13.4 | 15.1 | 15.1 |
| | Moderate Impact | 68 | 29.3 | 33.2 | 48.3 |
| | High Impact | 106 | 45.7 | 51.7 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 205 | 88.4 | 100.0 | |
| Missing | System | 25 | 11.6 | | |
| Total | | 230 | 100.0 | | |

Respondents recommending social media

92.5% of respondents recommend social media
7.5% of respondents do not recommend social media

*Regression analysis*

Contact through social media

Respondents who contacted a staff or student via social media to get their opinion on a university course offering, were asked to rank the extent to which: a) It provided the respondent additional information for my university course decision; b) It had some influence on the respondent's university course decision; and c) It helped the respondent make a decision on my university course. 73.3% of the respondents contacted a university friend or staff via social media, while 26.7 did not. In the regression table below, all three determinants mentioned above did not prove significant. This can be explained that, still, students are mainly depending on traditional sources, and basically only using social media for additional information. Therefore, the respective mean ranks of Social Media and Traditional Media influences are very close to each 1.49 and 1.51.

**Table 3 - Did you contact university students or staff to get their opinion on a university course using social media?**

| Classification Table[a] | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Predicted | | |
| | | | Did you contact university students or staff to get their opinion on a university course using social media? | | |
| | Observed | | No | Yes | Percentage Correct |
| Step 1 | Did you contact university students or staff to get their opinion on a university course using social media? | No | 0 | 24 | .0 |
| | | Yes | 0 | 151 | 100.0 |
| | Overall Percentage | | | | 86.3 |
| a. The cut value is .500 | | | | | |

| Variables in the Equation | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | B | S.E. | Wald | df | Sig. | Exp(B) |
| Step 1[a] | additional_info_14 | .384 | .434 | .782 | 1 | .377 | 1.468 |
| | some_influence_14 | .044 | .454 | .009 | 1 | .923 | 1.045 |
| | helped_decision_14 | -.173 | .414 | .174 | 1 | .676 | .841 |
| | Constant | 1.249 | .778 | 2.580 | 1 | .108 | 3.488 |
| a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: additional_info_14, some_influence_14, helped_decision_14. | | | | | | | |

Social media profile – during high school

When respondents were asked whether they had a social media account when they were in high school, 89.6% of the respondents claimed they had, while 10.4% of the respondents

said they did not. The regression shows significance with Facebook and Instagram. Indeed, Facebook and Instagram are among the most favoured. The overall statistics also show significance in the test.

**Table 4 - Did you have a social media profile when in high school?**

| Classification Table[a,b] | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Predicted | |
| | | | Did you have a social media profile when in high school? | | Percentage |
| | Observed | | No | Yes | Correct |
| Step 0 | Did you have a social media profile when in high school? | No | 0 | 24 | .0 |
| | | Yes | 0 | 206 | 100.0 |
| | Overall Percentage | | | | 90.0 |
| a. Constant is included in the model. | | | | | |
| b. The cut value is .500 | | | | | |

| Variables not in the Equation | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Score | df | Sig. |
| Step 0 | Variables | facebook | 40.092 | 1 | .000 |
| | | myspace | 1.135 | 1 | .287 |
| | | linkedin | .814 | 1 | .367 |
| | | twitter | .952 | 1 | .329 |
| | | google | .088 | 1 | .767 |
| | | youtube | 1.257 | 1 | .262 |
| | | pinterest | 1.721 | 1 | .190 |
| | | instagram | 4.015 | 1 | .045 |
| | | other | 4.576 | 1 | .032 |
| | Overall Statistics | | 45.104 | 9 | .000 |

Social media profile – during higher education

When respondents were asked whether they currently have a social media, 97% of the respondents claimed they have, while only 3% of the respondents said they do not. The regression shows significance in the overall statistics, with $p$-value = 0.012. Facebook's $p$-value = 0.05 as Facebook has a percentage of 93.9%, followed by Instagram (45.9%), YouTube (21.2%) and Twitter.

**Table 5 - Do you have a social media profile now?**

| Classification Table[a,b] | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Predicted | |
| | | | Do you have a social media profile now? | | Percentage |
| | Observed | | No | Yes | Correct |
| Step 0 | Do you have a social media profile now? | No | 0 | 7 | .0 |
| | | Yes | 0 | 223 | 100.0 |

| | | | Score | df | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Overall Percentage | | | | 97.0 |
| a. Constant is included in the model. | | | | | |
| b. The cut value is .500 | | | | | |

**Variables not in the Equation**

| | | | Score | df | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Step 0 | Variables | facebook | 6.385 | 1 | .012 |
| | | myspace | 1.816 | 1 | .178 |
| | | linkedin | 1.429 | 1 | .232 |
| | | twitter | 1.854 | 1 | .173 |
| | | google | .026 | 1 | .871 |
| | | youtube | 1.904 | 1 | .168 |
| | | pinterest | .087 | 1 | .768 |
| | | instagram | 2.863 | 1 | .091 |
| | | other | .045 | 1 | .832 |
| | Overall Statistics | | 16.261 | 9 | .062 |

## Recommendation of Social Media

**Table 6 - Do you recommend social media?**

**Classification Table[a,b]**

| | | | Predicted | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Would you recommend your friends to use social media to select a university course? | | Percentage |
| | Observed | | No | Yes | Correct |
| Step 0 | Would you recommend your friends to use social media to select a university course? | No | 0 | 17 | .0 |
| | | Yes | 0 | 210 | 100.0 |
| | Overall Percentage | | | | 92.5 |
| a. Constant is included in the model. | | | | | |
| b. The cut value is .500 | | | | | |

**Variables not in the Equation**

| | | | Score | df | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Step 0 | Variables | facebook | 20.797 | 1 | .000 |
| | | myspace | 2.072 | 1 | .150 |
| | | linkedin | 6.898 | 1 | .009 |
| | | twitter | 1.462 | 1 | .227 |
| | | google | 9.938 | 1 | .002 |
| | | youtube | .492 | 1 | .483 |
| | | pinterest | 1.775 | 1 | .183 |
| | | instagram | 1.378 | 1 | .240 |
| | | other | 7.296 | 1 | .007 |
| | Overall Statistics | | 32.030 | 9 | .000 |

When respondents were asked whether they recommend social media, 92.5% of the respondents claimed they do recommend, while only 7.5% of the respondents said they do not. The regression shows significance in the overall statistics, with a value of 0.000. Compared to the set value of 0.005, Facebook's *p*-value = 0.000 is significant. Also shown significance are LinkedIn, Google+ and Instagram.

*ANOVA test*

The demographic section is done to provide additional information about the respondents. In general, the answers do not show a strong relation between gender and the use of traditional versus social media sources, knowing that the percentage of females (60.5%) exceeds that of the males (39.5%). The high difference between both means makes any attempt to study a relation between an independent and a dependent variable not to be significant. Regarding the time of search for university course information, timing is not expected to show a relatively strong relation in relation to social media. Most students had a social media account when they were in high school, and still do have social media accounts during their search. The level of studies shows no relation as to the use of social media network. Running ANOVA test on the level of studies at university and social media usage shows no significance. Therefore, demographic factors in the questionnaire are only informative, and are not really related to social media usage. All tests conducted proved insignificant.

Non Parametric Tests (K related sample)

Most of the questions of the self-administered questionnaire are multiple answer questions. The best measuring tool is the Friedman's test, which provides descriptive information regarding the values available in each question. The researcher can view which of the answers was mostly favoured and answered.

Dependence of social media versus traditional media

Traditional information sources have a slightly higher mean of 2.36 than that of social media sources which values 2.26. The low Chi-Square value suggests that the two means are relatively close to each other, knowing that 0.409 suggests a high variance. The *p*-value of 0.522 proves the test's insignificance.
We can, however, deduce that traditional and social media sources were equally important to international students.

**Table 7 - Which information sources you depended on most when making your university course decision?**

| Descriptive Statistics | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Minimum | Maximum |
| Social media sources | 230 | 2.26 | .784 | 1 | 3 |
| Traditional sources | 230 | 2.36 | .730 | 1 | 3 |
| Ranks | | | | | |
| | | | | Mean Rank | |

| | |
|---|---|
| Social media sources | 1.49 |
| Traditional sources | 1.51 |
| **Test Statistics[a]** | |
| N | 230 |
| Chi-Square | .409 |
| df | 1 |
| Asymp. Sig. | .522 |
| a. Friedman Test | |

Social media accounts during high school

A mean of 1.88 and a mean rank of 7.91 explain that Facebook is the social media mostly used by students in high school. Instagram comes next with a mean of 1.31 and a mean rank of 5.34. Google+ follows with a mean rank of 4.70. Again here, a Chi-Square of 658.270 suggests a large variance between means, and this explains the higher percentages of Facebook and Instagram. The test is significant with a *p*-value = 0.000.

Social media accounts during higher education

A mean of 1.94 and a mean rank of 7.98 explain that Facebook is still currently the social media mostly used by students. Instagram comes next with a mean of 1.46 and a mean rank of 5.81.
YouTube follows with mean ranks valuing 4.70 and Twitter 4.68. The Chi-Square value of 709.116 suggests a large variance between means, and this explains the higher percentages of Facebook and Instagram. The test is significant with a *p*-value = 0.000.

How active are respondents are on social media?

Students can spend some time on a specific social media network, yet may not be active. This explains the difference between this question and the next one. In many instances also, respondents claimed having an account at a specific social media but may not be active (as in LinkedIn, for example). Others, on the other hand, may spend quite a big amount of time on a social media, but may not have an account (as in YouTube). Here also, Facebook and Instagram have the highest ranks and mean ranks, followed by YouTube and Google+. The previous question (current social media accounts) shows that Google+ and YouTube have similar mean ranks. This can be explained by the fact that Google+ is the main account that comprises all of Google's services. When it comes to being active on a social media, YouTube precedes Google+. This is not surprising, for many students refer to YouTube for course information, tutorials and so on and so forth. Students are therefore highly active on YouTube. The Chi-Square value of 682.075 is still relatively high, and depicts a large variance between the different means.

Time spent on social media

The mean distribution is almost the same in terms of ranking. Facebook and Instagram are followed by YouTube, Google+ and Twitter, making them the top five with the highest

means and the highest mean ranks; the mean ranks are 7.94, 6.07, 5.64 and 4.53 (for both Google+ and Twitter) respectively. The Chi-Square value of 649.714 suggests a relatively high variance in mean values.

Kind of activities respondents participate in using social media sites

Top activities respondents are mostly involved in on social media are: creating entries, posting comments, keeping in touch with friend, sending messages, sharing photos and keeping in touch with family; their respective mean ranks are: 9.02, 8.59, 8.37, 7.94, 7.94, and 7.66. Chi-Square value of 243.808 also suggests a variance of means.  Activities involving search are less frequent; for instance, looking for information about health and fashion (6.99), computers (6.99), technology (6.93), and travel (6.68). This suggests that the students are not yet highly involved in "online searches", but rather use the Internet for social purposes rather than for searching and working. Buying online also proves true this point, with a mean rank value of 6.96.

**Table 8 - What kind of activities do you participate on social media sites?**

| Descriptive Statistics | | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Minimum | Maximum |
| Create entry | 230 | 1.49 | .501 | 1 | 2 |
| Post comment | 230 | 1.43 | .495 | 1 | 2 |
| Send message | 230 | 1.33 | .472 | 1 | 2 |
| Share photos | 230 | 1.33 | .472 | 1 | 2 |
| In touch with family | 230 | 1.29 | .457 | 1 | 2 |
| In touch with friend | 230 | 1.39 | .490 | 1 | 2 |
| Info computer | 230 | 1.20 | .399 | 1 | 2 |
| Info travel | 230 | 1.15 | .361 | 1 | 2 |
| Info health | 230 | 1.20 | .399 | 1 | 2 |
| Fashion trends | 230 | 1.23 | .421 | 1 | 2 |
| Buy online | 230 | 1.19 | .396 | 1 | 2 |
| Tech news | 230 | 1.19 | .392 | 1 | 2 |
| General news | 230 | 1.26 | .441 | 1 | 2 |
| other | 230 | 1.10 | .296 | 1 | 2 |
| Ranks | | | | | |
| | | | Mean Rank | | |
| Create entry | | | | | 9.02 |
| Post comment | | | | | 8.59 |
| Send message | | | | | 7.94 |
| Share photos | | | | | 7.94 |
| In touch with family | | | | | 7.66 |
| In touch with friend | | | | | 8.37 |
| Info computer | | | | | 6.99 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Info travel | 6.68 |
| Info health | 6.99 |
| Fashion trends | 7.20 |
| Buy online | 6.96 |
| Tech news | 6.93 |
| General news | 7.45 |
| other | 6.28 |
| **Test Statistics[a]** | |
| N | 230 |
| Chi-Square | 243.808 |
| df | 13 |
| Asymp. Sig. | .000 |
| a. Friedman Test | |

The way universities should use social media to provide information on their programs

International students believe that creating blogs and forums for specific university course and education topics (5.46), using photo and video hosting services to show university facilities and activities (4.69), making university course information available through video (4.50), and advertising in blogs and social networks (4.76), are the most important activities that universities should indulge in using social media. Participating in education related blogs and forums (4.46), creating and hosting a sample video lecture on social media sites (4.13), making an online presentation about the university (4.04), and showcasing international students from a specific country (3.96) are the least important. The Chi-Square also suggests a variance, but is more transitional.

**Table 9 - How Should Universities use social media applications to provide information on their programs to international students?**

| Descriptive Statistics | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Minimum | Maximum |
| Topic blogs | 230 | 1.48 | .501 | 1 | 2 |
| Education blogs | 230 | 1.23 | .423 | 1 | 2 |
| Advertise blogs | 230 | 1.31 | .462 | 1 | 2 |
| Show facilities | 230 | 1.29 | .454 | 1 | 2 |
| Sample video | 230 | 1.15 | .356 | 1 | 2 |
| Presentation | 230 | 1.13 | .333 | 1 | 2 |
| Showcase Intl. students | 230 | 1.10 | .307 | 1 | 2 |
| Video course | 230 | 1.24 | .428 | 1 | 2 |
| **Ranks** | | | | | |
| | | | | | Mean Rank |
| Topic blogs | | | | | 5.46 |
| Education blogs | | | | | 4.46 |
| Advertise blogs | | | | | 4.76 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Show facilities | 4.69 |
| Sample video | 4.13 |
| Presentation | 4.04 |
| Showcase Intl. students | 3.96 |
| Video course | 4.50 |

| Test Statistics^a | |
|---|---|
| N | 230 |
| Chi-Square | 132.248 |
| df | 7 |
| Asymp. Sig. | .000 |
| a. Friedman Test | |

## How respondents expect a university to use social media with prospective students

Information on educational opportunities (4.47), latest university news and activities (3.73), and information on events through videos (3.70) are the ways respondents most expect a university to use social media with prospective international students. The Chi-Square also suggests a variance, but is more transitional (highest 4.22, lowest 2.86).

**Table 10 - How would you expect a university to use social media with prospective students?**

| Descriptive Statistics | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Minimum | Maximum |
| Education opportunity | 230 | 1.59 | .494 | 1 | 2 |
| Events info | 230 | 1.36 | .482 | 1 | 2 |
| Latest news | 230 | 1.35 | .479 | 1 | 2 |
| Connect student | 230 | 1.17 | .381 | 1 | 2 |
| Link to alumni | 230 | 1.10 | .307 | 1 | 2 |
| University alert | 230 | 1.19 | .391 | 1 | 2 |

| Ranks | |
|---|---|
| | Mean Rank |
| Education opportunity | 4.37 |
| Events info | 3.70 |
| Latest news | 3.68 |
| Connect student | 3.14 |
| Link to alumni | 2.93 |
| University alert | 3.18 |

| Test Statistics^a | |
|---|---|
| N | 230 |
| Chi-Square | 165.511 |
| df | 5 |
| Asymp. Sig. | .000 |
| a. Friedman Test | |

Students' recommendations

Facebook (7.81), Instagram (5.03), Google+ (4.81), YouTube (4.79) and are the social media sites that respondents mostly recommend. In other instances, Instagram is the second behind Facebook. The fact that many universities use Google mail as their mail server, and that YouTube is a main site in which students are highly active (as much for educational as for entertainment purposes) convinced respondents to highly recommend Google+. Instagram, for many respondents, is vital since it assists much in promoting the image of the university. LinkedIn is half way through, respondents acknowledged the importance of a professional social network. Along with Slideshare website, LinkedIn is nowadays more and more appealing to students.

Findings generally show that international students do indeed use social media sites for university course information, but only to assist them in their search. The findings show that international students still depend more on traditional media sources. International students' activities on social media prove this point correct. International students usually use social media to connect with family and friends more than to look for specific information. The following section concludes the findings and offers recommendations for institutions of higher education for a more effective use of social media sites. For that, it offers three social media strategies; support international students in each step of their journey at the university, make use of departmental social media, and provide students with real-time support.


**Discussion and implications**

*Discussion*

The research results, in relation to the stated research questions are as follows:

**RQ1)** International students indeed use social media for university and course selection. More than half of the respondents (73.3%) contacted a staff or a friend via social media, and believe it has some influence on their university course decision.
**RQ2)** Social media influences the university course selection process of international students. Obviously though, students still depend more on traditional media sources.
**RQ3)** Current international students use social media extensively. As shown in the results, Facebook, Google+ and Instagram are among the most used and preferred social media networking channels. Most International students, on the other hand, use social media to create an entry (48.9%), post comments on a friend's page (42.8%), keep in touch with friends (39.7%), keep in touch with family (29.7%), and read general news (26.6%). It is unlikely that students look for any type of information (percentages in the parts asking whether students look for specific information like health, tourism and so on do not exceed (20%). Most International students use a university's Facebook page (61.9%) during their university course search. LinkedIn and Twitter showed relatively low percentages.
**RQ4)** Most international students believe that universities should create blogs and forums for specific university course and education topics (48.0%), advertise in blogs and social

networks (30.6%), and use photo and video hosting services to show their facilities and activities (28.8%). Students expect a university to use social media to provide information on work opportunities (58.5%), provide information on events through photos and videos (36.2%), and provide latest university news (35.4%).

The research results, in relation to the discussed research hypotheses are as follows:

**H1:** Most students agree that "social media marketing can effectively influence international students' university selection process".  The results clearly prove this point.
**H2:** International students use social media for their university selection decision- making process. The results show that students indeed make use of social media, and social media assists by providing additional information. However, students still depend more on traditional media sources.

When international students were asked about how they have first heard about a university course, that is the pre-search behaviour, most students answered that university website (33.2%), friends (27.2%), and family members (15.9) were their first starting points.  Most students have started their search for university course after finishing high school (61.5%), using traditional media sources, among which university website (65.8%), internet search (41.6%), and friends (16.9%) ranked the most. Basically, most students looked for university information (54.5%) and course information (53.2%).

Lebanon is a very small country, and proximity allows for easy access to an institution's physical location. International students, mostly coming from neighbouring countries who are interested in applying for a specific university, still prefer the 'face-to-face contact'. This way, students get a better understanding of the university image, which is a crucial factor in decision-making. Facilities provided by the institution are also important in the process of decision-making, and many students prefer to visit the campus to check the cafeteria, sport grounds, and so on.  A very important factor that usually draws students to visit the campus is the factor that many students have an "internal reference", that is they know some administration personnel, staff, instructors or friends. Financial concerns like facilities of differed payments, financial aid and possible discounts are also usually discussed on a personal level - a private meeting with a university representative. Some parents of international students do escort their kids to university during and after the decision-making process.

It is also important to mention that many families of international students coming from the neighbouring Arab countries have connections (relatives and/or friends) with families in Lebanon, and have previously visited Lebanon at several instances. Awareness of the country thus drives the international parents and their children to visit the country prior to deciding upon a specific university so as to visit the campus and check on all matters that concern them including residence. Many international families are guided and referred by fellow Lebanese families and friends when it comes to university course decision, residence, and so on. For all the reasons stated above, institutions of higher education in Lebanon are therefore still using traditional marketing and recruitment tools.

On the other hand, respondents also turned to social media for course information. Facebook (76.7%) and Instagram (17.2%) are among the most visited social networking sites that students turned to. University information (54.5%), course information (53.2%), and student activities (18.3%) are among the information that students sought in their online search. A university's Facebook page is the most common mean of interaction done by students (61.9%). Not surprisingly also, the most influential social media website is Facebook (70.6%). Things are even more interesting when the survey acknowledges that, prospective international students turned indeed to social media to get the opinion of existing students or staff regarding a specific university course. Current prospective students belong to the "Generation Y" or "Millenniums", which explains their technology savviness, exposure, and their immunity to pure traditional marketing tools. Around three quarters of the respondents (73.3%) contacted a staff or student via social media to get a judgment regarding a course. Many believed this had a high or moderate influence on their decision-making (46.9% claimed it had a high impact, 33.0% claimed it had a moderate impact, and 20.1% claimed it had only low impact).

Not surprisingly, though, most students depended still on traditional information sources. This is due in part to the facts stated above, and in part to the fact that prospective international students –mostly coming from the neighbouring Arab countries - still depend on their parents in decision-making; at least financially. Their parents, from either the "Generation X" or beginning "Generation Y", are most of the times highly educated, yet sceptical. This can explain why, in Lebanon, current international students still rely on traditional media sources along with social media sources. Friends (36.2%) and family (38.4%) are therefore important traditional media sources, along with university website (59.3%).

However, this trend is rapidly changing though, with many international students being "almost" fully financially independent from their parents. Although not a high percentage of international students are part-time workers, their number is increasing due to the current economic crisis, and these students are taking full responsibility of their university tuition fees. These students are therefore trying to manage their schedule at work and their university studies; and they are taking even more time to graduate due to work commitments (in many cases, international students work on a full-time basis). These international students therefore depend more on social media sources than traditional media sources. Institutions of higher education can make effective use of social media to recruit international students, mainly from the pan Arab region. Prospective pan Arab students, when efficiently targeted, will also turn to social media for university course selection. The remoteness of such students will eventually lead them to use social media sources in their university course selection.

*Recommendations*

Effective use of social media can be very beneficial in international recruitment in institutions of higher education. In a small country like Lebanon, traditional marketing strategies still do work well for local students who have the luxury of visiting the campus. International students, on the other hand, will surely rely on social media, whenever available, knowing that it provides instant access to loads of information needed for student.

Instead of taking the longer way of traditionally collecting information regarding a university or a course, an international student can access all required information in a click. People's lifestyles have changed drastically over the last decade. Technological advancements and globalization are pushing all industries to find new approaches to being highly competitive to preserve their market share. Institutions of higher education also need to be creative in ensuring a competitive advantage and a better market share. A better market share, in such an economic recession, requires targeting non-Lebanese citizens. The Internet statistics provide statistical and analytical data regarding the use of social media and its importance in many industries and sectors around the world. Today, there is no doubt that Facebook is the most important social media network that marketers around the world are seriously investing in. The advancements of telecommunication, tablets and smart mobile phones also had their impact. Not only do websites need to design a "responsive" website that adapts automatically to different devices (phone, tablet, portable computer etc), but also they need to design applications for the different smart phones and tablets available. Today, Facebook owns WhatsApp Messenger, the free instant messaging app that everyone uses. Moreover, all other social media networks link to Facebook, and even allow their users to log in using their Facebook credentials; LinkedIn, Instagram, and Pinterest allow their users to sign in using Facebook through the "Continue with Facebook" button. Even twitter links to Facebook, and a user can link both accounts easily through "Link to Twitter" (using Facebook account) and "Connect to Facebook" (using twitter account).

Universities nowadays can use three main social media strategies:

1) Support international students in each step of their journey at the university.
a) Build relationships with potential international students. Social media channels will provide a direct view to university life, and are also a platform to answer any question, inquiry or concern a student might have. Social media channels thus allow universities to better understand the type of information that students inquire about, and to deliver content accordingly, by tracking the behaviours and incentives of potential international students. For instance, universities can provide students with a series of videos on YouTube showcasing specific facilities and services. To ensure high levels of involvement, students are encouraged to vote. For instance, many universities can therefore turn to virtual college fairs. Many universities have their own YouTube channel that links to their official website. International students can use virtual college fairs to ask any question that they might have. Not only can universities share videos and photos on Facebook, but they can also create events and invite international students to attend. Events can definitely also be virtual. Moreover, Facebook can be used as a discussion forum for international students. Students, staff and instructors can discuss any matter and issue of concern.

b) Communities are built amongst current existing international students at the university. By building a community spirit, potential international students express a higher level of engagement and involvement. By showcasing the diversity of students coming from different countries and cultural backgrounds, universities promote their diverse "university life" on social media channels. This diverse university life will assist in creating a unique "branded image" that will be favourable to many potential international students who look forward to join a higher education institution that provides more than just academics. "Tweets" are therefore an interesting tool to keep students highly involved in the university

community. When students from different countries share their opinions and experiences on Twitter, potential students from each country are more likely to consider this university when planning to study abroad. By providing user generated content, universities involve their students even more in university life.

c) Alumni associations are very important for graduate students to stay connected. They might use the existing university channel while still on campus but after graduation, a new mean of communication is required. Previously, institutions of higher education have made efficient use of their website, and added the alumni to their branded image. This can still be done nowadays, with the addition of social media networks. The best way to reach people, as a matter of fact, is by using the platforms on which they are mostly active. After graduation, LinkedIn and Facebook are most likely to provide better long-term ways for international students to stay connected. LinkedIn can be effectively used as a professional network. The alumni LinkedIn page can be separate from the official University page, but has to be closely linked to it. Connecting professionally with other students provides opportunities for trainings and future careers. LinkedIn will also assist potential students get a clear image of the university through the alumni who are currently on the market, working. The use of YouTube is also very important; universities can record and upload videos of graduate students who talk about their positive experiences at the university.

2) All institutions of higher education have different departments even within a single school. For example, the school of arts and sciences is usually divided into two departments, the department of arts and that of sciences which are quite different in nature and even in the type of students enrolled in them. Granting self-sufficiency to each department over their social media channel is a very healthy practice, knowing that each department is unique. Departmental social media is healthy in a way that it provides a less official and branded image, and incites international students to share their positive experiences among one another. This being said, central governance and coordination is a must, so as not to lose track of things, and to provide a unified overall image of the university. This is best done by: establishing all accounts with a social media managing policy; designing a social media procedure for departments creating new accounts; creating an effective method to pinpoint risky and off-brand social media accounts; and establishing goals that match the entire university.

3) Providing international students with real time support through social media is also primordial. Social media networking channels offer universities the chance to interact with forthcoming students in a fast and easy way, and grant universities the opportunity to answer all questions in a timely and efficient way. Providing a customer support service through social media channels is therefore vital. Universities can connect with potential international students and answer questions about course and facilities using social media networking channels. Successfully managing this necessitates effective planning. During registration, for example, most international students have different inquiries regarding offerings, course information, and schedule and time conflict and so on. These questions and inquiries certainly differ from one student to the other, and traditional ways of dealing with such issues like phone and mail are time consuming and, definitely, more expensive. Twitter can be used to promptly answer all questions that students might have. To make sure that another staff member has not already answered and replied to a specific question, multiple

keyword searches and geo-located streams can be efficiently used. This way, duplicate answers or messages are avoided. Therefore, the following steps are important for real time support: Set up a social media teams answering specific subject matter. Each member should be knowledgeable of a specific section in the international student recruitment procedure. Assign a particular team head who is accountable for supervising across all social channels and would then allocate specific messages to the appropriate member of the social media working team so as to take the required action. By doing so, a university ensure the students who inquire about a specific topic has received the precise answer the first time, and in a short timeframe. Average response times is usually expected no to exceed two to four minutes.

*Future research and theoretical implications*

The demand for global competitiveness means greater university-enterprise-institution cooperation (Lombardi et al., 2017; Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2000), and for some universities inter-organisational partnerships represent a strategic option to gain critical access to necessary resources to ensure organisational competitiveness (Franco et al., 2017). In order to build capacity to attain and retain sustained competitive advantage through international student recruitment, the insights of this study would be instrumental. For example,

> capacity building is a continuous process to develop innovative capacities in socio-economic settings through on-going development and adaptation of strategies and processes that enable higher advantage in collective and individual levels, compared to the prior strategies and processes to enhance socio-economic development. (Shams, 2016c, p. 671)

From this context, the insights of this study, such as the international students' preferences can be taken into consideration to develop future research proposition(s), with an aim to focusing on how international education host institution could develop innovative capacities in their international student recruitment strategies, based on adaptation of recommendations of this study for higher advantage in the student recruitment processes. Furthermore, stakeholder orientation, such as international students as the key stakeholders of the education exporting countries is recognised as a crucial factor to uphold the international students' academic and non-academic experience in the international host countries (Shams, 2013d; 2017b; Kaufmann and Shams, 2015; Shams and Belyaeva, 2017). Therefore, the international students' experience, perceptions and the relevant insights learnt from the Lebanese international students would be valuable to extend future researches in the area of quality assurance in international education. In terms of research in sustainability of international education operations, it is acknowledged that "there is a consistent interrelationship between different sustainability indicators and market orientation, which has implications for incorporating sustainability issues into TNE (transnational education) services and transnational strategies" (Shams, 2016d, p. 139). Also, lack of orientation towards the international students as the key stakeholder of the industry can lead to managerial myopia, relevant to the sustainability of international education industry (Shams, 2012). From this context, future researches in international education

industries' sustainability across the global education markets would be benefited through the insights of this study.

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