

**THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 AND DIGITAL  
TRANSFORMATION ON THE MARKETING AND  
COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF HIGHER  
EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS, IN RELATION TO  
STUDENT RECRUITMENT**

**by**

**Emma-Jean Williams**

**Canterbury Christ Church  
University**

**Thesis submitted for the  
Degree of MA by Research**

2021

## Abstract

Where the Coronavirus pandemic has interrupted face to face delivery of university student recruitment events, whether large scale external events or internal events, digital channels appear to have been utilised as the main form of communication to engage prospective students. However, what is unclear is to what extent COVID-19 and digital transformation have impacted the marketing and communication strategies of HE institutions and whether other universities have had to increase their social media presence and online resources and recruitment events more than others. The thesis finds that COVID-19 has ultimately acted as a catalyst for digital transformation, allowing universities more flexibility to move their marketing and communication strategies online through virtual activities and events, as well as through greater use of image and video content across webpages and social media. Factors considered include reflecting the differences and extent of digital transformation between Russell Group and Non-Russell Group universities. The target audience majority of 'digital natives' is also considered as a reason for this accelerated effect of digital transformation, with COVID-19 allowing an opportunity to adhere to their demands. Their familiarity and accessibility to online information is an important rationale for HE institutions to create content on digital platforms and move away from paper communications and marketing material – a strategy that will remain in future student recruitment.

## Acknowledgements

There are many people I would like to thank for their help during my MA by research.

Firstly, I would like to thank all my family, especially my wonderful partner, Ben for supporting me throughout and keeping me motivated to set time to write alongside working full-time.

I would also like to thank my supervisor Agnes Gulyas and Chair of Supervisors, Shane Blackman for helping get my MA started and for providing me with useful resources and guidance.

I would also like to thank both the Interview participants who kindly gave up their time to be a part of my study.

I would also like to thank my colleagues at work for adding suggestions and being understanding during the challenging times throughout writing my thesis.

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction	8
1.1 Research Context	8
1.2 Research Aim	8
1.3 Thesis Structure	9
2. Literature Review	11
2.1 Introduction	11
2.2 The Marketing and Communication Strategies of Organisations	12
2.21 Digital Technology in Strategic Marketing	12
2.22 Social Media Across Other Sectors	12
2.23 Key Elements of Marketing and Communication Strategies	13
2.3 The Marketing and Communication Strategies of HE Institutions	15
2.31 Marketing and Communication Strategies Prior to the Impact of COVID-19	15
2.32 Competition Across the HE Sector	16
2.33 HE Branding and Social Media Use	17
2.34 Student Recruitment During COVID-19	18
2.4 ‘Digital Natives’ and the Target Audience of HE	19
2.41 Using Digital Technology to Relate to the Target Audience	20
2.42 Digital Channels and the Prospective Student	21
2.5 Conclusions from the Literature Review	22
2.6 A Conceptual Framework	24

3. Methodology	25
3.1 Introduction	25
3.2 Research Positionality	25
3.3 Mixed Methods	26
3.4 Content Analysis	26
3.5 Quantitative Research	27
3.51 Sampling Process for the Content Analysis	28
3.52 Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis	30
3.6 Qualitative Research	31
3.61 Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Content Analysis to Determine Interview Questions	31
3.62 Interviews	32
3.63 Sampling Process and Participants for Interviews	33
3.64 Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Virtual Interviews	34
3.65 Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis	34
3.7 Ethical Considerations	35
3.8 Methodological Challenges	36
4. Findings: Content Analysis	40
4.1 Introduction	40
4.2 Quantitative Findings	40
4.21 Use of Virtual Events	40
4.22 Use of Video Content	43
4.23 Use of Video Conferencing Platforms and Live Chats	46

4.24 A Summary of the Quantitative Data Collected	49
4.3 Qualitative Findings	50
4.31 How Have They Tried to Relate to the Target Audience?	50
5. Discussion of the Content Analysis Findings	58
5.1 Introduction	58
5.2 The Virtualisation of Events and Increased Use of Content	58
5.3 A Change in Messaging and the Student Voice	60
5.4 Not All Universities were Digitally Transforming at the Same Rate	61
5.5 Conclusions from the Content Analysis	62
6. Interview Findings	64
6.1 Introduction	64
6.2 “We Have Moved to an Online Profile”	64
6.3 A Demand for New Content and Relatable Messaging	66
6.4 Putting People at the Heart of Strategy	68
6.5 The Difference in Digital Transformation Between Russell Group and non-Russell Group Universities	69
6.6 A Summary of the Findings	71
7. Discussion of the Interview Findings	72
7.1 Introduction	72
7.2 How the Digital Transformation of HEI Marketing and Communication Strategies has Accelerated because of COVID-19	72
7.3 How the Digital Transformation of HEI Marketing and Communication	

Strategies has Accelerated because of Other Influencing Factors	74
7.4 A Summary of the Discussion	75
8. Conclusions	77
8.1 How has the Study Answered the Research Question?	77
8.2 Limitations	78
8.3 Further Considerations	79
9. Bibliography	80
10. Appendices	98
10.1 Appendix 1	98
10.2 Appendix 2	100
10.3 Appendix 3	109
10.4 Appendix 4: Ethics Form	117

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Research Context

The United Kingdom (UK) Higher Education (HE) sector is globally renowned, including top universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, Durham (Times Higher Education University Rankings, 2021) and many more. Universities across the UK differentiate in geographical location, as well as overall status and reputation and can be categorised into many subgroups from Russell Group to Polytechnic group to Cathedral group universities. With the UK having over 100 universities across the country, student recruitment is key within marketing and communication strategies across the sector. Researchers who have observed UK HE student recruitment, have remarked that in recent years, changes have forced UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to constantly explore a unique definition of what they offer to differentiate themselves and attract students (Chapelo *et al.*, 2007, cited in Bolat and O’Sullivan, 2017, p. 742). Within the context of a more competitive environment for student recruitment, digital transformation has appeared at the forefront, from the introduction of computers in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, to the use of websites as a main platform for providing information to prospective students. In addition to digital technologies, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact in recent years on how universities operate and communicate.

In December 2019, The COVID-19 outbreak began in the city of Wuhan, in the Hubei province of China. The pandemic, within weeks, led to the unprecedented health and socioeconomic crisis which we are still living in, and which has severely impacted the HE sector across the entire world (Marinoni, van’t Land and Jensen, 2020). The pandemic has affected, society, both individually and at large, with health care thrown into an economic, cultural, and social crisis. The societal measures across the UK and the rest of the world have had a huge effect on higher education which Marinoni, van’t Land and Jensen (2020) claim “have impacted often dramatically, the conditions under which higher education all of a sudden had to perform research and what is often now referred to as emergency online education” (p. 6).

## 1.2 Research Aim

The research aims to answer, to what extent has the impact of COVID-19 accelerated the digital transformation of marketing and communication strategies in HE Institutions

(HEIs), in relation to student recruitment? Therefore, the primary goal is to discover how the digital transformation of HEI marketing and communication strategies changed because of COVID-19. To explore this, the key research objectives are:

- To compare the difference in HE digital tools and technology both before and after the impact of COVID-19.
- To assess other factors that may contribute to the digital transformation of HEI marketing and communication strategies.

### 1.3 Thesis Structure

The thesis will firstly begin with a literature review to position the study and collect relevant research to prepare the researcher when discussing the findings later in the study. The chapter will also assess other influencing factors that may contribute to the digital transformation of HEIs. With advancements in digital technology, many factors have changed our understanding of marketing and communications and altered previous marketing methods and techniques for student recruitment. The literature review has been split into three main themes: the marketing and communication strategies of organisations, the marketing and communication strategies of HEIs, and ‘digital natives’ and the target audience of HEIs. These will be introduced further in the next chapter.

The methodology chapter will then go into detail about the mixed methods approach of the thesis, ethical considerations, and sampling procedure to best achieve the research objectives and explore the primary goal of the study. The study has a mixed methods design of content analysis and interviews. The findings from the Content Analysis are firstly displayed in Chapter 4, followed by a separate discussion in Chapter 5 organised into three sections: the virtualisation of events and increased use of video content, a change in messaging and tone of voice, and ‘not all universities are digitally transforming at the same rate’. These were used to help form the semi-structured interviews. Chapter 6 then analyses the interview findings, followed by a separate discussion in Chapter 7 of the factors that support the primary goal of the study and explore the other factors influencing the digital transformation of HEI marketing and communication strategies. The thesis will conclude by evaluating how this argument

affects the 'extent' at which the acceleration of digital transformation was due to COVID-19, to answer the research question.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

The impact of COVID-19 on HEIs allows for limited but ever developing literature, furthermore, asserting the research's significant contribution to the sector. The purpose of this literature review is to explore existing research that examines the use of digital technology in UK universities, particularly in relation to their marketing and communication strategies. The chapter will also illustrate the digital tools used by organisations and how they compare to HEIs, followed by an investigation of the HE target audience.

The literature review first considers the general topic around the importance of digital content strategies for all organisations. This aims to understand how key marketing techniques are utilised and what is important to look out for and ask during the research's content analysis and interviews. Sources illustrate the importance of coherent branding and tone of voice, the use of social media and different types of content, and benefits of adding value when utilising digital technology for marketing and communication purposes. The second subchapter focuses on the marketing and communication strategies of HEIs. Although literature is limited when it comes to their strategies during COVID-19, the aim is to determine the extent of digital transformation prior to the pandemic and during where possible, to then compare the literature with the research's own findings later in the thesis. The use of social media and branding is then further researched, now with a focus from the HE viewpoint, as well as the concept that 'competition' between universities and different organisations within the same industry acts a catalyst for fundamental change. Finally, the literature moves to the narrower exploration of how young people, particularly the Generation Z and end of the Millennial demographic cohorts, are increasingly using digital technology, and how they play a significant role in university marketing and communication strategies. Furthermore, in this subchapter, the research presents how prospective students engage with universities, particularly in relation to branding and social media, to understand the importance and effectiveness in relating to target audience demands and providing accessible information.

## 2.2 The Marketing and Communications Strategies of Organisations

### 2.2.1 Digital Technology in Strategic Marketing

To understand the salience of communication and marketing strategies in HE, it is important to firstly consider other organisations within the public and other sectors to establish where the HE sector is positioned. There is no single definition of marketing, however Gundlach and Wilkie (2009, p. 259) define it as:

The activity, set of institutions and processes of creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.

According to Kotler *et al.* (2002), Butler and Collins (1995) and Burton (1999), marketing should be broadly defined and include all exchanges between social groups. (cited in Pasquier and Villeneuve, 2018, p. 20). Pasquier and Villeneuve (2018) claim that the public sector can be “contextualised within a marketing approach, allowing all public services – social, cultural, sporting or educational in nature to be included in marketing” (p. 21). There is a significant majority of research that agrees to strategic marketing being a necessary tool in all sectors, with technology changing the way in which businesses operate in the public sector. Marketing within the public sector has now created a very individualised experience, providing people with large amounts of information on many topic areas (Proctor, 2008, p.16). Strategic marketing planning is a necessary management tool, one that relies on a citizen orientated approach and employs a blend of marketing methodologies, which the private and non-profit sectors have been using for decades (Kotler and Lee, 2007, p. 12). In relation to strategy, Lazie and Jovie (2019) state that “conducting a strategic digital transformation of organisations is becoming more and more present practice in business strategies of organisations in the last couple of years” (p. 184).

Furthermore, the tourism sectors approach to marketing during the pandemic is an interesting area to explore to understand further the different organisational strategies adopted during COVID-19. It was discovered that during COVID-19, audience-based strategies became increasingly important (Ketter and Avraham, 2021) with claims that “handling the emotions and concerns of the target audience can enhance the consumer’s confidence in the destination and increase the intention to visit” (Hange *et al.*, 2020 cited in Ketter and Avraham, 2021, p. 20). As we will delve into further in the ‘digital natives’ sub-chapter within this review, this principal is the same within HE, with strategies having to be audience-based. Many brands have thrived throughout the pandemic, and although the line between education and digital is

becoming thinner, like other brands, digital marketing channels have been used to engage with students. HEIs have products to sell and with that there are commercial pressures just like any other business. (Fraser, 2020).

### 2.22 Social Media Across Other Sectors

When we look at digital marketing across the public and private sectors, it must be considered that social media plays an important role in the digital transformation of organisations with it becoming one of the defining technologies of our time, used by billions of people across the world (Appel *et al.*, 2020, pp. 79-95). It is important to further understand the social media landscape to determine how universities may be utilising it similarly to other organisations. Appel *et al.* (2020, pp. 79) suggest that:

The current social media landscape has two key aspects to it. First are the platforms – major and minor, established, and emerging – that provide the underlying technologies and business models making up the industry and ecosystem. Second are the use cases, i.e., how various kinds of people and organisations are using these technologies and for what purposes.

This statement illustrates how to understand what marketing and communication strategies work, we need to firstly look at what digital technology (in this case social media) is present. Then we must look at exactly how HEI target audiences interact with this technology to learn how prospective students want to interact with a university. With this identified social media landscape, the need to measure the success of marketing techniques is important as research has shown how social media marketing has a direct impact on business outcomes (Achen, 2017, p. 39). Askool and Nakata (2011), state that social media has “the ability to make an organisation more successful, especially if the company engages in meaningful conversations with customers” (p. 776). This leads into further research discovered around the ‘key message’ in marketing.

### 2.23 Key Elements of Marketing and Communication Strategies

The idea of a message supporting the communications of organisations is an important factor to consider when looking at different organisational marketing strategies. ‘Message’ is a concept within the discipline of communication which over the centuries has both narrowed

and broadened in meaning (Lammers, 2011, p. 160). Simpson and Weiner (1989) define it as being important in expressing “the broad meaning of something; an expressed or implied central theme or significant point, especially one with political, social or moral importance”. In any organisation, the information they communicate to newcomers during socialisation is a priority for employee indoctrination and adjustment (Jablin, 1987, Lankau and Scandura, 2002, Saks and Ashforth, 1997, pp. 670-740), which in turn makes it important to analyse the actual content of that information (Hart, 2012, p. 193).

Furthermore, information and the type of content produced is important to the overall marketing of any organisation, with digital content acting as a product that can share the essential characteristics of information (Vinerean, 2017, pp. 92-93). He and Harris (2020, p.116) claim that:

the lightning speed of the spread of COVID-19 required organisations to develop such entrepreneurial agility as to constitute flexibility to the point of hypermobility... a key facet of this is the exponentially increased move to online communications and change.

This research shows the capabilities of digital content in increasing the accessibility of information during the pandemic, however, what the research also argues is the importance of producing engaging and purposeful content to attract a target audience. The term ‘content’ is rooted in the publishing, where words, images and motion graphics must be sufficiently interesting for the target audience to seek out the publishing platform whether it is a newspaper, magazine, TV, or radio channel (Holliman and Rowley, 2014). Whether this be a prospective student audience or other consumer audience, Vinerean (2017) illustrates that the importance of ensuring the right content is created is essential. Furthermore, their research reflects how a priority of content marketing is to provide customers with value rather than an advertisement trying to persuade consumers to buy. This could be through the display and communication of information through text, image, and video (p. 92). Therefore, when looking at digital transformation, “content marketing is changing the way companies sell and communicate with its target audience” (Vinerean, 2017, p. 93).

## 2.3 The Marketing and Communication Strategies of HE Institutions

### 2.31 Marketing and Communication Strategies Prior to the Impact of COVID- 19

According to *Fitzgerald et al.*, (2014, p. 2) digital transformation can be defined as:

The use of new digital technologies such as social media, mobile technology, analytics, or embedded devices to enable major business improvements including enhanced customer experiences, streamlined operations, or new business models.

Before the digital age, research on the marketing and communication strategies of universities had little to no mention of digital technology and instead focused on letters, campus visits and view books as being one of the most prominent methods to engage potential applicants (Peruta and Shields, 2018, pp. 175-191). Just over ten years ago, many researchers defined universities as “highly conventional institutional practices” (Brown and Duguid 2010, p. 11) that hadn’t really changed beyond the replacement of libraries with online directories, the use of computers as modernised typewriters, and popularity of e-mails (Brown and Duguid 2010, p. 11).

However, there are studies that have found that the strategies of HEIs have advanced online prior to the impact of COVID-19. Pfeffer (2012) found that universities were increasingly using digital media in the form of the web and social media, to complete their tasks. However, it can be argued that rather than being revolutionary, their transformation is evolutionary (p. 1) with the massive infiltration of the web forcing universities to digitalise their processes and provide innovative products and services, although at perhaps a slower rate compared to other organisations (Rodríguez-Abitia and Bribiesca-Correa, 2021, p.1). By 2020, some researchers say that universities entered a new phase of evolution in terms of their use of digital technologies. For example, Strielkowski (2020) suggests that HE is creating a generation of universities titled “online and digital universities” (p.1). Strielkowski’s research is significant as it specifically identifies universities as “digital” whilst stating that much of that is because of the COVID-19 pandemic which has launched a “digital revolution in academia and higher education” (Strielkowski, 2020, p. 1). Brown and Duguid (2010) support this statement, and although they recognise their conventionalism, they understand that campuses are changing due to target audience demand and the increased influence of student bodies and the student voice (p. 11). This represents this transformation of universities from professional

“highly conventional institutions” of research, into market players, whose strategies are having to become audience based (Delmestri, Oberg and Drori, 2013, p. 134-147).

### 2.32 Competition Across the HE Sector

A notable trend throughout the marketing of HEIs and other organisations is competition, as competition between organisations, in this case HEIs, can often stimulate innovation (Anderson and King, 1991, p. 17). Marketing can be widely identified as a strategy that aims to define and react better than competitors to the needs and preferences of the target audiences (Ismail Alshaketheep, et al., 2020, p. 832). In the last twenty years with the introduction of tuition fees, the HE sector has become more competitive, however adding a global pandemic to the mix has created a lot of pressure on HE marketing and communication professionals and their strategies. Many organisations were quick to react and adapt to certain communication techniques such as content marketing and targeting, in turn leading to their success (Dance, 2020). Across the research there is this strong argument that environmental changes and competition across the sector (Mocan, Maniu and Ionela, 2019) has allowed HEIs to adopt “market-driven business practices” (Bolat and O’Sullivan, 2017, p. 758), to create student-generated content across the web and social media. With this increased competition, university websites are being designed with a focus on the effectiveness and efficiency of interaction and prospective student (customer) satisfaction to attract more viewers. The use of colour on university websites, along with other iconic elements such as logos and eye-catching images, are instances which not only contribute to the creation of institutional identity, but also function as elements of the commodification of education (Simin, Tavanger and Pinna, 2011).

Furthermore, it is evident that universities have changed due to the pandemic, however it can be argued that not all universities have noticed increased competition. Many universities with higher status and capacity have been taking away students who may have previously gone to a smaller university because of the decline in students entering university during the pandemic (Anthony Seldon, 2020 cited in Higgins, 2020). Researchers believe that this “might deprive small institutions of their intake” (Higgins, 2020), highlighting this continued or even increased competition between HEIs during the pandemic, and how it has affected certain universities more than others.

### 2.33 HE Branding and Social Media Use

It is important to discover how universities are branding themselves on digital platforms, in particularly on social media and the web. Branding is a phenomenon that has become increasingly more common in the marketing of HEIs over the last few years (Waeraas and Solbakk, 2009, p. 1). Brands are intended to convey meaning and represent identity with brand images of HE institutions conveying the gradual transformation of universities (Delmestri, Oberg and Drori, 2015) from institutes of scholars to “organisations” (Krucken and Meier, 2006, p. 241). With the guidance of marketing and branding consultants in recent years, many universities across the world have been replacing their more traditional branding methods such as their seals and emblems, with modernised and eye-catching logos (Delmestri, Oberg and Drori, 2013, p. 134-147). Whilst it is recognised that consistency in branding across all communications with stakeholders is important to attract students, the use of social media is portrayed as the best method to move from initial interaction to a positive relationship between the university and its prospective students (Shileds and Peruta, 2018, p. 69-70).

Social media is useful in revealing how consumers connect to those brands that they have an interest in (Davis, Piven and Breazele, 2014, pp. 468-481). Across the literature, HEIs along with many other organisations are showing an increased interest in social media as an effective marketing tool to reach and attract future students. As Constantinides and Stagno (2011) highlight, the next step in developing this type of research is to better “understand how potential students use social media and what their role is in the decision-making process of choosing a program of study, a university, or college” (p. 7). In terms of communication and engagement with prospective students “social media users aged 16-24 were more likely to be active engagers with 34% of users often sharing, posting and commenting” (OFCOM, 2021a). A study by Rutter, Roper and Lettice (2016) tests the relationship between social media factors and higher education recruitment performance. Most consumers follow brands that they like, and brands can then engage with these consumers to begin to build a relationship between the two. The benefit of this relationship developing on social media is that they are public platforms. When someone retweets, or comments or even likes something, a brand gets in front of many other potential consumers who weren’t involved in the initial interaction (p. 3101). Both prospective and current students may use social media to feel connected and “in the loop” whilst also building relationships professionally and with friends (Fujita, Harrigan and Soutar, 2017). The added benefit of these platforms being that they are public therefore adding to the brand awareness of an HEI. Lipsman *et al.* (2012), further support this argument in their study

of how brands reach and influence fans stating that “when a brand focuses on acquiring and engaging fans, it can benefit from a significant secondary effect – exposure among friends of fans that often surpasses reach among fans” (p. 2).

What is important to note is that the sole use of social media is not necessarily a positive branding tool for HEIs. Tweeting or commenting a large amount is not a key performance indicator, but instead “the content and type of tweet are more important” (Lipsman *et al.*, 2012, p.2). Fletcher and Lee (2012) further support this statement saying that “quality and type of social media site are seen as more important than quantity” (p. 518), which is useful for the purpose of this research in addressing the research objectives. University marketing practitioners are advised to approach social media marketing in ways that reflect the defining characteristics of social media itself – interactivity, openness and flexibility, and fast paced flows of information (Larson and Draper, 2015, cited in Shields and Peruta, 2018, p. 68).

#### 2.34 Student Recruitment During COVID-19.

In the past, student recruitment professionals have typically attracted prospective students through campus open days and events, as well as through school visits. Now, research shows how the pandemic has moved the HEI world entirely online with universities having to shift their focus to online events and activities (*Digital student recruitment in the time of coronavirus*, 2020). Furthermore, all education has witnessed a digital surge with schools, colleges and universities around the world shifting to the use of video conferencing platforms such as zoom and google meet for classes and meetings. (De’, Pandey and Pal, 2020, p. 2) Many universities were ahead of the curve in terms of digital events, whilst others lacked any digital transformation prior to the pandemic. Maguire (2020) found that:

As a rough estimate the ratio of spending on digital estate versus physical estates has tended to be 1:10 – so for every £10m universities spend on physical estate, they spend £1m on digital. The events of the last several months suggest that this needs to get to parity.

This shift in priorities is illustrated, with Maguire further suggesting that more should be spent on digital in the next few years, due to the impact of COVID-19. This is further supported by Owen (2018) who states that “in this digital age, we’re finding more students

now expect universities to offer virtual elements to their open days and careers fairs” (p. 1). This reflects this organisational type pressure and target audience demand universities are now challenged with, which are reoccurring themes within the existing literature.

#### 2.4 ‘Digital Natives’ and the Target Audience of HEIs

The study of the communication and marketing strategies of HEIs necessitates the review of existing research regarding the age, traits, and familiarity with digital channels and platforms of the target audience of prospective students, to understand how universities can best relate to and communicate with this audience. There is much debate in the academic literature as to what age group is defined as the “traditional” student with 18 to 24-year-old students generally fitting into this category (Durkin, Filbey, and McCartan-Quinn, 2013, pp. 56-70). This category is currently classed as Generation Z (born from 1997 onward), or towards the end of the Millennial Generation (born between 1981 and 1996) (Dimock, 2019). Both generations were raised during the boom of the internet and have witnessed the impact of digital technology in all aspects of their lives from healthcare to communication, with technological advances at the forefront of their childhood, university, and then further into their careers (Gibson and Sodeman, 2014, p .65). A wealth of literature describes them as a generation that is “living lives immersed in technology” (Bennett, Maton and Kervin, 2008, p. 776), who “are the true digital natives: from earliest youth, they have been exposed to the internet, to social networks, and to mobile systems” (Francis and Hoefel, 2018, p. 31). The literature therefore establishes that this is a generation of technology users. The primary market of universities can be described as the “under 21-year-old segment” (Durkin, Filbey, and McCartan-Quinn, 2013, p. 58), which fits into this Generation Z category of a target market who has considerable experience with digital technology. Research has also shown that this younger generations’ aptitude and attitude towards digital technology has an impact on university marketing and communication strategies. Universities are having to adopt new technologies to engage with the younger undergraduate target audience who represent their core business (Durkin, 2011). However, there is limited research on how universities are engaging with their target audience, particularly after the impact of COVID-19, therefore identifying a gap that will be explored further in the study.

### 2.41 Using Digital Technology to Relate to the Target Audience

There is often an assumption that Generation Z is fixated on technology and because they have grown up with technology and are used to using it 24/7, that they would ultimately give up anything else before their mobile device (Warner, 2013). Although perhaps a bold statement, the importance of this literature in defining this generation as “digital natives” and digitally dependent, is that it illustrates how young people may wish to access information about a university, with the assumption being that this is likely through the internet and mobile device. There is essentially a new generation of students entering higher education institutions, one which has grown up with technology both informative and communicative as a significant part of their everyday lives. Their immersion in this technological upbringing and culture has influenced their interests and skills in relation to education. (Bennett, Maton and Kervin, 2008, p. 776).

Many HE institutions recognise the growing importance of developing digital marketing strategies that enables them to capture the interest of prospective students (Mocan, Maniu and Ionela, 2019), having established that these prospective students comprise of, not all, but many digital natives. In recent years, higher education institutions are being viewed by many researchers and marketing practitioners as service providers, with education as the product and students as the consumers (Ionela, 2019). Furthermore, with the technological advances and the emergence of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, it is no surprise that young people fit Warner’s assumption with “96% of their generation belonging to at least one social network” (Gibson and Sodeman, 2014, p. 65). UK internet users on average spend three hours and thirty-seven minutes a day on smartphones, tablets, and computers (OFCOM, 2021b). With the pandemic, digital technology has been crucial in keeping parts of the economy going, allowing large groups of people to work and study from home, enhancing social connectedness and providing entertainment (Király *et al.*, 2020). When the pandemic first forced the closure of HEIs, staff had to quickly gain the right digital skills to deliver effective online learning, with many perhaps less familiar with digital technology as the prospective student (Taylor, 2020).

On the other hand, although Gibson and Sodeman (2014) claim that a high percentage of millennials belong to at least one social media network (p.65), further supported by the OFCOM (2021b) statistics. Its limitations are that it does not account for the entire target audience of prospective students. Not every student at university is between the ages of 18 and

24 and the so called “non-traditional” students (essentially students over the age of 25), are a growing proportion of students who are influencing prominent change in the identity of the overall university student population (Tilley, 2014, 95). In an early study, an analysis of the demographic data found that the percentage change in the population of 18–20-year-olds from 2006 to 2027, will show a decline in the traditional school leaver age groups across the UK with a peak in 30–39-year-olds and a rise in 50–59-year-olds predicted (Universities UK, 2008). Therefore, another outcome of COVID-19 could be that it has accelerated this predicted increase in mature learners entering university, with the recession and increased competition during the pandemic, leading people to retrain for the “changing labour market” (Hewitt, 2020, p. 40). These demographic and societal changes in HE reflects how different universities may need to learn about their audiences and communicate through different mediums to be successful with different audiences and to achieve their desired results (Durkin, Filbey, McCartan-Quinn, 2013, p. 57). These are all factors which will be interesting to see if universities are considering when collecting data later in the study.

#### 2.42 Digital Channels and the Prospective Student

The literature has outlined the different social media platforms prospective students are likely to interact with. To address the research objectives, it is important to consider what digital channels prospective students are likely to use to engage with a university. In recent years, established platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn are being replaced by trendier and newer platforms such as Instagram and TikTok (Peruta and Shields, 2018, pp. 175-191), which subsequently HEI marketing professionals are having to learn and keep up with as well. Ofcom (2021b) reports that younger adults were more varied in their use of social media sites and apps and therefore the content being viewed. The results from users aged 16-24 when asked what they considered to be their main social account was widely varied; 24% said Instagram, 21% Snapchat, 19% Facebook and 13% TikTok. This use of varied social media platforms supports Vitelar’s (2019, p. 257) statement that:

Building a personal brand in this modern age, where technology and social platforms redefine the way individuals interact, has become a necessity, especially for the young generation Z which are increasingly involved in the online medium.

This leads to the discovery that user-generated content is the most popular amongst Generation Z (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021), which is mostly found on TikTok, Instagram and

YouTube (*Which social networks have the highest usage among Gen Z and Millennials*, 2021). When looking at video-sharing platforms like these, the OFCOM (2021b) results show that younger users were accessing those sites more regularly than older users. According to a report by Singh and Awasthi (2020), “video conferencing platforms downloads topped 62 million in the month of March 2020” (p. 1). HEIs can benefit from Generation Z’s interest in learning through video and other visuals on these channels (Seemiller and Grace, 2017). Even prior to the pandemic, the use of video conferencing had been widely used among HE institutions and students as an effective form of communication when face-to-face activity isn’t possible (Al-Samarraie, 2019, p. 1).

## 2.5 Conclusions from the Literature Review

Research has found that HEIs have been digitally transforming in recent years to reflect the changing target audience to an audience of “digital natives”. The emergence of the web and social media, as well as new social media channels, has been implemented into university marketing and communication strategies in the same way as other organisations. This is supported by literature that shows there is now a new generation of students entering HEIs, one which has grown up with technology both informative and communicative as a significant part of their everyday lives (Bennett, Maton and Kervin, 2008, p. 776). Furthermore, within the literature there is evidence to suggest that COVID-19 has launched a “digital revolution in academia and higher education” (Strielkowski, 2020, p. 1), with schools, colleges and universities around the world shifting to the use of video conferencing platforms such as zoom and google meet for classes and meetings (De’, Pandey and Pal, 2020, p. 2). These findings present two influencing factors – the target audience of HEIs and new digital tools and channels. The third factor is around the type of HEI with literature in the ‘competition’ subchapter reflecting how certain, perhaps more “traditional” HEIs don’t necessarily feel the same rush to new digital tools and technology as others (Anthony Seldon, 2020, cited in Higgins, 2020).

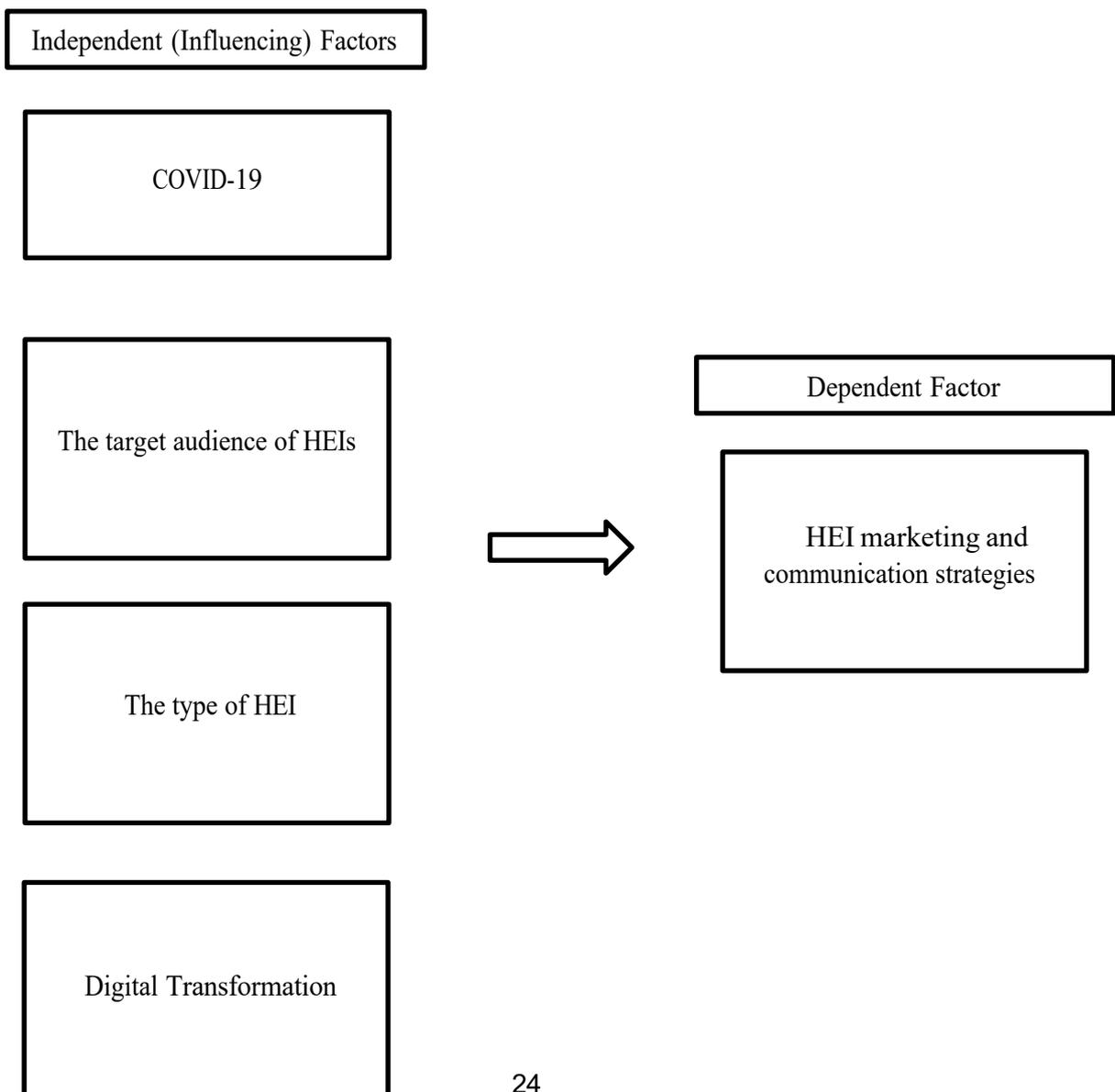
However, some of the research argues that not all the target audience of HEIs are of Generation Z, which is further supported by the OFCOM (2021b) report showing that not everyone belongs to a digital channel – factors that must be considered within this studies data collection. Research has also found that content marketing is an effective type of marketing utilised more in recent years to add value to a product or service (Vinerean, 2017, p. 92-93).

The literature around the use of branding of HEIs similarly supports this idea around value and the importance of conveying meaning when engaging and communicating your brand with a target audience (Delmestri, Oberg and Drori, 2015). This exploration around value helped necessitate the need for a qualitative analysis as well as a quantitative analysis to understand further the influencing factors and how they affect the dependent variable of HE marketing and communication strategies, both individually and collectively. This research method will be discussed further in the next chapter, the methodology.

## 2.6 A Conceptual Framework

Having explored the influencing factors contributing to the digital transformation of HEI marketing and communication strategies within the literature review, a conceptual framework can be presented to outline a roadmap for the study, helping to organise the research and the different factors that will be explored to answer the research question.

*Figure 1: A conceptual framework. The dependent factor is HEI marketing and communication strategies. The independent factors are COVID-19, digital transformation, the target audience of HEIs, and the type of HEI. Through the empirical evidence and analysis presented in this thesis, the research aims to understand the extent at which the independent factors influence the dependent factor of HEI marketing and communication strategies.*



## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

The purpose of a methodology is to enable myself, the researcher, to plan and examine critically the logic, composition, and protocols of research methods (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 5). The study incorporated mixed methods applying content analysis to university webpages and social media, and conducting interviews with university marketing practitioners. In this chapter, as a university marketing practitioner, the researcher will firstly discuss their own position and explain throughout the chapter how this has contributed to certain decisions such as determining what universities, participants, and questions to include. The chapter then provides a detailed overview of the research methods, firstly looking at mixed methods, followed by an overview of quantitative methods, content analysis, the sampling process for the content analysis and quantitative data collection. The chapter will then provide an overview of qualitative methods and interviews, followed by the sampling process for participants and step-by-step process of the qualitative data collection and analysis. The chapter will conclude with an overview of the ethical considerations and methodological challenges.

### 3.2 Research Positionality

As a HE practitioner within the Marketing and Communications Department at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU), the researcher has a professional interest in exploring how universities are adapting their marketing and communication strategies and using digital technology to combat cancelled face-to-face student recruitment events and talks both internal and external to the campus. The researcher's relevant work within this sector during the pandemic provided an understanding for how CCCU had adapted their strategies to meet changing priorities. This provides an insight into how post 1992 and polytechnic universities are perhaps modifying their marketing and communication strategies for online delivery. What is unclear and reasons this thesis is the researcher's aim to explore how other, very different, universities compare and discover whether the digital transformation of their marketing and communication strategies has changed because of COVID-19. The study also necessitates an exploration as to whether other factors have influenced the digital transformation, and whether some universities were already noticing

an acceleration of digital transformation prior to COVID-19 because of these factors.

### 3.3 Mixed Methods

The research incorporated an explanatory sequential design of mixed methods whereby a quantitative content analysis was conducted first, followed by a qualitative content analysis, which was further developed using semi-structured interviews. Different methods, whether quantitative or qualitative, have different strengths and weaknesses which can be combined to take advantage of these differences. This argument is known as “offsetting strengths and weaknesses” (Plano Clark and Ivankova, 2006, p. 84). In the case of this research, using quantitative content analysis produced a generalised statistic to show the amount of content being presented on university digital platforms. However, what it lacked was the ability to interpret and provide an in-depth description on the type of content - only capable with a qualitative approach. Furthermore, with the research question revolving around such a large-scale phenomenon, there was also this need for a transformative and participatory perspective to support this interpretivist approach. This justifies why semi-structured interviews were used to find out personal experiences and more in-depth correlations or differences between participant experiences. By carefully combining the two types of methods with a qualitative dominance, the aim of using mixed methods was to obtain results that compensated for each other and provided a better understanding of the overall research problem.

### 3.4 Content Analysis

The term content analysis is about sixty years old and is generally defined as an “analysis of the manifest and latent content of a body of communicated material (as a book or film) through classification, tabulation and evaluation of its key symbols and themes in order to ascertain its meaning and probable effect” (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 1). As previously mentioned, the mixed methods approach created this “offsetting of strengths and weaknesses” and it can further be discussed that quantitative analysis was reliable in providing the facts when it came to numerical data of words, images etc., with many researchers believing that the truth can be objectively measured rather than constructed by

us and our observations in the case of qualitative analysis (Sukamolson, 2007).

However, in the case of this study, the content analysis was broken down into two subcategories, rhetoric analysis that focuses on the number of words, images etc, followed by ethnographic content analysis which Krippendorff (2013) says “does not avoid quantification but encourages content analysis accounts to emerge from readings of texts”. Furthermore, in the context of wider organisational research, Metcalfe and Blanco (2019) state that “visual methods are particularly well-positioned to provide a deep understanding of higher education”, which usually involves interpreting data through visual cues such as pictures, maps, logos, video and web-pages or any other visual materials relevant to the organisation (p.154). The importance of the content analysis having both quantitative and qualitative questions can be reflected by Holliman and Rowley (2014) who suggest that “creating content that is valuable to business-to-business audiences require brands to take a ‘publishing’ approach”. This involves relating to the audience and their information needs in the consumer cycle. In the case of this research, this audience is prospective students. “Valuable content is described as being useful, relevant, compelling and timely” (Holliman and Rowley, 2014, p. 269), which therefore means that although quantitative questions were useful to understand the amount of content and the inclusion of specific content, qualitative questions were also essential to determine the quality of that content. By looking at important marketing tools and factors such as how content relates to the target audience, and how branding and messaging is used, the qualitative content analysis therefore created a deeper insight into the research topic.

### 3.5 Quantitative Research

Quantitative methods adopt this positivist paradigm and assumption that social reality has an objective ontological structure, and those individuals are responding agents to this objective environment (Morgan and Smircich, 1980, pp. 491-500). This was beneficial to the study when collecting data so that it clearly and precisely reflected whether digital platforms were using certain strategies to meet their target audience demands and expectations. Furthermore, the method achieves high reliability of gathered data due to controlled observations, which for this thesis, was beneficial when looking at whether a digital platform either included or excluded images, text or video content.

### 3.51 Sampling Process for the Content Analysis

To examine how different universities have been adapting their marketing and communication strategies, it was decided that a purposeful sampling was to be applied to determine which universities to include in the study. Purposeful sampling is a “technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources” (Patton, 2002, cited in Palinkas *et al.*, 2013, p. 2). “This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest” (Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2011, cited in Palinkas *et al.*, 2013, p. 2). This concisely related to the research’s aim of interviewing individuals who have experienced the impact of COVID-19 and digital transformation in their HE role. Three main factors were considered for sampling:

- A geographic sampling and spread:

This involved selecting universities that were spread out across the UK rather than universities all in one area such as London. Ten universities were chosen which was a small sample size compared with the total number of universities across the UK. Therefore, a geographical spread and variation of the type of locations: campus based, city based, coastal or rural, allowed for more diversity despite the sample being approximately 5% of the overall HE population.

- Including Russell Group and non-Russell Group universities:

It was important to include an analysis of Russell Group universities to understand further whether these universities utilised digital platforms as much as perhaps ‘post 92 universities do. It was also interesting to discover the similarities and differences between different types of universities to relate to the research objective around exploring how certain types of universities may have digitally transformed more than others.

- UK University League Table

*The Complete University Guide League Table (2021)* was considered during the sampling process of universities to factor in whether universities higher up in the rankings perhaps relied less on marketing in comparison with universities lower down the rankings.

Ten universities were selected for the sample incorporating all three factors above: geographical location, Russell Group and non-Russell Group and the UK University league tables. After careful consideration, without neglecting the other two approaches, it was decided that having a geographical spread of universities across the UK would give a wider scope to how different universities marketed their universities, however the other two elements were also incorporated into the sample decision.

#### List of University Sample for Content Analysis

Number = UK University League Table

17. (Russell Group) The University of Manchester
19. (Russell Group) University of Glasgow
32. Swansea University
52. University of Hull
61. University of Portsmouth
66. Liverpool John Moores University
64. University of the West of England
77. Falmouth University
90. University of Greenwich
125. Canterbury Christ Church University

### 3.52 Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

Firstly, the Online Wayback Machine, a platform which allows researchers to view and navigate around past versions of websites, was used. It was decided that this web platform was useful in analysing the content, activities and branding presented on these digital platforms before the pandemic in March 2019, as well as after the impact of the pandemic, to determine the differences and similarities between the two versions and time periods. The literature reviewed in the previous chapters suggest that HE digital platforms have been transformed over the last decade, but that they have become particularly innovative in the last few years. Therefore, it could have been decided that these websites were analysed earlier in the 2010's to allow a potentially larger difference in content produced, messaging and branding. However, the decision to analyse the content approximately one year before the beginning of the pandemic seemed most suitable for answering the research question focused on finding out to what extent digital transformation has been accelerated by the pandemic in such a short period of time.

The next step after testing the Wayback Machine for the content analysis, was to test the universities from the sample to ensure that they were compatible with the software. Then a coding sheet was created to analyse two different digital platforms: the website home page and Instagram. The coding sheet included nine quantitative and six qualitative questions to discover the content of different university websites home pages and Instagram. These platforms were chosen as the home page would normally be the first place a prospective student may go to when finding out information about a university. It was therefore determined that it was the best page for presenting the different universities overall message, branding and use of content. Furthermore, Instagram was chosen as the representing social media platform. With the existing research suggesting that the use of Instagram has become "particularly popular at the moment" (Stuart, Stuart, Thelwall, 2017, p. 582), therefore providing an interesting analysis of newer digital platforms as part of the exploration of digital transformation amongst the university sample.

For the quantitative questions, the research aimed to discover whether there was video, image, text, and other forms of digital content present on the university webpages prior to the pandemic and after the impact of COVID-19. To present the data, the researcher gathered the quantitative coding sheets in a Microsoft Excel table to clearly present the home webpage and Instagram findings associated with video content, virtual events, live chats and

video-conferencing platforms before and after the impact of the pandemic (Appendix 1). The researcher then stated either ‘yes’ or ‘no’ for if these types of content, activities and communication strategies were present on both the platforms. Themes that implied an increased use of video content, virtual events, live chats and video-conferencing platforms were then drawn and used to discuss the findings in relation to the research question.

### 3.6 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research on the other hand, shares the theoretical assumptions of the interpretive paradigm, which is based on the notion that social reality is created and sustained through the subjective experience of people involved in communication. (Morgan & Smircich, 1980, pp. 491-500) By accurately describing, acknowledging themes, and noting the authenticity of data, meanings of phenomena can be interpreted within their social contexts. As Matveev (2002) suggests, qualitative methods produce data that allow the researcher to gain a “more realistic feel of the world that cannot be experienced in the numerical data and statistical analysis used in quantitative research” (p.59). The qualitative content analysis followed the quantitative content analysis and assessed the quality of the content gathered in the coding sheet. The analysis looked at how universities were changing their visual branding, use of certain marketing tools and tone of voice and messaging across their webpages and social media.

#### 3.61 Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Content Analysis to Determine Interview Questions

The advantages of designing a coding sheet to analyse the content of the ten different universities utilised in the study were that it clearly displayed quantitative data to determine distinctive changes in their webpages and social media from before the pandemic to after the impact of the pandemic. This related back to the research objective around comparing the differences in digital technology pre and post pandemic. Furthermore, to support the quantitative data that clearly outlined the digital transformation or lack of digital transformation across universities prior and during the impact of COVID-19, the qualitative data was effective in displaying the reasons for stating this digital change. The interpretation of video content, images and key branding and tone of voice techniques enabled insights

into the universities marketing and communications to be discovered such as their approach to communicating effectively with their target audience and their advantages in essentially ‘selling’ their university offer. Another advantage of the content analysis and from both the quantitative and qualitative data was that it was good in identifying themes and concepts that needed to be explored further through personal insights in the form of interviews. The content analysis was used to determine questions and the type of university practitioners that were best to approach to gain the best insights into the sector, despite being a small sample size. Furthermore, the content analysis allowed for themes and patterns to occur to develop further when analysing the interview data.

A potential disadvantage of the qualitative content analysis was that it was difficult to display the qualitative data in a clear manner that was easy to decipher what was being communicated. It also may have included bias in the fact that it incorporated the researcher’s perspective. Therefore, for a deeper and more reliable insight, the research could be extended. A secondary researcher could review the content and present their findings, which may include observations that may have either been missed or exaggerated by the researcher in this study.

The results from the content analysis contributed but did not fully determine the sampling process for participants in the semi-structured interviews. However, it did contribute to the types of questions the researcher felt necessary to ask the participants to gain a further understanding into areas that the content analysis was not able to include. By continuing the research with the use of semi-structured interviews, further insights into the personal experiences and challenges practitioners within different university marketing and communication departments faced during COVID-19 were discovered. This supported the assumptions made within the qualitative content analysis. The interviews also uncovered how the sampled universities have personally used digital platforms to adapt their work and communications with prospective students.

### 3.62 Interviews

David Silverman (1993) suggests that we now live in what has been called an “interview society” (Silverman, 1993, cited in Gubrium and Holstein, 2001, p.10). This is becoming increasingly the case within the public sector with university researchers, government officials and even the police force increasingly getting their information via

interviews. Many researchers would argue that interviewing is the most widely used and most popular technique for administering systematic social inquiries that create “windows on the world” (Hyman *et al.*, cited in Holstein and Gubrium, 2011, p.2). This method was essential to allow further insights to support and develop the findings from the content analysis.

The semi-structured interviews conducted incorporated two different universities, one from a Russell Group university and one from a non- Russell Group university. Five semi-structured questions were asked to enable a flow for discussion around their opinions on the digital transformation of the overall sector rather than their specific university. The reason for following the content analysis with semi- structured interviews was that “in mixed method research, semi-structured interviews can be useful as an adjunct to supplement and add depth to other approaches” (Adams, 2015, p. 494). Adams (2015) continues to say that this can be particularly beneficial when exploring “puzzles that emerge (or remain) after you have analysed survey or even focus group findings” (p. 494). This further relates to the study’s purpose in analysing the university webpages and social media prior to a more in-depth discussion with practitioners. Furthermore, Adams (2015) states how semi-structured interviews should be considered “if you...want to know the independent thoughts of each individual in a group” (p.494), which is exactly what has been deemed necessary to understand the thoughts and impact of such a huge social phenomenon on the digital transformation of the sector.

### 3.63 Sampling Process and Participants for the Interviews

Looking back to the literature and the conceptual framework, the research needed to include participants who were going to represent different types of universities such as Russell Group and non-Russell Group. This aimed to understand further the literature around the competition between universities, as well as the varying extent of digital transformation with previous research suggesting that a certain universities’ status or caliber helped them to attract prospective students during the pandemic (Anthony Seldon cited in Higgins, 2020). It was clear that the participants were going to be taken from the content analysis university sample, however they were finalised after the content analysis had begun and themes began to appear that created insightful questions to ask the participants from the chosen HEIs. As discussed further under the ethical consideration’s subchapter, the

interview participants university employer was kept anonymous, as well as their role and name. However, it will be stated within the interview chapters whether they were Russell Group or non-Russell Group. It was also important for participants to have worked within HE marketing and communications for a significant time prior to the pandemic, and then during, to understand the extent of digital transformation.

### 3.64 Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Virtual Interviews

The semi-structured interviews conducted within this research were online due to the pandemic. However, Wilson (2012) suggests that online interviews have their benefits and that “using the telephone or Skype is cost effective, as no travel is involved, and may provide a certain level of comfort to participants” (p.97). In this case, Microsoft Teams was used and because of the careful consideration of geographical location within the study, online interviews were easier to conduct as travel didn’t need to be factored in. People who are care givers or who have limited mobility may also find that online interviews are easier for them, as they don’t need to make as many arrangements in terms of travel or accommodation to take part in the study (Hewson, 2020).

There are disadvantages to conducting online interviews that mirror the purpose of the study and that is around access to digital technology. The online data collection limited the studies participation to those who were able to use the web and who had sufficient internet connection and high data usage installed on their computers. Furthermore, not all technology can accommodate the needs of participants living with specific disabilities, therefore also limiting the inclusivity of the data collection (Carter et al., 2021, p. 713).

### 3.65 Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

The quantitative data collection created a straightforward process, however, to explore more factors associated with how the universities were explicitly addressing COVID-19, updating information, and creating content and messaging to relate to their brand and target audience, the study needed to collect qualitative data from both the Instagram and home webpage (Appendix 2). This was presented in a similar format as the quantitative data within a table in Microsoft Excel, where key words and phrases from text and video were noted as well.

For the interviews, data was collected via a transcription of Microsoft Teams recordings. This approach appeared more reliable than taking notes as it allowed for anything missed during the interviews to be reviewed and analysed more closely afterwards to draw up themes. Themes and patterns were then highlighted and grouped together to begin to form an analysis of the meaningful interpretation of the data. As a method of meaning making, thematic analysis seemed most appropriate for providing a flexible approach to the interpretation of data, particularly with it being an effective method in examining the perspectives of different research participants (Nowell, Norris, White and Moules, 2017, p. 2). This was used to present the interview data and show clear patterns or contrasts that appeared across both the participants interviews.

A similar approach was used to interpret the qualitative content analysis of different university webpages and social media. However, it was important to ensure that any themes that emerged were set aside during the interview analysis to ensure that the interviews were separately analysed rather than forced to fit into the same themes. Separate discussions followed the content analysis and interview findings. With the researcher being a marketing practitioner, there were themes that could be predicted, however, it was important to not actively look for these themes, but instead allow the data to form patterns that could then be grouped into themes and discussed in relation to the literature.

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was gained for the study, outlining that both practitioner's names, job role and institution were to be recorded in the interview but that their name and the name of their institution was to be anonymised in the thesis. The personal data was necessary to find the relevant participants for the study but did not need to be shared in the thesis, as the aim of the interviews were to understand the digital transformation of the HE sector rather than the specific universities. It was however stated within the thesis whether the participants were from a Russell Group or non-Russell Group university. Canterbury Christ Church University's 'Research Privacy Notice' was adhered to and made explicit to participants before undertaking the interviews (see Appendix 4 for the consent forms, participant information sheet and risk assessment).

### 3.8 Methodological Challenges

The table below (Ramona, 2011, p.109) shows the advantages and disadvantages of having a qualitative and quantitative approach to a research design which was useful to refer to throughout the study to determine how the advantages of both could be best used throughout the content analysis and interviews, as well as what disadvantages must be avoided throughout.

Table 1. The advantages and disadvantages of having a qualitative and quantitative approach to a research design.

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Quantitative Approach</b>	<b>Qualitative Approach</b>
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risks are sorted by their financial impact, assets by their financial value.</li> <li>• The results can be e in a specific management terminology.</li> <li>• The evaluation and the results are based on objective methods.</li> <li>• Security level is better determined on the three elements: availability, integrity, and</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This approach makes it easier to understand and observe the level of risk.</li> <li>• Methods of calculation are simple to understand and implement.</li> <li>• It is not necessary to quantify frequency of occurrence of the threats.</li> <li>• It is not necessary to determine the financial value of the assets.</li> <li>• Monetary value of</li> </ul>

	<p>confidentiality.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A cost-analysis can be implemented for choosing the best suited measures.</li> <li>• Management performances can be closely watched.</li> <li>• Data accuracy improves as the organisation gains experience.</li> </ul>	<p>information is not determined, which makes the analysis process easier.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quantitative calculation of frequency and impact are not necessary.</li> <li>• Estimated cost of the measure that should be implemented are not calculated.</li> <li>• The most important areas of risk are evaluated.</li> </ul>
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The methods of calculation are complex.</li> <li>• Without an automatic tool the process can be really difficult to implement.</li> <li>• There are no standards and universally accepted information for</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The evaluation of risk and its result are subjective.</li> <li>• It is possible that the reality is not defined correctly because of the subjective perspective of the author.</li> <li>• The performance of risk management are</li> </ul>

	<p>implementing this method.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The values of risk impacts are based on subjective opinions of people involved.</li> <li>• The process handles a long time.</li> <li>• The results are presented only in monetary values. And are hard to understand by persons without experience.</li> <li>• The process is very complex.</li> </ul>	<p>hard to follow because of their subjectivity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A cost benefit analysis is not implemented, only a subjective approach of the author and that makes difficult the implementation of controls.</li> <li>• Insufficient differentiation between major risks.</li> <li>• Results depend on the quality of risk management team.</li> </ul>
--	--	---

(Source: Ramona, 2011, p.109)

A number of challenges occurred during the research design such as whether the sample size would be appropriate and whether the qualitative content analysis allowed too much room for opinion. Ramona (2011) says that “it is possible that the reality is not defined correctly because of the subjective perspective of the author” (p.109) and therefore their personal opinions incorporated elements of bias into the findings. However, these challenges were overcome by ensuring that there was a purposeful sample process and that all universities were carefully considered to create the best insight into the overall sector, despite only looking at a fifth of the overall HE population. Furthermore, it was decided that

combined with the quantitative content analysis and the interviews, the qualitative content analysis's main purpose was to determine the questions for the interviews and draw up themes that could begin to be analysed in light of the literature, helping to support the final discussion chapter at the end of the thesis.

## 4. Findings: Content Analysis

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter identifies the advancement in technology and implementation of new marketing and communication tools through a comparison of digital transformation pre-COVID-19 to that after the impact of COVID-19, in line with the first research objective. The aim is to present empirical evidence that establishes a relationship between the factors presented in the conceptual framework to explore how the digital transformation of HEI marketing and communication strategies changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As previously stated, the content analysis was both quantitative and qualitative. The first data collected was quantitative and is grouped into the subchapters: use of virtual events, use of video content, and use of video-conferencing platforms and live chats. The qualitative part of the content analysis focused on the target audience and how messaging, tone of voice, and branding was used to relate to the target audience. The target audience is a reoccurring factor presented throughout the literature review that not only acts as an influencing factor within the conceptual framework, but also as a salient factor affecting the extent of the acceleration of digital transformation on the marketing and communication strategies of HEIs during COVID-19. This chapter focuses on the findings discovered in the data and is later followed by a separate discussion in relation to the existing literature and research objectives.

### 4.2 Quantitative Findings

#### 4.21 Use of Virtual Events

Firstly, with events playing a significant role in the recruitment of prospective students to universities through open days, applicant days and UCAS fairs, it was interesting to see how these events had moved online over the last few years, since the start of the pandemic. The tables below present the use of virtual events across the sampled universities.

Table 2. The use of virtual events and activities on home webpages pre-COVID-19 and after the impact of COVID-19.

<b>University</b>	<b>Virtual Events (Pre - COVID-19)</b>	<b>Virtual Events (Impact of COVID-19)</b>
<b>The University of Manchester</b>	No	Yes
<b>Swansea University</b>	No	Yes
<b>University of Hull</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>University of Portsmouth</b>	No	Yes
<b>Liverpool John Moores University</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>University of the West of England</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Falmouth University</b>	No	Yes
<b>University of Greenwich</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>University of Glasgow</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Canterbury Christ Church University</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Total</b>		
<b>Yes (%)</b>	60%	100%
<b>No (%)</b>	40%	0%

The sample shows that 60% of universities had virtual events pre pandemic, with 40% having no virtual events. Looking at the data after the impact of COVID-19, the sample shows that 100% of events were virtual. This shows a 40% increase in universities adding virtual events to their webpages post pandemic.

Table 3. The use of virtual events and activities on University Instagram channels pre-COVID-19 and after the impact of COVID-19.

<b>University</b>	<b>Virtual Events (Pre COVID-19)</b>	<b>Virtual Events (Impact of COVID-19)</b>
<b>The University of Manchester</b>	No	Yes (virtual open days story highlight)
<b>Swansea University</b>	No	No
<b>University of Hull</b>	No	Yes
<b>University of Portsmouth</b>	No	Yes (podcast series)
<b>Liverpool John Moores University</b>	No	Yes (promotion of virtual open days)
<b>University of the West of England</b>	No	Yes (virtual open days highlight and #LetsTalkNow series)
<b>Falmouth University</b>	No	Yes (virtual festival)
<b>University of Greenwich</b>	No	Yes (undergraduate and postgraduate virtual open days)

<b>University of Glasgow</b>	No	No
<b>Canterbury Christ Church University</b>	No	Yes (virtual open days story highlight)
<b>Total</b>		
<b>Yes (%)</b>	0%	80%
<b>No (%)</b>	100%	20%

The increased importance of virtual activities in university communication strategies has also been shown in relation to the use of Instagram by the sampled institutions in the table above. Table 3 shows that 0% of events promoted pre-COVID-19 were virtual. After the impact of COVID-19, 80% of universities were promoting virtual events on their Instagram channels. The 20% who did not have any virtual events promoted on their Instagram were Swansea University and Glasgow University, both different types of universities with Glasgow University being a Russell Group University.

#### 4.22 Use of Video Content

Furthermore, with the absence of physical events, activities, and information sessions, it was important to discover how video content may have provided valuable information on specific subjects and aspects of student life. Therefore, the tables below represent the use of video content prior to the pandemic in comparison to the impact of COVID-19.

Table 4. The use of video content on home webpages.

<b>University</b>	<b>Use of Video Content (Pre-COVID-19)</b>	<b>Use of Video Content (Impact of COVID-19)</b>
<b>The University of Manchester</b>	No	No
<b>Swansea University</b>	No	No
<b>University of Hull</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>University of Portsmouth</b>	No	No
<b>Liverpool John Moores University</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>University of the West of England</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Falmouth University</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>University of Greenwich</b>	No	Yes
<b>University of Glasgow</b>	Yes	No
<b>Canterbury Christ Church University</b>	No	Yes
<b>Total</b>		
<b>Yes (%)</b>	50%	60%
<b>No (%)</b>	50%	40%

Table 4 illustrates that the use of video content after the impact of the pandemic has

increased by 10% with 60% of universities utilising video content on their university homepages after the impact of the pandemic, and 40% not. Prior to the pandemic the results are even with 50% using video content and 50% not. The University of Greenwich and Canterbury Christ Church University are two examples of universities digitally transforming during the pandemic, with both previously having no video content on their homepages, to both having significant video present. Disparately, The University of Glasgow challenges the research goal and acts as a somewhat anomaly with their degression from using video content prior to the pandemic, but not after the impact of COVID-19. Suggestions as to why this may be the case will be presented within the next chapter in light of the previous literature.

Table 5: The use of video content (IGTV's and Reels) on Instagram.

<b>University</b>	<b>Use of Video Content (Pre-COVID-19)</b>	<b>Use of Video Content (Impact of COVID-19)</b>
<b>The University of Manchester</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Swansea University</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>University of Hull</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>University of Portsmouth</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Liverpool John Moores University</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>University of the West of England</b>	No	Yes
<b>Falmouth University</b>	Yes	Yes

<b>University of Greenwich</b>	No	Yes
<b>University of Glasgow</b>	No	Yes
<b>Canterbury Christ Church University</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Total</b>		
<b>Yes (%)</b>	70%	100%
<b>No (%)</b>	30%	0%

Looking at table 5, there is an increase from 70% of universities in the sample using video content on Instagram across the universities, to an 100% use of video content across all universities after the impact of COVID-19. This video content included a mix of both IGTV and Reel videos consisting of explanatory videos, and campus tours.

#### 4.23 Use of Video Conferencing Platforms and Live Chats

As previously mentioned within the literature review, there is significant evidence to suggest that during the pandemic there has been an increase in the use of video conferencing platforms such as Zoom amongst people at home and for work (OFCOM, 2021b). The tables below therefore present the use of video-conferencing platforms and live chats prior to the pandemic in comparison to the impact of COVID-19 amongst the universities.

Table 6. The mention of Video Conferencing Platforms on home webpages.

<b>University</b>	<b>Are Video Conferencing Platforms being used? (Pre-COVID-19)</b>	<b>Are Video Conferencing Platforms being used? (Impact of COVID-19)</b>
<b>The University of Manchester</b>	No	Yes
<b>Swansea University</b>	No	Yes
<b>University of Hull</b>	No	Yes
<b>University of Portsmouth</b>	No	Yes
<b>Liverpool John Moores University</b>	No	Yes
<b>University of the West of England</b>	No	Yes
<b>Falmouth University</b>	No	Yes
<b>University of Greenwich</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>University of Glasgow</b>	No	Yes
<b>Canterbury Christ Church University</b>	No	Yes
<b>Total</b>		
<b>Yes (%)</b>	10%	100%
<b>No (%)</b>	90%	0%

Table 6 shows a 90% increase in use of video conferencing platforms on the sample's university websites. After the impact of the pandemic 100% of universities had mentioned or linked to video-conferencing platforms for webinars and virtual events from their home webpages.

Table 7. The use of live chats on home webpages (and associated tile links)

<b>University</b>	<b>Are there Live Chats? (Pre COVID-19)</b>	<b>Are there Live Chats? (Impact of COVID-19)</b>
<b>The University of Manchester</b>	No	Yes
<b>Swansea University</b>	No	Yes
<b>University of Hull</b>	No	Yes
<b>University of Portsmouth</b>	No	Yes
<b>Liverpool John Moores University</b>	No	Yes
<b>University of the West of England</b>	No	Yes
<b>Falmouth University</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>University of Greenwich</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>University of Glasgow</b>	No	Yes
<b>Canterbury Christ Church University</b>	No	Yes

<b>Total</b>		
<b>Yes (%)</b>	20%	100%
<b>No (%)</b>	80%	0%

Like table 6, table 7 shows that after the impact of the pandemic, 100% of universities were using live chats on their university homepages or associated landing pages. This is an 80% increase from the 20% of universities within the sample who were using live chats prior to the pandemic (University of Greenwich and Falmouth University).

#### 4.24 Summary of the Quantitative Data Collected

The quantitative data collected from the content analysis shows that the use of virtual events, video content, video-conferencing platforms and online live chats all increased after the impact of COVID-19. Although the use of video content on the university website homepages only increased by 10%, video-conferencing platforms, live chats, virtual events, and video content on Instagram were used by 100% of the sampled universities after the impact of COVID-19. 80% were also using virtual events on their social media (Instagram). The results currently show a rapid acceleration in digital transformation of HEI marketing and communication strategies during COVID-19, which begins to answer the research question. However, other influencing factors were to be discussed and analysed further to determine the extent of this acceleration. The quantitative content analysis provides some interesting finds; however, this will need to be explained further in relation to the literature within the discussion chapter.

### 4.3 Qualitative Findings

#### 4.3.1 How have they tried to relate to their target audience?

As previously mentioned within the literature review, quality can be seen as more important than quantity (Fletcher and Lee, 2012, p. 518). Therefore, a qualitative content analysis has been incorporated to analyse the effect the content had on the target audience – an influential factor within this study. The data collection includes an exploration of whether branding and use of colour was visually engaging and coherent, and whether the type of content, tone of voice, and messaging was effective in engaging with the target audience.

Table 8. Home webpages (and associated tile links) –incorporating key messages, tone of voice, branding and information.

<b>University</b>	<b>How have they tried to relate to their target audience? (Key messages, tone of voice, branding and information on website – Pre COVID-19)</b>	<b>How have they tried to relate to their target audience? (Key messages, tone of voice, branding and information on website – Impact of COVID-19)</b>
<b>The University of Manchester</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They appear inclusive stating that they are “supporting talent” and that they are “committed to ensuring there are no barriers to studying and no boundaries to learning.”</li> <li>• No upcoming events present but latest</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They create a sense of adventure: “gain a passport to a successful life and career”.</li> <li>• Range of resources for support, career progression and life experience.</li> </ul>

	news/information is stated.	
<b>Swansea University</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Where bright futures begin.”</li> <li>• “Discover Swansea.”</li> <li>• Undergraduate, Postgraduate and International sections clearly presented to relate to individual audiences.</li> <li>• Focus on the location and living by the sea.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student life – music scene and activities outside of uni.</li> <li>• Study, work and summer abroad.</li> <li>• Student profiles to chat with current students online.</li> </ul>
<b>University of Hull</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community feel: “be part of something extraordinary.”</li> <li>• To promote the webinar the slogan “let’s make it a date” is used.</li> <li>• Student stories “Since coming to Hull I’ve become more independent and more confident as a person.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of virtual events evidence: “join our virtual open day.”</li> <li>• “Be a part of something extraordinary” slogan remains.</li> <li>• Focus on the environment: “working for a fairer, brighter future.”</li> <li>• Same student story used (outdated).</li> <li>• Acknowledgement of COVID-19: “we</li> </ul>

		<p>know that things are a bit challenging at the moment, to say the least. But – better days are coming.”</p>
<p><b>University of Portsmouth</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of messaging and they only signpost to other information across the webpages.</li> <li>• No clear slogan (perhaps as the website is being updated).</li> <li>• Focus on location: “Portsmouth is a great place to live, whatever you decide to study.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hero images of different age groups.</li> <li>• Statistics: “Top 30 for Student Satisfaction.”</li> <li>• Top 20 most affordable city to live in the UK.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Liverpool John Moores University</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quite a forceful slogan: “That’s what university teaches you...to be ready for real-life challenges.”</li> <li>• There is a focus on location and Liverpool, stating that students should “come and be a part of it.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making prospective students feel involved “come and be part of it”.</li> <li>• Live online Q&amp;As</li> </ul>

<p><b>University of the West of England</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of virtual tours and messaging to relate to the tours: “more than a degree – a 360-degree experience.”</li> <li>• Focus on the fact that it isn’t all about the studying but also the living in Bristol.</li> <li>• Long list of the latest news and events (both corporate and inclusive of prospective students).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online webinars and resources.</li> <li>• Virtual Open Days.</li> <li>• Monthly support virtual events.</li> <li>• Slogan: “Choose a Mindset”.</li> <li>• “Discover Bristol” – focus on the city.</li> <li>• Student satisfaction rating as “2<sup>nd</sup>”.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Falmouth University</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slogan: “Real courses, real careers, real life.”</li> <li>• Lack of information other than that slogan – only sections for applying, open days and asking current students.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on their values: “Creativity”, “Connected”, “Courageous”.</li> <li>• Motivational tone of voice: “Now’s the time”, “Take up space”, “Now make noise”, “Now make change”, “What are you waiting for?”</li> </ul>
<p><b>University of Greenwich</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very formal looking.</li> <li>• No use of hero</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of subsections/tiles for undergraduate,</li> </ul>

	<p>images in main banner – blurred images.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More of a focus on research and what’s happening at the university rather than information for prospective students.</li> <li>• “Find your course” is the only relevant area for prospective students – no subsections.</li> </ul>	<p>postgraduate and international study.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hero image (only 1 on the main banner).</li> <li>• “New Flexible Degrees – online and on-campus” relates to the impact of COVID-19 and a wider target audience.</li> </ul>
<b>University of Glasgow</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No slogan or hero images</li> <li>• Study search and a subject A-Z</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No slogan or hero images</li> <li>• Tiles added incorporating sections on flexible study and student life.</li> </ul>
<b>Canterbury Christ Church University</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bold slogan: “You Can”.</li> <li>• Hero image.</li> <li>• Many prospective student tiles: choose your course, applicant events, open days, why Christ Church, virtual tours.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “You can” message still present but not as a bold slogan on the main banner.</li> <li>• Use of words such as “explore” and “be inspired”.</li> <li>• Undergraduate, Postgraduate and Apprenticeship</li> </ul>

		<p>sections relate to a wide audience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Hear from our students.”</li> <li>• “Experience student life – join our community.”</li> </ul>
--	--	---

Table 8 presents examples of the use of tone of voice, messaging and branding to illustrate how Universities have aimed to relate to their target audience both pre-COVID-19 and after the impact of COVID-19. There were many differences pre-COVID-19 to after the impact of COVID-19, as well as between the different types of universities in the sample.

All universities sampled show how tone of voice was used to make students both prospective and current feel reassured and inspired by university despite being taught online and not having face-to-face interactions with other students, staff, and resources on campus during the pandemic. Universities such as Hull appeared quite obvious in this supportive messaging: “we know that things are a bit challenging at the moment, to say the least. But – better days are coming”, which is a stark contrast to their slogan before COVID-19 which said: “Let’s make it a date”. Liverpool John Moores University also presented this reassuring messaging with their slogan changing from: “that’s what university teaches you...to be ready for real-life challenges”, to “come and be part of it”, with the second creating a sense of community and inclusivity. Falmouth University used phrases such as “now’s the time” which creates this sense of urgency; however, this hasn’t changed from their messaging pre-pandemic. When looking at the University of Manchester after the impact of COVID-19, we can determine that within their messaging there was this theme of adventure with phrases such as “gain a passport to a successful life and career”. Their messaging continued to follow a tone of voice of reassurance by addressing the key queries of prospective students such as, why a degree is worth it and what a student will gain from it. However, this was also present prior to the pandemic with their slogan: “committed to ensuring there are no barriers to studying and no boundaries to learning”, on their homepage. This tone contrasts with the likes of universities such as Swansea and Portsmouth who had a greater emphasis on portraying the student voice and celebrating the location and affordability of their university rather than being focused on just

the academia. Swansea University focused on being a “small city, big personality” and “city by the sea”, reflecting this location focus on the marketing of their institution. They also had a live chat for prospective students to talk to current students, again focusing on the student voice. The University of Portsmouth appears to have been student focused both pre and post pandemic, stating prior to the pandemic that they were “affordable and that “students like us”. This type of messaging continued to be used after the impact of the pandemic with the use of statistics to illustrate how affordable the university is for students to “begin their future”.

Furthermore, when looking at the different platforms, the qualitative findings in Table 8 are important in illustrating the use of branding across the different university webpages and social media platforms to see how much more focus has been given to digital platforms. Looking at Liverpool John Moore University’s home webpage, there was a lack of imagery and video content present, and the hero image and branding was inconsistent with an initial use of dark and light blue but incorporation of yellow and purple at the bottom for the “Discover” and “Connect” pages. Looking at the website after the impact of COVID-19, it was clear to see that their use of forceful messaging had subsided with the use of multiple fun hero images and coherent use of colour and vector icons. What was interesting to discover was that the University also included quite a large range of webinars focused on subject cluster content such as an online film seminar. Upcoming open days and events were clearly presented as well as the latest news, features, and blogs. Furthermore, The University of Portsmouth clearly stated that they were changing their website which in turn provides evidence to suggest this change in marketing and communication strategy from before the pandemic to after the impact without the researcher having to make personal observations as to whether the website has digital transformed. It is difficult to say whether the change on the website has digitally transformed their content and messaging, however looking at the website design after the impact of the pandemic, the homepage was very visually engaging with a banner including key events - virtual and non-virtual later in 2021. Furthermore, when looking at the University of Manchester prior to the pandemic there was a basic design yet coherent use of branding on their home webpage. Their display banner was perhaps confusing, along with their course list. Looking towards the impact of COVID- 19 and the coherent use of branding was adapted to be accessible and inclusive of virtual activities and events on their home web page. There were links to blogs, virtual campus tours, mental health support and course specific events. One of the biggest changes in terms of branding can be seen from the University of Greenwich who prior to COVID-19 had a

very formal website with little use of imagery. Looking at the website after the impact of COVID-19 and there has been a huge shift in style and imagery followed by the inclusion of “New Flexible Degrees – online and on-campus”, which illustrates both the effect of COVID-19 and perhaps the ambition to target a wider audience, although this is currently an assumption. The data allows for many assumptions and observations to be made which when we refer to Ramona’s table within the methodology chapter, enables “reality to not be defined correctly because of the subjective perspective of the author” (Ramona, 2011, p.109). Therefore, these observations from the data in Table 8, along with the quantitative findings, will be further discussed in the chapter that follows.

## 5. Discussion of the Content Analysis Findings.

### 5.1 Introduction

The content analysis chapter has primarily focused on the objective that aims to compare the difference in HE digital tools and technology both pre and post pandemic, which in turn also begins to show the relationship between the change in HEI marketing and communications, COVID-19, and digital transformation, as well as assessing the other influencing factors. In summary, the content analysis shows that all universities examined were using video-conferencing platforms, live chats and video content on social media after the impact of COVID-19. It also shows that all events changed to virtual, and that the majority of universities were advertising these virtual events on their social media and using video content on their home webpages. The qualitative content analysis shows that colour had been adapted to represent more coherent branding. The tone of voice also changed to be more understanding and sensitive to prospective and current students, and the use of video content and virtual campus tours were also visually engaging.

This chapter discusses the findings present in the content analysis, grouping the themes that have begun to occur into relevant subchapters. The discussion will begin by identifying the virtualisation of events and increased use of video, followed by the messaging of “reassurance and success” utilised, and finally followed by the idea that not all universities are digitally transforming at the same rate. The chapter will then include an overview and conclusion of all themes.

### 5.2 The Virtualisation of Events and Increased Use of Video

The content analysis presents the advancement in virtual events from pre-COVID-19 to after the impact of COVID-19. The main argument within the existing research suggests that universities are now very digital with an extensive online presence (Strielkowski, 2020, p.1), and that digital transformation has naturally happened over the last ten to fifteen years because universities have been forced to digitalise their processes and provide innovative products and services (Rodríguez-Abitia and Bribiesca-Correa, 202, p.1). The findings support this argument through the increased use of virtual events promoted on social media, and the university homepages from pre-COVID to after the impact of COVID-19.

Furthermore, the existing research suggests that students are now expecting universities to have virtual elements incorporated into their open days and events (Owen, 2018, p.1), which further reflects this advancement in digital transformation prior to the pandemic, as evidenced by 60% of the universities who had virtual events prior to the pandemic (table 2).

What the literature review does not cover is examples of the rapid acceleration of the use of virtual events after the impact of COVID-19. Elements of virtual events had begun to emerge as Owen's (2018) and the findings support; however, the findings further show that all universities had moved their events online during the impact of COVID-19. This relates back to the research question, illustrating that COVID-19 has accelerated the digital transformation of events – with events acting as a key marketing and communication tool within HE marketing and communication strategies to attract, inform and bring in prospective students (*Digital student recruitment in the time of coronavirus*, 2020). Without COVID-19 would the findings be the same and would all universities have virtual events? This is something that is hard to measure because COVID-19 is a social phenomenon that can't be controlled. However, considering the existing research, the findings support the argument that many HE institutions have had to develop their marketing strategies to not only capture the interest of prospective students, but also to adapt to environmental changes like COVID-19 (Mocan, Maniu and Ionela, 2019).

The findings show that Reels and IGTV's became more prominent during the pandemic on Instagram (table 5), as well as the use of video-conferencing platforms on the university webpages (table 6). The use of Reels and IGTV's support the existing research that defines the target audience of HEIs as being predominantly "digital natives", who are likely to learn and access information through observation in the form of video or other visuals (Seemiller and Grace, 2017). This also reflects this "supply and demand" theory acknowledged throughout the existing literature that states that marketing professionals have had to learn how to capture the interest of prospective students (Mocan, Maniu and Ionela, 2019) and act as market players (Delmestri, Oberg and Drori, 2013, p. 134-147) like other organisations. The findings also support the argument that even prior to the pandemic, video-conferencing platforms had been used when face-to-face activity was not possible (Al-Samarraie, 2019, p1), with evidence of this presented on the University of Greenwich homepage prior to the pandemic (table 6). This was interesting to discover considering that there was no video content prominent on their webpages. As other universities such as The

University of the West of England, Falmouth University, Canterbury Christ Church University and Glasgow University appeared to be ahead of the game in advertising virtual events prior to the pandemic (table 3), it was interesting to see that no digital platforms such as zoom were present, and that the virtual events consisted of only virtual tours that did not require such platforms. Owen (2018) and other researchers suggest that universities are having more virtual elements and online interactivity, however the existing research did not predict that all universities would be using video-conferencing platforms in the future. The findings add to the existing literature and present an acceleration of digital transformation during the pandemic with all universities using video-conferencing platforms on their websites after the impact of COVID-19.

### 5.3 A Change in Messaging and the Student Voice

Another theme that has emerged within the qualitative content analysis is the change of slogans, key messages, and tone of voice on the university websites and social media from pre-COVID-19 to after the impact of COVID-19. Russell Group universities such as Manchester and Glasgow appeared to target their audience in a way that focused more on careers with the University of Manchester's slogan saying "gain a passport to a successful life and career" (table 8) and the University of Glasgow immediately directing visitors to a subject search. This challenges the literature which suggests that universities are changing from being solely described as institutions of scholars and academics, to "organisations" (Krucken and Meier, 2006). There is much more of a focus on qualifications and scholarly academia as opposed to student life and the student experience that was presented across other university webpages and social media. The findings from Manchester and Glasgow (table 8) also support the argument that the impact of COVID-19 could be the cause for the increase in mature learners entering university, as the recession and increased competition may be causing people to look at retraining, to equip themselves for the "changing labour market" (Hewitt, 2020, p.40) and to ensure a "successful life and career" (table 8).

However, many of the universities within the sample used slogans and key messages that relate to previous theories that a company will be successful if they "engage in meaningful conversations with customers" (Askool and Nakata, 201, p.776). Looking at the qualitative analysis of the content and messaging on the Liverpool John Moores University home webpage (table 8), prior to the pandemic there was the use of quite forceful messages

with words such as “challenges”, and phrases such as “be ready”. When analysing the website after the impact of COVID-19, it was clear to see that this use of forceful messaging had subsided with a larger focus on community and the student voice, using messages such as “come and be a part of it” (table 8). The existing literature around the purpose of digital channels in helping both prospective and current students feel connected and “in the loop” (Fujita, Harrigan and Soutar, 2017), whilst also building relationships professionally and with friends, helps to understand the strategy behind this change in messaging. What the existing research lacks is an understanding of why this messaging has changed. We can assume reasons such as sensitivity for the mental health effects of COVID-19, and desire to feel connected and find meaning during a period where there was no face-to-face interaction. An exploration of the psychology behind prospective student behaviour during the time of COVID-19 could help to explain these changes in message.

#### 5.4 Not All Universities were Digitally Transforming at the Same Rate

The University of Glasgow challenges the researcher’s primary goal and acts as an anomaly with their degeneration from using video content prior to the pandemic, but not after its impact (table 4). As a Russell Group university, the findings support the research that not all universities have experienced increased competition during the pandemic with some taking away students who may have previously gone to a smaller university, purely because they have the status, capacity, and capability to do so (Anthony Seldon cited in Higgins, 2020). Furthermore, the literature highlights that “many organisations were quick to react and adapt to certain communication techniques” (cited in Dance, 2020), however the findings show that not all organisations fit within this statement. The findings suggest that the University of Glasgow may be included in this group of organisations who have not felt the pressure to quickly gain the right digital skills (Taylor, 2020), having not utilised video content on social media or their university home webpage after the impact of COVID-19. Falmouth University, The University of the West of England, The University of Hull and Liverpool John Moores University all utilised video content prior to the pandemic and were continuing to afterwards, with Canterbury Christ Church University resulting in the only university who had no video content present prior to the pandemic, but video content present after the impact of COVID-19 (table 4). With Canterbury Christ Church University being a small university, this supports research that believes that universities that fit into the criteria of the University of Glasgow,

“might deprive small institutions of their intake” (Higgins, 2020), because of their status as a Russell Group university. This in turn puts a lot of pressure on HE marketing and communication professionals and their strategies within smaller institutions (Dance, 2020), suggesting reasons why the content analysis has shown such a huge shift across all marketing elements such as video, events, and messaging from some of the smaller institutions.

### 5.5 Conclusions from the Content Analysis

Looking at all the themes above, they collectively show a change in events, platform use and social media (Instagram) after the impact of COVID-19. After the impact of COVID-19 all events were virtual, and video-conferencing platforms were utilised across the web and social media (Instagram). The rapid shift in digital technology during this time suggests that this change in HEI marketing and communication strategies was due to COVID-19. The acceleration in digital transformation that occurred shows how strategies were formed to enable continuous communication with the target audience when face-to-face wasn't an option. The student voice was used to attract the target audience. This was illustrated in the use of words such as ‘affordable’, ‘career’ and ‘adventure’, which suggests that the influence of the target audience impacted the change. The creation of new content in the form of video and virtual events and activities, further reflects this pattern of demand from the target audience in contributing to the increase in content from before COVID-19 to after the impact of COVID-19 across all universities sampled. Furthermore, the content analysis explored how different digital platforms were being used to display new content, for example with the use of Reels being utilised across Instagram and the use of video content being used on home webpage banners.

The themes illustrate the importance of the influencing factors within the study's conceptual framework, in understanding what digital tools HEIs implement and how they relate to the target audience. This in turn affects the extent of which COVID-19 has solely impacted the marketing and communication strategies of HEIs. Most of the themes that emerged throughout the content analysis support the theories within the literature of rapid digital change within HEIs and pressure to keep up with target audience demands. The theme from the content analysis that does not support this, but that is still acknowledged within the literature, is that not all universities appeared to be digitally transforming at the same rate. Although this affects the studies hypothesis that COVID-19 has changed the

digital transformation of HEI marketing and communications, it relates to the literary argument that many universities are still “highly conventional” (Brown and Duguid, 2010, p.11). Many universities are able to be successful with their student recruitment because of their status, despite factors such as COVID-19 and digital transformation. The studies conceptual framework may need to be adapted to incorporate this influencing factor, perhaps by making the dependent factor less generalised and more specific e.g., ‘Russell Group HEI marketing and communication strategies’ or ‘Non-Russell Group HEI marketing and communication strategies’. Furthermore, although themes have emerged from the content analysis, the majority of the qualitative analysis was based on observations. Whilst the quantitative data provided concise results, the methodological decision to incorporate interviews helped to identify the accuracy of the observations and support the quantitative findings further.

## 6. Interview Findings

### 6.1 Introduction

After the analysis of the content across the sample of university webpages and social media (Instagram), the use of interviews allowed for a more in depth and personal account of the digital transformation of the HE sector. Although, as previously stated within the ethics section of this thesis, the interview participants university employer was kept anonymous, as well as their role and name (see Appendix 4 for more information on ethical considerations and anonymity). However, their status as to whether their university employer is Russell group or non-Russell group has been identified to draw comparisons between the two most prominent types of universities across the sector.

#### Key:

Participant 1: Non-Russell Group

Participant 2: Russell Group

### 6.2 “We Have Moved to an Online Profile”

The increase in the use of virtual events and activities was made evident within the content analysis subchapter with 100% of the universities sampled moving to virtual events during the impact of the pandemic. This theme was continuously evidenced within the interviews of both participants who agreed that areas of their work such as the planning of events such as open days and information sessions had been shifted digitally, whether that be through online webinars or virtual open days. Both participants made almost identical statements that their marketing and communication strategies had moved online during the pandemic:

“Moved to an online profile” (Participant 1).

“Moved things a lot online” (Participant 2).

These statements begin to answer the research question regarding whether marketing and communication strategies were digitally transformed during COVID-19. However, to

answer the research question and adhere to the research objectives, it is necessary to understand the extent of this transformation.

Participant 1 outlined this “rush” (Appendix 2) in the organisation of events and activities for digital delivery claiming that the University was too adamant in maintaining the same dates as their physical events, without allowing time to explore the right video conferencing platforms required for the events success. The participant reported that many different platforms were used but that it was a huge challenge to ensure the chosen platform was the best for academics, marketing practitioners and the prospective students to ensure an impactful first interaction between the University and student (Appendix 2). However, both participants expressed that these challenges were overcome, and that they both adapted their student recruitment events:

“A successful digital platform was found that may not have been without the pandemic” (Participant 1).

“We have, and I know that other universities have as well, but as open days can’t happen, universities have had to be nimble” (Participant 2).

Both universities implied that they have had no choice but to move their events virtually. They have had to be open-minded in their exploration of the right digital platforms and reactive to the changing format of events.

To look at the successes of virtual events and activities, both participants were asked what the benefits of moving activities virtually were. Both expressed that they allowed students to see the campus whilst being unable to visit in-person, whilst also adhering to the target audience demand:

“It makes it more accessible for students who may not be able to visit the campus” (Participant 2).

Therefore, reaching a wider demographic of students. Although campuses are a great way of experiencing what it is like to study somewhere, the participant suggested that this can always be recreated through video and online platforms (Appendix 3). The participant expressed that they did recreate the feeling of being on campus by filming what campus looked like, as well as the safety measures in place so that the audience could be reassured:

“There are ways to do it but you just have to think creatively about how to do it and know what the audience wants and respond to that” (Participant 2).

This again relates to target audience demand. Furthermore, Participant 1 similarly illustrated their views on the benefits of virtual events in reaching a wider demographic and communicating with the target audience:

“I hope we never lose the online delivery element of what we are doing because actually our outreach of recruitment can go much further than just the confines of Kent, Medway, Surrey, Essex and Southeast London” (Participant 1).

However, both participants expressed that physical open days and events cannot be replaced as it is that feel of campus that sparks prospective student interest and curiosity:

“I don’t think you can replace face-to-face meeting that takes place” (Participant 1).

“You still need that personal interaction and to explore places on campus” (Participant 2).

Both universities admitted that a hybrid way of engaging with the target audience should remain and a mix of face-to-face and virtual activity may be the best way forward in reaching a wider demographic and utilising the advancements in technology that occurred during the pandemic.

### 6.3 A Demand for New Content and Relatable Messaging

A consistent pattern identified across the two interviews was the demand for new content creation, to communicate with both prospective students and current students at their university. Both participants were asked whether they felt there had been a greater demand for new content, posts, and resources during the pandemic. Both agreed that there had been a greater demand, however Participant 2 focused more on the use of video marketing strategy to combat the demand, whereas Participant 1 showed a slightly muddled and unclear strategy present at the start of the pandemic. Participant 2 firstly stated:

“Yep, and I’ve definitely felt that within the team. Whether that be informational posts and giving updates, I mean we did about 21 videos with our principal during the main part of the Covid-19 to update people on where we were and to show a visible, strong,

and transparent leadership which was important”.

This theme of support and reassurance has repeatedly occurred between universities and prospective and current students, as well as the need to produce digital alternatives to maintain communications whilst in-person was not an option. Participant 2 supports this statement having stated that “Facebook Lives” were used so that “students and staff could ask questions about things that were worrying them and were responsive”. The use of Facebook Lives also adheres to this increased use of digital platforms for live chats illustrated within the content analysis and 100% increase of live chat use across all ten universities analysed. Participant 1’s answer to the same question was slightly different, highlighting that there had been a movement towards a greater “online profile of delivering things”, however perhaps with a more disorganised start in comparison to Participant 2:

“Potentially at the start of lockdown I don’t think things were addressed maybe properly because we all thought we were only home for one month, so we put things on delay and then I would say as an organisation we then reacted to the situation of COVID-19, and we maybe hastily put in place new events, content and messaging across our platforms and email communications”.

Participant 2 focused on their positives in creating video content and addressing the target audience through Facebook Lives, whereas we can see from Participant 1 that there has been a trial and error in terms of strategies for moving online and relying on communication tools already in place such as the CRM and use of email (Appendix 2). The underlying theme in both their answers is that both strategies involved movement to online activity and communications.

We have expressed previously in the study that the target audience of HEIs acts as an influencing and salient factor affecting the research question: to what extent has the impact of COVID-19 accelerated the digital transformation of marketing and communication strategies in HE Institutions (HEIs)? Both participants were asked whether moving fully online best related to a wider HE target audience and whether it was the best way to communicate with students, other than through prospectuses and other physical material. Similar themes were drawn from both the participants answers around the idea that yes, moving fully online does best relate to the majority of the target audience who are used to accessing information online, but that again there is a proportion of prospective students who would still like to access information physically and through different mediums of communication:

“I think it has developed it, but I think there is still a need for those things as well and I think you have to think about the whole picture. Not all students are on certain channels but it’s also about resource” (Participant 2).

“As we’ve gone through COVID-19, we have adapted to the market and what we are being asked to present other than relying on just what we know” (Participant 1).

The overall need to respond to the target audience during COVID-19 and adapt strategies to meet their demands is evidenced:

“The silver lining of Covid is that we’ve had to adapt very quickly to the needs of our prospective students and their parents as well who wants to find out about -x- or other universities” (Participant 2).

#### 6.4 Putting People at the Heart of Strategy

When identifying the use of branding and social media strategy, both participants understand the importance of this in engaging with the target audience and creating value and a tone of voice that best relates to the target audience. When asked how they thought HEIs determined the branding and social media use of their university and whether there may be a difference in this process depending on whether they are a Russell group or non-Russell group university:

“I think it depends on your institution. University X is obviously Russell group and seen as a high caliber university which it is, research intensive as most are but I think it’s about getting a balance and I think with social we are lucky at University X that we can add personality, the branding of the city as people make University X and people is very much focused as part of our strategy” (Participant 2).

Participant 2’s statement shows how a Russell Group University can utilise social media for branding purposes to communicate a balance of their personality and research status, to relate to their target audience who are at the heart of their strategy. Both participants however expressed the importance of social media and branding in relating to the target audience:

“I think you need to with social media, but it needs to be in keeping with your universities brand and values...people at the heart of our strategy, world change is our

brand, and we use colleagues and our students to tell their stories through video and we've been successful in that front" (Participant 2).

"I think students liaise much more through social media and I think as a university we need to have a much more robust strategy between student recruitment teams and social media teams on how we are going to work with social media" (Participant 1).

This illustrates further how the target audience acts as a factor influencing the marketing and communication strategies of HEIs, with social media acting as a beneficial engagement tool. Although one of the participants is from a Russell Group University and the other is not, both participants show how people are at the forefront of their strategies. This challenges existing research that claims Russell Group universities only put academia at the forefront of their strategies (Krucken and Meier, 2006, p. 241).

### 6.5 The Difference in Digital Transformation Between Russell Group and non-Russell Group Universities

Both participants had similar views that the HE sector is a slow-moving sector in terms of digital transformation and pushing forward innovative ideas. For instance, Participant 1 expressed that:

"You'll always find with universities that they are about ten to fifteen years behind the curve, so in about ten years' time when we are out of the pandemic, they'll be getting really good at doing online stuff...if you're a Russell Group University, you can do what you like because they turn up. In the likes of us you have to work hard and the challenges we have with our own academics to understand the importance of student recruitment not being one team, it's a whole university approach, is so challenging".

Participant 2 defended this statement having previously proven that marketing and communication strategies are still very much present within a Russell Group university whether that's through the use of social media or virtual events during the pandemic. The content analysis subchapter also further supports this through the use of coherent branding and messaging from The University of Manchester and Glasgow University. Participant 2 did acknowledge that "with University X, as our numbers are always good it's easier", which reflects how other, very different universities compare in the extent of their need for digital marketing and communications. Perhaps the more established the university, the less

difficult it is in reaching recruitment targets. However, it appears that having a balance is key:

“It is still important to show your point of difference and that you’re caring about your community and things like that, so it’s forced people to up their game and improve on things and move at a pace that’s quicker than normal for universities” (Participant 2).

Participant 2 continued to highlight the importance of personality and community in their hashtag across social media, allowing their community to feel a sense of personality whilst in keeping with the University’s brands and values. It was however interesting to see a further divide between Russell Group universities:

“Some universities, maybe Cambridge and Oxford, they can’t have quite as much because they need to be seen as more highbrow, we are highbrow but I think it depends what content it is, so it’s getting that fine balance’ (Participant 2).

This illustrates how although the marketing and communication strategies of Participant 2’s University allows flexibility, not every Russell Group university does. Universities such as Oxford and Cambridge potentially differ even more when it comes to the extent of change within their marketing and communication strategies.

Both participants however agreed that universities in general have a slow process when it comes to moving marketing strategies, events, and other recruitment activities digitally in comparison with other organisations:

“They would have kept with what they’ve always done, they don’t change unless they have to” (Participant 1).

“Nothing happens quickly in HE, maybe for smaller or more modern institutions, but it is hard to make change happen as it’s very bureaucratic and lots of people have to sign off on things” (Participant 2).

This again indicates the benefit of COVID-19 in pushing forward strategies more quickly, supporting Participant 2’s statement that it is the “silver-lining” of the pandemic. In relation to the sector as a whole, when looking to the future of HE marketing, communication and student recruitment strategies, a similar theme occurred between both participants around the idea that digital transformation would not have taken place at such a fast pace had it not been for the pandemic:

“In my personal opinion, I think University X would have stuck to the structures of what open days have been like, the open evenings, the prospectus in print. I think had we not been forced to move the way we are, we would not have changed” (Participant 1).

“Covid has accelerated it” (Participant 2).

This supports the research’s hypothesis that the digital transformation of HEI marketing and communication strategies has changed because of COVID-19. The word acceleration is present within the studies research question, so provides fantastic evidence to support existing theories, whilst also helping to answer the research question.

## 6.6 Summary of the Findings

Despite their disparate status within the HE sector, the previous subchapter is perhaps the most important in reflecting how universities across the sector have similarly faced these inevitable challenges because of COVID-19 in not only adapting marketing and communication strategies but also through challenging the traditional conventions of the sector. Both participants have highlighted other factors contributing to the extent at which COVID-19 has accelerated the digital transformation of HEIs. These include the target audience demand, and the introduction of new social media platforms and tools. The themes from the data begin to answer the research question, however the next chapter aims to form a critical discussion both for and against COVID-19 accelerating the digital transformation of HEI marketing and communication strategies to determine the overall impact each of the influencing factors has on the dependent factor within the study’s conceptual framework.

## 7. Discussion of the Interview Findings

### 7.1 Introduction

To recap, the main aim of the thesis is to answer, to what extent has the impact of COVID-19 accelerated the digital transformation of marketing and communication strategies in HEIs, in relation to student recruitment? Chapters 4 and 5 identified themes emerging from the content analysis that explored the research objective: to compare the difference in HE digital tools and technology both pre and after the impact of the pandemic. The previous chapter then explored the other influencing factors that have contributed to the digital transformation of HEI marketing and communication strategies. It also provided personal insights to explain why the themes from the content analysis have occurred.

The penultimate chapter provides a critical discussion incorporating all the themes previously mentioned and drawn from the interview data, with reference to the content analysis where required, and previous literature around the thesis subject area. Firstly, the chapter will discuss how COVID-19 has accelerated the digital transformation of HE marketing and communication strategies, in relation to student recruitment through the use of virtual events and activities, quantity and quality of content, and the type of content. Then, the chapter will discuss all of the factors that support the idea that COVID-19 has not solely accelerated the digital transformation of HE marketing and communication strategies, in relation to student recruitment. The chapter references and extends previous research mentioned within the literature review, acknowledging how the findings support the literature, challenge the literature, and add new insights to the research area. Finally, the chapter will conclude all of the influencing factors discussed for each argument to determine the overall extent at which COVID-19 has accelerated the digital transformation of HE marketing and communication strategies, in relation to student recruitment.

### 7.2 How the Digital Transformation of HEI Marketing and Communication Strategies has Accelerated because of COVID-19

In agreement with previous literature (De', Pandey and Pal, 2020, p. 2), the study shows an acceleration of digital transformation during COVID-19 with the increased incorporation of virtual events and activities within HEI marketing and communication strategies during the pandemic. The interview findings uncovered many reoccurring phrases such as “we have had

to”, “moved to” and “adapt to”, in the context of virtual events, illustrating that universities have had no choice but to move their events online because of the impact of COVID-19. This terminology reflects some of the phrases explored in the existing research such as “they have had to shift their focus to online events and activities” (*Digital student recruitment in the time of coronavirus*, 2020). Other research supports this adaptation and statement that universities have had no choice with all education witnessing a “digital surge with schools, colleges and universities around the world shifting to the use of video conferencing platforms such as zoom and google meet for classes and meetings” (De’, Pandey and Pal, 2020, p.2). However, much of the existing research up to now has been descriptive in nature. Although they adhere to the findings, both the quantitative content analysis and the insights from the participants evidence how universities have adapted to the “rush” to virtual events and an “online profile”, which most studies within the field have been unable to comment on due to the nature of COVID-19 being a recent event.

As well as video-conferencing platforms, the increased use of video and other newer types of content was present within the findings, illustrating this acceleration in digital transformation during COVID-19. Although the main purpose of introducing new content such as video and social media reels or TikTok’s was to communicate and relate to the target audience. The acceleration of this in just a few years, when most HE processes take significantly longer (Appendix 2), suggests COVID-19 aided this acceleration. Both participants expressed that nothing happens very quickly in HE, which supports the literature around HE marketing being evolutionary rather than revolutionary (Pfeffer, 2012, p. 1), with the massive infiltration of the web forcing universities to digitalise their processes, although at perhaps a slower rate compared to other organisations (Rodríguez-Abitia and Bribiesca-Correa, 2021, p.1). Previous studies have not explored this theory in much detail, perhaps going off the assumptions that universities are defined as “highly conventional practices” (Brown and Duguid, 2010, p.11), rather than exploring how their marketing and communication strategies have changed in recent years. It must also be mentioned that this definition is based upon data from over twenty years ago and that it is unclear if it is still relevant in influencing these assumptions. The studies interview findings do however evidence that although nothing normally happens very quickly, the “silver-lining” of the pandemic was that it enabled digital strategies to be signed off more quickly, reflecting Strielkowski’s (2020) literature that states that COVID-19 has launched a “digital revolution in academia and higher education” (p.1).

### 7.3 How the Digital Transformation of HEI Marketing and Communication Strategies has Accelerated because of Other Influencing Factors

Furthermore, there is evidence within the findings that suggest that COVID-19 has not accelerated the digital transformation of HE marketing and communication strategies. Instead, the target audience of HEIs has. All strategies for video content, branding, social media, and events have been centred around target audience demand and how best HEIs can relate to their target audience. The findings suggest that HEIs believe the target audience of HEIs are “digital natives” (Francis and Hoefel, 2018, p.31). Therefore, HEIs create strategies that adhere to their target audience, in their case a target audience of primarily “digital natives”. The existing research supports the findings in reflecting how the target audience, who are primarily Generation Z living a life “immersed in technology” (Bennett, Maton and Kervin, 2008, p.776), engage with universities through visuals on social media channels (Seemiller and Grace, 2017). The findings can be interpreted to support the argument that universities have “had to” digitally transform as people are at the heart of their strategies with students communicating more through social media (Appendix 1 and 2). This further supports Mocan, Maniu and Ionela’s (2019) research that claims the HE sector recognises the growing importance of developing marketing and communication strategies that relate to the prospective students (Mocan, Maniu and Ionela, 2019).

The type of university also appears to be a salient factor in understanding the extent at which COVID-19 has accelerated the digital transformation of HE marketing and communication strategies. The findings suggest that the more established the university and higher up it is in the UK University League Table (2021), the less student recruitment work is required. It is always going to be easier for universities like Participant 2’s, because their “numbers are always good” (Appendix 3) and students are likely to show up. This supports the literature that suggests that universities with more status may “deprive small institutions of their intake” (Higgins, 2020), purely because of the type of university they are. This therefore leads to smaller universities having to constantly transform their marketing and communication strategies and techniques to both relate to their target audience and combat the continuously competitive sector (Dance, 2020). Previous studies challenge some of these findings by stating that when the pandemic first forced the closure of HEIs, staff had to quickly gain the right digital skills (Taylor, 2020). However, researchers have failed to treat each type of university in much detail leading to more of a generalisation of universities when perhaps not every university staff member across the UK felt the same extent of digital transformation. This thesis

shows that this “rapid acceleration” may not relate to every university, with the interviews having shown how digital processes were slow at first, with a lot of challenges in finding the best digital platforms to use.

Furthermore, the existing literature suggests there has been an increase in digital tools and technology with digital transformation becoming more present within organisational marketing strategies in the last few years (Lazie and Jovie, 2019, p.184). This supports the increased use of video content and other digital tools post pandemic present within the content analysis and interview findings. The introduction of new social media platforms such as TikTok and features such as Instagram Reels are still in their infancy, and where the content analysis presented this digital transformation pre and post pandemic, the acceleration in popularity of these tools is a significant factor influencing the overall effect of COVID-19 on the digital transformation of HEI marketing and communication strategies.

#### 7.4 A Summary of the Discussion

Looking at both arguments, they have one thing in common and that is that digital transformation has accelerated during COVID-19. When we look at the research question and the word ‘extent’ it allows for other factors to significantly influence this extent without contributing to the majority. The discussion clearly shows that HEIs have had no choice but to move their whole marketing and communication strategy online. However, there are some majorly influencing factors, the most prominent being the target audience, that have affected the ability for the study to say that the digital transformation of HEI marketing and communication strategies has accelerated solely because of COVID-19. This study has helped to highlight how many influencing factors have contributed to the change in marketing and communication strategies. Previous studies have only dealt with one factor at a time stating that universities have changed because of the target audience or because of COVID-19, rather than considering both. The studies conceptual framework may need to be adapted to present relationships between the different influencing factors, whilst also positioning them in a way that illustrates the amount of influence each factor has in changing HEI marketing and communication strategies. Furthermore, although relationships can be suggested now, the conceptual framework will never be static because of the uncertainty as to how long COVID-19 or digital transformation may influence HEI marketing and communication strategies for. With previous research illustrating the importance of target audience in marketing and

communications, this is more likely to remain an influencing factor in the future. The type of HEI may also remain as an influencing factor, although this is less certain due to the innovations and changing priorities of both Russell and non-Russell Group Universities, as evidenced in the interview findings and existing research.

## 8. Conclusions

### 8.1 How has the study answered the research question?

In conclusion, the purpose of this mixed methods study was to examine to what extent the impact of COVID-19 has accelerated the digital transformation of marketing and communication strategies in HEIs, in relation to student recruitment. The researcher achieved the studies purpose by collecting and analysing data from university webpages and social media, as well as conducting semi-structured interviews with two university marketing practitioners. The studies two main objectives have been explored throughout. The content analysis primarily supports the first objective around exploring the difference in HE digital tools and technology pre and post pandemic. This is further supported by the insights provided by the interview participants. The interview findings and qualitative content analysis also support the aim of exploring to what extent COVID-19 has digitally transformed HEI marketing and communication strategies by providing an exploration of the other influencing factors contributing to the change in HEI marketing and communication strategies. The interview findings provided personal insights into the challenges of digital transformation during COVID-19, as well as why the findings from the content analysis were discovered.

The research has provided a new light to the existing research around this topic to begin to form an understanding of the overall impact of COVID-19 and digital transformation on the marketing and communication strategies of HE institutions. It is interesting to see that prior to the pandemic, universities across the sector were digitally transforming as evidenced within both the content analysis and the insights from the two participants. However, the hypothesis that the marketing and communication strategies have changed because of COVID-19 can be proven correct by looking at the rapid change in recruitment activities and events, as well as the personal experiences with the acceleration of digital technology expressed by both interviewees. COVID-19 has accelerated the digital transformation of HEIs to a great extent, with factors such as the type of HE, target audience and new tools and technology also influencing this acceleration to a certain extent.

This can firstly be concluded from the findings discovered within the content analysis that proved successful in beginning to draw themes associated with virtual events, type of content and the digital divide between Russell and non-Russell Group universities. The quantitative analysis allowed for the increase or decrease in content, virtual events, live chats and use of video-conferencing platforms to be clearly presented which then allowed for the

qualitative analysis to delve deeper into the type of content being presented to then create patterns. Secondly, the use of interviews to create even more depth to the study proved successful with both practitioners making similar statements about the amount of video content needed, and the increased use of virtual events and activities. As one practitioner was from a Russell-Group university and one was from a non-Russell Group university, there is unsurprisingly slight differences in their responses. For example, the non-Russell group practitioner felt that Russell Group universities did not have such a challenge or struggle to create digital marketing and communication strategies during the pandemic because their student recruitment numbers would naturally meet targets. However, this was proven to not be the case as effective messaging between Russell Group universities and prospective students still needed to be maintained using digital technology. Despite some disputing views, when looking at themes and findings associated with digital acceleration during the impact of COVID-19, and the findings indicating the other influencing factors affecting the acceleration of digital transformation, both university practitioners believe that the digital transformation during COVID-19 was the ‘silver-lining’ of COVID-19 that will not only enhance marketing and communication strategies in the future, but will stay as a key priority across the sector to effectively target a majority of ‘digitally native’ prospective students.

## 8.2 Limitations to the Research

Factors to consider regarding limitations to the findings may include looking at more social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and TikTok within the content analysis to determine what the marketing and communication strategies were like across different digital channels across different universities. Furthermore, the researcher would have perhaps benefited from analysing the university websites further to determine how consistent their branding, tone of voice and overall message was across different university websites. The sample of ten universities which were different in UK University League Table status and geographical location was effective in providing an insight into how universities were using their home webpages and Instagram for student recruitment purposes. However, ten universities only amount to around 5% of the overall UK university sector and therefore cannot necessarily determine or answer theories relating to the sector thoroughly enough. The content analysis worked well in clearly presenting digital transformation through the quantitative analysis of content prior and after the impact of COVID-19. However, if the researcher was to

progress this study further, it may be useful to break the coding sheet down into shorter time frames rather than just from March 2019 to present day, to illustrate the motion of change more clearly in digital resources and content presented throughout the pandemic. Furthermore, with the interviews, although difficult to acquire participants, if the study was to be developed further it would be useful to include more participants to analyse a wider demographic and allow a greater discussion and reflection of the overall HE sector. This could incorporate groupings participants into Ancient, Red Brick, Plate Glass and Polytechnic (Types of UK universities, 2021) universities to see if the progression or degeneration in university establishment affects their ability to digitally transform their marketing and communication strategies.

### 8.3 Further Considerations

A rising university presence on TikTok would be interesting to take the analysis a step further and depict a potentially less corporate style of content creation from universities as a potential by-product of the pandemic meeting the demands of students. Also looking at other social media channels may be useful within the content analysis to see how they differ and have individual advantages to relating to the target audience. TikTok became more popular in 2020. Ofcom's (2020) report stated that TikTok had increased its reach among UK adults from 5.4 million to 12.9 million between January and April 2020 (Ofcom, 2020).

Furthermore, if the researcher conducted this study again, they would perhaps consider grouping universities into different sub-sectors within higher education for example, cathedral group universities or polytechnic and identify their digital transformations in individual separate studies. Comparing Russell Group and non-Russell group universities in one study works to an extent but the sample size does not allow for there to be a complete overview of the overall sector as it is less than a 5% sample of the overall amount of higher education institutions across the UK. The content analysis was beneficial in being analysed, similarly to how a prospective student may analyse and access information across webpages and social media. However, along with a larger sample size, if the research was to be conducted again, I think it would be particularly interesting to look at the university webpages from a more technical perspective incorporating Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) and accessibility testing that hide behind what prospective students may see when exploring those home webpages.

## 9. Bibliography

Afprelaxnews. (2021) *Which social networks have the highest usage among Gen Z and Millennials?* Available at: <<https://www.forbesindia.com/article/lifes/which-social-networks-have-the-highest-usage-among-gen-z-and-millennials/72471/1>> [Accessed 3 January 2022]

Achen, R. (2017) 'Measuring social media marketing: moving towards a relationship- marketing approach', *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 22(1), p.39. Available at:

<<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23750472.2017.1379883?scroll=top&needAccess=true>> [Accessed 28 December 2020].

Adams, W. (2015) 'Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews'. In: K. Newcomer, H. Hatry and J. Wholey, ed., *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*, 4th ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass - A Wiley Imprint, p.494. Available at:

<[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301738442\\_Conducting\\_Semi-Structured\\_Interviews#fullTextFileContent](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301738442_Conducting_Semi-Structured_Interviews#fullTextFileContent)> [Accessed 13 January 2021].

Al-Samarraie, H. (2019) 'A Scoping Review of Videoconferencing Systems in Higher Education', *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 20(3), p.1.

Anderson, N. and King, N. (1991) 'Managing Innovation in Organisations', *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 12(4), p.17. Available at:

<<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/01437739110143024/full/html>> [Accessed 4 November 2021].

Appel, G., Grewal, L., Hadi, R. *et al.* (2020) 'The future of social media in marketing'. *J. of the Acad. Mark. Sci.*, 48, pp. 79–95.

[doi: 10.1007/s11747-019-00695-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-019-00695-1)

Askool, S. and Nakata, K. (2011) 'A conceptual model for acceptance of social CRM systems based on a scoping study', *AI & Society*, 26, pp. 205–220.

[doi:10.1007/s00146-010-0311-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-010-0311-5)

Bennett, S., Maton, K. and Kervin, L. (2008) 'The 'digital natives' debate: A critical review of the evidence', *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 39(5), p.776.

Available at:

<<https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2007.00793.x>> [Accessed 15 April 2021].

Bolat, E. and O'Sullivan, H. (2017) 'Radicalising the marketing of higher education: learning from student-generated social media data', *Journal of Marketing Management*, 33(9-10), p.742.

Brown, J. and Duguid, P. (2010) 'Universities in the Digital Age', *NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education*, p.11.

[doi:10.1080/00091383.1996.9937757](https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.1996.9937757)

Camilleri, M. (2021) 'Strategic Dialogic Communication Through Digital Media During COVID-19 Crisis', *Emerald Insight*. Available at:

<<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/978-1-80071-264-520211001/full/html>> [Accessed 28 June 2021].

Carter *et al.* (2021) ‘Conducting Qualitative Research Online: Challenges and Solutions’, *Patient* p.713. Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40271-021-00528-w> [Accessed 13 June 2023]

Chapleo, C. (2007). ‘Barriers to brand building in UK universities?’ *International Journal of Nonprofit & Voluntary Sector Marketing*, 12(1), 23–32.

doi:10.1002/nvsm.271

Constantinides, E. and Zinck Stagno, M., 2011. ‘Potential of the social media as instruments of higher education marketing: a segmentation study’, *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 21(1), p.7. Available at:

<<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08841241.2011.573593>> [Accessed 13 December 2021].

Cresswell JW, Plano Clark VL. (ed.) (2011) *Designing and conducting mixed method research*. 2nd Sage; Thousand Oaks, CA.

Crick, J. and Crick, D. (2020) ‘Coopetition and COVID-19: Collaborative business-to-business marketing strategies in a pandemic crisis. *Science Direct*. Available at:

<<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0019850120303758>> [Accessed 6 January 2021].

Dance, E., 2020. ‘Higher education marketing in a pandemic: Rules of engagement, *University Business | The Business of Higher Education*. Available at:

<<https://universitybusiness.co.uk/student-recruitment-marketing/higher-education-marketing-in-a-pandemic-rules-of-engagement/>> [Accessed 9 February 2021].

Davis, R., Piven, I. and Breazeale, M. (2014) 'Conceptualizing the brand in social media community: The five sources model', *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 21(4), pp.468-481. Available at:

<[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261716275\\_Conceptualizing\\_the\\_brand\\_in\\_social\\_media\\_community\\_The\\_five\\_sources\\_model](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261716275_Conceptualizing_the_brand_in_social_media_community_The_five_sources_model)> [Accessed 12 November 2021].

De', R., Pandey, N. and Pal, A. (2020) 'Impact of digital surge during Covid-19 pandemic: A viewpoint on research and practice', *International Journal of Information Management*, 55, p.2. Available at:

<<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0268401220309622>> [Accessed 19 May 2021].

Delmestri, Oberg, Drori. (2013) 'Branding the University: Relational Strategy of Identity Construction in a Competitive Field,' in Engwall, L. and Scott, P. (eds). *Trust in Higher Education Institutions*, London, Portland Press, pp. 134-147.

Dimock, M., 2019. 'Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins', *Pew Research Center*. Available at:

<<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>> [Accessed 13 November 2020].

Djafarova, E., & Bowes, T. (2021) "Instagram made me buy it": Generation Z impulse purchases in fashion industry. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 59, 2021, pp. 102345

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102345>

Durkin, M., Filbey, L. and McCartan-Quinn, D. (2013) 'Marketing to the mature

learner: exploring the role of web communications’, *The Service Industries Journal*, 34(1), pp. 56-70. Available at:

<<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02642069.2013.763342>> [Accessed 24 January 2021].

Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007) ‘The benefits of Facebook “friends:” Social capital and college students’ use of online social network sites’, *Journal of Computer- Mediated Communication*, 12(4), 1143–1168. Available at:

<<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00367.x>> [Accessed 5 February 2021]

Fitzgerald M., Kruschwitz N., Bonnet D., Welch M. (2014) ‘Embracing digital technology: A new strategic imperative’, *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 55(2), 2.

Fletcher, A. and Lee, M. (2012) ‘Current social media uses and evaluations in American museums’, *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 27(5), p.518. Available at:

<<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09647775.2012.738136>> [Accessed 12 November 2020].

Francis, T. and Fernanda, H. (2018). ‘True Gen’: Generation Z and its implications for companies’, *McKinsey & Company*. Available at:

<<https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/true-gen- generation-z-and-its-implications-for-companies>> [Accessed 8 March 2021].

Fraser, E. (2020) 'If universities think like modern brands, they can thrive in the time of remote working', *fenews.co.uk*. Available at: <<https://www.fenews.co.uk/featured-article/53597-if-universities-think-like-modern-brands-they-can-thrive-in-the-time-of-remote-working>> [Accessed 24 May 2021].

Frølich, N. and Stensaker, B. (2010) 'Student recruitment strategies in higher education: promoting excellence and diversity?', *International Journal of Educational Management*, 24(4), p.359. Available at: <<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/09513541011045281/full/html>> [Accessed 11 February 2021].

Fujita, M., Harrigan, P., & Soutar, G. N. (2017) 'International students' engagement in their university's social media: An exploratory study', *International Journal of Educational Management*, 31(7), 1119–1134. Available at: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/IJEM-12-2016-0260/full/html> [Accessed 5 February 2021]

Gallagher, S. and Palmer, J. (2020) 'The Pandemic Pushed Universities Online. The Change Was Long Overdue', *Harvard Business Review*. Available at: <<https://hbr.org/2020/09/the-pandemic-pushed-universities-online-the-change-was-long-overdue>> [Accessed 13 August 2021].

Gibson, L. and Sodeman, W. (2014) 'Millennials and Technology: Addressing the Communication Gap in Education and Practice', *Organization Development Journal*, 32(4)(63), p.65.

Grau, S., Kleiser, S. and Bright, L. (2019) 'Exploring social media addiction among student Millennials', *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 22(2), pp. 200-216. Available at:

<[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331964104\\_Exploring\\_social\\_media\\_addiction\\_among\\_student\\_Millennials](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331964104_Exploring_social_media_addiction_among_student_Millennials)> [Accessed 12 February 2021].

Gubrium, J. and Holstein, J. (200) 'From the Individual Interview to the Interview Society', *Handbook of Interview Research*, p.10. Available at:

<<https://methods.sagepub.com/book/handbook-of-interview-research/d3.xml>>  
[Accessed 1 January 2021].

Gumpert, G. and Cathcart, R. (1985) 'Media grammars, generations, and media gaps', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 2(1), pp.23-35. Available at:

<<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/15295038509360059?needAccess=true>>  
[Accessed 8 April 2021].

Gundlach, G. and Wilkie, W. (2009) 'The American Marketing Association's New Definition of Marketing: Perspective and Commentary on the 2007 Revision' *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 28(2), pp.259-264.

Hart, Z. (2012) 'Message Content and Sources During Organizational Socialization', *International Journal of Business Communication*, 49(3), p.193.

Available at: <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0021943612446731>>  
[Accessed 15 January 2021].

He, H. and Harris, L. (2020) 'The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on corporate social responsibility and marketing philosophy', *Journal of Business Research*, [online] p.116. Available at:

<<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0148296320303295#b0055>>  
[Accessed 6 January 2021].

Hesel, R. A. (2013) 'The influence of social media sites on the college search process', Available at:  
[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5810fea5e58c62bd729121cc/t/58b0642ea5790a22724108fa/1487954991642/studentPOLL\\_V10.1\\_Sept.2013.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5810fea5e58c62bd729121cc/t/58b0642ea5790a22724108fa/1487954991642/studentPOLL_V10.1_Sept.2013.pdf) [Accessed 5 February 2021]

Hesel, R. A., & Williams, R. C. (2009) 'Social networking sites and college-bound students', *StudentPoll*, 7(2), 1–8.

Hewitt, R. (2020) 'Demand for Higher Education to 2035', p.40 Available at:  
<[https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Demand-for-Higher-Education-to-2035\\_HEPI-Report-134\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Demand-for-Higher-Education-to-2035_HEPI-Report-134_FINAL.pdf)> [Accessed 9 February 2021].

Hewson C. (2020) 'Qualitative approaches in internet-mediated research: opportunities, issues, possibilities', *The Oxford handbook of qualitative research*, 2nd ed. Oxford University Press.

Higgins, J. (2020) 'Coronavirus: 'Universities will be changed forever', says Sir Anthony Seldon - University Business', *University Business*. Available at:  
<<https://universitybusiness.co.uk/news/coronavirus-universities-will-be-changed-forever-says-sir-anthony-seldon/>> [Accessed 17 May 2021].

Higgins, J., 2020. 'More than half of students lacked access to online materials during lockdown, OfS survey suggests', *University Business*. Available at:  
<<https://universitybusiness.co.uk/technology/more-than-half-of-students-lacked-access-to-online-materials-during-lockdown-ofs-survey-suggests/>> [Accessed 24 May 2021].

Holliman, G. and Rowley, J (2014) 'Business to business digital content marketing: marketers' perceptions of best practice', *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 8(4), p.269. Available at:

<[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280172879\\_Business\\_to\\_business\\_digital\\_content\\_marketing\\_Marketers'\\_perceptions\\_of\\_best\\_practice](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280172879_Business_to_business_digital_content_marketing_Marketers'_perceptions_of_best_practice)> [Accessed 13 December 2020]

Holstein, J. and Gubrium, J. (2011) *Inside Interviewing: New Lenses, New Concerns*. [ebook] Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc, p.2. Available at:

<<https://methods.sagepub.com/base/download/BookChapter/inside-interviewing/n1.xml>> [Accessed 13 January 2021].

Ismail Alshaketheep, K. (2020) *Digital Marketing during COVID 19: Consumer's Perspective*. [ebook] World Scientific and Engineering Academy and Society, p.832. Available at: <[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Khalid-Alomari/publication/345496962\\_Digital\\_Marketing\\_during\\_COVID\\_19\\_Consumer's\\_Perspective/links/5fbd517a299bf104cf740a03/Digital-Marketing-during-COVID-19-Consumers-Perspective.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Khalid-Alomari/publication/345496962_Digital_Marketing_during_COVID_19_Consumer's_Perspective/links/5fbd517a299bf104cf740a03/Digital-Marketing-during-COVID-19-Consumers-Perspective.pdf)> [Accessed 6 February 2021].

Jablin, F. M. (1987) 'Organizational entry, assimilation, and exit', In Jablin, F. M., Putnam, L. L., Roberts, K. H., Porter, L. W. (Eds.), *Handbook of organizational communication: An interdisciplinary perspective*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage, pp. 679-740.

Király, O, et al. (2020) 'Preventing problematic internet use during the COVID-19 pandemic: Consensus guidance', *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, 100, p.2.

Kotler and Lee. (2007) Marketing in the Public Sector: The Final Frontier. *Public Manager*, 36(1), p. 12.

Ketter, E. and Avraham, E. (2021) ‘#StayHome today so we can #TravelTomorrow: tourism destinations’ digital marketing strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic’, *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, p. 20. Available at:

<<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10548408.2021.1921670>> [Accessed 18 May 2021]

Krippendorff, K. (2013) ‘Content analysis - An Introduction to Its Methodology’, 3rd ed. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications Inc, pp.1-5.

Krücken, G., & Meier, F. (2006) ‘Turning the university into an organizational actor’, In G. S. Drori, J. W. Meyer, & H. Hwang (Eds.), *Globalization and organization: world society and organizational change*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 241– 257.

Lammers, J. (2011) ‘How Institutions Communicate: Institutional Messages, Institutional Logics, and Organizational Communication.’, *Management Communication Quarterly*, 25(1), p. 160. Available at:

<<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0893318910389280>> [Accessed 1 November 2020].

Lankau, M. J., Scandura, T. A. (2002) ‘An investigation of personal learning in mentoring relationships: Content, antecedents, and consequences’, *Academy of Management Journal*, 45, pp. 779-790.

Lazie, A. and Jovie, M. (2019) 'Strategic digital transformation of organisations'  
In: *SENET Project Management Conference (SENET 2019)*. Dordrecht: Atlantis  
Press, p.184.

Lažetić, P. (2019) 'Studying similarities and differences in higher education  
organisations based on their websites – comparative methodological approaches and  
research potential', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 23(1), pp.75-  
90. Available at:

<<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13645579.2019.1672286?needAccess=true>  
> [Accessed 24 January 2021].

Lipsman, *et al.* (2012) 'The Power of "Like"', *Journal of Advertising Research*, 52(1), p.  
2. Available at:

<[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269554092\\_The\\_Power\\_of\\_Like\\_How\\_Brands\\_Reach\\_and\\_Influence\\_Fans\\_Through\\_Social-Media\\_Marketing](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269554092_The_Power_of_Like_How_Brands_Reach_and_Influence_Fans_Through_Social-Media_Marketing)> [Accessed 15 December 2020].

Matveev, AV. (2002) 'The advantages of employing quantitative and qualitative  
methods in intercultural research: practical implications from the study of the  
perceptions of intercultural communication competence by American and Russian  
mangers', *Russian Journal of Communication*. 168: 59-67.

Maguire, D. (2020) 'Perceptions of digital education have changed dramatically in six  
months'. [Blog] *WONKHE*, Available at: <<https://wonkhe.com/blogs/perceptions-of-digital-education-have-changed-dramatically-in-six-months/>> [Accessed 16 June  
2021].

Marinoni, G., van't Land, H. and Jensen, T. (2020) 'The Impact of Covid-19 On Higher Education Around The World', *Iau-aiu.net*, p. 6 Available at: <[https://www.iau-aiu.net/IMG/pdf/iau\\_covid19\\_and\\_he\\_survey\\_report\\_final\\_may\\_2020.pdf](https://www.iau-aiu.net/IMG/pdf/iau_covid19_and_he_survey_report_final_may_2020.pdf)> [Accessed 12 April 2021].

Metcalfe, A. S., & Blanco, G. L. (2019) 'Visual research methods for the study of higher education organizations'. In M. B. Paulsen & L. W. Perna (Eds.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research*, 34, pp. 153–202

Morgan, G., Smircich, L. (1980) 'The case for qualitative research', *Academy of Management Review*, 5, pp. 491-500.

Nowell, L., Norris, J., White, D. and Moules, N. (2017) 'Thematic Analysis', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), p.2. Available at: <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1609406917733847>> [Accessed 4 May 2021].

OFCOM. 2021a. *Adult's Media Use and Attitudes report 2020/21*. [online] Available at: <[https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0025/217834/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2020-21.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/217834/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2020-21.pdf)> [Accessed 14 August 2021].

OFCOM. 2021b. *Online Nation 2021 report*. [online] Available at: <[https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0013/220414/online-nation-2021-report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0013/220414/online-nation-2021-report.pdf)> [Accessed 14 July 2021].

Owen, J. (2018) 'Should lecturers have careers outside academia?', *University Business*. Available at: <<https://universitybusiness.co.uk/comment/should-lecturers-have-careers-outside-academia/>> [Accessed 6 March 2020].

Palinkas, *et al.* (2013). 'Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research.' *Administration and policy in mental health*, p. 42. Available at:

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258315317\\_Purposeful\\_Sampling\\_for\\_Qualitative\\_Data\\_Collection\\_and\\_Analysis\\_in\\_Mixed\\_Method\\_Implementation\\_Research](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258315317_Purposeful_Sampling_for_Qualitative_Data_Collection_and_Analysis_in_Mixed_Method_Implementation_Research)

Pasquier, M. and Villeneuve, J. (2018) *Marketing management and communications in the public sector*. 2nd ed. London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, pp.20- 21.

Peruta, A. and Shields, A. (2018) 'Marketing your university on social media: a content analysis of Facebook post types and formats', *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 28(2), pp.175-191. Available at:

<[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323420018\\_Marketing\\_your\\_university\\_on\\_social\\_media\\_a\\_content\\_analysis\\_of\\_Facebook\\_post\\_types\\_and\\_formats](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323420018_Marketing_your_university_on_social_media_a_content_analysis_of_Facebook_post_types_and_formats)> [Accessed 12 December 2020].

Pfeffer, T. (2012) *Virtualisation of Universities. Digital Media and the Organisation of Higher Education Institutions..* 1st ed. Krems an der Donau: Springer, p. 1

Plano Clark, V. & Ivankova, N. (2016) 'Why use mixed methods research?', *identifying rationales for mixing methods*. In *Mixed methods research: A guide to the field*. SAGE Publications, Inc, p. 84. Available at:

<<https://methods.sagepub.com/book/mixed-methods-research-a-guide-to-the-field/i961.xml>> [Accessed 13 November 2020].

Proctor, T. (2008) *Public sector marketing*. Harlow, England: FT Prentice Hall, p.16.

Rahman, M. (2016) 'The Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches and Methods in Language "Testing and Assessment" Research: A Literature Review', *Journal of Education and Learning*, 6(1), p.107.

Ramona, S. (2011) 'Advantages and Disadvantages of Quantitative and Qualitative Information Risk Approached', *Chinese Business Review*, 10(12), p.109.

Razavi, L. (2020) *Students like the flexibility': why online universities are here to stay*, The Guardian. Available at:

<<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/may/27/students-like-the-flexibility-why-online-universities-are-here-to-stay>> [Accessed 24 May 2021].

Res, J. (2020) *The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on corporate social responsibility and marketing philosophy*. [online] National Center for Biotechnology Information. Available at:

<<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7241379/>> [Accessed 12 December 2020].

Rodríguez-Abitia, G. and Bribiesca-Correa, G. (2021) 'Assessing Digital Transformation in Universities', *Future Internet*, 13(2), p.1.

Rutter, R., Roper, S. and Lettice, F. (2016) 'Social media interaction, the university brand and recruitment performance', *Journal of Business Research*, 69(8), pp. 3101-3102.

Available at: <<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0148296316000382>>  
[Accessed 1 January 2021].

Saks, A. M., Ashforth, B. E. (1997) 'Organizational socialization: Making sense of the past and present as a prologue for the future', *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 51, 234-279.

Seemiller, C., & Grace, M. (2017) 'Generation Z: Educating and Engaging the Next Generation of Students', *About Campus*, 22(3), 21–26.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/abc.21293>

Shields, A. and Peruta, A. (2018) 'Social media and the university decision. Do prospective students really care?', *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, [online] 29(1), p.68.

Available at: <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08841241.2018.1557778>>  
[Accessed 12 December 2020].

Stuart, E., Stuart, D. and Thelwall, M. (2017) 'An investigation of the online presence of UK universities on Instagram', *Online Information Review*, 41(5), p.582. Available at:

<<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/OIR-02-2016-0057/full/html>>

[Accessed 17 September 2021].

Silverman, David. (1993) "*Beginning Research*". *Interpreting Qualitative Data. Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction*. Londres: Sage Publications.

Simin, S., Tavangar, M., & Pinna, A. (2011) 'Marketing and culture in University Websites', *CLCWeb - Comparative Literature and Culture*, 13(4), 1–10.

Simpson, J.A., & Weiner, E. S. C. (Eds.). (1989). Message. Oxford English dictionary online.

Available at:

<http://www.oed.com>

[Accessed 20 August 2021].

Singh, R. and Awasthi, S. (2020) *Updated Comparative Analysis on Video Conferencing Platforms- Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, WebEx Teams and GoToMeetings*. Easy Chair, p.1.

Strielkowski, W. (2020) *COVID-19 Pandemic and the Digital Revolution in Academia and Higher Education*. [online] Academia.edu. Available at:

<[https://www.academia.edu/42768766/COVID\\_19\\_pandemic\\_and\\_the\\_digital\\_revolution\\_in\\_academia\\_and\\_higher\\_education?auto=citations&from=>](https://www.academia.edu/42768766/COVID_19_pandemic_and_the_digital_revolution_in_academia_and_higher_education?auto=citations&from=>) [Accessed 19 January 2021].

Sukamolson, S. (2007) 'Fundamentals of quantitative research', *Language Institute Chulalongkorn University*, 1(3), pp.1-20.

Taylor, C. (2020) *Coronavirus helped our staff embrace online learning. Here's how...*Jisc. Available at: <<https://www.jisc.ac.uk/blog/coronavirus-helped-our-staff-embrace-online-learning-heres-how-21-apr-2020>> [Accessed 17 May 2021].

Tilley, B. (2014) *Marketing to the mature learner: exploring the role of web communications*. Taylor & Francis. Available at:

<<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02642069.2013.763342>> [Accessed 22

November 2020].

Times Higher Education (THE). (2020) *Digital student recruitment in the time of coronavirus*. [online] Available at:  
<<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/hub/keystone-academic-solutions/p/digital-student-recruitment-time-coronavirus>> [Accessed 7 February 2021].

*Types of UK universities*. (2021), Ukuni.net. Available at:  
<<https://www.ukuni.net/articles/types-uk-universities>> [Accessed 16 November 2021].

van Teijlingen, E. and Hundley, V. (2001) *Social Research Update 35: The importance of pilot studies*. Sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk. Available at:  
<<https://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU35.html>> [Accessed 7 December 2020].

Vinerean, S. (2017) 'Content Marketing Strategy. Definition, Objectives and Tactics', *Expert Journal of Marketing*, 5(2), pp.92-93.

VITELAR, A. (2013) 'Like Me: Generation Z and the Use of Social Media for Personal Branding', *Management Dynamics in the Knowledge Economy*, [online] 7(2), p.257.

Available at: <<https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=943886>>  
[Accessed 7 February 2021].

Waeraas, A. and Solbakk, M. (2009) 'Defining the Essence of a University: Lessons

from Higher Education Branding’, *Higher Education*, 57(4), p.1. Available at:  
<[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/226599043\\_Defining\\_the\\_Essence\\_of\\_a\\_University\\_Lessons\\_from\\_Higher\\_Education\\_Branding](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/226599043_Defining_the_Essence_of_a_University_Lessons_from_Higher_Education_Branding)> [Accessed 3 December 2021].

Warner, R. (2013) *Millennial Workers: Understand or Lose Them*. [online] HuffPost. Available at: <[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/millennials-jobs\\_b\\_2566734](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/millennials-jobs_b_2566734)> [Accessed 12 January 2021].

Wilson, V. (2012) ‘Research Methods: Interviews’, *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, 7(2), p.97.

Wright, *et al.* (2015) ‘Competitive outreach in the 21st century: Why we need conservation marketing’, *Ocean & Coastal Management*, [online] 115, pp.41-48. Available at:  
<<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0964569115001829>> [Accessed 8 July 2021].

## 10. Bibliography

### 10.1 Appendix 1: Coding Sheet

Quantitative Analysis:

	Home Page	Instagram		Home Page	Instagram
Pre Covid-19: 16 <sup>th</sup> March 2019			Impact of Covid-19 (2021)		
Are there videos?					
Are there images?					
Is there text?					
Are there virtual events?					
Are digital platforms such as Zoom & Microsoft Teams being used?					
Are there live chats?					

Qualitative Analysis - Key Findings:

	Pre-Covid 19: March 16 <sup>th</sup> 2019	Impact of Covid-19 (2021)
Are there regular posts and updated information?		
What initial observations are there?		
What effect does the Instagram have?		

How is Covid-19 addressed?		
How are colours and graphics used?		
How have they tried to relate to their audience?		

<p>How does their tone of voice communicate with prospective students?</p>		
--	--	--

## Appendix 2: Interview

Participant 1: 18<sup>th</sup> February

2021

**Researcher:** So, hello, I'm x, I work as a Graduate Trainee for the School and College Engagement Team within the Marketing and Communications Department at Canterbury Christ Church University. Could you just introduce yourself and give a little overview of your job role in the Marketing department at -x-.

**Participant 1:** Hello, so my name is -x-, I am the Deputy School and College Engagement Manager within the Marketing and Communications Department at -x- and within my role I focus a lot of work on the recruitment of engineering. I work heavy with FE partners with partnership programmes, I support the ambassador programmes within the university, and I am a safeguarding lead for the department.

**Researcher:** Thank you, so my study is about the impact of Covid-19 and digital platforms on the communication and marketing strategies of HE institutions, in particular relation to student recruitment. So, my first question is, how has Covid-19 impacted your marketing and communications strategies.

**Participant 1:** I would say through marketing and comms, obviously it is a very outbound activity which has always taken place up to March 2020 and I feel that potentially at the start of lockdown I don't think things were addressed maybe properly because we all thought we were only home for one month so we put things on delay and then I would say as an organisation we then reacted to the situation of Covid-19 and we maybe hastily put in place new events, content and messaging across our platforms and email communications. We may have heavily relied on the use of CRM via email communication within the team that I sit in we've moved to an online profile of delivering things through webinars. Having these virtual events then be promoted via 3 videos that directed prospective students to the webinar landing page also proved beneficial to our student recruitment strategies and overall offer of activity. So I do think as time has developed, we have shifted how we work into a new digital way, maybe not always using the right platforms. I think for us we started using Blackboard Collaborate as a platform which although it is good for us as an organisation to use, it perhaps isn't as user friendly for other organisations and individuals trying to access it, but I also think as we as individuals have become more confident with technology, we are using different things such as Zoom a little bit more, not that we are allowed to, but other organisations. We use Teams for events and Teams Live, so I think as we've gone through, we have adapted to the market and what we are being asked to present other than relying on just what we know.

**Researcher:** Amazing, so how have you adapted your student recruitment events, I know there have been large scale events previously such as UCAS and What Uni Live, has that been moved online? If so how has it been moved online?

**Participant 1:** So with the UCAS, they have been changed. So obviously we did live events up to early march when they got cancelled and then they were cancelled for the remainder of the academic year, however they did change them to online events, but these didn't really start until the September time, so I think there were a couple of UK Uni Search events which happened between Easter and the summer,

and then UCAS did some virtual events from September to Christmas. Now I wouldn't necessarily say the UCAS events were very well set up and I felt that the way in which they were targeted which were programme related more than location located I think had a bit of an impact in how it was attended. I'm also not entirely sure how well it was promoted so I don't know how large scale the promotion went out about the changes from face to face to online content was delivered. In terms of -x- the first event we did after lockdown commenced was a postgrad open evening where it was a rushed event online so that it could still maintain the same date as was booked in face to face. Blackboard Collaborate was used as that platform and I think it was then identified that this wasn't the right way to move forward, however in the short time that we had to get other events up to scratch we did continue to use the Blackboard Collaborate and Teams as a way of providing access for people to access us during open days. That continued through for the June open day, for UCAS clearing. For UCAS clearing we did have at the time, the restrictions weren't as...as strict, we did have some access onsite for campus tours, so we did have that mixed approach. Moving into the autumn we went back to digital content and we used a different platform called Springpod which was an externally funded platform and although it was good because it actually was coordinated by an external company, a lot of the academics using it felt like they didn't get that interaction they would get through Collaborate and Teams. So, we've just done some information sessions for conversion campaign and have then gone back to Collaborate, and Teams and I guess that will be evaluated again at the end of this cycle just to see the impact of it. So, we've moved through using different platforms, a challenge that was eventually combatted with a successful digital platform being found that may not have been without the pandemic.

**Researcher:** Yep.

**Participant 1:** Each have their good qualities, and each have kind of barriers for people with it and I think what comes from this is that we've all adapted to this change, but I don't think you can replace that face-to-face meeting that takes place.

**Researcher:** Do you think this change would have happened without Covid-19; would it have been a slower process? Do you think that there would have been this shift to digital platforms alongside face-to-face kind of events or do you think it would have been in like 10 years' time or a lot further into the future?

**Participant 1:** So in my opinion, -x- would have kept with what they've always done, they don't change unless they have to. We had an online virtual tour which is good, but I think it could be updated and I think especially as technology has moved forward and you can see amazing stuff out there, I think there is a lot more we can do. In my personal opinion, I think

-x- would have stuck to the structures of what open days have been like, the open evenings, the prospectus in print. I think had we not been forced to move the way we are we would not have changed.

**Researcher:** Yeah, that has answered a lot actually. Have you felt a demand for new online resources, you talked about webinars, have there been any other digital resources you have felt a demand for?

**Participant 1:** I think what would be nice. I mean what there is a demand for and what we are able to produce are two different things as well.

**Researcher:** Yep I can understand that.

**Participant 1:** I think what would be nice in an ideal world is if all the things that we have created as a face-to-face delivery we could make into a virtual kind of booklet or we could make our own virtual learning platform would be fantastic. I think we had the personal statement one which was one of the first ones we moved and actually that was quite successful, and we did have the workbook anyway to download. I work with an amazing team of people that worked hard together across all areas of marketing to create more content and build resources in a virtual platform, so student life talks, things around clearing, student finance, we have

moved that into a digital kind of way that we deliver it through webinars, but we can now also deliver that into classrooms, and they've got recordings. So where time is precious within the curriculum we haven't just said its live delivery we've actually converted it so that it is accessible for them when they need and if they need to go back to it. I think what would be nice is if we had downloadable FAQ sheets to go alongside each of our webinars or each of our presentations to talk about the points that we've covered just so that's a lasting memory for them or it's emailed to them, but again because so much has changed within a big organisation to put it all online I think it does take a bit of time for the processes to go. I hope we never lose the online delivery element of what we are doing because actually our outreach of recruitment can go much further than just the confines of Kent, Medway, Surrey, Essex and South East London.

**Researcher:** Yes digital content has enabled students to reach us from further afield whether that be an open day or webinar we have hosted. The social media campaign and promotional videos created that promoted the webinar landing page also contributed to targeting prospective students form further away. Thank you. I do have a question about social media, but I know that isn't as relevant to our team. However, we do have some social media strategies regarding our Twitter so yeah what do you think of the University's social media strategies? Do you think they've changed during Covid-19? Do you think there has been more content produced on social media? What have you noticed?

**Participant 1:** I think students liaise much more through social media and I think as a university we need to have a much more robust strategy between student recruitment teams and social media teams on how we are going to work with social media. I also think we need to look at the avenues that young people are working with so not necessarily with Twitter or Facebook but looking at that Instagram which is where more people kind of work with us.

**Researcher:** Yep.

**Participant 1:** Where it reaches our demographic more. I think it would be good to have our own. Where we have a -x- page for stuff, I think it would be good if there were more teams so for the work that we do if we could then sync up with schools and their organisations because a lot of schools have Facebook pages, they've got Twitter accounts some of them even have Instagram accounts. So, if we had our own account, I think it would give us a lot more autonomy on what we are doing and not necessarily have to process it through on the main campaign which obviously our work is only a small part of what the University is trying to achieve. I do understand why it is quite controlled through those avenues because obviously social media is quite influential, and we want to be able to target anything that comes back from it, but I believe that this is the opportunity now where social media is the way to reach people. If we could in the SCE team have our own avenues which are more directed to our network than it would be much better.

**Researcher:** That is something I've always wanted to push forward. We have the Twitter, but we mainly retweet from the main page.

**Participant 1:** I tried for us to have our own Instagram account so that when we take pictures its uploaded to that, because we upload to our Facebook account but that only goes internally.

**Researcher:** Yes, it goes to the ambassadors or I've put it on LinkedIn but that doesn't go to our audience.

**Anne:** See yeah, I put it on my LinkedIn, see I think us at SCE should have our own LinkedIn account but then it only goes to professionals I think we need to see how other schools and colleges approach and tap into what they're doing.

**Researcher:** What about TikTok? Do you think any new or other digital channels or platforms will be utilised in the future?

**Participant 1:** You'll always find with universities they are about 10-15 year behind the curve. So in about 10 years' time when we are out of the pandemic, they'll be getting really good at doing online stuff.

**Researcher:** Do you think that's the case for most universities?

**Participant 1:** Very much, a lot of them are run by old, traditional professors who are academics, where students turn up. If you're a Russell Group University, you can do what you like because they turn up. In the likes of us you have to work hard and the challenges we have with our own academics to understand the importance of student recruitment not being one team, it's a whole university approach, is so challenging.

**Researcher:** Very challenging and is also something I have discovered when researching literature around university marketing.

**Participant 1:** We in marketing and communications have been employed for our ideas and our vision but universities are very risk averse at doing something new which is why the pandemic has been amazing in some ways.

**Researcher:** That's a massive aim of my research, how its acted as a catalyst for this digital change that has appeared to be happening for the past 10 years or more, but just so gradually and so slowly. The odd webinar has cropped up or a few videos and then in the last year it seems to have taken off because it has had to really.

**Participant 1:** It has, and also the confidence in people in delivering. So for me I could stand in a class of 100 and deliver fine but the thought of going online and delivering in front of 20 people was terrifying. Now I don't think anything of it, so I

think the personal development of people is massive and I don't think it has necessarily been recognised, so also facing your own fears in how you deliver things. And it's just things like is the presentation in the right format and that you have to convert it to pdf for it to work on certain platforms.

**Researcher:** It has been really beneficial to help everyone understand visual branding more to keep an audience engaged. So do you feel that these digital platforms relate best to our target audience of prospective students?

**Participant 1:** I think, is this through social media or any platforms.

**Researcher:** So social media and also our website, do you think that targets our audience well?

**Participant 1** No, I think we use the platforms that suite our university because we are not using anything with Google, not using anything through Zoom, Teams we can't even get students to tag you into Teams we have to create an associate account. I think there are so many limitations that I truly believe we as a university didn't act quick enough to see what else was going on. So a lot of the schools we are working with will use Google Meet or Google Hangout, I had to really request to have training on that because that's not something the University use. We have to recruit so we need to use it. Zoom, not permitted to use it. I do know some teachers now have to use it because Teams doesn't support what they want but again that's a fight. So, I feel there are so many platforms out there but yet we still as an organisation have to fight to use some of them to recruit to the University which shouldn't be the case. It should be if that platform works to reach out to these students, we should be using it not having to give reasons of evidence to want to use it.

**Researcher:** Yeah, I think it almost limit's ability, because students might find it easier to use Google Meets or Zoom. Young people are probably more likely to have Zoom on their computers from talking to friends or family over lockdown, rather

than Microsoft Teams or Blackboard Collaborate. I definitely think it's as though we are forcing these platforms on them rather than adhering to the platforms that they use.

**Participant 1:** But I also think that in terms of recruitment to the University, not just in terms of platforms but just how we recruited. We've stuck with the traditional, lets put a sticker on a bus, lets put something in a bus stop, why didn't we use the television more. So many universities, including our closest competitor up the road, -x-, used televisions as a way of targeting. Why did we not think to throw more money at it. I know we have had digital animations made, but I think at a moment in time when the world is sitting on the sofa watching telly, why have we not used that as an amazing platform to encourage people to come and see us.

**Researcher:** Well I think that has pretty much covered everything. So, my aim is to really see whether universities would have moved forward this quickly online had there not been a pandemic. Just to finish, do you think they would have?

**Participant 1:** We 100% would not have. Had the pandemic not hit, -x- would not have changed. We'd still be printing a prospectus to deliver to people that people don't want. We wouldn't be giving them anything that they would really need, so for us I do.

**Researcher:** Thank you very much Anne. That's really supported some of the theories I have been accumulating. It will be interesting to see whether digital content will remain as crucial after the pandemic.

**Participant 1:** It really will be. Happy to help.

### 10.3 Appendix 3: Interview

#### Participant 2: 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2021

Researcher: So, I'm x as well and I am doing an MA in Media, Art and Design but it is Media focused and I am also a graduate within the SCE team at CCCU, so that kind of sparked my idea to do research into the digital transformation of marketing and communication strategies during the pandemic. Would you be happy introducing yourself?

Participant 2: Sure. So I'm Participant from the x and I am the universities head of social media and student communications. So I have a team of people. Do you need the details of who is in my team?

Researcher : Ermmm, maybe the kind of work they do rather than who they are?

Participant 2: So we look after all the main corporate social media channels of the university, Instagram, twitter, Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn and TikTok more recently. So most of my team are sort of content creators and video creators so we very much focus on storytelling for the university. So people at the heart of our strategy, world changes is our brand and we use our colleagues and our students to tell their stories through video and we've been successful in that front. We also have two student interns who run the Chinese social media channels because we have a big Chinese community at x both alumni and students and partners because we have a few campuses in Asia. And on the other side of it I have two student communications officers and we do a student newsletter for students which we launched during covid which was great and they run the website and provide new information for students joining us and obviously it's been really important to continuously update students current and future on what the universities doing and staff. But I guess internal comms for students and internal comms for staff, I may talk to colleagues about that but it's not really my remit.

Researcher: So I've just got a range of questions. It's more to do with how you feel the sector has kind of moved forward in certain areas rather than specifically x. So the first question is, how do you feel the sector has adapted to moving their student recruitment events and activities online, I know that you're more social media focused but have you witnessed anything?

Participant 2: I do work with colleagues and we do help. We have moved things a lot online. We have and I know that other universities have as well but as open days can't happen, universities have had to be nimble and sometimes that's hard in a university because universities are very big organisations that can move things very slowly so the sliver lining of covid is that we've had to adapt very quickly to the needs of our prospective students and their parents as well who want to find out about or other universities. So open days can't happen so we've had to move online so academics have had to record themselves, they've had to show what campus looks like through video, lots of live Q&A's. We've always done sort of Facebook Lives at x for onboarding and asking questions but we've had to do more of them so there's been a lot more and then streaming them to YouTube as well so multi-platform. So there has been a lot happening and they've had to move quickly on that which doesn't always happen in uni so that's been good that we've been able to do that quickly and then of course the online teaching and learning has had to move quickly as well.

Researcher : So obviously it's all been a challenge because of the pandemic, do you feel as though there has been benefits moving these activities virtually?

Participant 2: Yeah, it makes it more accessible for students who may not be able to visit the campus. I mean I think there is something to be said that when especially you have a beautiful campus like x does that looks like Hogwarts, you do find that if you get the students to come onto campus to see the space that they will be learning in, that helps. But there are ways of recreating that through video and online platforms and showing that community but you have to do it well, but it does open it up as it means that someone in China or another country who can't come physically to x or another campus can see what life is like and for the Chinese channels we did

a lot of videos about safety as for most countries and cultures this is very important so we filmed what campus looked like, the safety measures, the sanitizing so that parents could be reassured what it would look like and what we were doing to protect our community. So there are ways to do it but you just have to think creatively about how to do it and know what the audience wants and respond to that.

Researcher: Yep, so do you think that maybe in the future you think you will keep some of the strategies?

Participant 2: Yeah I think it will change the landscape and I think we will need a hybrid approach. There will always be a space for these open days for people to come onto campus but I think it will open it up and mean you can do both.

Researcher: Can you really beat coming onto campus then?

Participant 2: You can't even with VR and things, I feel it is always good to see the space you are learning in and also for the parents to see it as they may be partly paying for their children's education so it's good for them to see. The physical space but also the culture of a space and meeting lecturers and stuff, I know from when I visited the uni I went to that made a difference in my decision making as to where I wanted to go.

Researcher : Yes definitely. Do you feel like there has been a greater reliance on social media and other digital platforms for communication purposes? So do you feel like there is a harder demand for creating new content, posts and resources?

Participant 2: Yep and I've definitely felt that within the team. Whether that be informational posts and giving updates, I mean we did about 21 videos with our principal during the main part of the Covid-19 to update people on where we were

and to show a visible, strong and transparent leadership which was important. We did a lot of Facebook lives so that students and staff could ask questions about things that were worrying them and were responsive. So we'd used social listening data as well as intel that we'd got from a local level from colleges and schools to say what pinch points or things were needed and addressed them in our comms. But then I also guess graduations which we've just been doing at x this week, online ceremonies as we still can't do the physical. We've been creating content and replicating that celebration normally but online and there have been students on campus this year to film which we didn't have last year. But to still maintain that community and celebration is important and we've had to do more and as I said on the Chinese channels, make that tailored for whatever things they are worried about and we have been planning what to do this year and we know that they are worried about whether they need to come to x what they need to do about vaccinations so they're informational but also community building as well.

Researcher: Brilliant. Do you think that social media and the use of these digital platforms and moving online best relate to a wider HE target audience? Do you think it is the best way to communicate with students, other than prospectus's etc. Does having webpages, Instagram and twitter develop and relate more to the target audience?

Participant 2:: I think it has developed it but I think there is still a need for those things as well and I think you have to think about the whole picture. Not all students are on certain channels but it's also about resource. Most social media teams in university are quite small, mine is relatively big compared to the sector and there's things that we want to do where we just don't have time to and we had TikTok but we had to park it because we had other things to do so we need to revamp that so I think you just have to think about the holistic approach to it and your content. So creating content but I think the sector will be thinking more carefully as to where that content sits and seeding it through different places and how it gets segmented into different areas. So our team has recently moved from just communications into external relations so we are working a lot more closely with teams that are doing

corporate comms for funders and partners and also the new students and so we are thinking about where we can place that content to make it do more for us.

Researcher: Thank you. So how do you think that HE institutions determine the branding of their university, do you think they base it on their location or the courses they offer? Do you feel there is a difference between Russell group universities like yourselves and non Russell groups? Do you feel there is a difference in branding?

Participant 2:: I think it depends on your institution. X is obviously Russell group and seen as a high calibre university which it is, research intensive as most are but I think it's about getting a balance and I think with social we are lucky at x that we can add personality, the branding of the city as people make x and people is very much focused as part of our strategy and world changers so world changing research, world changing students and that can be doing something in terms of climate change or something smaller as well. So team x is our hashtag so that's our community and we can have personality and I think you need to with social media but it needs to be in keeping with your universities brand and values. So some universities, maybe Cambridge and Oxford they can't have quite as much of that in it because they need to be seen as more highbrow, we are highbrow but I think it depends what content it is. So it is getting that fine balance and we've worked hard at x to get that but I think social media is about engaging with your community you can't just publish stuff you need to keep up with the trends and you need to be relevant and as well as showcasing research, showcase the people of your university as well. SO I think there is a c change In that, I think it depends on your institution, our principal is very active on social media and trusts us to do whatever makes sense but not all institutions are like that.

Researcher: That's exactly what I've found in some of my research when reviewing literature. There is a lot of people higher up who don't quite understand the use of social media and the purpose of it necessarily and then you've got to kind of keep that corporate way to an extend but then relate to your audience. I think it's quite difficult

to keep that balance. I see it from a x but it's a relatively new university so it is interesting to see that Russell group universities are still putting their student voice first essentially.

Participant 2: I think you need to for it to be relevant. I mean the two stories we put out this week for widening access students who one yesterday who she was in the care experience, she dropped out of uni, she went through other things with her mental health, she had cancer, and she came back and out WP team are amazing so we wanted to showcase the support there but also that she thought that x was snooty and wasn't for her but she did fit in and she did find a place there and just to show it's not that kind of elite university, well it is an elite university but it can be for everyone, whatever your background so it shows a second chance and you may not do that judiciary of that normal journey and there may be bumps in the road which it was for her but she came back and did it so it's that kind of challenging the perspectives and perceptions of university that are important too.

Researcher: Thank you. Do you feel the sector has become more competitive during the pandemic. It can be quite a competitive sector anyway but do you think it has kind of again in terms of creating resources and having the strongest social media presence.

Participant 2: It is a funny one because as a sector in my area of work we are all very supportive of each other and we have regular meetings and we had a meeting yesterday with the Russell group social media managers and it is quite nice because we share inspiration and we share ideas and it's a hard job and it's been particularly hard in the last 2 years or especially 18 months dealing with a lot, having to be reactive, responsive and never switching off and having quite angry people on the channels sometimes about certain things so yes it is a competitive sector because we are trying to get students to us but I don't know if it has made us more competitive. It has made everyone have to up their game with how we communicate and be responsive and quick to act so we've had to up our game in that responsive nature. I think maybe with x as our numbers are always good it's easier but you have had to show your point of difference and that your caring about your community and things

like that so it's forced people to up their game and improve on things and move quicker at a pace that's quicker than normal for universities. I know we are a big institution sometimes decisions take a long time, frustratingly long but for example the student newsletter we did that really quicker because we knew we needed one point of comms outside social where people could get all their information and feel part of a community.

Researcher: Have you always worked at x or have you also worked at a non-Russell group university?

Participant 2:: I've worked at x for a long time, 8 years this year and before that I worked at x university and before that I was outside the sector. There's probably some universities that are a bit more closed with what they share but I think it's forced everyone to have to do more or to focus more on the informational stuff and give students what they need more quickly. But as a sector as well we work closely with the x so sometimes we have discussions with Scottish universities as to how we are going to approach things and as a Russell group as well. We communicate a lot whether that be on social media, internal comms, comms and media so that we can be on the same page with certain things.

Researcher: Amazing, one last questions. My main aim is to see whether universities would have moved forward and had that push you talked about had it not been for Covid-19, so do you think they would have moved forward that quickly online had it not been for the pandemic because there has been this gradual movement building webpages and social media presence but do you think certain online events such as virtual open days things like that, do you think it would have happened without the pandemic?

Participant 2: I don't think it would have happened at the same pace. I think we were moving in that way because that's the way the world is but it definitely wouldn't have happened that quickly so covid has had a silver lining in the sense that it has enable change and that hybrid sort of way of working a lot quicker than it would

have done. However in terms of social media some of those elements we are doing at x already with the Facebook lives with the onboarding but we are doing more because obviously we have had to adapt and change the way we work accordingly and pivot in the way we needed to respond. So in answer I think it would have happened, maybe not as quickly and maybe not as fully as it has so I think that Covid has accelerated it.

Researcher: Exactly, it may have just been a much slower process.

Participant 2:: Nothing happens quickly in HE, maybe for smaller or more modern institutions but it is hard to make change happen and it's very bureaucratic and lots of people have to sign off on things. It has speeded things up and we've just gone right we need to do this and also try things, look at it and see if it works and then that forms your content strategy and then you tweak it. I think teams have done amazing with the small resources they have to deliver all of this and I think it will be interesting to see how it progresses going forward as well.

Researcher: Yeah I think so. It'll be a shame to move that change I think.

Participant 2:: I don't think we will I think it has changed the way that things work.

Researcher: It just may be having that face to face delivery as well as the virtual.

Participant 2: You still need that personal interaction. To explore spaces on campus and I think students will want to come and have a person teaching. I hope that was helpful.

Researcher: Absolutely, thank you so much.

#### 10.4 Appendix 4: Ethics Form

Ethics: ETH2021-0099: Miss Emma-Jean

Williams Date Created: 23 Nov 2020

Date Submitted 15 Jan 2021

Date of last resubmission 06 Apr

2021 Date forwarded to

co

mm

itte

e

19

Feb

202

1

Researcher: Miss Emma-Jean

Williams Student ID

WIL16135939

Category Postgraduate Research

Student Supervisor Professor

Agnes Gulyas

Project THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION  
ON THE MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF  
HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS, IN RELATION TO STUDENT  
RECRUITMENT.

Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Education

School of Creative Arts and Industries

Current status: Approved

Does your project involve human participants? Yes

Does your project involve interaction with animals? No

Does your project involve the processing of data not in the public domain? Yes

Will the study involve participants who may lack capacity to consent or are at risk of losing capacity to consent as defined by the Mental Capacity Act 2005?

No

Will the study involve recruitment of participants through the NHS? No

Will the study involve participants (Children or Adults) who are currently users of social services including those in care settings who are funded by social services or staff of social services departments?

No

Project summary

Briefly explain the purpose and intended outcomes of your project.

The purpose of my project is to research the impacts of COVID-19 and digital platforms on the communication practices and strategies of HE Institutions in relation to student

recruitment and outreach. My intended outcomes of the project are to discover to what extent Covid-19 has acted as a catalyst for further digital transformation in new and innovative ways; whether

there is a specific type of university (pre 1992, post 1992, city based and campus based) where this transformation is particularly evident; and how digital platforms are being used to communicate with prospective students.

Briefly explain your methods, research design and data analysis in lay terms.

For my research, I will be using a mixed methods approach of content analysis followed by semi structured interviews. For my interviews, I will create a purposive sample of approximately 2 participants who work within student recruitment and outreach in universities across the country, from a Russell Group and non-Russell group university. My aim is that my content analysis will enable me to determine which university practitioners I will approach and will be most relevant in determining the impact of Covid-19 and digital platforms across different universities in the sector. Furthermore, having an insight into personal experiences to support such a large phenomenon will enable me to

understand why certain digital platforms have been used and whether my hypothesis that Covid-19 has complemented digital transformation and fueled a catalytic change of communication and marketing strategies within student recruitment and outreach.

Please indicate how you may disseminate the findings from your project.

Thesis/Dissertation

Ethics & governance checklist

Does your project involve collecting and/or processing Personal Identifiable Information/personal data?

Yes

Does your project involve processing security-sensitive data? No

Is this an externally funded project? No

Will your research/any part of your research be carried out in a location outside of the UK? No

Is the research taking place primarily within an organisation external to CCCU? No

Does the study have the potential to impact on professional relationships? No

Does the study involve participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed

co

ns

en

t?

N

o

Does the project involve any patients and/or service users of a health and social care organisation?

No

Will the study require the co-operation of a 'gatekeeper' for initial access to any vulnerable groups or individuals to be recruited?

No

Will the study use deliberate deception? No

Will the study involve discussion of, or collection of information on, topics of a sensitive nature personal to the participants?

No

Is it possible that criminal or other disclosures could be made by participants in the research that will require action?

No

Are drugs, placebos or other substances (including but not restricted to food substances, vitamins) to be administered to human or animal participants?

No

Does the study involve invasive or intrusive procedures, such as blood taking or muscle biopsy, from human or animal participants, or the storage of human tissue?

No

Is physiological stress, pain, or more than mild physical discomfort to humans or animals, beyond the risks encountered in normal life likely to result from the study?

No

Is it anticipated that there will be any discomfort or distress caused to participants and/or animals (as appropriate), the researcher or organisations as a result of this research?

No

Will the study involve prolonged or repetitive testing? No

Will financial inducements be offered to participants? No

Human participants

Who are the participants?

Marketing and Communication Practitioners from 12 different UK Universities.

How many participants will there be? 2

Please detail the rationale for the number of participants including, if necessary, a power calculation.

Two Practitioners from two different UK Universities that are chosen according to geographical aspect and spread which works out to be just under 10% of HE Institutions.

What are the selection criteria for participants?

They must be currently working and have worked in a Marketing and Communications

(or equivalent)

department since October 2019 in one of the following areas:

- Student Recruitment
- Outreach
- Digital Communications
- School and College Liaison

What will the participants be expected to do?

Answer a series of questions over Microsoft Teams from the researcher (myself) and add their personal experiences and insights into the digital transformation of their Institutions during the impact of Covid-19.

How will the participants be recruited?

My content analysis of 10 different universities chosen according to their geographical aspect and spread will allow me to then determine which 2 universities will provide the best findings to support my thesis aims. After this I will also be sure to consider other factors such as including 'Russell Group' and 'Post 1992' universities as well as choosing Institutions in which I have contacts with through my own work at Canterbury Christ Church University.

Please upload any advertisement materials (i.e. posters, flyers etc).

Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without usual informed consent procedures having been implemented in advance?

No

How will you record consent?

I will seek consent from my participants with a consent form that I will email.

How will participants be informed of the research project and what is required of them?

I will email the potential participants beforehand to request that I interview them as part of my study.

Please describe any expected benefits to the research participant.

My research will give practitioners who have faced challenging times working from home and adapting their marketing and communications strategies online to have their views and experiences heard. I think my findings may also help to improve the communication across Institutions within the sector and allow them to listen and potentially work more closely together. How will participants be debriefed following their participation in the research?

I will debrief my participants by saying that I will share with them my findings once I have concluded my research.

How will individual participants be made aware of the results of the project?

All participants will be thankfully emailed at the end of my project and either given a link to my overall thesis or the findings from my interview study.

Please detail the process for participant withdrawal and what is to be done with their data once consent is withdrawn.

If a participant withdraws from my study I will be sure to discard their data immediately. CCCU participants.

Will your study specifically target staff or student participants from a Faculty other than your own?

No

If yes, please select all relevant Faculties.

Will your project involve the recruitment of 100 (or more) CCCU student participants? No

Research materials & additional information

Please upload any research materials or tools e.g. surveys, interview questions, focus group guidelines.

Please provide details of any other ethical issues that you think are relevant to your project that have not been covered elsewhere within this application.

Please upload any additional documentation to support the submission.

Data protection

Will special category personal data be collected? No

What types of personal data will be collected?

The name and job role of the participant will be recoded but their name and the name of their institution will be anonymised in the thesis. This personal data is necessary to find the relevant participants for the study but doesn't need to be shared in the thesis as the aim of the interviews is to understand the digitalisation of the HE sector rather than specific universities. It may however be stated that a participant is from a Russell group or post 1992 university.

What is the lawful basis for the collection and processing of personal data? Public interest or exercise of official authority

Please provide details of any arrangements in place to respond to individual requests for access to their personal data (Subject Access Requests).

The researchers telephone number and email address have been provided on the consent form.

Will participants be able to withdraw consent at any stage of the research? If not, what is the cut-off date and the reasoning for this?

No as all information provided will be anonymised. If the participant believes that their personal data is being inaccurately used then they can withdraw consent within a month of the interview.

What is the process for participant withdrawal?

As the participants will be contacted via email this will be the main point of contact but if a participant aims to withdraw anonymously than they can contact the telephone number on their consent form and their personal data can be withdrawn within one month of the interview.

Who will have access to the personal data?

The researcher, Emma-Jean Williams and supervisor of the MA by Research, Agnes Gulyas.

Please provide details of any third parties involved in the collection or processing of personal data.

N/A

If relevant, have you ensured that all third party involvement in the processing of data is/or will be covered by a Data Sharing Agreement (with a data controller) or a Data Processing

Agreement (with a data Processor)? Not applicable

Will personal data be collected from or shared with parties outside of the UK? No

If yes, please list the country/ies involved.

Detail the additional safeguards that are in place to ensure the personal data is protected.

- Anonymous personal names and names of the HE institutions participants work in.
- Recorded interviews only able to be accessed and downloaded by me.

Are you using social media/online forums to recruit participants? If so, how are you gaining informed consent?

No

Are you using social media/online forums as a source of data collection? If so, how have you ensured the security surrounding your use of personal data in social media/online activities? No

Are you undertaking any activities that could create privacy concerns for individuals due to personal intrusion? If so, please provide details of the activities and how the privacy concerns will be addressed to reduce the impact.

-Audio/visual recordings will be used as the interview will be recorded on Microsoft Teams and then

personally transcribed. However, interviewers will be made aware of this at the beginning of their

interview and no one other than the researcher will be able to share or download the recording.

Please provide details of the processes in place to ensure confidentiality.

-Anonymous names and HE institutions mentioned in the study.

- Any names shared will be recorded but strictly confidential to the researcher.

Please detail the processes in place to check the dataset received or processed is, and will continue to be, relevant, adequate and not excessive.

That the researcher has worked out what HE institutions will be best to approach prior to avoid an unnecessary amount of email communications and irrelevant consent from other practitioners who then won't be necessary for the study.

Where and how will personal data be stored?

Data will be stored on Microsoft Teams and then the CCCU one-drive.

How are you ensuring that personal data is safely stored, processed and disposed of securely when no longer needed?

- Encrypted recordings only to be downloaded by me using my university email and password. Data will be stored on CCCU systems as an audio file and deleted appropriately.

How long will personal data be kept/stored for after the project has completed and in what format will this be?

Data will be kept for a maximum of 3 years compliant with the GDPR retention period and maximum MA time frame, however it will likely be kept for a significantly less period of time. Data will be stored on CCCU systems as an audio file and deleted appropriately.

Research health & safety risk assessment

Have you completed a Research Health & Safety Risk Assessment form? Yes

Has your supervisor reviewed your Research Health & Safety Risk Assessment form? Yes

Has your Research Health & Safety Risk Assessment form been approved by the relevant Head of School/Department or delegated member of staff?

Yes

### CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: The Impact of Covid-19 and digital platforms on the communication and marketing strategies of HE Institutions in relation to Student Recruitment and Outreach

Name of Researcher: Emma-Jean

Williams Contact details:

Address: North Holmes Road. Canterbury, Kent  
CT1 1QU Faculty of Arts and Humanities (Media,  
Art and Design) Tel: 01227 922595

Email:

ew286@canterbury.ac.uk

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the participant information for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. (If applicable) I confirm that I agree to any audio and/or visual recordings.
3. I understand that any personal information that I provide to the researchers will be kept strictly confidential and in line with the University Research Privacy Notice
4. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time, without giving a reason.

5. I agree to take part in the above project.

—  
Name of Participant: Date: Signature:

Researcher: Date: Signature:

Copies: 1 for  
participant 1 for  
researcher

The Impact of Covid-19 and digital platforms on the communication and marketing strategies of HE Institutions in relation to Student Recruitment and Outreach

#### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

A research study is being conducted at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) by Emma-Jean Williams

Please refer to our Research Privacy Notice for more information on how we will use and store your personal data.

#### Background

The background to my study is to use existing literature on the digitalization (or lack of digitalization) of universities and public sector organisations marketing and communication

strategies prior to Covid-19 and compare them to now with the present impact of Covid-19. My aim is to see whether Covid-19 has acted as a catalyst for digital change through a content analysis of university websites and social media and through personal experiences of the Student Recruitment and Outreach Practitioners from different Higher Education Institutions.

This is not a funded

project.

What will you be  
required to do?

Participants in this study will be required to answer the questions clearly but also facilitate a discussion on the personal experiences and insights they have into how they think the HE sector has dealt with the impact of Covid-19. Have they recognised a digital transformation? To participate in this research you must:

Be working with the Marketing and Communications (or equivalent) department of a University since at least October 2019 in one of the following areas:

- Student Recruitment
- Outreach
- Digital Communications
- School and Colleges Liaison

#### Procedures

You will be asked to Attend a 40-minute Interview on Microsoft Teams with the researcher and answer their 10 questions using personal experiences and insights into how Covid-19

has impacted the digitalization of Higher Education marketing and communication strategies. Please note that the interview will be recorded, and the researcher will ask whether this is okay with you at the beginning of the interview.

#### Feedback

I will happily share my findings with you upon request as the study aims to understand how the HE sector's marketing and communication strategies (in relation to student recruitment and outreach) have developed during the pandemic.

#### Confidentiality and Data Protection

The following categories of personal data (as defined by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)) will be processed:

- Personal data will be collected.
- We have identified that the public interest in processing the personal data is:
- Your name and role in the university will be recorded but your name and the name of your institution will not appear in the thesis. For example: ‘Emma’ will be replaced with ‘Participant 1’ and ‘Christ Church University’ will be replaced with ‘-x-’, however it may be stated that it is a post 1992 university. This personal data is necessary to find the relevant participants for the study.

Data can only be accessed by, or shared with:

- The researcher, Emma-Jean Williams, and supervisor Agnes Gulyas. The identified period for the retention of personal data for this project:
- A maximum of the 3 years compliant with the GDPR retention period and maximum MA time frame, however, it will likely be kept for a significantly less period of time.

If you would like to obtain further information related to how your personal data is processed for this project please contact Emma-Jean Williams.

You can read further information regarding how the University processes your personal data for research purposes at the following link: [Research Privacy Notice](#) -

<https://www.canterbury.ac.uk/university-solicitors-office/data-protection/privacynotices/privacy-notices.aspx>

#### Dissemination of results

The MA thesis will be published in the Canterbury Christ Church University library. Process for withdrawing consent to participate

You are free to withdraw your consent to participate in this research project at any time without

having to give a reason. To do this please email Emma at [ew286@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:ew286@canterbury.ac.uk) You may read further information on your rights relating to your personal data at the following link: Research Privacy Notice - <https://www.canterbury.ac.uk/university-solicitorsoffice/data-protection/privacy-notices/privacy-notices.aspx>

Any  
questions?

Please  
contact:

Emma-Jean  
Williams Tel:  
01227 922595

Email:  
[ew286@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:ew286@canterbury.ac.uk)  
Media, Art and Design  
Department Supervisor:  
Agnes Gulyas

Chair: Shane Blackman