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## The Influence of Social Media on International Students: Case Study Analysis of International Students from Arabian Gulf

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**The Influence of Social Media on International Students:  
Case Study Analysis of International Students from Arabian  
Gulf**

Submitted By Faisal A. Almutairi

Thesis Prepared for the Degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

May, 2016  
Arcadia University  
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## **CHAPTER 1- INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1. Introduction**

This chapter gives an overview or background of social media and its influence on international students, which is the primary focus of this research. This chapter also presents or analyzes the research problem, gives an insight into the purpose or significance of the research, and highlights the scope of the research alongside the limitations of the research. Moreover, this chapter gives an in-depth overview of the aims and objectives of the study, the primary research question, as well as a layout of the entire dissertation.

### **1.2. Background of the Research**

Today's globalized world is all about competition, growth and prosperity in which technology plays most dynamic part. The technological parameter measures the quickness of adoption done by any economy with the latest technologies for the development of the efficiency of its industries. Information and communications technology has effected the procedures conducted by human and institutes. It has simulated the ways they perform, communicate, execute, hire, and conduct trade. The more quick you be with the upgradation of information, communications and internet technology into your business communication and production processes and marketing strategies, the more you can compete with the current business and marketing trends. Information technology is in demand for every developing country to enable novelties and competitiveness. Technology in use may or may not been developed within the country. The main concern is the aptitude to absorb the advancements and enhancements. Foreign direct investments plays important role to provide main resources of latest technologies to the under developing countries. Country readiness for accepting any technology is also very important. The level of technology any country can absorb must be well known to their introducing bodies.

While technology has become an important element for organizational competitiveness, there is no doubt that the environment in which organizations and enterprises in developing countries create and use technology has increasingly become dynamic and complex. The complexity and dynamicity of the environment can be attributed to greater integration with the global economy, the fast pace of technological change and adoption, the global strategies implemented by multinational enterprises, as well as changes in global trade initiated by international trade agreements (Krishnan, 2003). One of the greatest technologies ever invented in global history is the Internet. The Internet is considered the greatest invention ever since as compared to other technologies; it has played a crucial role in revolutionizing how people around the world live. The Internet has gradually become an important part of the global population's economic, social, and political lives. It is also important to note that the Internet has significantly altered how the global population purchases goods and services and how the global population communicates. Furthermore, the Internet, as a form of technology, has significantly changed how news and information is delivered, as well as who delivers the news and information. It can also be argued that the Internet has changed the vocabulary used the world over and how people go about activities such as checking and forecasting the weather. Thus, that the internet has grown rapidly over the past decade should not be a surprise. According to Ali (2011), the number of people using the Internet grew from approximately ten million in 1993 to approximately forty million by 1995. The number of Internet users further shot to over 670 million as of 2002 ("Global Digital Overview," n.d.). It is estimated that, by 2011, the number of Internet users was at 1.97 billion. According to Global Digital Overview, today, approximately 4.66 billion people use the Internet globally, with this figure representing close to 60 percent of the world's total population

(“Global Digital Overview,” n.d.). The number is still growing, as latest data shows that roughly 319 million users are recorded annually.

Unfortunately, in spite of the huge numbers, the growth of the Internet, as well as its benefits, is hardly distributed equally around the world. In 2007, for instance, estimations indicated that 67 percent of people from around 27 high-income countries forming part of the OECD had access to the Internet (Ali, 2011). On the other hand, a significant percentage of the populations in the developing world, comprising of the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America, did not have access to the internet in 2007 (Ali, 2011). Despite accounting for 12 percent of the global population in 2007, Sub-Saharan African housed a mere 2 percent of all internet users (Ali, 2011). Despite accounting for only 15 percent or less of the global population in 2007, high-income countries, forming part of the OECD, had around 96 percent of secure internet servers. These disparities have led to conclusions that a significant percentage of the global population is missing the numerous opportunities from political, economic, social, education, and career viewpoints created by the ongoing digital revolution (Ali, 2011). These disturbing levels of inequality in countries around the world have led to the coining of the concept “global digital divide.” The “digital divide” has elicited mixed reactions across nations, with some scholars arguing in favor of addressing it. Addressing the “digital divide” issue could have numerous benefits for the global population, with regard to Internet access. Notably, it is argued that addressing the digital divide could see the Internet become an important component for leveling the playing field between nations and post-industrial societies. One of the benefits of equality when it comes to Internet access is the reduction of traditional barriers to commerce and trade. This, in turn, will enable small businesses, particularly those in developing nations, to trade directly with developed countries such as the United States (Ali, 2011). Another benefit of equality in internet access is that its informational capacity will allow developing nations to make significant strides in the improvement of basic services. For instance, equality in internet access could lead to significant improvements in the global education field. Students in developing nations in Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East, and Latin America could have an opportunity to access training and education offered by educational institutions located in developed countries.

The above argument on the importance of promoting equality in internet access, introduces the concept of social media whose use has expanded significantly with the push for equal internet access. Discourse and focus on the digital divide has resulted in the disregard and expression of aversion to some uses of information communication technology, which can be considered the most important when it comes to bridging the existing digital divide. An important use of information communication technology that has been largely ignored because of the digital divide is social media access that undoubtedly has intrinsic value to populations in developing countries (Ali, 2011). Social media is instrumental in complementing efforts to integrate information communication technology into communities in which the technology has faced resistance. According to Reddy (2014), the advent of various information and communication technologies has revamped how people, organizations, and society as a whole communicate, function, recruit, transact, and conduct their day-to-day operations. To be at pace with today’s society and in line with the marketing and business trends that change frequently, several institutions have had no alternative but to embrace ICT alongside internet technology in important areas, such as communication, business, production, as well as marketing (Reddy, 2014). The inception of social media as a technology alongside innovation and development of social media have been instrumental when it comes to influencing organizations as far as identification of sustainable

effective ways and communication with customers and ultimate attraction of prospective consumers or clients are concerned.

Various types of social media exist, including social networking sites, blogs, as well as picture and video-sharing websites. Social network sites are commonly used in society today and they have been instrumental in promoting in the achievement of online presence for many users. The online presence concept means that users have the capacity to share or convey information that is about themselves. Users are also able to search for important information and communicate with colleagues without limitations. Today, the most common social networking site is Facebook with over 2.8 billion active users (Ali, 2011). These users have an average of 130 friends with whom they connect over the website. Communication through social networking sites takes many forms, although a common form adopted by sites such as Facebook and others entails communication from one user to another user (Ali, 2011). Another type of social media is blogs that serve a different function altogether. An advantage of blogs is that they allow publication of commentary content on specific topics or subjects of interest, with the content being conveyed to the public over the internet. Although blogs often focus on specific themes, they are usually self-expressions of bloggers. Multimedia-centered sites are platforms that allow users to share music, images, or videos that can later be access by other users over the internet (Ali, 2011). These websites often allow other users or followers to view and comment on the content shared. A good and most prominent multimedia-centered social media is YouTube, which allows the publication of video content leaving an opportunity for other users to view, comment, or discuss.

The various types of social media, social networking sites, blogs, and multi-media social media, have numerous benefits. Ali (2011) lists some of these benefits, which include; capacity to attract a wide audience, scalable content creation, promotion of basic ICT skills, as well as participation and democratization. The first benefit of social media touches on the capacity to attract a wide audience. The explosion and rapid growth of social media sites and their use globally is an illustration of their capability to attract a broad audience base to information communication technology. A social networking site, such as Facebook, has over 2.8 billion users, whereby approximately 80 percent are not from the United States. This demonstrates such social networking sites' capacity to attract a wide audience. Ali (2011) also talks about a social networking site known as Orkut, which, in 2008, was visited by close to twenty-one million users in Brazil alone in one month. In the same year, Orkut experienced an almost similar popularity in India, with roughly 12.8 million visits in only one month.

Another social media platform that attracts billions of users on a daily basis is YouTube. Today, YouTube claims to receive close to two billion visits every month by users from over two hundred countries. Notably, it is argued that roughly 80 percent of people who use the Internet have set up YouTube accounts (Ali, 2011). That various social media platforms have the capacity to attract a broad audience base is linked to specific characteristics of these platforms. A key characteristic behind their capacity to attract a broad customer base is that the concept of "social media" itself is hardly targeted at a specific market in the manner that content coming from traditional media platforms does. On their part, social media sites or platforms are easily available for communication and related purposes and their appeal does not necessarily depend on how interested users are in the content or information that they contain. Instead, social media is about users' interest in self-expression and communication with other people, without taking into account their origin or background. Social media's capacity to attract wide audiences is also linked to the specific characteristic that they are developed with simple affordances. That is, users require little knowledge of or familiarity with these platforms in order to use them in one way or another

(Ali, 2011). A good example is Facebook, where users can easily post and access information without necessarily having great knowledge of or familiarity with the platform. This specific feature sends the message that unlike the advanced uses stressed by past development initiatives, social media usage hardly requires much formal training on technology and information skills. A third characteristic underlying social media's capacity to attract a broad customer base is that social media is available freely to users. This characteristic applies to common and popular social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, Orkut, YouTube, as well as blogs. This particular characteristic means that social media is accessible for users immediately they have physical access to the internet and devices for accessing the same. For similar reasons, social media has also been instrumental, as it has allowed users to go beyond racial and socioeconomic barriers that characterize modern society. A study by the Pew Institute points to how low-income teenagers in the U.S. are more likely to use and engage in social networking as compared to teenagers from high-income U.S. neighborhoods (Ali, 2011). Social media's capacity to attract a broad customer base is linked to digital inclusion for certain reasons. Foremost, how sustainable ICT development projects are depends on whether a large consumer base exists. In Brazil, for instance, that *cabinas* are successful has to do with the traffic generation from the big Peruvian and Brazilian populations seeking internet services to communicate with one another over Orkut, a common social media site in Brazil. Second, a wide user audience is associated with the rising incentives for local and foreign business when it comes to targeting specific content at the market. Third, with many users online, it is highly likely that many individuals are involved in the creation of content through social media and that many individuals are growing and developing their ICT skills.

Social media platforms are also acknowledged for their benefit related to scalable content creation. With social media platforms, creation of content occurs every time a user initiates a communication with another user. Initiation of communication can be through tweeting on Twitter, posting on another person's Facebook Wall, or publishing or uploading a video to YouTube. Consequently, the content created through the initiated communication on the various platforms is of relevance to the local interests of the users. This specific feature helps to differentiate social media as a communication tool from other approaches for content generation relevant to developing communities (Ali, 2011). At the local level, various social media applications are developed, although the publication of information on these platforms is through a central entity. For instance, various governments develop platforms through which they communicate information to citizens. Unlike social media, these platforms do not give citizens the freedom to post and share information. Rather, the central entities, such as governments, determine what information to disseminate to the target audience. Another difference is that the content is created on behalf of the users, rather than being created by users as is the case with social media platforms.

Social media platforms are also recognized for their role in the promotion of basic information technology skills. In the traditional sense, illiteracy is one of the biggest problems faced throughout the developing world. There are efforts to address this problem, which ought not to be existing in the twenty-first century. With the widespread use of social media, there is a good opportunity for the developing world to address this problem and keep pace with the literacy momentum being witnessed in the developed world. The emergence of the internet and its active usage in the developed world has contributed to the new literacy being witnessed in the developed world. That most social media platforms are easy to use makes them attractive when it comes to the promotion of basic information and communication technology skills. Today, the research on how social media influences skill development and education is still in its early stages. However, reports tend to indicate that social media, particularly social networking sites, play a key role when

it comes to the development of crucial ICT skills amongst users. For users of social networking sites such as Myspace, access to these sites tends to require having knowledge of a wide range of information and communication technologies. For one to navigate through Myspace, he or she must have the right knowledge. Moreover, to be able to use Myspace, a user must understand and possess knowledge of monitoring, responding, multi-tasking, and navigating multiple communication channels.

Social media must also be appraised for its role in promoting participation and democratization. According to Ali (2011), the most important contribution of social media is its capacity to foster democratization and participation, particularly in developing nations. As compared to traditional mass-media platforms, the internet has played a bigger role, and it qualifies as a liberalizing technology. Due to the widespread usage of the internet, there has been an increased and active use of social media. These platforms, in turn, play a key role in converting users from mere listeners to people who actively participate in public debates. By using social media, individuals move from passive to active individuals. They also move from mere observers to more engaged members of social spaces, and this has given social media users a voice when it comes to global political conversations. The active engagement perspective is evident in blogs, which is one of the available social media types. Through blogs, users are able to publish content in what is referred to as “journalism time,” which is a diversion from the traditional slower-moving page culture. Moreover, through blogs, users engage in weighted conversations with the engagement being between the person blogging and those commenting on the blog content. There is a need to acknowledge the fact that blogs are a crucial part of web technologies that allow active participation in the social media sphere. These roles of blogs are also played by other social media types including multimedia-centered platforms and social networking sites. The democratizing aspect of social media is evident in the numerous protests witnessed in the Arab world in the early 2010s. During the protests in Arab nations, such as Libya and Egypt, social networking sites, such as Facebook assisted with the stimulation of political discussion and organization of political demonstration (Ali, 2011). The role of social media in democratization and participation is particularly of relevance in countries with authoritarian administrations. Most authoritarian regimes, thus, resolve to discourage the use of social media by arresting social media activists, banning mobile phones in specific public places, and shutting down social media sites. These actions are a clear illustration of how important and powerful social media is in the contemporary society.

The meaningfulness of social media, in terms of capacity to attract a wide audience, scalable content creation, promotion of basic ICT skills, as well as participation and democratization, has extended from the public sphere to the organizational or institutional context. Many institutions or organizations today rely on the power of social media to achieve their goals that have to do with growth and expansion. From the beginning of social media to the modern social media, continuous development and novelty has stimulated worldwide industries to notice effective methods to connect with their loyal customers and attract with their potential customers. To a large extent, today’s society faces a new communication and marketing challenge that has been extended from businesses and other for-profit organizations to learning institutions, such as universities and colleges. Most of these educational institutions are focused mainly on influencing the learners’ decision-making processes. All educational institutions have also adapted these changes to face the communication and marketing challenge, which eventually helps to attract talented lot of international students. This helps international students to make faster decisions to their choice of fields and institutions. Today, students feel more comfortable to access all

information through the Internet and specifically social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, Google+, etc. They no more require the old style of information such as university websites, printed or broadcast media, and others.

The rapid growing phase in the recruitment process of international students is only because of continuous improvements in the field of social media, which directly effects on the behavior and perceptions of people. This impact of Internet on individual's decision-making highly influenced educational bodies to follow the latest trends and improvements by being more effective in understanding and implementing tools and techniques. Although these educational bodies have to go through many experiments and to face many challenges during the initial phase of development and deployment of their goals and approaches. Some of the important challenges are lack of expertise level and poor practices while using social media and internet for marketing purposes, cope up with the fast developing technology, practice of communication platform changes with the passage of time.

The evolution of Internet headed with a bang in the field social sites which now comprises platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Google+, blogging sites, YouTube, Dailymotion, Netflix, Yahoo, etc.), and other internet applications. Facebook is the most prevalent social networking site in Europe. Such sites mostly attract youngsters and teenagers worldwide especially because of language flexibility. Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are well liked in the Arab countries as well. On the other hand, Arabic social sites are also developing and expanding continuously to compete with them. These trending technological deployments helps countries to find out unique methods and procedures to connect effectively and attract more and more capable knowledge seekers in different countries. Bigger educational bodies all around the world do not only strive for capable students but also put their best to attract brightest pupils. Old-fashioned style of marketing approaches are costly and have restricted range to students, all educational bodies must realize the power of social sites and its effectiveness as early as possible so that they start promoting their courses and can groom their institutions to attract potential students.

In America, specifically, universities such as University of Rochester, Yale University, University of Oregon, John Hopkins University, Princeton University, as well as Harvard University, have witnessed an unlimited potential of social media in the context of connection with and recruitment of international students. Estimations further reveal that in every 100 top universities and colleges across the U.S., 92 rely majorly on social media for the purposes of program and course promotion to prospective students who may be interested in joining these institutions (Ali, 2011). The average number of social media sites that are used by these universities and colleges to promote or market their programs to potential students, stands at 3.7, with Facebook being the most commonly used social media site (Ali, 2011). In the Gulf region and the whole of the Middle East region, an increase in the demand for higher education is currently being witnessed. This heightened demand for higher education can be attributed to various factors including the region's young population growth, as well as economic growth. Despite the increased demand for higher education, the student percentage pursuing their education abroad in the Gulf region remains low. Consequently, local higher education institutions, particularly in the Gulf region, are focused on achieving competitive advantage. These institutions aim is to attract, recruit, and retain high-quality international students to remain competitive. The biggest challenge these institutions encounter as they seek to realize their aim is the fact that international student recruitment scope is facing constant fluctuation. This specific challenge has prompted many higher education institutions in the Gulf region to adjust their strategies to realize their goals related to student recruitment. As universities and colleges seek to become more



competitive than ever, they face significant pressure that comes with a significant decline in their budgets. On this account, universities and colleges have a responsibility of improving their recruitment strategies. Unfortunately, this is a daunting task in today's fast-moving world.

### **1.3. Problem Statement**

Students who join universities and colleges around the world today are best described as digital natives. Another common description of students joining colleges and universities today is "social networking generation" (Schroeder & Greenbowe, 2009). These descriptions of today's students entering higher education institutions are linked to their increased engagement and interaction in social media platforms (Schroeder & Greenbowe, 2009). Data from the 2012 PEW Internet Project estimates that 73 percent of teenagers and a further 72 percent of the young adult population that are active on social media encompass prospective students of higher education institutions such as universities and colleges. Moreover, these populations actively use social media for a number of purposes. International students are actively involved or engage in social media given these platforms' importance in assisting with decision-making processes related to joining colleges and universities. A significant percentage of prospective university and college students not only visit Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others, but have also set up accounts in these social networking sites (Morris, 2012). Moreover, that colleges and universities are also actively involved in social media activities means that they could take advantage of and design these platforms to help with purposes of branding. Notably, social media has an influence on how collaboration, engagement, and participation take place and it is possible that colleges and universities can use social media to increase visibility and attract an increased number of students in the end. Several prior studies conducted on a similar research topic have been specific when it comes to countries and faculty while ignoring the international students' point of view. Thus, for this study, the problem of focus is that whereas social media tends to be promising and with much potential, there is a dearth in understanding and knowledge of whether and what role it can play when it comes to influencing decision-making processes of international students with regard to joining colleges and universities. This problem, thus, requires investigating various aspects including how international students use social media, their social media preferences and activities, as well as their social media usage with a particular focus on their university decision-making processes.

### **1.4. Significance/Purpose of Research**

This research purpose is to spread awareness about the social media sites and their marketing techniques, which has been used by different institutions to appeal potential students. As stated before the basic challenge that most of the universities facing is the rapid development of technology frequently changing choices regarding social media. Universities in USA, Canada, Australia and UK are most successful as they adapt these changes rapidly. Their institutions attract best scholars from all over the world with the help of latest tools and techniques. This is the most important reason for gulf students to select institutes from the above-mentioned countries. Like several other organizations, both public and private, it is increasingly becoming important for educational institutions, such as universities and colleges, to communicate effectively their expectations, programs, vision, as well as courses offered to students who are their primary prospective clients. One way these educational institutions can achieve this objective is through the application of the most effective communication and marketing techniques. With such techniques, the institutions will be better placed to not only inform, but also attract prospective clients in students. However, the concern is not whether universities and colleges should settle for either traditional marketing techniques or digital marketing strategies, but how educational

institutions, mostly universities, can leverage social media to attract and recruit international students effectively and efficiently. However, effectiveness and efficiency in attracting and recruiting international students depends on how educational institutions can employ social media to influence their decision-making when it comes to selecting their preferred educational institutions. Considering these aspects, this study is of significance and beneficial to the following.

- *Academia or universities:* This study can support universities in many ways. For instance, we would study most favorite applications, platforms and devices used by the students, also the effective methods to connect with the students. To make connection of institution with the potential students is not the only key, important is to maintain and keep an active participation and attention of students. Number of researches have investigated regarding marketing aspect of social media but this study would be focusing the impact of social media, which actually make students especially gulf students to decide among thousands of universities. This study's aim is, thus, to provide information to educational institutions, such as universities about social media sites and social media marketing strategies that are effective and that can help with the attraction of prospective international students. The biggest challenge universities face when it comes to using social media is how complex and evolutionary internet technology is, as well as internet users' ever-changing choices of social media platforms and decision-making processes, especially the contemporary young generation. This study is of significant to educational institutions including universities and colleges in that it examines the social media platforms that are majorly preferred by teenagers as well as effective strategies required to attract and communicate with potential international students. The study also focuses on identifying some of the ways and social media sites that educational institutions can rely on when they have to reach out to international students.
- *International students:* This study focuses on benefiting international students given how universities and colleges leverage social media marketing techniques and the fact that it seeks to connect students and universities or colleges by emphasizing the role of social media in this context. Annually, millions of international students move from their home countries to study in foreign countries. In addition to depending on traditional information sources, such as print and mass media, these international students depend on social media platforms for information related to their academic endeavors. The primary objective of universities and colleges is to ensure that they reach out to these international students mainly through social media, which is currently the most affordable and easily accessible.
- *Study's significance to social media marketing research.* A number of studies that have examined and extensively investigated social media's value when it comes to communication exist. However, the area of how social media influences the decision-making process of international students remains largely unexplored. This study thus Therefore, this study is of significance to social media marketing research as it introduces multiple new social media strategies, which may be used by universities and colleges, and further be explored in depth by scholars and researchers.

### **1.5. Scope and Limitations of Research**

The scope of research is about the study limits. The scope or limits of research are often dependent on the research population or respondents that will be recruited in a study, the population sample, as well as the factors, topics, and variables forming part of a study (Padua & Santos, 2008). This study's focus is on the role played by social media in decision-making of international students, particularly in Gulf countries. Thus, the study's scope is confined to a

survey that will be conducted with international students in Gulf countries to determine how impactful or influential social media is on their decision-making when it comes to university or college choices. The research will collect views of several international students in Gulf countries with first-hand experience of social media, and who at one point, have used social media in their search for the right universities or colleges. This research also aims to convince educational institutions not only in the Gulf region but also around the world on the importance of social media in marketing themselves, particularly to international students.

One possible limitation of this study is that it will leverage the sampling method, which may ultimately result in a reduction of the study findings' generalizability. This study also focuses mainly on Gulf countries, which means that participants will mainly be from the Gulf region, with participants from other regions of the world being ignored. Moreover, this study does not take into account several issues surrounding social media use, such as culture, trust, and security.

### **1.6. Aims and Objectives of the Research**

This research will explore the role of social media in decision-making of international students, particularly those in Gulf countries. This aim will be achieved through the following objectives:

- To investigate which social media platform is commonly used by Gulf students to search for university programs or courses.
- To assess which social media marketing techniques inspire Gulf student to make decisions with regard to their preferred universities or colleges.
- To determine the preferences of Gulf students when it comes to selecting educational institutions.
- To identify social media sites or applications that are mostly liked by Gulf students.
- To determine the most effective social media sites that can be utilized by educational institutions to attract and recruit potential students.

### **1.7. Research Questions**

Many studies have been done on effect of social media. This study is related to role played by social media in decision-making of international students, especially in Gulf countries. This statement of the study requires research on international student's effect by social media use, their activities and fondness, with the marketing practices applied by different universities. Hence, this study emphasizes on the connection among gulf students and use of social sites for their university selection process. This research would seek for answers of following questions as well.

1. Which social media platform helps Gulf students to search for a university/programs/course?
2. Which social media marketing techniques inspires gulf students to making decisions?
3. What are the preferences of gulf students while selecting any institution?
4. Which social apps are more likeable by the gulf students?
5. What are the most effective media sites, which can be utilized by educational bodies to attract potential students?

### **1.8. Thesis Layout**

The layout of this thesis is as follows:

- Chapter One: This chapter includes an in-depth background of the research topic that starts by exploring social media from a general perspective and gradually moves to its use by colleges and universities for marketing to international students.

- Chapter Two: This chapter presents an extensive review of related literature and studies exploring the role played by social media in decision-making of international students. The review or literature is sub-divided into themes, such as social media types and features; social media impact on engagement; social media impact on collaboration; social media and online communities; students, social media, and decision-making; educational institutions' use of social media for advertisement, benefits of social media to universities; and a conclusion of the chapter.
- Chapter Three: This chapter presents the methodology used in the research. The chapter encompasses research design; research question and sub-questions; research objectives; research hypotheses; research framework; population of the study; sampling techniques; sample size; instruments and measures that entails the relationship of survey question to research objectives; survey questions; procedure and data collection; nature of research that entails the research approach and strategy; research validity and reliability; and ethical implication.
- Chapter Four: This an analysis chapter that entails the survey responses and their analysis, as well as a summary of the chapter.
- Chapter Five: This chapter summarizes the whole thesis and includes recommendations with regard to the research problem.

## CHAPTER 2- LITRETURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Introduction

This chapter will review some previous literature and past studies covering mainly three aspects which can help further in the study of our problem. These features are marketing done by universities, decision-making process by universities and by the students in different parts of the world. Recruiting new students is always the main target for all the universities. The core objective of this chapter is to understand the key perceptions of decision-making process done by universities and marketing techniques used with the help of social media, and its impact on the individual's decision-making process regarding selection of courses and university.

A new world of interactivity has been created because of social media. According to Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert (2009), media provides emotional, cognitive and social development. One of the most commonly used social media tools is social networking sites like Facebook, My Space, etc. The popularity of these websites is evident through the boosted market share which increased by 11.5 percent from January 2007 to February 2007 (a period of one month). Moreover, 6.5 percent of online traffic is accounted for social networking sites. (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011)

Social media supports interactivity which is why it is also used for information seeking. A study on October 2007 Southern California Wildfires suggested that social networking websites has gained a lot of prominence in managing the uneven situations. This proves that people use social networking sites quite often for seeking information. (Sutton, Palen, & Shklovski, 2008). A study on the online activities of teens found that 31% of teens use internet for getting health information and 17% admitted that they use internet for getting fitness information which they cannot discuss with someone else. It proves that social media supports the concept "easy to use" (Lanhert, Purcell, Smith, & Zickhur, 2010).

Globalization has increased the requirement of competitive skills in a job market because of which many universities from around the have started exchange programs to share knowledge. As quoted by Daly, exchange programs in US and Europe are really beneficial. A study found that social media is heavily used while adjusting in the host countries which indicates that social media is used by students who are interested in exchange programs. A subjective research indicates that students use social media to seek information about their host countries. (Hesse, 2007)

This is the reason it is important to throw some light on what social media tools are used for seeking information, the communication patterns of students for seeking information and whether they are satisfied with the use of social media or not. For this reason, Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) will be used as it is helpful in identifying whether the user is satisfied with a certain technology considering age, gender and experience. This will not only help benefit students approaching websites for information of host countries but will help various exchange programs improve their communication practices.

According to Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), there are four elements which define the attitude to use a certain technology in future. They are performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions. Age, gender and experience also play an important role in determining the behavioral intention to use the technology. The following table will define the four variables.

Variables	Definition
Performance Expectancy	Benefits provided by the use of social media
Effort Expectancy	Is social media easy to use?

Social Influence	The role of significant others (friends and family) in making one use social media for seeking information
Facilitating Conditions	Are all social media tools easily available?

Source: (Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003)

## 2.2. Social Media Types and Features

“Since the development and introduction of Social media technology, social media has increasingly transformed the way people, industries, firms and universities conduct their business and relay information”(Qualman, 2010). Facebook has become the most famous and demanding social network site with more than 1 billion. Furthermore, approximately half of Facebook user i.e. 46% are school going pupils, which are teenagers. Those universities, which are already present on Facebook, can reach them easily to find out potential students for their programs.

In May 2014, the countries with the most Facebook users were:

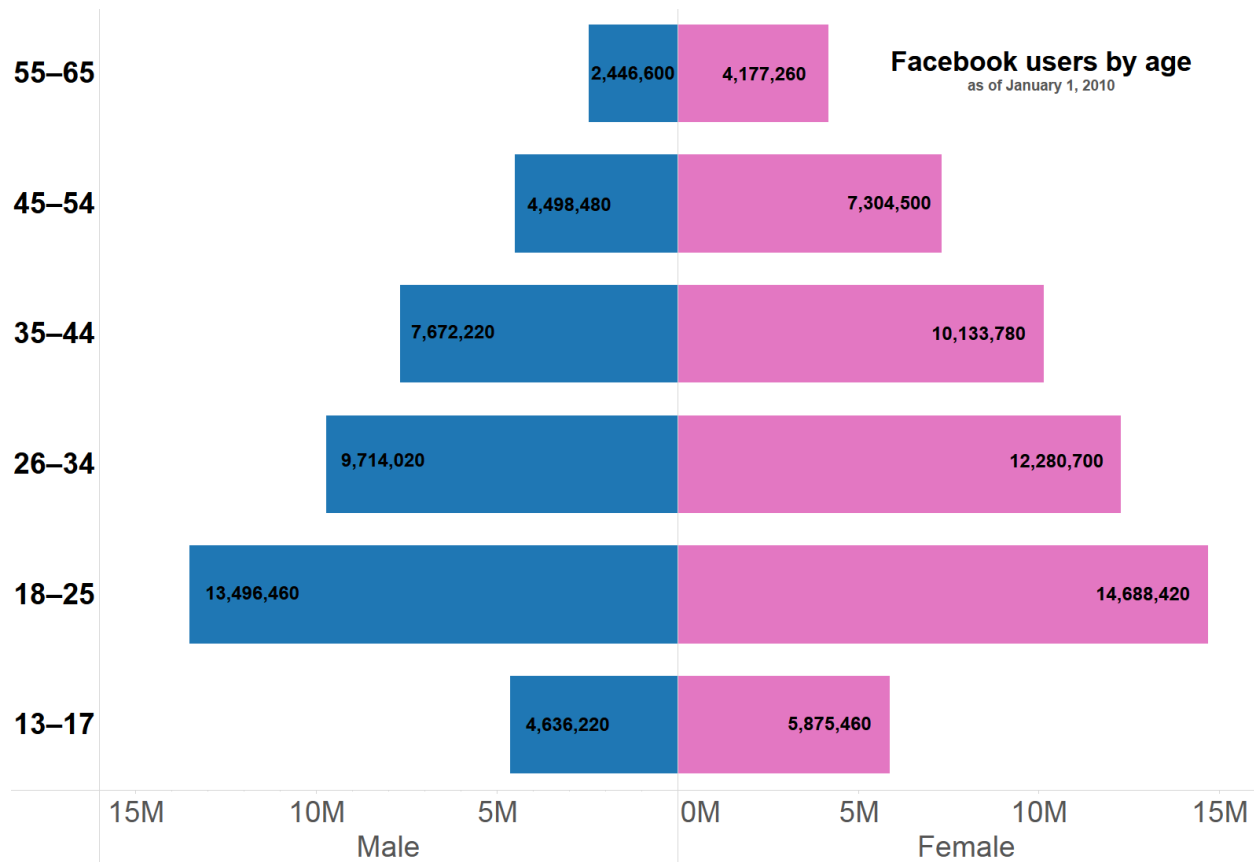
- United States with 151.8 million members
- India with 108.9 million members
- Brazil with 70.5 million members
- Indonesia with 60.3 million members
- Mexico with 44.4 million members

Source: Statista.com (2013)

Source: Inside Facebook

According to study it was stated that the daily usage of Facebook via mobile device has been reached to more than 200 million users which shows the growing use of mobile gadgets for accessing social media sites which also includes Twitter, google+, Instagram and also some video sharing sites like Youtube, Netflix, and Dailymotion etc. So that’s why the number of Facebook users through mobile devices are far more active and significant in number as compared with the non-mobile users. If we have a look on figure 2.1 then we can understand the significance of marketing done to attract individual ages 18 to 44. Educational Institutes must also understand this why they need effective marketing through the social sites like Facebook. Those aged among 18 to 25 are the most active users on Facebook which includes both male and female. Following them is the age group from 26 to 34 which also can have prospective scholars which a university is looking for.

Figure 2.1 Population pyramid of Facebook users by age as of January 1, 2010



There are number of famous social networking sites besides Facebook. All have different features and characteristics which have been discussed in brief below:

**Facebook.** Facebook is the most popular free social networking site which allows users to get registered and to create their profiles by uploading photos and videos, Facebook allows to share any message, picture, video on the friend's wall or your own wall and private messages as well. It shows the latest updates by friends and family in the News Feed section. One can play different games with friends and family on Facebook and can have a nice chat on the messenger as well. Member's personal profile includes information one wants to share with their friends and family. It also allows to create open and closed group where number of people can discuss with each other on different topics they like. It is a very helpful marketing channel. The Market Place section allows the members to publicize and their customers to respond to the advertisements. The Event feature helps to advertise any events and to invite guests to be a part of it. Similarly Pages feature helps to create page to promote anything you want to.

**Twitter.** Twitter is also very famous social networking sites which asks you a Question "What are you doing?" you have to answer it in 140 characters which they called tweets. These tweets can be done for your friends, family and followers. These tweets help you to tag your friends and any topic with the use of hashtag. Twitter is used for quick connection with the followers because of the short format. Twitter can be used for both personal and business matters. It is the trending way to be in touch with each other nowadays. In regard with business one can use twitter as a broadcasting platform which can be used for the latest announcements to interact with the potential customers. It also helps in internal communication of the company.

**LinkedIn.** LinkedIn is famous for creating professional profiles to attract employers and stay in touch with the friends and colleagues all over the world. It helps in discovering new

professional opportunities for any individual. Latest business deals, news, ventures, and insights can be easily accessed with the help of Linked In. A LinkedIn profile highlights member history in education and employment. LinkedIn Network consists of two types of membership, Basic membership can only help to create links with your forgoing relations. On the other hand, Premium membership allow you to access to all contacts present in the database.

**YouTube.** YouTube is popular for sharing video clips one can share videos easily on YouTube without those problem which they face in emailing websites. The video can be shared with the help of URL link which is actually the address of that page. One can comment and rate videos as well. With more than 2 billion users logged-in monthly, YouTube has a huge marketing potential for almost all business organizations (“UNESCO Institute of Statistics,” n.d.). Industries have recognized this ability of YouTube to reach potential customers and started creating their accounts for effective marketing videos and advertisements. Universities have also realized the marketing potential of YouTube and have not only opened, but constantly post relevant content in their official accounts.

**Google+.** Google has social networking project named as Google+. The key characteristic of Google+ are Circles and Hangouts. Circles are like groups for connections, to selectively share with any particular group. Hangouts help to video chat with up to 10 people at same time. Through spark feature Google+ users can discuss pertinent issues with each other. Through Google+, users can effectively interact offline compared to other social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. Google+ is an effective social media platform for initiating internet trends and universities can leverage its online and offline capabilities to attract attention to their services.

**MySpace:** MySpace is an intricate social media site that enables it users to not only interact and network, but also have fun through video or music sharing. MySpace was initially founded as a site for budding musicians to share their artistic content and advertise their concert dates and albums (“UNESCO Institute of Statistics,” n.d). MySpace has since evolved into a full-fledged social networking site where members can create profiles, interact with others, share videos, photographs, and blogs. Moreover, MySpace has newsgroups where members are allowed to share classified adverts. The ability to share classified adverts makes MySpace a good social media site that business organizations and universities can utilize to attract and interact with new customers and prospective students.

**Pinterest:** Pinterest is a social networking platform that enables image sharing among members. According to Ben Silbermann, one of the founders of Pinterest, the social media platform is a site for sharing creative ideas mostly through pictures, animated GIFs, and videos. Pinterest enables its members to save and discover images and other relevant information on the internet. By clicking on an image in Pinterest someone is immediately taken to the original source of the image, most likely a website. For example, clicking on a picture of a car posted in Pinterest will take one to the car manufacturer’s website. Therefore, Pinterest is a creative way of not only finding information on the internet, but also advertising and universities can utilize it to bolster their chances of meeting prospective students.

**Instagram:** Instagram is a popular social network platform that enables users to instantly share photos and videos with their followers. Based on the notion that taking interesting photos need not be a preserve of the few, Instagram provides its users with numerous image filters that transform ordinary pictures into professional-like photos (“UNESCO Institute of Statistics,” n.d). Through Instagram, users can also share images and photos on other platforms such as Facebook. Instagram has an interactive interface that enables its users to comment on other’s users’ pictures, thus fostering social networking.



Other popular networking sites are Flickr and Foursquare. Each has unique characteristics and provide different features to their users to connect with the other world effectively. These sites are in continuous progression to grab more and more users as well.

### **2.3. Social Media Features**

Social media is multi-faceted, and therefore, has divergent features that explains why it is widely used globally. Similar to other phenomena, the features of social media can be derived from its definition. According to Constantinides and Zinck (2011), social media is an architecture of participation that enables individuals to not only collaborate, but also publish and post information online. Additionally, Cheung et al., (2011) argues that social media has various attributes, such as identity, presence, conversations, relationship building, sharing, and reputation. The divergent attributes of social media enable various individuals to network, connect, converse, and build reputations online. Moreover, social media is based on the notion of online communities. Therefore, the notion of relationship building and maintenance is an inherent element of all social media platforms. From the theoretical and practical conceptualization of social media, three overriding attributes can be discerned: engagement, collaboration, and community (Cheung et al., 2011; Constantinides & Zinck, 2011). The attributes of engagement, collaboration, and community form the cornerstone of all social media and networking platforms and sites.

### **2.4. Engagement**

Online engagement is the cornerstone of social media. According to Cheung et al. (2011), engagement is defined as the level of an individual's physical, cognitive, and emotional presence in their interaction with others. Online engagement is a recent phenomenon that emerged with the spread of the internet and online interactive platforms, such as websites, blogs, and social media. Social media interactions are not only physically and cognitively but also engaging emotionally. Thus, interactive (Qualman, 2010). That social media is physically, cognitively, and emotionally engaging means that it can be utilized by marketers and advertisers to create meaningful engagement with their potential customers. Engagement occurs within a context specific level between an individual and a particular object, such as a brand, therefore, can be leveraged by prudent business organizations to better not only their customer relations, but also improve their sale returns (Qualman, 2010). According to Constantinides and Zinck (2011), engagement is a highly context-specific variable that can massively influence consumers' purchasing preferences and choices. Therefore, online engagement, which is the cornerstone of social media, can be leveraged by business organizations and universities to improve their marketing strategies and outcomes.

### **2.5. Collaboration**

Social media is based on the notion of online communities that cannot exist without the notion of collaboration. Collaboration is conceptualized as a mutually-beneficial relationship between two or more individuals, entities, or organizations who work together to achieve common goals, and therefore, share responsibility, authority, and accountability (Constantinides & Zinck 2011; Qualman, 2010). In the physical world, collaboration is easy as it is based on easily discernable and quantifiable variables. For example, collaboration in the average family entails parents protecting and providing for their children with the children performing various household chores in return. However, in the digital world where interactions are online and relationships are based on different parameters from those in the physical world, collaboration takes on a different dimension. Since online relationships and connections are independent of geographic distance, collaboration in social media is based on the notions of connected presence and communicative readiness. Connected presence is concerned with the ability of various members of an online

community to remain present on social media by remaining connected to the internet (Qualman, 2010). Communicative readiness entails the willingness of members of an online community to communicate with each other (Qualman, 2010). Therefore, connected presence and communicative readiness are the basis of all interactions and collaborations on social media.

Social media has fostered the emergence of mass collaboration, a phenomenon that is behind the vast online communities. Before the advent of social media, the notion of mass collaboration was non-existent as the extent of people's collaboration was limited with geographical boundaries and distance. However, the emergence of social media and the fact that it is independent of geographic distance has fostered mass collaborations that has resulted in the rise of online communities. In the online communities, people hailing from divergent parts of the world can meet, interact, and collaborate as long as they maintain a healthy connected presence and communicative readiness. The phenomenon of mass collaboration has enabled social media users to participate in pervasive online debates and dialogues, thus fostering collaborations across organizational and national boundaries. Social media and its inherent notion of mass collaboration is causing major changes and disruptions, especially in the corporate environment where it is instigating the development of novel business models and corporate practices (Hesse, 2007). According to Qualman (2010), the notion of mass collaboration is behind the wild success of contemporary online businesses, such as taxi hailing giants Uber. The mass collaboration phenomenon has resulted in the emergence of wkinomics.

Keen to understand the notion of mass collaboration and its rise in the contemporary digital age, researchers Constantinides and Zinck (2011) coined the term wkinomics. Wkinomics is conceptualized as the new art and science of collaboration brought into the fore by the prevalence of social media. The notion of wkinomics advocates for global openness, peering, and sharing in all social media interactions (Constantinides & Zinck, 2011). Wkinomics is revolutionary as it encourages value creation through peering and allows for the co-creation of products and services through mechanisms of mass collaboration that are independent of geographical distance (Constantinides & Zinck, 2011). Business organizations and even universities have quickly bought into the notion of wkinomics and are utilizing internet-based technologies and interactive online platforms to benefit from mass collaboration. The unprecedented success of companies that leverage mass and peer collaboration, such as Uber and AirBnB, is a manifestation of the practical benefits of wkinomics to organizations, entities, and businesses. The foundation of the contemporary corporate environment and the digital economy lies on the notions of interconnectedness and mass collaboration. Therefore, organizations seeking financial success have to position themselves and leverage mass collaboration for their benefit.

## **2.6. Communities**

Online communities are an existential attribute of social media. Social media platforms are created with the intention of developing and maintaining an online community through wholehearted engagement and mass collaboration (Qualman, 2010). Facebook, for example, is considered a large online community where people can exchange information and ideas and perform transactions as if in physical community. According to Forbush and Foucault-Welles (2016), the phenomena of mass collaboration and constant engagement in social media have combined to create an online community of social media users who are united by the objective of achieving simultaneous communication independent of geographical distance. Online communities are based on the motivation, opportunity, ability (MOA) theory that focuses on maintaining and enhancing their ability to provide value to their members (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016). Thus, the ability of social media sites and platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook,

to provide value to their users is what makes them relevant. Social media sites provide various benefits to their users ranging from information to marketing services, thus providing the motivation, opportunity, and ability needed for the existence of the online communities.

Higher education institutions have leveraged the notion of online communities to improve their marketing and recruitment methods. By creating and constantly managing their official social media accounts, many universities and colleges have established interactive and supportive online communities. The online communities of most higher education institutions are comprised of their alumni, current staff and students, prospective students, and other stakeholders. Universities and colleges utilize their online communities to make not only relevant communications, but also market their services and attract prospective students. Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, are quite interactive, thus enabling higher education institutions to interact and connect deeply with their prospective students. Prospective students can also utilize social media to ask pertinent questions about the services offered by a university to arrive at an informed decision. The notion of online communities also enables universities to hold virtual fairs and web-conferences so as to not only connect, but also have a face-to-face conversation and question-and-answer sessions with prospective students. Virtual fairs and web-conferences are particularly important when dealing with international students, as most of them are often conflicted and anxious about learning abroad.

Vast and interactive online communities enable universities to disseminate their promotional videos and virtual videos, thus boosting their marketing and recruitment methods. Through the social media attribute of sharing, online communities enables universities to market their products and services to a wide number of prospective students. Online communities provide an interactive space among individuals sharing something. Therefore, members of universities' online communities are bonded by the fact that they are the stakeholders of the same educational institutions. The shared values among online communities provide universities with a perfect opportunity to market their services not only to members of their online communities, but also those connected to them. By sharing promotional videos and virtual videos about their services and offers to their online communities, universities create a domino effect. Social media platforms are based on a sharing attribute that promotes the sharing of information with one's online contacts (Qualman, 2010). Therefore, by sharing pertinent promotional videos to their online communities, universities instigate the sharing of their videos to others both within and without the networking communities. Online communities enable universities to disseminate their promotional videos and virtual videos, hence increasing their likelihood of recruiting new students.

Institutions of higher learning should build robust online communities among their current existing international students in order to improve their chances of attracting additional international students. According to Shu and Scott, (2014), universities and colleges that succeed in creating a community spirit among its international students by fostering online interactions and engagement are more likely to attract additional international students. Establishing a robust online community built amongst currently existing international students enables institutions of higher learning to not only showcase the diversity of their student body, but also the uniqueness of the experiences of their culturally-diverse students. According to Shu and Scott (2014), by constantly displaying the divergent cultural background of their students, universities and colleges promote their diverse university life, thus improving their ratings among prospective international students. Most international students are attracted by the notion of diversity and the prospect of enjoying a diverse university life whereby their cultural background is considered a non-issue (Shu & Scott, 2014). Tweets and other social media posts are effective ways of keeping diverse students,

especially international students, involved in the online university community, thus generating content that universities and colleges can leverage to shore up their admissions.

Institutions of higher learning should also create vibrant online alumni communities and leverage their extensive networks to bolster their admission and recruitment needs and strategies. All institutions of higher education that have been in existence for a while have alumni associations. Members of alumni associations have developed an extensive social and professional network in the course of their profession that institutions of higher education can leverage to bolster their rate of student admissions. Moreover, through their profession and work most members of alumni associations have solid reputations that institutions of higher learning can leverage to convince international students of the efficacy of the services they offer. According to Shu and Scott, (2014), alumni associations can be organized into vibrant online communities that colleges and universities can leverage for their marketing purposes. To organize their alumni associations, institutions of higher learning need to build an online community among its alumni members. Since most members of the alumni associations are graduates, and most likely working, it is advisable that universities and colleges build the online community, preferably on Facebook and LinkedIn. Colleges and universities should link the social media accounts of their alumni associations with their websites to allow for more interactions.

### **2.7. Students, Social Media, and Decision-making**

The process of university decision-making is quite intricate, especially for international students. Going to university or college is a watershed moment in every teenager's life. Higher learning opportunities present teenage students with the option of moving out of their parent's homes and developing themselves into self-reliant and independent individuals. Moreover, attending college or university provides individuals with the opportunity of securing an education, thus guaranteeing them a better future. Due to the importance of higher education, the opportunity of attending university is characterized by both optimism and fear; thus, this further complicates the process of university decision-making (Hamid et al., 2016). The process of university decision-making involves students weighing the benefits of each enlisted university or college, and eventually settling on a specific institution of higher learning to attend. The process of university decision-making is quite strenuous, as teenage students have to weigh various factors and make numerous considerations ranging from personal to economic. The complexity of the university decision-making process is exacerbated in the case of international students who face the task of going to a foreign country with alien cultures and without an immediate family or close friends for moral and social support.

The process of university decision-making is affected by various push-and-pull factors that shape and inform students' choice of university or college admissions. Various push-and-pull factors, such as parent influence, geographical proximity, language, and reputation of the institution of higher learning, influences students' university decision-making processes (Hamid et al., 2016). Parents are often a big influence on their children as they not only mentor, but also provide and take care of them. Therefore, a parent's decision and influence is a massive push or pull factor in determining a students' university choice. Parents influence plays even a major role when it comes to international students. According to Shu and Scott, 2014, most parents prefer that their children study in countries and institutions that they understand. Therefore, the university decision-making process of most international students are influenced by their parents and families. The reputation of an institution of higher education also influences students' university decision-making process, as most are likely to choose studying in a reputable university even if it is located abroad. The services, programs, and courses offered by an institution also influence a

student's university decision-making process. The effectiveness of an institution's recruitment process is also a pertinent push-and-pull factor, especially for international students.

Traditional and contemporary marketing sources have a massive influence in students' university decision-making process. According to Shu and Scott (2014), both tradition and modern marketing strategies and methods utilized by institutions of higher learning influence domestic and international students' university decision-making processes. Traditional marketing sources, such as word-of-mouth recommendation and referrals, especially from family and friends, shape and inform students' university choices. International students are mostly moved by the previous experiences of other previous international students (Hamid et al., 2016). Contemporary marketing techniques, such as social media marketing and direct marketing, also influence student's decision-making process. Direct marketing is based on the notion of personalized adverts, and therefore, provide prospective students with tailored messages that may help influence their university decision-making processes (Qualman, 2010). Social media marketing, especially through interactive social media pages, provide prospective students with the necessary information and insights needed to influence them into making an informed choice on the institution of higher learning they are to attend. The majority of students, especially international students who do not have the luxury of physically visiting colleges and universities, use social media to gain relevant information needed to make informed decisions about universities to attend.

Traditional and contemporary marketing techniques are effective in shaping students' university decision-making processes. Thus, institutions of higher learning should invest in both. Both traditional and contemporary marketing techniques have a massive impact on prospective students' decision-making processes. According to Hamid et al. (2016), traditional marketing techniques, such as print and broadcast media, remain highly relevant and influential in informing prospective students' university decision-making processes. The ubiquitous spread of the internet and social media has resulted in the emergence of social media marketing. Contemporary marketing techniques are quite effective as institutions of higher learning can utilize social media marketing to connect and interact directly with prospective students, thus shaping and informing their university decision-making processes (Sleeman et al., 2016). To achieve maximum marketing returns, universities and colleges need to not only invest in, but also better their traditional and contemporary marketing techniques. According to Sleeman et al. (2016), the amalgamation of both traditional and contemporary marketing techniques by institutions of higher learning should be based on a marketing policy that harmonizes their operations. Harmonizing traditional and contemporary marketing techniques not only increases their effectiveness, but also indicates a unity of purpose.

The university decision-making process is multifaceted and divided five distinct phases. According to Shu and Scott (2014), the process of university selection and decision-making has five phases: pre-search behavior, search behavior, application design, choice design, and matriculation decision. The pre-search behavior is the initial stage of the university decision-making process, and it involves students having a list of possible university and college opportunities. The pre-search behavior stage is characterized by the amalgamation of happiness and anxiety that characterizes having the opportunity of advancing one's education (Shu & Scott, 2014). The search behavior is the stage characterized by incessant search for insights, information, and data that can help the student make an informed decision. In the search behavior, stage students consult their friends, families, and other sources of reliable information on the programs offered in various institutions and their reputation. Application design is the stage whereby a student draws several university applications and sends them to universities and colleges of interest (Shu & Scott,

2014). The application design stage is important, as it requires a student to present his application in order to be considered for admission by their choice institution for higher learning.

The choice decision and matriculation decision stages are the penultimate and last steps in the university decision-making process, respectively. Choice decision is the stage whereby a student has to make an informed choice between two or more universities and colleges (Shu & Scott, 2014). The stage of choice decision occurs after a student's university application has been accepted by two or more institutions; thus, he or she has to make a choice. According to Shu and Scott (2014), the choice decision is the most draining among students as it forces them to make a decision whose consequences would have ramifications for their entire lives. Parental and professional guidance is recommended at the choice decision stage to help the prospective student to arrive rationally at an informed choice (Shu & Scott, 2014). The matriculation decision is the last stage of the university decision-making process, and it involves a student deciding to matriculate at an institution of higher education of his or her choice. At the matriculation decision stage, students have done their due diligence, consulted with their parents, and their decisions are not only grounded on tangible information, but also final.

Institutions of higher learning can maximize their marketing outcomes by focusing on the pre-search behavior, search behavior, and application decision stages of university decision-making. According to Sleeman et al. (2016), to maximize their marketing outcomes universities and colleges should focus on advertising their services to prospective students in the initial stages of the university decision-making process. The first three stages of the university decision-making process, especially the pre-search behavior, is characterized by student's uncertainty and doubt over their university and colleges choices. According to Sleeman et al. (2016), in the pre-search behavior, most prospective students are ignorant about not only the specific course and programs they want to pursue, but also the institutions of higher education they want to join. The search behavior stage of university decision-making process is characterized by prospective students seeking information about relevant course and institutions. Therefore, students need maximum insights and guidance during the first three university decision-making processes. By leveraging both traditional and modern marketing methods, institutions of higher learning can engage with prospective students in the first three stages of university decision-making process, thus, providing them with pertinent information and insights needed to make informed decisions.

## **2.8. Educational Institutions' Use of Social Media for Advertisement**

Continuous marketing and advertisement is the lifeline of most universities in the current field of higher learning. Traditionally, institutions of higher learning, such as universities and colleges, were set up and fully funded by governments or non-government entities. Through a harmonized admission framework and process, universities admitted students straight from high school mostly based on their grades. In the 1980s, however, the demand for higher education skyrocketed globally, thus fostering an unprecedented increase in the number of private universities and colleges (Calitz & Cullen, 2012). Moreover, numerous public universities also responded to the surge in demand for higher education by introducing self-sponsored education programs. Similar to private universities and colleges, self-sponsored education programs are not funded by the government and they depend on the tuition fees paid by the students they admit. For the self-sponsored educational programs to remain viable, universities and colleges have to focus on admitting numerous students. To attract more students, and thus, increase their admissions and intakes, universities have to continuously market and advertise the services they offer. The prevalence of social media and the internet provides universities with an immense marketing opportunity.

Technological advancements, such as social media, have revolutionized university marketing and recruitment methods. Service marketing, the notion that marketing is a service was developed in the 1980s and it formed the basis of university marketing methods (Calitz & Cullen, 2012). With service marketing, universities and colleges were able to promote services in the form of scholarships and courses offered to prospective students. Moreover, with service marketing, universities were able to use a range of advertisement techniques including outreach activities, exhibitions and road shows, recruitment agents, public relations programs, and print and broadcast media advertisements (Calitz & Cullen, 2012). Technological advancements, especially the emergence and prevalence of the internet and social media, facilitated the development of direct marketing and viral marketing. The revolutionary notions of direct and viral marketing enabled universities to develop websites and social media accounts, and therefore, switch from traditional to modern marketing and recruitment models (Hamid et al., 2016). Direct and viral marketing by leveraging the internet and social media enables universities to not only personalize their advertisements, but to engage with numerous prospective students. Social media and other internet-based interactive platforms, such as websites and blogs, enables universities to reach out to a wide number of international students than ever before.

Social media has enabled universities to leverage the notion of customer relationship management to attract numerous prospective students. The notion of customer relationship management emerged in the 1990s, and it espoused that, to attract more customers, business organizations need to focus on bettering the relationships with their customers (Hamid et al., 2016). Based on the notion that customer is king, customer relationship management enables organizations to focus fully on the satisfaction of their customers. Customer relationship management provides universities with a customer relationship dimension that enables them to boost their enrollment. Through customer relationship management universities maintain a database of individuals who visit their websites and official social media pages. Data from the databases enables universities to make personalized adverts enlisting their curricula, tuition fees, and other basic information to highly qualified prospects (Sleeman et al., 2016). Therefore, customer relationship management in the contemporary digital age, characterized by the prevalent usage of social media and the internet, has enabled universities to increase unprecedentedly their admissions and intakes.

The prevalence of social media users globally has made universities embrace social media marketing. Before the invention of social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, most universities utilized traditional marketing options, such as promotional tours and print and broadcast media. However, most traditional marketing options are dependent on geographical locations, a factor that limited the ability of universities to attract and recruit international students (Choudaha & Chang, 2011; Calitz & Cullen, 2012). For example, print and broadcast media, the most preferred marketing method used by universities before the emergence of social media, has limited international reach. The emergence of social media and the prevalence of the internet quickly made various marketing techniques, such as use of brochures, obsolete and led to the emergence of social media marketing. A 2015 survey conducted by Facebook revealed that more than 94% of undergraduate students have Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter accounts (Hamid et al., 2016). That millions of students and individuals in the world have and constantly use their social media account has also informed most universities' decision to embrace quickly social media marketing. Since social media is independent of geographical locations it enables universities to better attract international students.

To better their chances of attracting international students, institutions of higher education need to increase their online penetration rate and have an effective Facebook presence. According to a 2011 study, *Student Insight: Online Marketing to a Global Students Audience*, Facebook is set to remain the most popular and commonly used social media platform in the world; thus, it provides universities and colleges with an opportunity to attract international students from divergent parts of the world (“Inside Facebook,” n.d). Institutions of higher education also need to take account of the various emerging social network sites, such as Tencent QQ and TikTok. Tencent QQ and TikTok are Chinese social network platforms with a cumulative membership of more than 1.7 billion registered users (Shu & Scott, 2014). Institutions of higher education can establish online communities in TikTok and Tencent QQ, and therefore, tap into the potential of China’s big and ever-growing population. The 2011 study also revealed that most of the top 13 countries with the highest number of international students had a strong online penetration rate ranging between 70% and 80% (“Inside Facebook,” n.d). Asian countries, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea, have high online penetration rates that makes them attractive to international students (Shu & Scott, 2014). To attract international students, institutions of higher education need to invest in their Facebook accounts and increase their online penetration rate.

To attract international students, institutions of higher education need to improve their social media engagement. Social media engagement encompasses not only physical and cognitive but also emotional interactions. Most institutions of higher education have not fully invested in their social media accounts as most of them are drub and dull, and therefore, are not cognitively and emotionally engaging (Shu & Scott, 2014). Additionally, the social media accounts and pages of most universities are inactive. This is a big turnoff, especially to international students, who are keen to learn about every vital aspect of an institution before making an informed choice (Shu & Scott, 2014). To improve their social media engagement, institutions of higher learning need to create colorful and interactive social media pages and accounts. Moreover, universities and colleges need to hire or train social media experts who can not only handle their social media pages, but can also provide instant interactions with prospective students. According to Sleeman et al. (2016), most universities utilize virtual assistants in their social media pages for prompt interactions with prospective students. However, virtual assistants can never replace human interactions, especially the emotional skill required to convince an international student to make a life-changing decision, such as signing up for a foreign university.

Institutions of higher learning should also develop interactive websites that are not only connected with their social media accounts, but are also based on customer relationship management. A website is key in attracting both international and domestic students, as it is the first site prospective students interested in a university’s services visit. According to Sleeman et al. (2016), the specific function of a website depends on the purpose for which it is created, therefore, an institution’s website may be aimed at disseminating information, promoting services, or creating awareness. In the current digital age, a good website, however, needs to contain links to a university’s social media pages. For example, North Carolina State University’s website has an integrated social media function, and therefore, apart from disseminating relevant information about the institution can also be used for social interaction purposes (Hamid et al., 2016). Customer relationship management is an integral element of social media marketing and direct marketing. Thus, it should be embraced by institutions of higher education. The implementation of customer relationship management will enable colleges and universities to establish an interactive database of all prospective students visiting their websites and social media pages. Utilizing data from the customer-relationship management database, institutions of higher education can personalize their



advertisements to prospective students, thus increasing their chances of increasing their admissions.

To attract more international students, institutions of higher learning need to provide prospective international students with real-time support through verified social media accounts. According to Hamid et al. (2016), fast and easy interactions are integral in developing rapport and mutual trust in social media, and therefore, colleges and universities need to provide reliable and prompt customer support services to prospective students. According to Sleeman et al. (2016), the average response on social media should take between two to four minutes, as most institutions of higher learning take days to respond to simple inquiries. To streamline their social media operations, institutions of higher learning should first ensure that they have verified social media accounts to eliminate the risks of fraud. According to Sleeman et al. (2016), universities and colleges should also utilize multiple keyword searches and geo-located social media streams to not only avoid duplication of replies, but also personalize their responses to prospective students. Moreover, universities and colleges should set up a social media team led by an experienced team head who has deep insights and vast experience in dealing with international students.

The effectiveness of social media marketing is, however, dependent on numerous factors, and it may not result in increased enrollments if not properly utilized. According to Shu and Scott (2014), the concept of social media effectiveness in the recruitment of students, especially international students is impacted by how universities view social media usage and apply it to their marketing strategies. There is a high and growing demand in the number of international students globally, thus, their attraction and recruitment are characterized by intense competition. Therefore, institutions of higher education key in increasing their admissions and enrollments have to adopt a positive view and guiding philosophy on the role of social media not only in education, but also in marketing. Adopting a positive guiding philosophy on the role of social media enables universities and colleges to integrate social media in their marketing strategies and framework (Shu & Scott, 2014). Additionally, institutions of higher learning need to identify departments that are key to their marketing strategy and create for them interactive social media accounts and pages. University departments ranging from admission offices to others including, marketing department, alumni office, student body, and outreach department must set up social media accounts through which they can engage or interact with students.

To maximize the impact of social media marketing institutions of higher education need to grant self-sufficiency with regard to the management of social media channels to their various department. Universities and colleges are composed of various schools, faculties, and departments. For example, Harvard University has divergent schools, such as the Harvard Law School and Harvard Medical School, which further have various distinct departments. According to Shu and Scott (2014), institutes of higher education need to empower each school and department to not only create distinct social media pages and accounts, but also grant them the self-sufficiency needed for their efficient management. Establishing distinct social media pages for various departments will improve the quality of the interactions and engagement between institutions of higher learning and prospective students. Since the departments of higher learning are different, it is important that they have separate social media pages that highlights their uniqueness (Shu & Scott, 2014). However, due to the overriding need of creating a unified overall image of an institution, the contents of the divergent social media accounts must be harmonized. Institutions of higher education can harmonize the social media pages of their divergent departments by enacting a sound social media managing policy.

Apart from the strategic use of social media marketing, institutions of higher learning need to continue using traditional marketing models, such as print and broadcast media. Though universities and colleges should invest in social media networking, they should not completely abandon traditional marketing methods. Traditional marketing methods offer time-tested and reliable marketing techniques. Moreover, traditional marketing methods, such as print and broadcast media, provides institutions of higher learning with a ready domestic market for the recruitment of prospective students. Countries, such as the U.K., U.S., Australia, and Canada, that have recorded reduced number of international students' admission in the recent past have encouraged their higher education institutions to not only embrace the strategic use of social media marketing, but also not to ignore traditional marketing techniques (Hamid et al., 2016). Maintaining a healthy balance between traditional and social media marketing techniques provides universities and colleges with a large number of target audience, thereby increasing their chances of upping their admissions.

### **2.9. Benefits of Social Media to Universities**

Social media marketing provides several strategic advantages to institutions of higher learning, thus making it effective for the recruitment of both domestic and international students. Social media is not only fast-paced, but also independent of geographical locations, thus enabling prompt and seamless interactions (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Social media is internet-based, thus allowing for the quick flow of information without hindrance from geographical barriers. That social media is independent of geographical locations enables institutions of higher learning to maintain seamless and uninterrupted communications with prospective students from all over the world. Moreover, social media correspondences are quite fast. Hence, they enable colleges and universities to provide prospective students with relevant information and insights.

Social media is highly cost-effective compared to other marketing platforms, thus providing colleges and universities with the opportunity of cheaply recruiting more students. Social media is internet-based, thus requiring only a reliable internet connection and internet-enabled devices, such as smartphones and laptops. Unlike traditional marketing methods, such as print and broadcast media and international exhibits, social media marketing is relatively cheaper. Moreover, the management of social media marketing is relatively easy and institutions of higher education do not have to hire experts to manage their social media accounts. According to Shu and Scott (2014), colleges and universities should train members of its student body and staff on social media marketing, and therefore, forego the need of hiring experts whose salaries will stretch their operating expenses. Numerous universities, such as the North Carolina State University, have tasked their model students with managing their websites and social media accounts. For example, model students in North Carolina State University, at no cost, programmed the university's website into a social networking platform to enable interactive engagements by its users (Shu & Scott, 2014). Therefore, universities and colleges can involve their staff and students in the day-to-day management of their social media account, further minimizing on operation costs.

Social media allows for personalization that is integral to recruiting international students. Almost all social media accounts enable their users to customize their languages and layouts, thus facilitating interactive engagement among social media users. According to Hamid et al. (2016), various American and Canadian universities have leveraged the personalization utility of social media to attract thousands of international students from non-English speaking countries, such as South Korea, China, and Saudi Arabia. The personalization utility of social media also enables institutions of higher learning to engage in direct marketing. Direct marketing that involves the personalization of adverts to the target market, which is particularly important when targeting a

specific segment of the market. Through direct marketing colleges and universities are able to create personalized adverts and send them to prospective international students who have visited their social media accounts or websites. According to Hamid et al. (2016), the virtual tour application is also a social media tool that allows for institutions of higher learning to provide personalized virtual tours of their physical facilities, the course, services, and programs they offer. By giving a personalized sneak peak of what universities and colleges have to offer, the virtual tour applications enables institutions of higher learning to attract more international students.

As we all know that usage of Internet has been increased as a tool of connecting to each other. People find Internet the best way to communicate as it has made their lives easier. Social networking sites are more friendly and appealing. People use to spend plenty of their time on this kind of sites. These sites are easily accessible by all kind of smart phones. This trending behavior enforces other industries to approach their potential customers through these sites. However, Industries especially educational institutions needs to understand why they need to use these sites for their advertisements. They have to find out why and what type of people are using this type of sites. They will find out that large number of students are using these types of social sites and they introduce them to their other fellows as well. Some use to find their old colleagues and some use to keep in touch with their friends which live in other regions of the world. Adding to this both male and female shows equal involvement in participating on these sites.

The UNESCO Institute of Statistics (n.d.) states international or internationally mobile students as "students who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purpose of education and are now enrolled outside their country of origin." Alternatively, the OECD (2003) describes international students as "persons admitted by a country other than their own, usually under special permits or visas, for the specific purpose of following a particular course of study in an accredited institution of the receiving country. International students are students who do not hold the citizenship of the country for which the data are collected."

Any university would suffer because of inappropriate marketing procedures and recruitment targets. Implementing advertising concepts and attracting foreign student may be hard at times. But they must continuously figure out different and unique ways to attract foreign students if they have goals to recruit potential students from all over the world. Knowing the most effective ways is important in publicizing. "While increased mobile technologies influence student communication, social media marketing focuses on customer engagement, improved communications, and increasing brand loyalty" (Constaninides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). Universities must have clear understanding of the needs of foreign students, the kind of universities students are looking for, how they choose for academic courses offered by any university also why they choose abroad for higher studies. Universities need to build strong communication strategies to find out the solutions so that they can keep them up to date by students needs and desires. Many universities are in contact with their students through their websites and email as well. "Ohio State University students chosen communication from the school via email (82%) followed by the website (17.8%). For general updates, 68.9% chose email, while 33.7% chose the web site" (Ohio State Office of Student Life, 2010).

More educational institutions are embracing social media for purposes such as marketing educational programs or courses and recruiting students. According to Calitz and Cullen (2012), today's educational institutions are involved in business, as they struggle to recruit students and maximize profitability in the process. For today's educational institutions, particular those of higher learning, students are consumers of educational services. In this regard, educational institutions have capitalized on numerous opportunities provided by social media, such as reach,

traffic, new audiences, and expertise (Calitz & Cullen, 2012). Concerning reach, educational institutions today seek to enhance awareness of their brands among students. Through social media, educational institutions as service providers enjoy a wide reach (Calitz & Cullen, 2012). Markedly, the use of social media channels has been instrumental in the institutions' tremendous extension of brand presence from regional contexts to the international context.

Through social media, educational institutions have also managed to drive traffic to other channels, such as websites. For instance, for an educational institution with a huge following on either Facebook or Twitter, it can direct the traffic to its own website by providing more information to the followers on how they can access the institutional website (Calitz & Cullen, 2012). The institutions can also take advantage of an opportunity provided by social media, such as new audience. Social media helps corporates reach new and growing audiences and helps in completing other efforts corporates have in interacting with the new and growing audiences (Calitz & Cullen, 2012). Many educational institutions are taking advantage of this specific opportunity and are striving to convert the new and growing audiences into students. Moreover, the expertise brought about by social media is important for today's educational institutions in their expansion objectives (Calitz & Cullen, 2012). Through social media, the staff and faculty in such institutions can share, educate, and provide relevant information to prospective and current student about course or programs offered.

A study by Paladan (2018) also sought to establish the correlation between the success of higher education institutions (HEIs) and their adoption of social media marketing. Paladan (2018) notes that HIEs are increasingly realizing the importance of appealing to an ever-expanding and diverse student base. To achieve this objective, many HEIs are increasingly becoming reliant on social media for marketing and successful outreach. With the help of social media, HEIs have acquired new communication possibilities that enable their direct engagement with potential consumers in the form of students. The engagement occurs when HEI recruiters interact with students searching for suitable courses or programs to pursue. Principally, engagement of students on social media platforms is one expensive strategy for HEIs to persuade and attract prospective students (Paladan, 2018). However, the benefits associated with engaging prospective students on social media are tremendous. For HEIs that seek to reduce the costs that present with marketing on social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, creating own social networks or online communities is important.

That social media is integral to marketing and recruitment functions of HEIs can have direct correlation with how successful these institutions can be and have notable influence on these institutions' policy formulation. The study by Paladan (2018) found that students who are logged onto certain social media networks and access information on a university are likely to apply to join the university. Notably, this is particularly important in the recruitment of foreign or international students (Paladan, 2018). The dire global economic situation linked to inflation has resulted in a rise in tuition and fees in several countries. HEIs have been affected adversely as many domestic students can hardly afford the exorbitant tuition and fees. Consequently, many HEIs are dependent on the recruitment and attraction of international students with the capacity to pay higher fees and ultimately help with subsidization of part of these institutions' financial success. In this regard, HEIs are finding it critical to recruit international students by relying on the power of social media (Paladan, 2018). As HEIs accept international students due to the power of social media, the benefit is not only for the institutions, but also for their domestic students who get the opportunity to interact with international students.

## **2.10. Chapter Conclusion**

Numerous reputable scholars have conducted intensive research and written on the influence of social media on international students. The literature review has revealed that a vast knowledge of relevant knowledge exists on the nexus connecting social media, international students, and institutions of higher learning. Various studies have pinpointed the multifaceted nature and the numerous steps that characterize students' university decision-making process. The university decision-making process is also not only susceptible to various push-and-pull factors, but is also impacted by both traditional and contemporary marketing methods. Numerous push-and-pull factors, such as parental influence and the reputation of an institution of higher learning, influence individuals' university choices. Both traditional and contemporary marketing techniques, such as print and broadcast media and social media networking, respectively, also influence the university decision-making process. Therefore, it is a well-established fact that institutions of higher learning can utilize both traditional and contemporary marketing models to increase their rate of enrollment, especially for international students.

Social media and its divergent attributes has revolutionized how institutions of higher learning market themselves to and attract international students. Social media is based on three key attributes: engagement, collaboration, and community. The divergent attributes enable social media to provide marketing services to institutions of higher learning. The attribute of engagement enables institutions of higher learning to have and maintain physical, emotional, and cognitive engagement with prospective international students. The notion of mass collaboration forms the basis of online communities, which enables universities and colleges to perform both direct and social media marketing effectively. The attribute of online communities is the hallmark of social media marketing as it creates an interactive and virtual community characterized by the mutual sharing of obligations. The various attributes of social media have revolutionized how institutions of higher learning market their programs and services. Due to their reliability and effectiveness, especially in attracting domestic students, various studies maintain that traditional marketing methods, such as international exhibitions and print and broadcast media, are still relevant, and hence, universities and colleges should not completely abandon them based on the emergence of social media.

Regardless of the wealth of literature and information on the influence of social media on international students, there is a glaring knowledge gap on the impact of social media on international students hailing from the gulf countries. The bulk of literature on the topic does not address how social media impacts university and college choice among students hailing from the gulf area and are interested in studying abroad. Most studies on the nexus between social media and the impact on university decision-making process rather focuses on students hailing from other parts of the world, particularly European, Asian, and African countries. Therefore, there is limited evidence not only on the preference of prospective gulf students when making university or college choices, but also on the social media platforms preferred by most gulf students. The dearth of relevant studies and literature that address the specific concerns of prospective Arabic international students justifies the urgent need for this study.

## **CHAPTER 3- RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the chapter and justify the methodological processes applied in this research to respond to the research questions, sub-research questions, and research objectives. The rationale for the research approach, philosophy, purpose, and description of the strategy adopted. Besides, the discussions about the methods rejected and reason for rejection outlined. Furthermore, the choice of data collection methods and sampling techniques, and matters about the reliability of those approaches are discussed. The chapter also outlines the ethical considerations and limitations associated to the research methodology that has been adopted. Ultimately, the paper enhances the replication of the methods of research employed thereby backing up the reliability of the study.

### **3.1. Research Design**

Research design is defined as “a blueprint for conducting a study with maximum control over factors that may interfere with the validity of the findings” (Burns & Grove, 2009). According to Donald Cooper research design is defined as “The research design constitutes the blue-print for collection, measurement and analysis of data”

Facts and figures are collected with the assistance of questionnaires that are being set up by means of the research approach, philosophy, intention, and strategy and time horizon. The respondents of this study are international students from the Gulf countries such as Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia to assess the impact of the social media on international students. Furthermore, the prepared mode of questionnaires will assist the researchers to easily relate the statistical mediums on the compiled data, to ascertain the important consequences of the study.

The first part of data collection concerned critical study of previous literature with the intention of making a series of questionnaire items found on the matter interrelated to the research purpose. The second part necessitates the formation of theoretical framework with indication to existing literature in those areas of social media, which has effect on students. The matter and pattern dealings across diverse literatures knowledgeable hypotheses and testimonial of dimensions and constructs for the self-administered survey questionnaires via the online Key Survey system. International potential students were encouraged to contribute in the online survey via the Intranet portal along with information for the survey. No individuals' personal or student particulars were obligatory for this survey therefore declaring confidentiality and ambiguity.

### **3.2. Research Question**

The overall design is guided by the research question. For a research question to be relevant to the overall design, it must be supported by the goals or objectives of the study. Therefore, the researcher must ensure that he or she clearly defines and establishes the scope and limits of the research question, because they act as a guide to the overall research design. A well-defined research question is characterized by clear definition and identification of the research topic and the research endeavor. Notably, this thesis' research question satisfies this conceptual requirement. A good and well-defined research should define the research topic, which, in this case, is about the impact of social media on international students' decision-making processes, especially those from the gulf. A good research question, therefore, should define the research endeavor, which, in this case, is the purpose of this particular work. The purpose of this study is to explore and investigate the role of social media in influencing the decision-making and choices of international students from the gulf to pursue education in foreign countries. A good research question should also define the questions that the experimenters are interested in finding answers to. The questions that this study is interested in include:

- Which social media platform helps gulf students to search for a university/programs/course?
- Which social media marketing techniques inspires gulf students to making decisions?
- What are the preferences of gulf students while selecting any institution?
- Which social apps are more likeable by the gulf students?
- What are the most effective media sites which can be utilized by educational bodies to attract potential students?

The main research question is that: What is the effect of social media in influencing international students' decision-making processes, especially from gulf countries, to be incited by developed countries in order to improve their overall economic competitiveness?

### 3.2.1. Sub Questions

- Q1. Which social media platform helps gulf students to search for a university/programs/course?
- Q2. Which social media marketing techniques inspires gulf students to making decisions?
- Q3. What are the preferences of gulf students while selecting any institution?
- Q4. Which social apps are more likeable by the gulf students?
- Q5. What are the most effective media sites which can be utilized by educational bodies to attract potential students?

### 3.3. Research Objectives

The research objectives solidify the relationships between the research problem, question, and goals. The process of defining and designing a clear and concise statement of research objectives is not just a matter of creating specific statement of the goals involved. Often, there will be no single definitive set of objectives for a given aim since the aim might be satisfied by different sets of objectives. This applies in this study as its fundamental aim is expressed by a number of different objectives. Notably, the study is somewhat complicated as it focuses on international students' perception and use of social media, social media marketing, and the impact of social media on the international students from the gulf region. The objectives of the research are aligned with the sub-questions that had been outlined earlier. Therefore, the objectives of the study are:

- To determine if social media helps the students from the gulf region to make own choices of their desired universities, programs, or courses.
- To determine if diverse social media marketing techniques inspire gulf students to make effective decisions.
- To establish the preferences of gulf students while selecting the international institutions they would like to join.
- To determine the social media sites that Gulf students often prefer using in searching for the international universities that they would like to join or the programs and courses they desire to pursue
- To establish the social media sites and features that international universities could use to attract and recruit students from the gulf.

### 3.4. Research Hypotheses

Research hypotheses are the tentative or presumptive answers to the research questions. The purpose of research hypotheses is mainly to indicate a researcher's interests in a particular topic, and that his or her goal is to prove or disprove the sets of assumptions or tentative answers. Thus, research hypotheses are the results that the experimenter(s) expect after completion of their work. In this study, there are only two hypotheses;

H<sub>1</sub>: Social media marketing techniques can effectively influence the decision-making and choices of the students from the gulf region while selecting the international universities that they would like to join and courses or programs that they would like to pursue.

H<sub>2</sub>: International students from the gulf region often turn to the use of social media while selecting the universities that they would like to join and courses they desire to pursue.

The above hypotheses are to be proved or disproved by the study's results and findings.

### **3.5. Research Framework**

Before researchers conduct an experiment, they ought to plan for the actual research in order to achieve better results for their work. In planning for the actual research, it is necessary if researchers apply various mechanisms including systematic and scientific aspects. Researchers can also apply those mechanisms while conducting the actual study. The above objectives can be best achieved through the integration of a research framework into the experiment, which largely helps to guide the overall study. This work has adopted the use of a research framework, which acts as a guide to addressing various aspects of the research including the main research question, objectives, strategies, and the methods used.

### **3.6. Population Of The Study**

Gulf countries are selected for the population of the study, such as Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia. Almost 250 to 300 is the size of population of the study. The research is carried out on the effect of social media for influencing international students' especially from gulf countries to be prompted by developed countries, in order to progress their overall economic competitiveness.

### **3.7. Sampling Techniques**

The self-administered method is moderately valuable particularly in the framework of this study. For example, it is further suitable in requisites of charges, time and comparative geographical dispersal of interviewer and the most potential respondents. Respondents were furthermore divided into sub-categories so as to be submitted as the stratum according to the countries.

### **3.8. Sample Size**

The overall sample size for the current research is 50. 10 students from each country were selected; total sample for pilot testing is 50. These samples were procedure in the different countries and those are attracted to move in different developed countries. The students were selected by emails being sent to them at the self-administered questionnaires being attached. The emails of the participants were obtained from various international universities.

### **3.9. Instruments and Measures**

Questionnaire has most widely been used for data collection in Gulf countries. To be completely related, the questions mention in research must maintain the goals or objectives of the research. The researcher ought to clearly describe and create the possibility and confines for the questions as they provide the origin of the research design. The questionnaire used in this study was adopted from a website, finest representation of the interests for this study. Questionnaire analysis is an incredibly and best conventional way to collect data and it assists researchers to collect reasonable information (Sekaran, 2003).

The study questionnaires develop mostly featured as open and closed ended questions, which is further divided into five segments. The segments include section A, B, C, D, and E.

**Section A-General Information.** This is the first section of the study, and it involves obtaining data related to various demographic aspects of the gulf students. The demographic data includes the country of residence of each of the students from the gulf region, name, age, gender,



university, course, and when did the students first search for the information about the university or course they would want to join or pursue, respectively. Notably, various demographic aspects are argued to influence the decision-making processes of gulf students. Thus, it was necessary to investigate whether this was applicable in this context of study. This section comprised of numerous questions to help the research to obtain sufficient demographic data from the participants. One of the questions is concerned with the age of each student. Another question sought to help the researcher establish the country of residence for each student across the gulf region. The questions also sought to identify the gender of each participant. Another question also sought to help the researcher to establish the international universities and colleges that gulf students might have joined and the courses or programs they pursue in those institutions. Another question also sought to establish when gulf students studying abroad first searched for the information about the programs they would desire to pursue and international universities they desired to join.

**Section B-Traditional Information Sources.** This section focuses on exploring the types of traditional information sources that gulf students in international universities may have used to obtain information about the universities and colleges they have joined, and the courses they pursue in those institutions. This section comprised of 3 questions that sought to investigate whether the students' choices and decision-making processes might have been influenced by their friends, teaching staff, parents, recruitment agents, and family members. The questions sought to identify how friends might have played part in influencing the decisions and choices of the students related to the course they are pursuing and the universities they might have joined. The questions sought to focus on the role parents and other family members might have played in persuading the students to pursue particular courses and join the universities and colleges they settled for. The questions were concerned with establishing whether the former teaching staff may have played a part in informing the gulf students about the importance of studying in international universities and providing them with information about various universities and the courses that they ought to pursue in those institutions in case they join one. Additionally, questions focused on whether or not recruitment agents might have influenced gulf students to join the universities they are currently in. The questions also focused on whether the gulf students in international universities and colleges might have obtained information about those institutions from various sources within their former schools.

**Section C-Social Media Information Sources.** This section was the most intensive as it centered on the research objectives. The section focused on addressing various aspects related to gulf students' familiarity to diverse social media sites and applications, usage patterns, the social media sites and applications that gulf students largely use, as well as the students' suggestions related to particular social media sites, such as Facebook and Google, among others. The section comprised of various questions. For instance, the questions focused on issues related to students' familiarity to various social media sites. The questions sought to determine whether gulf students studying abroad might have used those sites to obtain information and to influence their university and course selection process. They also sought to assess the students' usage patterns of the various social media sites they might have been familiar with. The goal of these questions was to evaluate how often gulf students uses various social media sites to obtain data related to particular universities. Furthermore, they focused on the social media sites that the gulf students often use to obtain data related to the universities and courses they would desire to join and pursue abroad. The questions were posed to help universities and colleges to establish the sites and applications they can use for social media marketing to attract students from gulf students to join those institutions.

The questions also emphasized on the students' perceptions related to diverse social media sites. These questions were to evaluate if international universities make attractive social media posts or if they post incomplete information on social media. The questions were also posed to assess the attitudes and beliefs of gulf students related to the usage of diverse social media sites, such as Facebook and Instagram. The questions could be of benefit to international universities by giving them insight into the various social media sites that gulf students tend to dislike, thus helping the institutions to avoid using them in their social media marketing practices.

**Section D- General Social Media Use.** This section involved how gulf students used social media and their activities and profiles. It comprised various questions that focused on their activities and the time they often spend on social media. The questions focused on the activities and profile checks that gulf students undertook in social media before being influenced to pursue education in universities abroad. The questions also sought to assess the time the students from the gulf region generally spent in various social media sites undertaking various activities or searching for information about aspects that are not related to the research questions and objectives.

**Section E-University Course Information on Social Media.** This section comprised of various questions that sought to identify how social media marketing may have influenced their choice of the course of study. It also sought to determine what social media apps they used to identify the better courses. The questions also focused on identifying the recommendations gulf students can provide to international universities on what social media sites and apps they should use to attract more students from the gulf region.

The survey comprises of attribute, behavior and judgment data. On the other hand, data representing behavior variable kinds was significantly more. The question natures applied in this survey are the demographic questions, dichotomous questions, multiple choice questions, ranking & rating scale or Likert scale questions and open-ended questions. The reason of each of these different natures of question is expressed in the table 3.1.

### 3.10. Nature of Question

Nature of Question	Explanation
Demographic	Demographic questions are an integral part of any questionnaire. They are used to identify characteristics such as age, gender, race, geographic place of residence, etc. Demographic data helps to establish a more accurate picture of the group of persons you are trying to understand
Dichotomous	This is generally a "Yes/No" question. They are screening questions with the option to branch out to relevant subsequent questions.
Multiple Choice	Consist of three or more exhaustive, mutually exclusive categories. Multiple choice questions can ask for respondents to select anywhere from or more answers. This type of question may include an "other" category.
Likert Rating Scale	Requires a person to rate a particular attribute along a well-defined continuum. They are often used to measure the direction and intensity of attitudes.
Open-Ended	The open-ended question seeks to explore the qualitative, in-depth aspect of a particular topic or issue. It gives the

	respondent an opportunity to respond in more detail and to validate the relevant responses
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Source: *QuestionPro* (<http://www.questionpro.com>)

The questionnaire is alienated into five most important segments i.e. Section A to Section E. The segments are modified to gather data connected demographics about the international student; traditional information; social media information; general social media application and proposal for social media application by universities.

### 3.10.1. Relationship of Survey Questions to Research Objectives

At the start of this study, the main research question was expressed as ‘What is the impact or influence of social media has on international students' university?’ Furthermore, 4 derivative questions were prepared to assist the main research question. The correlation between the survey questionnaire segments and the supplementary questions are comprehended in Table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2. Relationships of Survey Questions to Research Objectives

SURVEY SEGMENTS	RELATIONSHIP TO RESEARCH OBJECTIVES
Section A - General Information	To establish country origin of students attempting the survey.
Section B – Traditional Information	To conclude information that potential students notify university while course selection
Section C – Social Media Information	To authenticate the part of social media in their university course selection procedure of students.
Section D – General Social Media	To decide the use of social media usually and the type of activities in which they are keeping on social media
Section E – University Course Information on Social Media	To recommend effectual social media advertising practices that can be used to attract potential international students

### 3.11. Survey Questions

This section outlines all the questions from the survey questionnaire with the justification of each. In the process of creating the survey questions, the aim was to align them to the research objectives. The following are the questions from the survey questionnaire:

- ***What is your age?***

This question was about each participant’s age to determine that the age group corresponds to the age of the students from the gulf region who may or may not be planning to pursue higher education in the international universities. The study targeted gulf students who were aged between 18-40 years.

- ***Which country are you from?***

The study was focusing on students from gulf. This question sought to determine which of the five gulf countries each of the students studying abroad came from. The countries which were included in the study included Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia.

- ***What is your gender?***

The goal of asking the participants this question was to understand the perception of students depending on the behavioral aspects of feminine or masculine.

- ***Which university course are you studying?***

This question was included in the survey questionnaire to determine whether the students who participated in the study were undertaking diploma, bachelor's, or masters' degree courses in various universities abroad.

- ***When did you first look for university course information?***

The objective of this question was to determine in what instances did any of the students who participated in the study first looked for a given university and the courses they were pursuing in various institutions. Some of the expected results were that gulf students studying abroad may have first researched university course information while still in high school or after high school, while undertaking diploma or bachelor's degree courses, after university graduation, through friends, when reading newspapers' advertisement, or at work.

- ***How did you first hear about your university?***

The question sought to determine how gulf students studying abroad may have first heard about the university they may have joined. Some of the aspects considered in this question is whether they may have obtained information about particular universities they joined through their friends, recruitment agents, former teaching staff, family members, or other persons.

- ***Which traditional source did you use to obtain relevant information related to university you desired to join and course you looked forward to pursue?***

The question sought to ascertain the traditional sources of information that students from the gulf region used to research information about the university and course they may have joined and pursuing, respectively. Some of the technological sources that were being considered for this question include; newspaper advertisements, use of university and high school websites, recruitment agents, and other sources.

- ***What information did you look for using the traditional information sources?***

The objective of this question was to establish the type of information gulf students studying abroad were trying to obtain using traditional information sources. The expected answers for this question are that the students were relying on traditional sources to obtain information about given universities that they desired to join, the courses they looked forward to pursue in those institutions, university facilities, the culture adopted in those universities, and the activities and programs that students within those institutions mostly engage in.

- ***During your search for the appropriate course to pursue in a given international university, did you by anyway interact or contact with the university?***

This question sought to ascertain whether students from the gulf region might have contacted the international universities before they joined those institutions. The question sought to determine the means through which those students may have contacted the relevant institutions. The expected results were that they might have contacted respective universities through the various social media sites, the use of phone calls, emails, or engaging in face-to-face discussions with the university's faculty.

- ***What social media sites did you visit for University course information?***

The objective of this question was to establish the social media sites that the gulf students included in the study might have used in university course selection. Gulf students use various social media sites to obtain information about various international universities and the list of courses they offer, and other relevant information. Some of the social media sites they use include; Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and YouTube, among others.

- ***What kind of information did you seek from using diverse social media sources?***

The objective of this question was to identify whether the students from gulf region were using diverse social media sources to obtain university information, course information, university facilities, and other related information.

- ***During your university course search, did you interact or contact a given university using the choice of social media site?***

The objective of this question was to identify whether gulf students often interact with respective universities they may have searched in a bid to obtain more information. The goal was to give an insight into the kind of information they might be requesting for when they interact with relevant university departments.

- ***Which of the following sources influenced you most during your decision-making related to university course selection?***

The question was integrated into the survey questionnaire to establish the social media sites that positively influences the students' decision-making in gulf region related to course selection. It was integrated into the survey to give universities an insight into the social media sites they can rely on to reach many of students from the gulf region.

- ***How did social media help you in university course selection and decision?***

The focus of this question was on the benefits that students from the gulf region may have achieved by adopting the use of diverse social media in university and course selection. The answers were expected to relate to some aspects such as reliability and accuracy of information offered by diverse social media sources and sufficient or insufficient information, among others.

- ***Are there reasons why you may have not used social media for university course selection?***

The question's objective sought to identify the reason why some students may have adopted the use of social media sites in university course selection, as well as what factors might have influenced them not to use such sites.

- ***Did you have a social media profile while still in high school?***

The focus was on whether the gulf students studying abroad might have been active in various social media sites during their high school days, and how that may have influenced their intention to study abroad.

- ***On which social media sites did you have a profile when still in high school?***
- ***Do you have a social media profile right now?***
- ***On what social media sites do you have a profile right now?***
- ***How much time do you spend on these social media sites?***

The goal of this question was to identify how much time the students spent by being active on various social media sites that they love to associate themselves with.

- ***Which social media applications do you use occasionally, and what are the reasons for this?***
- ***How should universities use social media applications to provide information on their programs to international gulf students?***

The question focused on the social media marketing practices that the students think that universities should adopt to reach and attract diverse students from the gulf region.

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

The question emphasized over the practices and social media content that students from gulf region expect international universities to post in order to attract them.

- ***Which social media sites would you recommend for universities to use to help students in course selection?***

The question focused on obtaining students' views related to the social media marketing practices and media sites that universities and colleges can use to attract more students from the gulf to join and study courses they desire to pursue.

Some of the questions that were included in the survey questionnaire, and that were not subjected to analysis, are as follows.

- ***Which one of the following social apps do you open first after you wake up?***

The objective of this question was to determine the social media sites and applications that students from the gulf region spend more of their time on. Notably, most students check their phones for notifications in the preferred social apps, which forms the first activity that they engage in after waking up.

- ***Were or are you planning to study abroad?***

The question was integrated into the survey questionnaire to help analyze the impact of social media marketing on students from the gulf region who were planning to study abroad and who did not have those thoughts before.

- ***Do you find social media posts about relevant international universities or colleges?***

The question was used to understand if students from gulf who desire to study in international universities or colleges got relevant advertisements of the institutions they would like to join, or courses and programs they would like to pursue. Students from the gulf region use various social media sites and applications to analyze which country or institution would favor them academically. Hence, the students search for those countries and institutions that have environments that may favor their learning process.

- ***Do you or would you change your mind about an international university or college based on the information you obtain from the social media?***

The objective of integrating this question into the survey questionnaire was to understand the power that social media has in influencing the decision-making processes of the students from the Gulf region with regard to the choice of universities or colleges they would like to join abroad.

- ***When you see a friend's post on any social media site concerning an international college or university, do you tap or check out the page?***

The objective of posing this question to the participants was to understand the curiosity social media creates amongst the gulf students who have the desire to study in various international universities and colleges. Although the question is not related social media marketing, whereby the university or college uses social media to reach the students directly, the question helped to understand how other stakeholders, including friends, also help to indirectly influence the decision-making processes of gulf students related to the international institutions they would desire to join.

- ***Has social media brought a lot of options regarding the international universities or colleges you would like to join and the courses or programs you would desire to pursue, information you could have not found on your own?***

The objective of this question was to determine the effectiveness of social media in giving gulf students a wide range of options they can choose from to make decisions related to the universities or colleges they would want to join abroad, as well as the courses and programs they would desire to pursue.

- ***How often do you see posts related to studying abroad on social apps?***

The goal of this question was to determine how often international universities and colleges use social media marketing to attract or influence gulf students to join them and pursue their desired courses or programs. This was a multichoice question to help understand whether or not international universities and colleges have highly invested in social media marketing to attract more students.

- ***If you see an interesting social media post made by an institution, do you visit the page of that university or college?***

The goal of this question was to understand whether the social media posts that are made by international universities or colleges influence gulf students to read such posts. The aim of social media marketing is to influence students to turn to that university or college's page to obtain more information about that particular institution. The question was used to understand the behavior of gulf students whenever they see social media posts concerning international institutions and diverse programs and courses they offer.

- ***What attracts you more about international institutions on social media pages?***

The question was posed to understand the relevance of social media design on different respondents. This question was posed to help the international universities or colleges to gain insight into the strategies they can adopt to improve on their social marketing to attract or influence more students from the gulf region to join them to pursue courses of choice.

- ***Do you cross check the information about universities and colleges on social media posts with web search?***

The intention of this question was to evaluate the reliability of the information about international universities or colleges posted on various social media channels. The question was also used to help the researcher to identify the time that gulf students invest in social media to research and select universities, courses, and programs they prefer to join and pursue.

- ***Do colleges or universities abroad manipulate Gulf students by using attractive posts or by posting incomplete information?***

The question's objective was to understand the perspectives of the participants towards social media marketing undertaken by various universities or colleges. The goal was to determine whether the information the universities post in social media attracts gulf students or they post incomplete information that makes other students to search for more information on their pages or discourages them from searching more about a particular institution.

- ***If you are interested in an international institution, do you follow it on various social media sites?***

The question emphasized on the gulf students' engagement in the use of social media sites rather than social media marketing. The question helped to understand whether or not gulf students follow the universities they would like to join on various social media sites, and whether their decisions are influenced by external factors.

- ***Is social media presence a good way of finding out the culture of a particular international university or college?***

The question was integrated into the survey questionnaire to understand the strategic role social media plays in promoting the cultural aspects of various international institutions through videos or pictures, and to determine whether the culture of those institutions aligns to the spiritual and social needs of the selected gulf students.

- ***Does social media sometimes display more information about international universities and colleges than the world ranking websites?***

The question was posed to the selected students from the gulf region to understand their perspectives about the role social media plays in ensuring that they can access more information about the universities and colleges they desire or would desire to join.

- *Is it easier to find information about an institution in social media than on educational websites?*

The goal of using this question was to understand the gulf students' behavior towards the ease of accessing relevant information about institutions they desire to join, as well as determine if those social media sources provide them with reliable information.

### **3.12. Procedure and Data Collection**

In this study, the primary data was collected with a survey questionnaire is used. Survey questionnaires play important roles in helping the researchers to understand various aspects about the selected participants, including their beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and behaviors. When adopting the use of survey questionnaire, researchers need to understand that this method exists in different forms, including interviewer-administered questionnaires and self-administered questionnaires. The primary difference between these two survey questionnaire methods is related to the inclusion and exclusion of the researcher in the administration and control of the interviewing process. For interviewer-administered questionnaire, the researcher has full control of the interviewing process; in this method, the researcher has to maintain contact with the selected participants. Researchers maintain contact with the participants during the interview by engaging in face-to-face discussions, engaging in phone calls, or using video referencing to obtain primary data from the participants. In this method, the researcher plays a major role in assisting the participants related to how they can answer various questions. For instance, the researcher clarifies that a particular question needs a single choice or multiple-choice answers. Conversely, in a self-administered questionnaire, the researcher's presence is not required; instead, the participants engage in responding to the survey questions without the help of the interviewer.

The self-administered questionnaire presents numerous benefits compared to the interviewer-administered questionnaire. Among the advantages of the self-administered questionnaire includes that it is convenient in terms of cost and time. This method can save a researcher from the expenses of engaging in face-to-face meetings or engaging in phone calls with a high number of participants. Notably, an interviewer-administered questionnaire is time-consuming and exhausting. Therefore, relying on a self-administered questionnaire can help a researcher to address such issues. A self-administered questionnaire method is associated with various disadvantages. One of the disadvantages of this method is that it does not allow the respondents to seek for clarification about various questions in case they need the researcher to help (Maylor & Blackmon, 2005). Despite its limitation, this study adopted the use of a self-administered questionnaire method to obtain primary data from the selected gulf students. The self-administered method was implemented from the time when these limitations were offset in the mean of the questionnaire by counting simple close-ended questions, open-ended questions, Likert scales, with options pinched as of the literature review. Respondents were asked to fill the questionnaires and participate their feelings about most of the universities of developed countries try to attract talented international students to their countries, for improving their economic performance and competitiveness.

Fifty international students from gulf region completed all the survey questions, reflecting a 100 percent response rate. The response of one student was excluded due to provision of incomplete answers. Participants in this study involved gulf students aged between 18 to 40 years. The mean age of the students was 23.68 years. In terms of gender, male participants accounted for



47.2 percent of the total sample population, and the female participants accounted for 52.8 percent. A majority of the students (53 percent) were pursuing masters' degree in various courses, while 40 percent were pursuing undergraduate degrees, and 7.2 percent accounted for those pursuing diploma courses in different international universities. In terms of stay abroad, 20 percent had stayed in abroad for 1 year, 40 percent between 1-3 years, 10 percent for 4 years, 16 percent for 5 years, and 14 percent for 6 years and more.

The study was carried out after approval by the University's Institutional Review Board. Emails were sent to the participants, and after opening the emails and reading brief explanation of the study, including eligibility information, the selected gulf students were redirected to the self-administered questionnaire website where they were asked to read consent form and privacy statement. Consent was assumed when the participants clicked the next button at the bottom of the consent form. The survey remained active for at least 28 days and four emails were sent to the participants. The reminder emails addressed the need of the participants to submit the self-administered questionnaires within the stipulated time to allow data analysis to be done in time.

### **3.13. Methodology**

Research methodology is defined as "An overall approach to the entire process of a research study... a technique for collecting and/or analyzing data" (Collis & Hussey, 2009)

For the purpose of this research the data collected is in the form of qualitative data, which is collected with the use of a survey-based questionnaire. The purpose of this form of questionnaire is to limit the amount of data that the respondent is willing to provide and to focus on relative data only. Questions that would lead the respondent to answer in any specific manner are avoided, as they tend to create biasness and would affect the results of the research. Once the data is collected it would be analyzed and evaluated to identify the impact social media has on influencing international students and improving their overall competitiveness.

### **3.14. Nature of Research**

The research underway is exploratory in nature, whereas the data is collected through qualitative method by using survey methods. In a qualitative method the data collected is numeric in nature and is collected through a structured data collection process.

By distributing questionnaires among respondents, they are free to fill them out at any time feasible for them, they are not bound by time as they would have been in terms of an in-depth interview. This allowed the respondents to fill out the questionnaire at their own pace without being pestered for their views or concerns. The questions constructed are such that avoid leading the respondent in any specific direction. This method is used to minimize biasness and increases flexibility of the responses.

#### **3.14.1. Research Approach and Strategy**

A research can be conducted with either of the two approaches of research, which could lead to knowledge acquisition. The approaches include inductive and deductive reasoning approaches. The distinction between the two reasoning approaches is created by role of the data obtained versus the role of the theory adopted. A research can be carried out either to test an existing concept or theory or it can be aimed at creating a new theory. When the research is aimed at creating a new theory this approach of research is called inductive approach. This approach does not require any knowledge related to general literature and/or framework; rather, it involves a process of theory building, which begins by the researchers observing the certain instances and pursuing the establishment of generalizations of a phenomenon that is under investigation. In this approach, data is first analyzed, which is followed by the development of a new theory or theories. Goddard and Melville define inductive approach as "one which starts with the observation of the

environment and on the basis of that observation theories are formulated at the end of the research” in their book “Research Methodology: An Introduction” (Goddard & Melville, 2004) Another explanation of inductive research given by Bernard in his book “Research Methods in Anthropology”. He stated that inductive research “involves the search for pattern from observation and development of explanations –theories- for these patterns through series of hypotheses” (Bernard, 2011). When the research is aimed at testing any of the existing theories is said to be taking a deductive approach. Thus, the deductive reasoning approach involves a researcher seeking to determine whether a theory applies to given examples. In this approach, a researcher probes a given theory, develops logical inferences on the basis of the theory and provides inferences in hypothetical or propositional form. For the purpose of this research, the focus will be on inductive approach. The focus is study investigate the impact of social media on the gulf students to join international universities to pursue courses of choice and develop a new theory.

### **3.15. Validity and Reliability**

Validity is defined as the extent to which theory and evidence offer support to the interpretation of test scores that are obtained from the proposed use of a test. For a test to be valid, it must meet the initially set requirements and expectations. For this research, validity was increased through randomization that helped with reduction of sample bias. In the research’s sampling process, one of the risks was bias, which would have subsequently compromised the validity of study findings. To reduce the said risk and in turn increase validity, the researcher increased randomization. Another strategy that helped the researcher to increase validity was the improvement or increase of measurement techniques. An increase or improvement of measurement techniques required an examination of the different types of validity some of which include criterion-concurrent, content, constructive validity, and criterion-predictive.

Reliability is defined as the achievement of consistency across replications of a procedure. Reliability is usually measured over time, forms such as different tests, raters, and items. For this research, one of the researcher’s aims was to ensure the findings’ reliability. One of the strategies that was used to enhance study findings’ reliability was the use of an appropriate sample size. Another strategy that was used by the researcher to increase reliability was the minimization of the effects of external events. Moreover, the researcher eliminated some of the research questions that could not be understood easily or that seemed unclear to the respondents, and these strategies helped to increase the validity of research findings.

### **3.16. Ethical Implication**

When conducting any sort of a research it is necessary to be wary of the information gathered from the respondents, specifically personal information such as names, addresses and any other information. It is necessary to make sure that the information is not misplaced or misused. Another issue that researches are prone to face are personal biasness of the researchers, thus it needs to be avoided. The information shared by the respondents should not be disclosed in any way, which would lead to a breach of confidentiality. The outcomes of the research should be used for the development of the society and not for any personal gains. Another important ethical issue in any sort of research is the protection of human subjects. For instance, in this study, the respondents were human subjects hence the need for their protection. One of the ways of protecting human subjects in research is obtaining their consent before recruiting them as participants in the study. The consent form issued to potential participants in a study is usually designed to include elements such as the objectives of the study, the procedures to be followed during the study, the duration or time that the study will take, the potential risks of the study, benefits of the study to the subject and the environment, and alternative options. Other important elements included in the

consent form include how the confidentiality of records will be maintained, the contact information for participants to raise any concerns after the study, compensation if applicable and available, additional costs involved, as well as the voluntary participation and freedom of withdrawal for subjects.

## CHAPTER 4- Analysis

This chapter of the thesis analyzes the findings of the study in relation to demographic aspects, traditional information sources, social media information sources, general social media usage, and university course information on social media. Data collection was done through the use of the Key Survey questionnaire tool. For the purpose of the analysis qualitative method has been used, which follows coding and theming. Each of the theme discusses a different aspect of the research.

### 4.1. Survey Responses and Analysis

The survey results are divided into five sections. Each section presents an analysis of different sets of questions based on their parts.

#### 4.1.1. Section A: General Information about Respondents

- *What is your age?*

The study comprised of 50 students aged between 18 to 40 years. From the primary data obtained, most students (65 percent) fall in the age between 23-27 years, 26 percent between 18-22 years, and 9 percent between 28-40 years.

- *Which country are you from?*

The highest proportion (50 percent) were from Kuwait, 20 percent from Qatar, 10 percent of the total students were from Bahrain, 6 percent from Oman, and 14 percent from Saudi Arabia

- *What is your gender?*

The study comprised both male and female students. Markedly, 47.2 percent were male students, while 52.8 percent were female students from the gulf region.

- *Which university course are you studying?*

The participants were pursuing diverse courses in various universities abroad. The highest portion (70 percent) were pursuing degree courses in various international universities, 17 percent were pursuing masters' degree courses, and the rest (13 percent) were undertaking diploma courses in the universities of their own choices.

- *When did you first look for university course information?*

In this question, the participants were provided with three options they could choose from including when still in high school, after high school, and other. Seventy percent of the total sample population responded that they first looked for an international university course information after completing high school, 16 percent when still in high school, and 14 percent responded other. For the participants who responded as other, they were required to outline instances when they first looked up university course information. The responses that they gave include that they first looked up for university course information while working, through friends, after completing their undergraduate degrees, during their first or second year pursuing undergraduate or diploma degrees, during employment, after seven years of employment, or after losing their jobs.

#### 4.1.2. Section B: Traditional Information Sources

- *How did you first hear about your university?*

For this question, the participants were provided with multiple choices including friends, teaching staff, parents, recruitment agents, and family members. Thirty percent of the participants responded that they first heard about their university through friends, 14 percent through teaching staff, 20 percent through their parents, 6 percent through recruitment agents, and 30 percent through their family members. From these statistics, the traditional information systems play a major role in influencing the decision-making processes of students from the gulf region related to the international universities they should join.

- ***Which traditional source did you use to obtain relevant information related to university you desired to join and course you looked forward to pursue?***

The respondents were provided with multiple choices such as newspaper advertisements, university representative, recruitment agent, family member, former university or high school website. High portion (47 percent) responded that they obtained relevant information about the university they have joined through newspaper advertisements, 3 percent through university representatives, 10 percent through recruitment agents, 23 percent through former university or high school websites, and 17 percent through family members.

- ***What information did you look for using the traditional information sources?***

The gulf students were provided with three choices including university information, courses and programs, and others. Seventy-six percent of the student population responded that they obtained university information from the traditional sources, 20 percent obtained information about the courses offered in various international universities, and 4 percent researched other information. The other information that the 4 percent of the participants obtained includes the sports activities of those institutions, student activities, and samples of the lectures. From the above, most gulf students largely relied on traditional information sources to obtain relevant data concerning various international universities.

- ***During your search for the appropriate course to pursue in a given international university, did you by anyway interact with or contact the university?***

The participants were presented with multiple choices for this particular question including requesting for the structure of university courses through the email, engaged in a face-to-face discussion with a staff, made phone calls to the relevant department, and engaged in other interactions. From the data obtained, about 61 percent of the participants responded that they requested given universities that they joined to provide them with the list of courses that they offer through the email. Twenty percent responded that they engaged in face-to-face discussion with one of the teaching staff working in those international universities, three percent by making phone calls to the relevant department, and 16 percent interacted with the universities through other ways. From the data, most gulf students interact with the universities they would like to join by requesting the institutions to provide them with the list of courses they offer through their emails.

#### **4.1.3. Social Media Information Sources**

- ***What social media sites did you visit for University course information?***

The participants were provided with multiple options to choose from in response to the question including Facebook, Google+, YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter, Myspace, and other social media sites. Most students about 35 percent responded that they used Facebook to obtain information about university course information, 27 percent visited Google+, 28 percent used YouTube, 3 percent LinkedIn, 1 percent visited Twitter, 2 percent used Myspace, while 4 percent used other social media sites. From the data collected through interviews and questionnaires it was seen that the students mostly used Facebook, Google+ and YouTube when searching for a university, a program or a course. For most of these respondents, Facebook was the ideal social media platform when it came to researching about a university, course or program as they could obtain information through the pictures videos and individuals who maintained the accounts. Google+ and YouTube were also used by respondents but mostly in connection with one or more of the other social media platforms.

- ***What kind of information did you seek from using diverse social media sources?***

The respondents were provided with multiple options they could choose from to respond to this particular question. The choices included university information, university course information,

students' activities, sample lectures, and other information. From the data obtained, about 54 percent of the students looked for university information from the use of diverse social media sites, 10 percent looked for university course information, 5 percent looked for students' activities in various international institutions, 21 percent looked for sample lectures, and 10 percent looked for other relevant information. From the data, it is evident that most gulf students seek for university information from diverse social media sources.

- ***During your university course search, did you interact or contact a given university using the choice of social media site?***

The respondents were required to respond to this particular question by using a yes or a no. About 60 percent responded yes that they did interact or contact various universities they were searching. Forty percent of the participants responded no. From the above data, it seems that most gulf students who seek to pursue higher education abroad often contact or interact with the universities they would like to join. Therefore, it is essential for international universities to post-adequate information, and by adopting that strategy, the institutions can attract more students from the gulf region.

- ***Which of the following sources influenced you most during your decision-making related to university course selection?***

The respondents were provided with a wide range of choices including Instagram, Google+, Facebook, LinkedIn, Myspace, Pinterest, and YouTube, among other social media sites. Most participants responded that their decision-making process was influenced by YouTube and Google+, among other social media sites. Fifty-seven percent responded that Google+ largely influenced their university course selection process, 18 percent responded that other social media sites influenced their decision-making process, and 25 percent responded that they were influenced by YouTube. From the statistics, it seems that university course selection of most students from the gulf region is influenced by Google+. This implies that various international universities should use Google+ for social media marketing and should post attractive information to influence students from the gulf region to join them and pursue courses of their choices.

- ***How did social media help you in university course selection and decision?***

This was an open-ended question, and gulf students studying abroad were allowed to respond with their own answers. The selected students gave different responses related to the question. In relation to university course information, a few students stated that social media sites, such as YouTube, largely helped them to obtain in-depth information about a given university and particular course they desired to pursue. The students argued that YouTube provided videos that displayed the culture of each university they were researching. Other students also responded that the use of social media also offered them up-to-date information about various international universities and the variety of students who were studying in that institution at that particular time. The students argued that social media helped them to understand the cultural diversity of the institutions they researched.

In terms of university activities and life, many of the participants responded that the use of social media largely helped them to gain insight into the activities taking place within those institutions. From their responses, it seems university activities and student life played a significant part in influencing the gulf students' university and course selection process. Many students responded that social media gave them the opportunity to view the facilities of various universities they desired to join. When universities engage in social media marketing, they post little information that defines them and the list of courses they offer, as well as attach a few facilities. From the response, it is evident that gulf students go further to search for more photos of the

university facilities through the institutions' websites, brochures, virtual tours, or request their friends who are studying in those institutions. About this response, it seems gulf students' university and course selection process is influenced by viewing of an institution's facilities. Therefore, international universities ought to ensure they attach more photos of their facilities during social media marketing to help attract many students from the gulf region. Furthermore, a majority of the students responded to the question that social media helped them to get in touch with their friends studying in various international universities, university representatives, and got to know some students who study within those institutions.

With the help of social media, students from gulf region were able to get in contact with relevant departments to obtain more information about a given university including its programs and courses and various activities carried out. A few gulf students also responded that social media helped them to obtain intangible information, such as opinions. The students argued that their decision to join a particular international university and pursue a certain course was influenced by the opinions that other students gave in the comment sections of various social media posts of a given institution.

A majority of students, however, were of the view that they did not use any of the social media platforms as they do not provide any sort of information at all. One of the responded was of the view

“Nothing because there is no information in social media.”

While another respondent stated that,

“Nothing I follow what my adviser require.”

From the responses of these two individuals along with a number of other respondents it is seen that quite a significant number of individuals do not use any form of social media at all, when it comes to deciding which university, program or course they should opt for or get enrolled in. There are times when the information provided on these social media platforms is so messed up, that it gets difficult for individuals to filter out what they are looking for.

From the interviews and the questionnaires, it is seen that even though a number of respondents were of the view that social media is of no use when it comes to searching for university, a program or a course. Most of the time individuals avoid using social media as a source of information as the information provided on it is not in a sorted out fashion, everything is messed up and all over the place, this makes it difficult for individuals to sort out and dig for information that would be of benefit to them. Also this can be a very hectic and time consuming process, therefore people usually avoid visiting social media platforms when searching for something like this. However this does not mean that all the students or respondents avoid using social media, in fact the majority of the respondents, used some form of social media, when they were selecting for course or university.

In fact, the largest number of respondents used Facebook, followed by Google+ or Google search and lastly YouTube. It should be noticed that these are not the only social media platforms that individuals use. Respondents also visited the websites of the desired universities, their Twitter accounts and their LinkedIn accounts.

Social media are becoming platforms for interactions in real time. They can be the best places to research about a university, a program or a course, by asking the staff, faculty or the students regarding the university, its atmosphere and studies along with a number of other things.

- *Are there reasons why you may have not used social media for university course selection?*

This was an open-ended question, and the students gave different responses. Some of the students stated that they did not use social media in university and course selection because of the reliability and accuracy of information. The students argued that social media did not provide them with accurate and reliable information about a given university and the courses offered; therefore, they decided to obtain information from the particular institution's website and from their friends who were already studying in those universities. Some students from the gulf region studying abroad responded that they did not use social media in university course selection as it does not offer complete information, and at times, it gives misleading information. A portion of those students argued that social sites, such as Facebook, provided misleading information about particular universities. Therefore, they decided to use the institutions' websites or request for complete information from their friends studying in those institutions. A section of the participants responded that they did not use social media in university course selection because those sites did not provide them with an opportunity to engage or contact the institutions.

#### **4.1.4. Section D: General Social Media Usage**

- ***Did you have a social media profile while still in high school?***

This was a close-ended question whereby the students were provided with two choices; yes or no. A majority of the students, approximately 80 percent of the gulf students studying abroad, responded 'yes,' as they already had a social media profile while still in high school, while 20 percent responded 'no' to the question.

- ***On which social media sites did you have a profile when still in high school?***

This was an open-ended question, and students responded with their own words. Most students cited that they had a profile in social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, among others.

- ***Do you have a social media profile right now?***

This question required a 'yes' or 'no' answer. All the students responded 'yes,' as they had a social media profile by the time of the study was being carried out.

- ***On which social media sites do you have a profile now?***

When asked about which social media network these students have an account on, most of them name more than one account. On an average, these students had an account on 4 different social media accounts. They were most active and mostly used the Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google+ and YouTube. Out of these the used Facebook app the most of the rest.

- ***How much time do you spend on these social media sites?***

When asked about how much time they would spend on each of these applications, one respondent was of the view that, "On an average I would spend up to 2 hours on each of these (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube) social media networks. Most of the time I use their app to get updated." As students are always on the go, and they might need to connect to these accounts at various times of the day for different reasons, therefore it makes sense that they mostly use the applications. They are easier to use and convenient rather than logging into their accounts from the laptop or a desktop computers. Also, apps like Instagram do not even offer complete set of features when using it from the laptop. With the constant increase and modification in technology and changing needs of individuals some of these networks even offer customized applications, such as Facebook Lite, it is a version of Facebook which uses less data, making it easier to people and students to use on networks that are weak or slow.

- ***Which social media applications do you use occasionally and what are the reasons?***

There are a number of applications out there and the number is increasing day by day. However, it does not mean that each and every of these applications are to be used by students. From the data



collected it is seen that applications of social media such as LinkedIn, Pinterest and Myspace are rarely or occasionally used by students. There can be a number of reasons as to why students do not use these accounts as much as other social media accounts. However, the most common reason seen through the research was the purpose and nature of these accounts. LinkedIn is used to create connection and a network related to one's job and career, Pinterest is used to collect and share pictures from the internet or from personal collection and Myspace, a social media network on the verge of ending, is similar to Facebook but less user friendly and less popular. For students the most convenient apps are those that are easy to use and that connect them to those around them easily and in a way that they think is useful.

From the interviews conducted and data gathered it is seen that for students in Gulf the most commonly used apps are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google+ and YouTube. The reason this is their purpose and the entire experience that comes with the package. Most of these apps are very easy to use and can be customized as to the needs of the students, as is seen with Facebook Lite.

The main reason behind Facebook Lite and other similar apps that consume less data, is network connectivity issues. In some places the network or connection is not as strong as in others making it difficult of people to use the application, thus organizations have come up with an alternative to cater to this segment, which also compromises of students. However, not every app is used to the same extent, as seen from the discussion above. Some applications are only used occasionally, mostly because of the nature of the apps. For instance, how many times a day can a student change his education status in his LinkedIn profile, or update his network or increase his connections? Due to its nature and usability apps such as LinkedIn are not used to the same extent as Facebook. This does not mean that these apps are of not similar importance, it just means that for students' apps are prioritized differently than for a person in the working field.

#### **4.1.5. Section E: University Course Information**

- *How should universities use social media applications to provide information on their programs to international gulf students?*

The gulf students gave different responses. Many of the participants argued that universities should create blogs and forums for specific university course and education topic. Another section of students stated that universities should advertise their courses on social networks and blogs. Other students argued that universities should use photo and video hosting services to show their facilities and activities. As the world is becoming connected, there is an increasing opportunity for students to study at places that provide them with better opportunities. Thus for universities social media can play an important role to connect with these international students and to provide them with all the necessary information themselves and help them better understand what the university would provide them. Different students were of different view, for instance one respondent by saying,

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

When asked about the usage of social media by the educational institutes and how these can be incorporated by them in their various points of connections with students, different students were of different views. As the number of students using social media is increasing, educational institutes have found a new way of connecting with existing as well as prospective students. One student was of the view that "Universities should be using social media to provide information on educational opportunities, information on events through videos and photos, the latest university news and activities, they should have the ability to connect to other university students, link to university alumni and create university alerts". Even though most of the students had similar view stating that universities should be providing information regarding educational opportunities, there

were some who were more focused on knowing about the extracurricular activities that the university provides to the students. Yet from some the connecting universities have with their alumni is also of importance, as is seen mostly universities forget about their students once they graduate. “The university should create blogs and forums for university course and education topics and it would be best if they create and host a sample video lecture on social media sites. This would really help students like myself, who are looking to study abroad.”

Yet another student though that the university should incorporate as many ways as possible to improve their online presence,

“I believe that universities should incorporate a number of different methods when it comes to providing information when targeting international students. They should create blogs and forums for university course and education topics, participate in education related blogs and forums, advertise in blogs and social networks, use photo and video hosting services to show their facilities and activities, create and host a sample video lecture on social media sites, create and host a presentation of the university on a social media site, showcase students from my country on a video sharing application and they should make university course information available through video”

- *Which social media would you recommend for universities to use to help students in course selection?*

Most of the students from the gulf region responded that universities should use social media sites, such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter, among others. From the data obtained, it is evident that most of the students from the gulf region use Facebook to obtain information about various universities and for course selection. As the nature of education and the way information is transmitted and communicated is changing it is necessary for universities to change the way they provide information to students. Students are no longer simply looking for a place where they can learn bookish knowledge, they want to study at a place that would help them groom and take part in their hobbies and activities that they enjoy. For this purpose, universities should incorporate the various social media platforms to the maximum to showcase everything that they have to offer to their students.

Ideally, students prefer places that deal with them in a manner that is not to sugar coated, as this gives them a signal that they are being too nice only to get them to enroll with the universities, also the information being provided by the organization should not be such that portrays a false image of the university. Institutes should avoid doing so as this would create a completely different image in the mind of the prospective students. This will have a negative impact on the students once they arrive on campus.

#### **4.2. Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented survey findings of the open and close-ended questions that were provided to the students through self-administered interview. Fifty of the gulf students took part in the surveys and their responses to each question was effectively analyzed in this chapter. The findings have demonstrated the importance of social media in influencing the decision-making and choices of gulf students related to university course selection. The aspects of social media that have been outlined in this chapter include its urgency, reliability, connectivity, and popularity of various social media sites. Some of the social media sites that gulf students largely use in university course selection include; Facebook, Twitter, and Google+.

## **CHAPTER 5- DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

### **5.1. Introduction**

In this chapter of the thesis, there will be a discussion of the research findings, a summary of conclusion of the research, implications of the research, limitations, research recommendations, as well as research contribution. The conclusion will provide a brief summary of all the findings and recommendations will provide corrective measures that should be taken where necessary. The discussion and conclusion highlight the major findings related to the role played by social media in decision-making of international students, especially in Gulf countries. The discussion of findings sub-chapter entails a cross analysis that is aimed at comparing the findings of the research with the results of previous studies and literature as explored in the Literature Review Chapter. In the research conclusion sub-chapter, the major findings of the research are summarized. This chapter also encompasses sub-chapters that include research implications, research recommendations, as well as significant contributions of the research.

### **5.2. Discussion of Findings**

The first study objective was to investigate which social media platform is commonly used by Gulf students to search for university programs or courses. Research findings indicate that commonly used social media sites by Gulf students to search for university programs and courses are Facebook, Google+, YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Myspace. The review of literature found that many educational institutions share and convey message on these selected social media platforms, with an aim of recruiting prospective students.

The second study objective was to assess which social media marketing techniques inspire Gulf students to make decisions with regard to their preferred universities or colleges. Survey findings suggest that Gulf students rely on university information, university course information, students' activities, sample lectures, and other information conveyed by universities and colleges on social media to make decisions with regard to their preferred universities or colleges. The review of literature found that international student's preferences for universities or colleges are influenced by the social media marketing techniques employed by these institutions.

The third objective of this study was to determine the preferences of Gulf students when it comes to selecting educational institutions. The survey findings revealed that most Gulf students who seek to pursue higher education abroad often prefer to interact with or contact the educational institutions that they prefer to join. Gulf students mainly prefer educational institutions that post adequate and correct information on social media. The review of literature underlines this finding as it stated that educational institutions have a mandate to consistently share or convey correct information on social media if they are to attract and recruit prospective students.

The fourth objective of this study was to identify social media sites or applications that are mostly liked by Gulf students. The survey findings reveal that the social media sites that are mostly liked by Gulf students and with which they currently have profiles and are active include; Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google+, and YouTube. Out of these social media sites, Facebook is the most commonly used and most preferred by Gulf student. This finding is in line with the literature review finding that Facebook is the most preferred social media site in the Arab world and other regions, such as Europe, amongst university and college students.

The fifth objective of this study was to determine the most effective social media sites that can be utilized by educational institutions to attract and recruit potential students. The survey findings revealed that the social media site that happens to be the most effective and that can be utilized by educational institutions to attract and recruit potential students was YouTube. Respondents stated that YouTube is effective with regard to allowing prospective students to

obtain in-depth information about a given university or college and a particular course desired by prospective students. The respondents further stated that the effectiveness of YouTube is because it displays the culture of each university being searched by prospective students. This was in line with the literature review finding that YouTube is an exciting social media platform that provides detailed information or content with regard to courses and programs offered by various institutions of higher learning.

### **5.3. Research Conclusion**

From the analysis conducted it is seen that social media is of immense importance when it comes to selecting an educational institute. Students can find out a lot about a university and its environment from its Facebook pages and different online clubs and associations. Also students can connect with the numerous students already studying at these universities through their social media accounts.

Students are increasingly using social media networks and applications. They spend a large portion of their day on these applications, communicating with one another, uploading pictures and videos, this provides universities with an opportunity that was not available to them a decade ago. They now interact with students from all over the world in real time. They should use this opportunity to their benefit.

It is necessary that universities ensure that the information that they provide to the prospective students is not portraying a wrong image of the institute. Wrong does not mean that they are portraying a negative image online, instead it can be anything that they are pretending to be. Pretending to be something these universities can have a damaging effect on their image, therefore they should think twice before posting anything. There should be a fair balance between what to show and what to leave for the students to find themselves.

When universities display too much of themselves online there is little left to imagination of the student, now to some extent this might be useful, whoever this can have a negative effect on the number of enrollments at the institute. Also universities should be responsive to meeting the needs of their online customers just like they would cater to them as if they had come in person.

### **5.4. Research Implications**

The findings from the analysis respond to the research questions and are instrumental in the achievement of research objectives that include:

- To investigate which social media platform is commonly used by Gulf students to search for university programs or courses.
- To assess which social media marketing techniques inspire Gulf student to make decisions with regard to their preferred universities or colleges.
- To determine the preferences of Gulf students when it comes to selecting educational institutions.
- To identify social media sites or applications that are mostly liked by Gulf students.
- To determine the most effective social media sites that can be utilized by educational institutions to attract and recruit potential students.

The findings from the analysis have significant implications, particularly for universities and colleges that focus mainly on attracting and recruiting students. The implication of the research findings is that educational institutions should consider integrating social media into their day-to-day activities. By leveraging social media, universities and colleges could manage to engage, convince, and recruit prospective students. Moreover, the use of social media to market their brands could mean shifting focus from traditional media platforms that entail print and mass media.

### **5.5. Research Limitations**

This study had various limitations, which to some extent, influenced the research findings. The limitations of the research were as follows:

- The data collected was limited to only 50 participants, mainly from selected Gulf countries. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized to the global population.
- Some participants did not understand some of the concepts contained in the questionnaire survey. Consequently, they did not fill in the questionnaire, thus interfering with validity and reliability of research findings.
- The researchers had a say on who would be taking part in the research, which led to the exclusion of some participants. There was some level of bias, particularly in the recruitment of participants.
- The late responses from some participants delayed the completion of the research.

### 5.6. Research Recommendations

As universities and colleges work towards attracting and recruiting international students, it is clear that it is the right time for them to go beyond merely using traditional sources of information, such as print and mass media. Social media has been found to play an instrumental and influential role when it comes to providing global reach, ensuring easy access to information, as well as reducing the costs incurred in reaching out to international students. In this regard, it is becoming increasingly important for universities and colleges to come out clearly on the various types of international students they look forward to recruiting. This will ensure the availability of congruent information on various social media that can address the concerns of these institutions. In addition to social media usage by students and higher education institutions, such as universities and colleges, this thesis' literature review highlights other important elements of social media, such as collaboration, engagement, and online communities. Thus, universities and educational institutes should take into consideration the following when dealing with students through social media:

- **Universities and educational institutes should provide information that is true and accurate, so that students do not have any false hopes.**

In their engagement with students on social media, universities and educational institutes must strive to provide true and accurate information to students. Social media is a vast place with all sorts of information and characters. International students who engage universities and colleges via social media are constantly seeking to realize their academic goals. Therefore, any mistake by these institutions to provide inaccurate or false information to students could deal a blow to the institutions. For instance, the institutions could lose out when it comes to attracting and recruiting international students with the objective of gaining competitive advantage.

- **Universities and educational institutes should treat students and any prospective customers online, the same way they would treat them if they had come to the campus.**

The biggest challenge when it comes to engagement on social media is that most organizations or institutions tend to treat different prospective customers or clients on social media differently from how they treat them when they seek services physically. This specific challenge has had adverse implications on most organizations or institutions through destruction of image and compromised customer or client loyalty. Universities and educational institutes need to learn from this and ensure that their interaction with prospective students is done in the same manner, both online and offline.

- **Universities and educational institutes should monitor the information being given on their pages and social media accounts.**

The biggest challenge for organizations that leverage social media to engage customers or clients is the failure to assess or monitor information being conveyed to customers on these platforms.

Social media has increasingly become an important component for organizations, with many of them hiring personnel to handle or deal with customers on these platforms. In recent years, universities and colleges have incorporated social media as part of their communication and marketing techniques. Unfortunately, numerous gaps exist, such as where social media personnel post or convey inappropriate content or information. Such moves could be devastating to these institutions, as they could hinder them from achieving their set objectives with regard to attracting and recruiting more prospective students through these platforms. Thus, it is important for the top management of universities and educational institutes to monitor closely and regularly the information conveyed to prospective student on their social media pages and accounts.

- **They should ensure that the information is not having any negative impact on their reputation.**

Universities and educational institutes have a duty to ensure that the engagement with prospective students does not have negative impacts on their image and reputation. The primary objective for most educational institutions leveraging social media to engage prospective students is to convince them to have the institutions as their preferred choices. Notably, this is achieved by sharing and communicating information that does not have adverse impacts on the institutions' reputation.

- **Their focus should not only be prospective students, but also their current students and their alumni.**

Universities and educational institutes must note that one of the most effective ways of connecting with international students is active alumni collaboration. For most educational institutions, prominent international alumni have proven to be important resources for student marketing and recruitment initiatives. Another role of international alumni is to serve as reliable and excellent advisors, counselors, and role models to prospective international students. The chances of students joining an educational institution because of its affiliation with prominent international alumni are often high. However, many colleges and universities err in how they disregard and lose contact with their international students after graduation. Through social media, institutions of higher learning can reinforce their connection and contact with their international alumni and leverage them in activities and processes to do with international student recruitment and attraction. Universities can achieve active alumni collaboration by helping and encouraging their alumni to set up personal blogs where they publish information about their experiences with their universities or colleges. These institutions can also leverage international alumni to market themselves and ultimately recruit international students by having them interact actively with the public through the institutions' pages on social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. The prominent international student alumni could, thus, contribute to an immense growth in these institutions' international student population.

- **Universities and educational institutes should incorporate different methods to provide information online, such as videos, pictures, status updates, blogs, vlogs, emails and any other interactive method.**

Having and utilizing a variety of social media platforms can work to the advantage of universities and colleges when it comes to marketing themselves to prospective students. Unlike traditional media platforms that were limited, there exists various social media platforms through which universities and colleges can interact with or engage prospective students. Therefore, it is increasingly becoming important for these institutions to become active on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube, among others. A widespread online presence increases these institutions' reach to prospective students, thus increasing their chances of recruiting more international students.

- **They should make sure that the information being provided across the various social media platforms is same and consistent.**

Universities and colleges must always strive to convey consistent information in their social media platforms. Consistency is an important element in terms of content and information shared on social media. For organizations or enterprises leveraging social media to market their products and services, consistent information ensures customer loyalty and retention. Universities and colleges seeking to attract international students should also focus on providing same and consistent information across their social media platforms.

- **They should treat all in the same manner, avoiding discrimination on any basis or of any form.**

Educational institutions must engage prospective students on social media while avoiding discrimination based on gender, race, or religious affiliations. Personnel hired by universities and colleges to interact with prospective students must consider language and cultural disparities in international student decision-making processes. Such disparities may be closed by effectiveness using social media.

### **5.7. Research Contribution**

This research has significant contributions from both an academic viewpoint and social media usage by education institutions viewpoint. The study's findings indicate that there is a well-established and extensive research on the role played by social media in decision-making of international students. Thus, this thesis contributes to existing knowledge from an academic point of view and adds value to the argument of whether social media plays an instrumental role in international students' decision-making when it comes to selecting their most preferred higher education destinations. From an academic point of view, this research also provides strong evidence that social media can effectively help universities and colleges to market themselves and ultimately achieve their competitive advantage objectives by attracting more prospective students and retaining them. The major findings of this research for educational institutions, such as universities and colleges, is that social media is influential and powerful, and that they can leverage these platforms to attract and recruit international students. This research also gives an overview of various social media types and features, social media impact on engagement, social media impact on collaboration, and the impact of social media on the rise of online communities. The research further highlights the connection between student, social media, and their decision-making; educational institution's use of social media for advertisement; as well as the overall benefits of social media to universities and colleges.

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### **APPENDIX: International Students Questionnaire**

This questionnaire is part of a research project entitled "**The Influence of Social Media on International Students**", approved by the research committee of Arcadia University, PA. I assure you that responses will remain confidential and only results will be made public.

#### **Section A – General Questions**

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**a. Which is your country of residence?**

- Saudi Arabia     Kuwait     Bahrain     Oman     Qatar     UAE

**b. What is your gender?**

- Male     Female

**c. Which university course are you studying now?**

- Language Program     Bachelor's Program     Master's Program     PHD

**d. When did you first look for course information?**

- High School     College     Other

#### **Section B – Traditional Information Sources**

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**a. How did you first hear about your university course?**

- University Website  
 Internet Search  
 Education Exhibition /Fairs  
 University Representative  
 Recruitment Agent  
 Foreign Embassy  
 Scholarship Agency in my country  
 School Counselor  
 Family member  
 Friend  
 Newspaper Advertisement  
 Education Guide/ Directory  
 Other

**b. Which traditional information sources did you use when looking for a university course? (please tick all that apply)**

- University Website
- Internet Search
- Education Exhibition /Fairs
- University Representative
- Recruitment Agent
- Foreign Embassy
- Scholarship Agency in my country
- School Counsellor
- Family member
- Friend
- Newspaper Advertisement
- Education Guide/ Directory
- Other

**c. What kind of information did you seek using traditional media sources? (please tick all that apply)**

- University Information
- Course Information
- Sample Lectures
- Student Activities
- Other

**d. During your university course search, have you contacted or interacted with a university in any of the following ways? (please tick all those that apply)**

- I requested university course information through e-mail.
- I spoke to a university staff through the phone.
- I spoke to a university staff at an education exhibition/ fair.
- I downloaded university course information from the university website.
- I did not interact with the university using any of the above
- Other

**e. Which of these traditional information sources influenced you most in your decision-making and university course selection? (please rank the top 3 only)**

- Internet Search
- Education Exhibition /Fairs
- University Website
- University Representative
- Recruitment Agent
- Foreign Embassy
- Scholarship Agency in my country
- School Counselor
- Family member
- Friend
- Newspaper Advertisement
- Education Guide/ Directory
- Other

## Section C - Social Media Information Sources

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Think back to the time when you were seeking course information and tell us how you used social media.

- a. **Which social media sites did you visit for university course information? (please tick all that apply)**
- Facebook
  - My Space
  - LinkedIn
  - Twitter
  - Google+
  - YouTube
  - Pinterest
  - Instagram Other
- b. **What kind of course information did you seek on social media site(s) when searching for a university course? (please tick all that apply)**
- University information
  - Course information
  - University course recommendations
  - University course opinions
  - Video of university
  - Sample lectures
  - Other
- c. **During your university course search, have you contacted or interacted with a university in any of the following ways? (please tick all that apply)**
- I used a University's Facebook page.
  - I followed a university on Twitter.
  - I used a university profile on LinkedIn.
  - I contacted a university staff using Instant Messaging (IM)
  - I did not interact with the university using any of the above.
  - Other
- d. **Did you contact university students or staff to get their opinion on a university course using social media?**
- Yes       No

e. **Which of the following social media information sources influenced you most in your university course selection? (please tick one only)**

- Facebook
- Myspace
- LinkedIn
- Twitter
- Google+
- YouTube
- Pinterest
- Instagram
- Other

f. **Tell us about how social media helped you in your university course selection and decision. (please write your answer)**

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## Section D – General Social Media use

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Think about how you use social media generally and the kind of activities that you engage on social media and answer the questions in this section.

**a. Did you have a social media profile when in high school?**

- Yes       No

**b. On which social media sites did you have a profile when in high school? (you may tick more than one)**

- Facebook  
 MySpace  
 LinkedIn  
 Twitter  
 Google+  
 YouTube  
 Pinterest  
 Instagram  
 Other

**c. On which social media sites do you have a profile now? (you may tick more than one)**

- Facebook  
 Myspace  
 LinkedIn  
 Twitter  
 Google+  
 YouTube  
 Pinterest  
 Instagram  
 Other

**d. On which social media sites are you active on now? (you may tick more than one)**

**Very Active      Somewhat Active      Occasionally Active      Not Active**

- Facebook
  - MySpace
  - LinkedIn
  - Twitter
  - Google+
  - YouTube
  - Pinterest
  - Instagram
  - Other
- Social  
Media

**e. How much time do you spend each day on these applications? (you may tick more than one)**

	<b>Over 2 Hours</b>	<b>Up to 2 Hours</b>	<b>Up to 1 Hour</b>	<b>Up to 30 Minutes</b>	<b>None</b>
• <b>Facebook</b>					
• <b>MySpace</b>					
• <b>LinkedIn</b>					
• <b>Twitter</b>					
• <b>Google+</b>					
• <b>YouTube</b>					
• <b>Pinterest</b>					
• <b>Instagram</b>					
• <b>Other Social Media</b>					

**f. What kind of activities do you participate on social media sites?**

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## **Section E – University Course Information on Social Media**

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The questions ask you to reflect on how universities could have helped you further with your course selection process via social media and their websites.

**a. How should Universities use social media applications to provide information on their programs to international students (you may select more than one)**

- Create blogs and forums for university course and education topics.
- Participate in education related blogs and forums.
- Advertise in blogs and social networks.
- Use photo and video hosting services to show their facilities and activities.
- Create and host a sample video lecture on social media sites.
- Create and host a presentation of the university on a social media site.
- Showcase students from my country on a video sharing application.
- Make university course information available through video.

**b. How would you expect a university to use social media with prospective students? (You may select more than one)**

- Information on educational opportunities
- Information on events through video s; photos
- Latest university news and activities
- Ability to connect to other university students.
- Link to university alumni
- University alerts

**c. Which social media sites would you recommend universities to use to help students in their university course selection? (you may select more than one)**

- Facebook
- MySpace
- LinkedIn
- Twitter
- Google+
- YouTube
- Pinterest
- Instagram
- Other

**d. Would you recommend your friends to use social media to select a university course?**

- Yes       No

**e. If your answer is yes, what is the reason for recommending social media? (please write your answer)**

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