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Social media use in international students' decision-making: Choosing New Zealand as a study destination

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Due to international student enrolments and globalisation, universities worldwide compete for students by promoting their institutions, study programmes, and courses in various ways. At the same time, aspiring international students utilise a variety of information sources to conduct global university searches and make decisions. Traditional methods such as newspapers, mass media, broadcasting, educational fairs, and university websites were dominant long before the rise of social media. As many young people and students communicate, collaborate, and interact online, social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, X, Google, and YouTube have become additional sources of educational information.

This research investigates how social media influences international students' choices of courses and universities. A questionnaire was distributed to international tertiary students in New Zealand to collect demographic information, including both closed and open-ended questions. The results show that: (1) international students make extensive use of social media, (2) social media platforms affect their decisions about courses and universities, and (3) social media is vital in providing the information they need. Overall, this research offers a better understanding of which social media platforms international students use when choosing New Zealand as a study destination and the reasons behind their selections. It also gives universities ideas for improving social media engagement and recruitment strategies.

Keywords: International students, social media engagement, New Zealand

Introduction

The introduction of information and communication technologies has transformed how universities seek to influence the decision-making of international students (Reddy, 2014). In the past, traditional sources of information about studying abroad included broadcast and print media, acquaintances, relatives, and similar channels. Today, individuals use a variety of social media platforms. Students now utilise social media

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platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Google+, and others to find information about universities abroad (Almutairi, 2016).

Social networking platforms are becoming increasingly common; internet users spend more time on social applications such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, X, LinkedIn, and Google than on any other websites. There are several activities to consider when studying abroad, from finding the ideal place to study and choosing a programme to estimating the cost of studying overseas. In their study abroad experience, students can rely on social media. They can use platforms like Facebook to learn more about what current international students say about specific universities (Rekhter & Hossler, 2020).

In today's competitive environment, new technologies have become central to all businesses, supporting their development, success, and competitiveness. The rapid growth of social media has changed the structure of international student recruitment; it influences individual decisions, behaviour, views, and attitudes. Media and technology have increased competition and customer engagement with universities. Universities are developing emerging technologies to create new approaches and strategies for communicating with and recruiting prospective students worldwide (Kumar & Raman, 2020; Reddy, 2014).

Universities, on the other hand, face various challenges when developing and implementing marketing plans and objectives. These include limited knowledge, poor digital marketing techniques, and insufficient expertise in using social media platforms for marketing. Additionally, universities face challenges arising from the increasing complexity of digital marketing strategies and the rapid evolution of social media platforms. As Bartosik-Purgat et al. (2017) note, ICT developments have transformed information-searching and decision-making processes, and the diverse ways individuals use social media – shaped by cultural and socioeconomic factors – require institutions to continually adapt their communication approaches.

Research gap

Key factors influencing international students' choice of New Zealand as a study destination include its lifestyle and cultural environment, perceived safety, natural surroundings, quality of education, and overall value for money (Li, Rajah, & Doyle, 2023). International students also value New Zealand's supportive environment, inclusive multicultural society, and strong post-study work and employability prospects, which contribute to sustained satisfaction and increasing enrolments (Education New Zealand, 2025b). Therefore, New Zealand is well known for enrolling large numbers of international students. The government and universities of New Zealand highly value foreign student enrolment, considering it an important source of revenue.

In 2019, an estimated 115,705 international student enrolments occurred across all education subsectors (Education New Zealand, 2025a). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting border closures, international student numbers dropped significantly, declining to 51,580 in April 2022 (The Audit Office, 2022). In response, the New Zealand government has introduced initiatives to rebuild the sector, including expanding work rights, streamlining visa processes, and increasing global promotion

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efforts (New Zealand Government, 2025). Alongside these measures, universities are increasingly using social media platforms to attract and engage prospective international students. Despite this increasing reliance on digital platforms, there is limited empirical research on how international students actually utilise social media when choosing New Zealand as a study destination, and which platforms most effectively influence their decision-making. This represents a crucial gap in the literature.

Addressing this gap is important for several reasons. First, without a clear understanding of students' digital information-seeking behaviour, universities risk investing in ineffective or misaligned marketing strategies, which could lead to poorer recruitment results in an increasingly competitive global education market. Second, recognising the most influential platforms and content types can help universities optimise their communication strategies, thereby boosting engagement, trust, and conversion rates among prospective students. Third, from a policy perspective, insights into students' digital decision-making processes can support national-level strategies aimed at restoring and strengthening New Zealand's position as a preferred international education destination. Therefore, this study contributes by providing evidence-based insights into how social media platforms influence international students' choices, offering both theoretical value in understanding digital decision-making behaviour and practical implications for institutional marketing and national education policy.

Research objectives

Research objectives for this research are as follows:

- To identify the different social media platforms preferred by international students when choosing New Zealand as a study destination.

- To identify the most effective and widely used social media platforms – defined as those that students perceive as most helpful and influential in gathering academic information and making study-related decisions – when choosing New Zealand as a study destination.

This study aims to identify which social media platforms international students prefer when choosing to study in New Zealand. It examined their views on various platforms and assessed whether these influenced their decisions. These insights served as a guide for selecting courses and universities in New Zealand. Additionally, the research seeks to determine which social media platforms students use when choosing New Zealand as a study destination and to identify the platforms that students *perceive as most effective* for gathering academic information and supporting their study-related decision-making.

Research questions

The research questions for this study are:

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RQ1: Which social media platforms do international students use to search for a New Zealand educational institute or programme?

RQ2: What are the most effective and widely used social media platforms – defined as those that students perceive as most helpful and influential in gathering academic information and making study-related decisions – when choosing New Zealand as a study destination

Literature review

Influencing factors for international study choices

Numerous factors influence international students' attitudes, perceptions, and decision-making processes when choosing a destination and institution for their studies. Recent research confirms that employability, post-study work opportunities, and the overall student experience now play an increasingly important role in international students' decisions, alongside traditional academic considerations (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2021; Li, Findlay, & Pratt, 2023). International students' motivation to study abroad is driven not only by academic factors but also by personal goals, including expanding knowledge, gaining intercultural experience, improving career prospects, and enhancing overall quality of life. These ambitions reflect broader developmental and mobility objectives associated with international study experiences (Crawford et al., 2024). Perceptions of greater prestige and accolades are linked to higher-quality overseas education, as well as to a desire to achieve global recognition. Factors such as competitive entrance standards in students' home countries, difficulties in securing a place in preferred courses at home, and personal aspirations to improve English proficiency and skills all influence the decision to study abroad.

International students' study-abroad decisions are often shaped by interpersonal influences, including educators, peers, family members, and professional advisors, and many continue to rely on informal information channels, such as personal recommendations and word-of-mouth, when evaluating study destinations and universities (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). Interpersonal networks remain highly influential, but are now complemented by digital channels, including institutional websites, social media, and online peer reviews, which together shape perceptions of destination attractiveness and institutional credibility (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Li, Findlay, & Pratt, 2023). Most students conduct their own research when enrolling in international study programs, but some still seek suggestions and feedback from acquaintances.

Furthermore, the financial aspect is a crucial factor when deciding to study abroad, with tuition fees, living expenses, and overall study costs consistently identified as major influences on international students' decision-making (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2021; Li, Findlay, & Pratt, 2023; Baum, 2020). It significantly influences potential students' decision-making process. Consequently, the choice becomes an essential goal, a deliberate process that requires awareness, planning, effort, and aspirations within the

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organisation's decision-making. These activities include conducting thorough research, completing digital and printed documentation, taking exams and assessments, and visiting campuses, among others. Students pursuing higher education abroad often accumulate debt upon graduation (Baum, 2020).

Selecting and making decisions about foreign universities

International students' decisions to study abroad usually involve a structured evaluation process where learners assess their study environment, compare universities and programmes, consider expected academic and career outcomes, and ultimately choose the option that best fits their personal and professional goals (Weber & Van Mol, 2023; Xu & Ooi, 2024). This process has become increasingly dynamic and iterative, with students constantly reassessing their choices based on employability prospects, post-study work opportunities, perceived risks, and real-time information accessed through digital platforms and social networks (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2021; Li, Findlay, & Pratt, 2023). Many factors have influenced both the pre-search and search stages of selecting a foreign university and course over the years. Brochures, instructional displays, university websites, and parental, family, and social influences have all served as valuable sources of information. With the rise of social media, an additional resource for choosing universities and courses has emerged, providing new opportunities for collaboration, communication, and community engagement (Reddy, 2014; Rekhter & Hossler, 2020).

Sociological, economic, and mixed models are commonly used frameworks for explaining how students select universities and make study-abroad decisions. Economic models emphasise rational decision-making, where students and their families evaluate university attributes such as tuition fees, location, and expected returns before making a final choice (Migin et al., 2015; Fakunle, 2020). Sociological models focus on the influence of social factors, including parental expectations, peer influence, social status, and cultural norms, which shape students' educational aspirations and university preferences (Migin et al., 2015). Mixed models integrate both economic and sociological perspectives, recognising that university choice is shaped by a combination of personal characteristics, academic achievement, contextual factors, and institutional features (Reddy, 2014; Migin et al., 2015). The choice between enrolling in a university and choosing a non-collegiate alternative is examined in economic models. These models also emphasise students' and their families' rational decision-making processes and the methods students use to evaluate university features and attributes before making their final decision to attend (Migin et al., 2015). According to Fakunle's (2020) economic model, students' university-choice decisions occur in three stages. In the priority stage, students' educational aims and perceptions are shaped by factors such as academic achievement, family background, and socialisation. In the exclusion stage, students narrow their options by removing universities based on criteria such as tuition fees, location, and academic requirements. Finally, in the evaluation stage, students assess the remaining universities before making their final choice. This three-stage model outlines how students rationally filter and evaluate institutions during the decision-making process.

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According to the sociological models described by Migin et al. (2015), which emphasise the influence of social factors such as family expectations, peer influence, cultural norms, and social status on students' educational aspirations, the goals of international students seeking university education originate from studies on academic achievement and social status. These models detail specific personal and social factors that influence an individual's career and educational ambitions. The classification and interaction of parental influence endorsement, the impact of key individuals, and academic excellence as indicators of university enrolment are prominently featured in sociological models of university choice. The student-centred model emphasises the qualities of aspiring individuals and their families, as well as university features such as affordability, location, and course options. While these frameworks are useful for organising the diverse factors that shape university choice, they have been critiqued for oversimplifying what is often a dynamic and iterative decision-making process, particularly in contemporary digital environments (Reddy, 2014). Mixed models attempt to address this by incorporating both social and economic perspectives, offering greater analytical flexibility. Migin et al. (2015) further describe the university-choice process as a three-stage sequence – deciding to attend university, researching potential institutions, and completing registration and admission – which links earlier variables to specific phases of decision-making. However, even this staged model may not fully capture the influence of rapidly evolving digital information sources, such as social media, which can reshape students' choices in real time. Figure 1 presents the conceptual model developed for this study. It synthesises elements from sociological models (Migin et al., 2015), economic models (Fakunle, 2020), and mixed models (Reddy, 2014), and integrates them into a unified framework of international students' university-choice processes. The iterative reassessment component is an original addition reflecting the dynamic nature of digital-era decision-making.

Social media platforms and their usage by international students

Since the rise and adoption of social media technologies, the ways in which individuals, companies, businesses, and universities communicate and conduct their activities have changed dramatically. According to a statistics report, YouTube and Facebook are the most popular platforms in New Zealand, with 87% and 83% of people using each network, respectively (Harris, 2021). This suggests that organisations with a social media presence should optimise their Facebook and YouTube pages to improve their social media marketing strategies and reach more potential international students. According to Harris (2021), the most popular social media platforms among adults aged 18 and over in New Zealand are YouTube (90%), Instagram (43%), Facebook (48%), and TikTok (46%).

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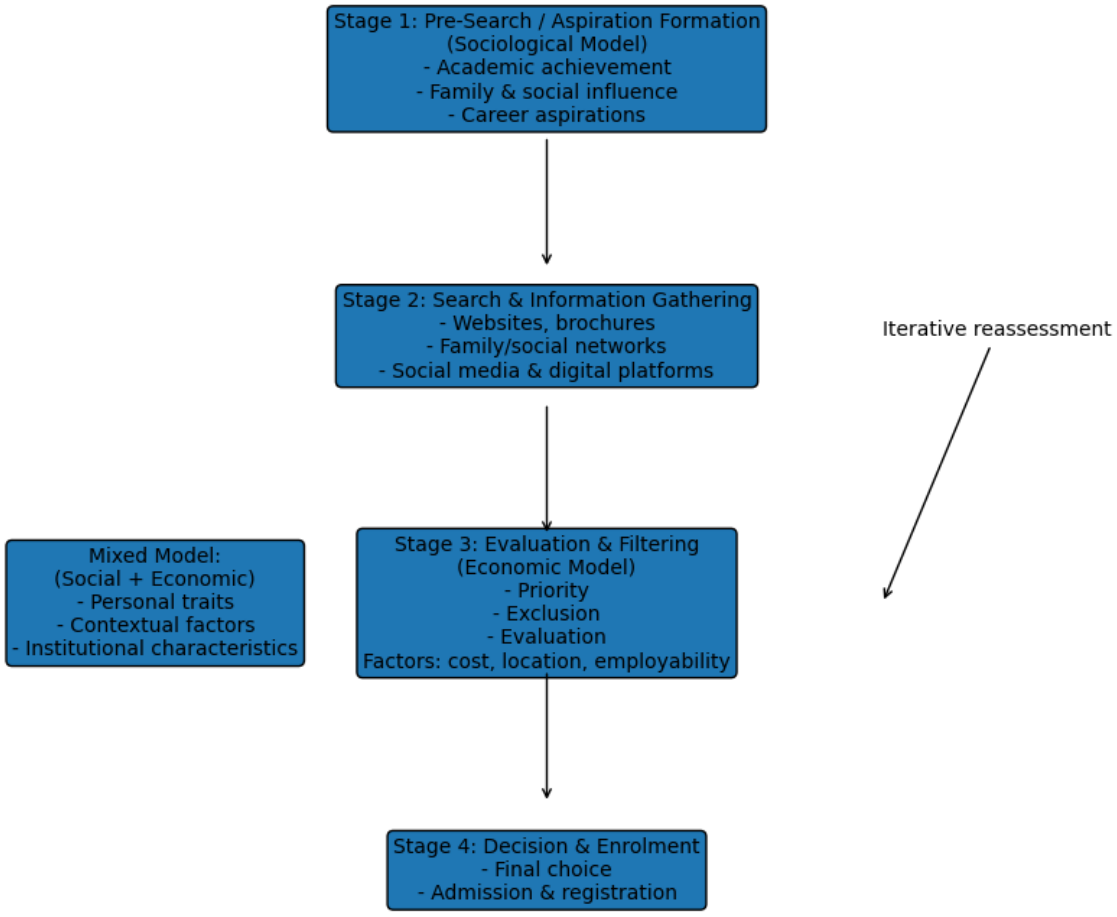


Figure 1. Conceptual model of international students' university choice process

Different features of social media platforms used by students

The key features of social media – presence, identity, relationships, sharing, reputation, and conversations – shape how students gather information online (Aichner et al., 2021). Table 1 summarises these features and explains how they support international students' information-seeking and decision-making processes.

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Table 1

Features of social media and how they support international students

Feature	Definition	How it helps international students	Key sources
Presence	Visibility and availability of users and institutions on social platforms.	Enables students to locate universities, view official pages, and access real-time updates.	Aichner et al. (2021)
Identity	How users present themselves online.	Helps students understand university branding, values, and culture.	Aichner et al. (2021)
Relationships	Connections and interactions between users.	Allows students to connect with peers, alumni, and university staff.	Aichner et al. (2021)
Sharing	Exchange of content such as posts, videos, and links.	Provides access to academic information, campus life, and programme details.	Aichner et al. (2021)
Reputation	Perceived credibility and trustworthiness of users or institutions.	Students evaluate universities based on reviews, testimonials, and online feedback.	Aichner et al. (2021)
Conversations	Two-way communication and dialogue.	Enables students to ask questions, join discussions, and clarify doubts.	Aichner et al. (2021)
Collaboration	Cooperative interaction to achieve shared goals.	Students engage in group discussions, shared resources, and peer support networks.	Mattessich & Johnson (2018); Tapscott & Williams (2006)
Engagement	Psychological and behavioural involvement in online interactions.	Encourages participation in academic communities, discussions, and virtual events.	Behnam et al. (2021); Astin (1984)
Online communities & virtual platforms	Digital spaces for interaction, virtual tours, fairs, and showcases.	Provides immersive experiences, virtual campus exploration, and direct communication with universities.	Reddy (2014)

Collaboration:

Collaboration is widely understood as a cooperative, mutually beneficial relationship in which two or more parties share decision-making authority, responsibilities, and accountability to pursue common goals (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018; Thomson et al.,

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2020). The methods and procedures for collaborating with users are crucial to the use of online and web-based technologies. Consequently, interaction and connections are unaffected by distance, which influences consumers' media preferences and usage. Tapscott and Williams (2006) argue that digital technologies have enabled forms of *mass collaboration* in which users co-create ideas, knowledge, and value across distributed networks. They suggest that this shift toward open, participatory, and collaborative online environments is driving significant change and innovation in organisational and business models.

Engagement:

Contemporary scholars define engagement not only as a process but also as a psychological state or behavioural manifestation that arises from specific interactive experiences (Behnam et al., 2021; Mpinganjira, 2016). With the rise of social media and online communities, engagement is now often examined as a form of digital interaction that connects physical and virtual service platforms (Winell et al., 2023). Astin (1984) described student engagement as the extent of psychological and physical energy students dedicate to education. Examples of student engagement include interacting with professors and peers, participating in co-curricular activities, engaging in student discussions, and exchanging knowledge and ideas. However, engagement has been critiqued for being a broad and sometimes inconsistently defined construct, making it difficult to measure reliably across different contexts. In digital environments, engagement may also reflect superficial activity (e.g., likes, clicks, or brief interactions) rather than meaningful learning involvement. In this study, engagement is therefore understood in terms of students' perceived involvement with social media platforms as sources of academic information, rather than as a direct measure of educational quality or learning outcomes.

Online communities and virtual platforms:

Universities utilise social media platforms, such as virtual tours, virtual fairs, and showcases, to conserve funds and resources for other vital functions and objectives, and to reach as many potential students as possible. For example, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram can provide prospective students with 24-hour connectivity and are easily accessible. Prospective students can also use Facebook to make enquiries and leave comments. Numerous organisations offer recruitment services to universities and provide international students who wish to study abroad with accurate, up-to-date, expert information on academic programmes. It also organises virtual conferences, enabling universities to engage with international students through virtual interviews and presentation sessions. Prospective international students can view videos and images of the university's amenities, atmosphere, classrooms, courses, and library. Videos and photos are among the most engaging features of institutional communication (Reddy, 2014). These online communities and virtual platforms are therefore significant because they extend the information environment available to international students beyond

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traditional recruitment channels. They allow students to form impressions, ask questions, and evaluate institutions in real time, which can meaningfully influence their perceptions and study-destination decisions. In this study, these platforms are understood as key digital touchpoints that shape how students gather, interpret, and compare information about studying abroad.

Choice of New Zealand as a destination of study amongst international students

According to a survey by Ward and Masgoret (2019), 62% of international students reported that New Zealand was their primary choice for a study-abroad destination. The factors influencing this decision included the global recognition of New Zealand qualifications, educational quality, affordability, the English-speaking environment, and safety. Furthermore, natural beauty and landscapes, New Zealand customs and beliefs, opportunities for travel and adventure, and the Kiwi experience were all of moderate importance.

Methodology

Research strategy

Research since the early 2000s has emphasised that the survey strategy remains a key quantitative method for systematically gathering data on attitudes, behaviours, and perceptions across diverse populations (Gamage, 2025). The use of structured tools, such as questionnaires, enables precise measurement and the application of multivariate statistical techniques to identify significant differences between groups (Aljarbou, 2022). A structured survey questionnaire with closed-ended questions was utilised in this study because this format enables standardised responses that can be easily quantified, compared, and statistically analysed across a large and diverse sample of international students. Closed-ended items also reduce ambiguity, minimise respondent burden, and ensure consistency in how participants interpret and answer the questions, which is essential for maintaining reliability in quantitative research.

Data collection

Sample size:

This study employed a convenience sampling method with a sample size of 119 international students in New Zealand. As a non-probability sampling approach, convenience sampling was selected because it allowed efficient access to international students currently residing in New Zealand, making data collection feasible within the study's time and resource constraints. A sample size of 119 was considered adequate because it exceeds the minimum thresholds commonly recommended for descriptive quantitative studies, where samples of 100–200 are regarded as sufficient for identifying patterns and producing stable estimates (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Israel, 1992). This size also meets the general rule-of-thumb of obtaining at least 5–10

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respondents per variable for basic multivariate analysis (Hair et al., 2010). The convenience sampling method is a research approach in which researchers gather market data from respondents who are readily accessible. It is the most commonly used sampling technique because it is very quick, simple, and cost-effective. Participants are typically approachable and willing to take part in the study (Aichner et al., 2013).

The sample refers to the subset of the target population selected for examination. To prevent sampling bias and errors, the sample size must be adequate. The sample size for this study was calculated using the following formula by Taherdoost (2020) where n is the sample size, E is the accuracy of error margin (it is the amount of inaccuracy that the researcher is willing to accept), Z is the confidence level (it relates to how specific the researcher wants that the survey results are correct), p is the population's estimate of variance, which is 50% by default.

$$n = \frac{p\,(100-p)z^2}{E^2}$$

Using the above formula, with a z-value of 1.95996 (confidence level = 95%), p = 0.5, and E = 0.9, the required sample size for this study is 119 international students in New Zealand. For this study, 134 respondents were approached.

Data sources

Primary data were gathered through the online platform SurveyMonkey, which included the study's purpose and a link for participants to complete the questionnaire. The link was distributed to international students via networking platforms, including email, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Findings and discussion

Data analysis

Country of origin for international students

Figure 2 shows that India accounted for the largest proportion of respondents (approximately 47%), followed by Nepal (around 12%). This pattern reflects broader national enrolment trends, as Indian students have consistently formed one of the largest international cohorts in New Zealand's tertiary sector. Their strong presence is linked to long-standing educational ties, English-medium programmes, and favourable post-study work opportunities that make New Zealand an attractive destination. In contrast, only very small proportions (each less than 1%) were recorded for countries such as South Korea, the Philippines, Cambodia, Kenya, and Indonesia. Interestingly, this 2025 finding contrasts with the New Zealand Universities (2021) report, which indicated that the

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largest proportion of enrolled international students at New Zealand universities came from China (46%). Other contributing countries included India (9%), the United States (8%), Malaysia (4%), Vietnam (3%), Saudi Arabia (1%), South Korea (2%), Japan (1%), and Germany (1%).

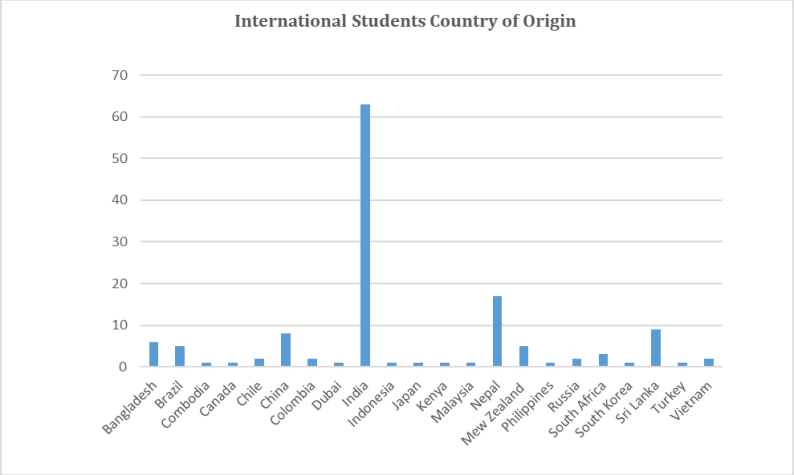


Figure 2. Countries of origin of international students in New Zealand

Gender of respondents

This study examined the gender distribution of participants based on their social media platform use when selecting New Zealand as a study destination. Figure 3 shows that a higher percentage of male participants (55%) responded to the survey questions than females (44%).

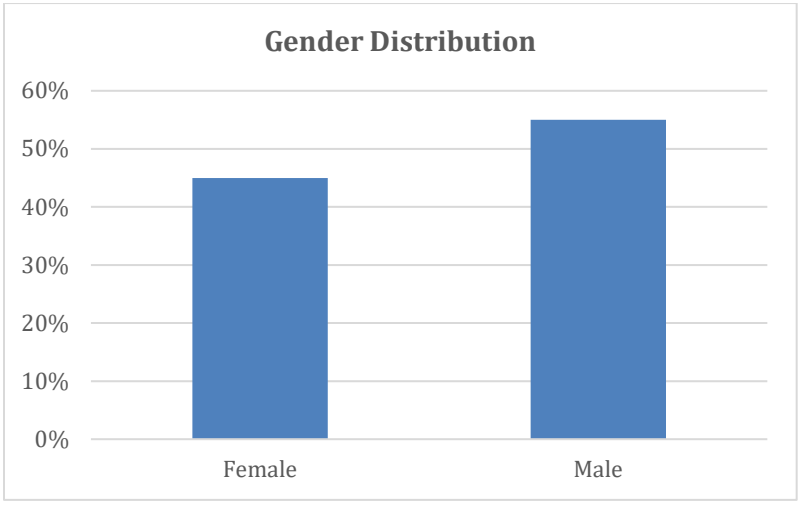


Figure 3. Gender distribution of respondents

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Age distribution of respondents

Respondents in the survey were categorised by age. Figure 4 shows the age distribution of the survey participants.

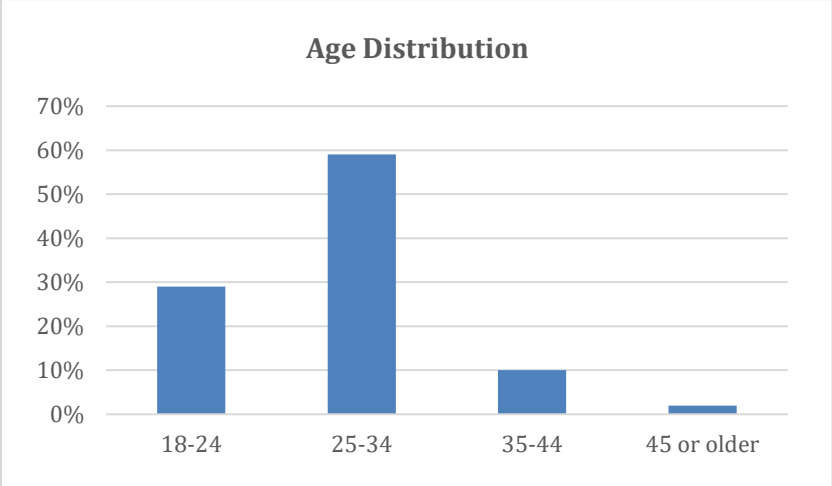


Figure 4. Age distribution of respondents

According to the chart above, most international students in New Zealand are aged 25-34, accounting for 59% of participants in the study. Other groups included 29% (18-24 years), 10% (35-44 years), and 2% (45 years and above). In summary, the majority of international students choosing New Zealand as a study destination are aged 18-25.

Respondents' current course or programme

The students enrolled in various courses at multiple New Zealand universities. Table 2 shows the courses in which international students are currently studying at New Zealand universities, based on the research findings. According to the survey results, 36.57% were pursuing a master's degree at various universities in New Zealand, followed by 24.63% pursuing a Graduate Diploma; the smallest group was PhD students at 1.49%. Meanwhile, 16.42% and 11.94% of international students in New Zealand were pursuing a bachelor's degree and an English Language Programme, respectively. According to the report of New Zealand Universities (2021), 15% of international students coming to New Zealand universities pursue a PhD. Overall, approximately 43% of students pursue postgraduate degrees, and 95% pursue bachelor's degrees.

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Table 2

Respondents' currently studying course or programmes

Respondents	Total	Percentage
Bachelor's Degree	22	16.42%
English Language Program	16	11.94%
Graduate Diploma	33	24.63%
Master's Degree	49	36.57%
PHD	2	1.49%
Other	12	8.96%

New Zealand as a study destination for international students

Figure 5 shows the various reasons why international students select New Zealand as their education destination in this study. According to the survey results, 23% of international students emphasised New Zealand's safe and peaceful culture, while 19% mentioned the quality of life or lifestyle in New Zealand. Additionally, factors such as improved English

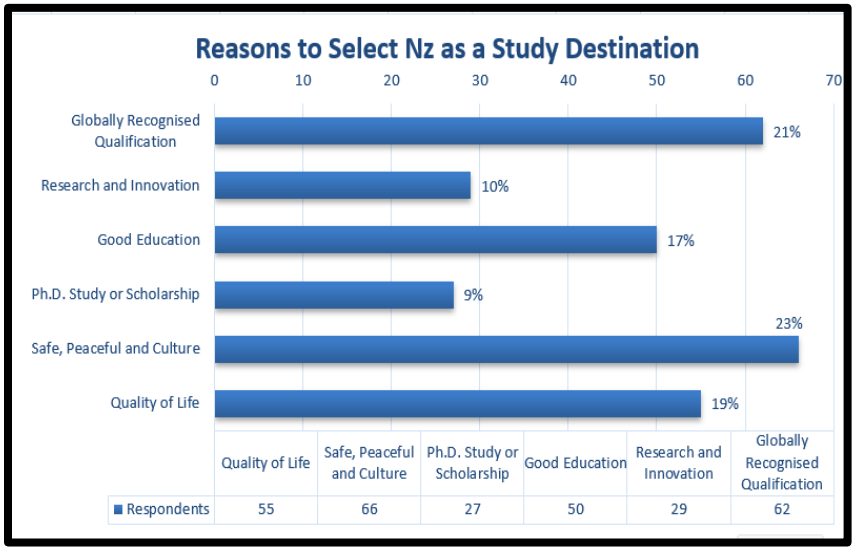


Figure 5. Reasons for selecting New Zealand as a study destination

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skills, greater cultural equality and fairness in the learning environment, increased interactions with New Zealanders, more positive perceptions of New Zealanders' attitudes towards international students, greater availability of social support, and reduced discrimination were identified as reasons for their choice. Consistent with earlier research (Li & Rajah, 2023), this study found that international students are attracted to New Zealand's globally recognised qualifications, safe environment, and high quality of life.

Information sources for New Zealand study

Participants were asked where they first learned about their respective New Zealand universities. Figure 6 shows the various sources of study-related information used by international students.

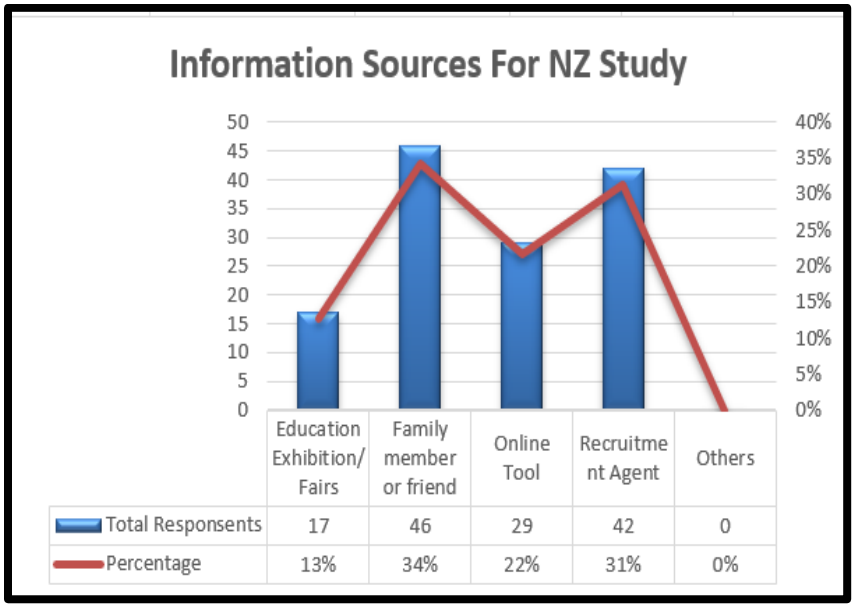


Figure 6. Information sources for New Zealand study

The survey responses found that international students prefer personal connections, such as family members or friends, for information about studying in New Zealand. This approach had the highest response rate (34%), followed by recruitment agencies (31%). Regarding sources of academic guidance, 22% of international students cited online media platforms. Meanwhile, 13% preferred to gather information about their university from education exhibition fairs. Traditional sources, such as walk-in inquiries and recommendations from known contacts, are often preferred during the initial university selection process.

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Types of academic information searched by foreign students

This question aims to identify the types of information that international students seek when choosing to study abroad. Some of the key information students look for about the universities they wish to attend includes details on the subject areas they plan to study, university infrastructure and facilities, the history of the university, and activities and programmes that students at those universities most commonly participate in.

Figure 7 shows that most participants searched for information about the university and the desired courses of study (each at 27% of responses). The other common responses were university course recommendations and opinions on popular courses, at 18% and 19% respectively. 8% of international students took virtual university tours and compared tuition fees and course costs across courses.

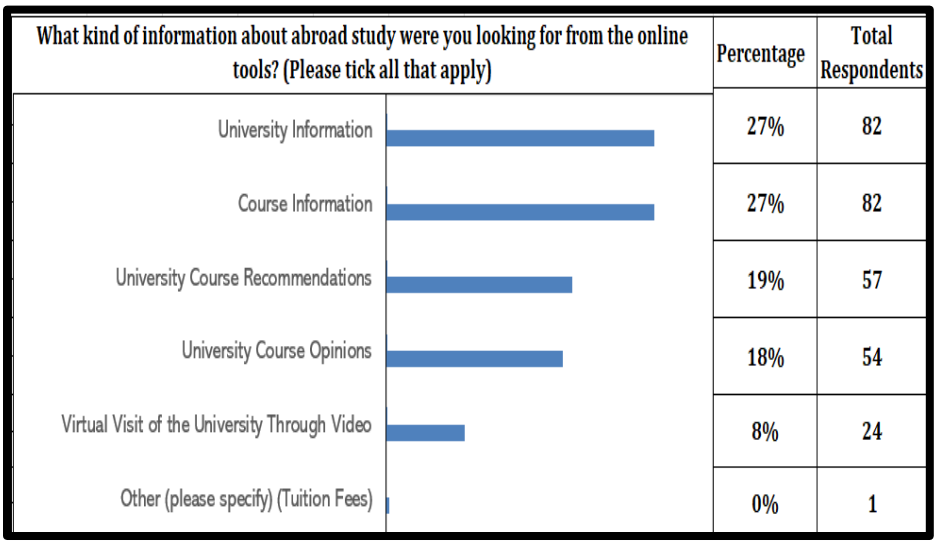


Figure 7. Types of academic information searched by international students

Online platforms visited for New Zealand study information

Figure 8 indicates that the university website is the most common medium for gathering information about university courses, with 109 responses. In comparison, Facebook received 38 responses, and YouTube received 26 responses. International students most frequently used Facebook, university websites, and YouTube when searching for a university, a course, or a programme, according to the survey data. Other popular social networking sites that received responses include Google, WeChat, WhatsApp, and Google reviews.

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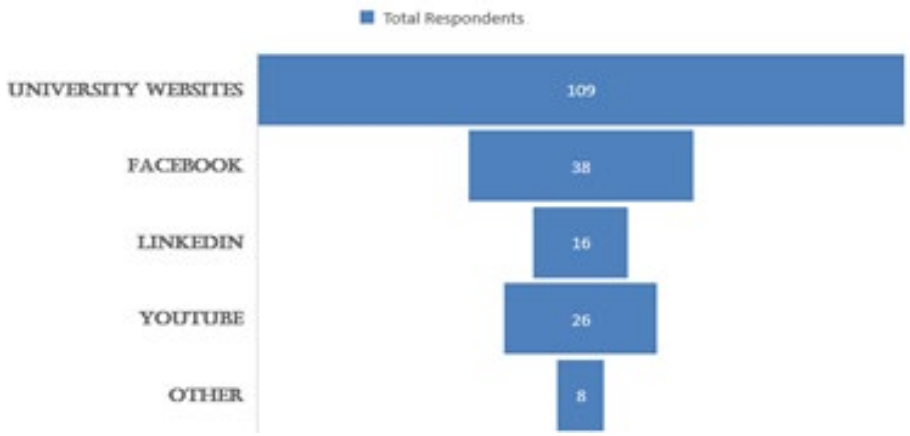


Figure 8. Online platforms visited for New Zealand study information

Recommended social media platforms

International students were asked whether they would recommend social media platforms to their friends interested in studying in New Zealand; the results are shown in Figure 9. The survey showed that 92% of respondents would suggest social media platforms to their friends when seeking information about overseas universities and courses. Conversely, 8% of respondents would not recommend using social media platforms to collect study-related information.

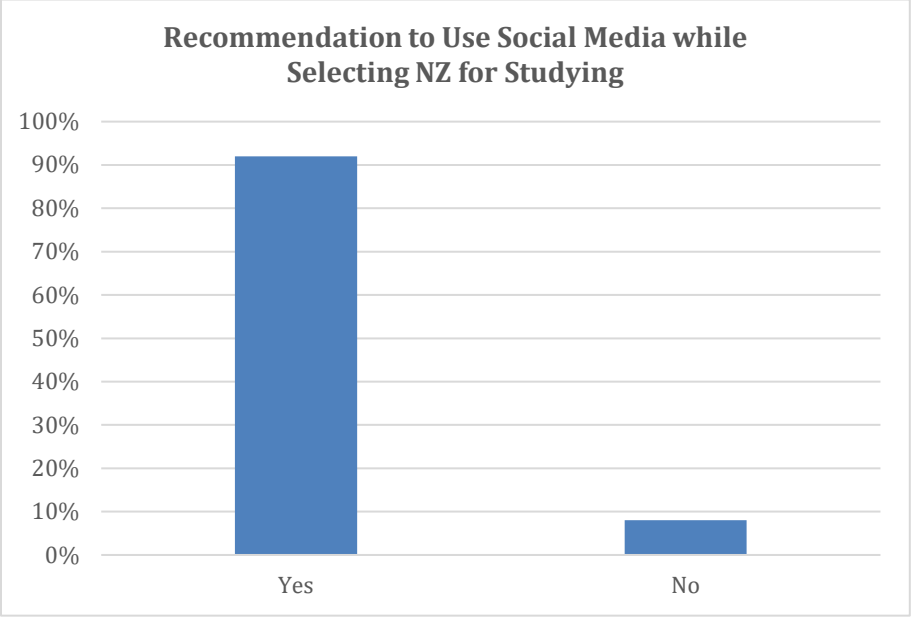
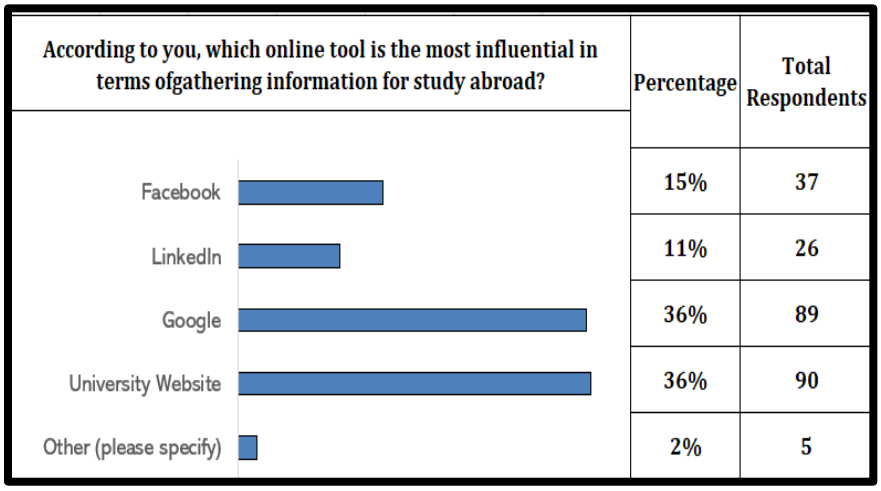


Figure 9. Recommendations for using online tools while selecting New Zealand

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Most influential online tools according to international students

Figure 10 shows that according to the survey results, university websites and Google are the most effective online tools students use to select university courses, each accounting for 36%. Social media platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn are also increasingly popular, receiving 15% and 11% of responses, respectively. Google, WhatsApp, and WeChat are additional practical tools that appear to influence international students' decision-making.



Percentage	Total Respondents
15%	37
11%	26
36%	89
36%	90
2%	5

Figure 10. Most influential online tools

Ways to employ social media platforms by New Zealand universities

International students gave diverse responses to this question, as illustrated in Figure 11.

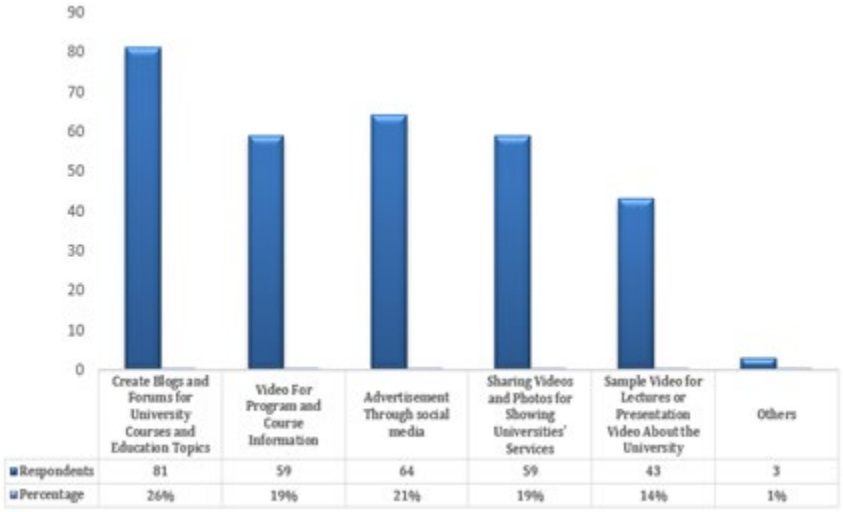


Figure 11. Ways New Zealand universities employ social media platforms

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According to the responses, 26% of international students believed that universities should create blogs and forums to provide information about their institutions and courses. 19% thought that universities should use videos to share details about programmes and courses. 21% believed that universities should utilise social media advertisements, including images and videos, to promote themselves. 19% of respondents said universities should produce images and videos showcasing their services, while 14% of international students recommended sample videos of lectures, campus exhibits, and perspectives from other students. In short, as the world becomes more connected, it seems that students have more opportunities to study at places that offer better options. The findings suggest that social media functions as an important point of connection between universities and international students, particularly in providing accessible information about programmes and campus life.

Different ways to interact with universities

The survey results in Table 3 show that most respondents obtained course information through online platforms. These accounted for 42% of the total, while 11% did not contact the universities. Additionally, 31% of the respondents requested the necessary course information via email. Others spoke to university staff face-to-face.

Table 3

Different ways to interact with universities

	Total Respondents	Percentage
I requested study information through the mail	62	31%
I spoke to the college's staff	31	15%
I searched about the institute through the online platforms	85	42%
I haven't contacted the institute	23	11%
Other	0	0%

Discussion

The primary aim of this research was to identify which social media platforms international students use when selecting a university and course. Although many students still rely on traditional university websites for information, an increasing number

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also use Facebook, Twitter/X, YouTube, LinkedIn, and other social media platforms to research universities and programmes. These student respondents reported that social media platforms strongly influenced their decisions about universities and courses.

International students choose New Zealand universities for many reasons, including globalised curricula, high-quality student life, and collaborative research and teaching. Furthermore, New Zealand universities' extensive global connections with other institutions support international scientific cooperation, faculty exchange programmes, and student research initiatives for both incoming and outgoing students (New Zealand Universities, 2021).

The findings of this study reinforce the growing body of literature demonstrating that social media plays a central role in how international students evaluate universities and academic programmes. Consistent with Reddy (2014), students viewed platforms such as YouTube and Facebook as trusted spaces for accessing authentic experiences, particularly through student-generated content and visual representations of campus life. This aligns with Almutairi's (2016) argument that social media's accessibility, immediacy, and connectivity make it a dependable source of academic information. The emphasis students placed on multiculturalism and peer perspectives also reflects broader research showing that international students rely heavily on online communities and visual media when assessing institutional fit and campus culture. Together, these findings suggest that social media functions not only as an information channel but also as a space where students form impressions of inclusiveness, credibility, and belonging – factors that have been widely recognised in the literature as influential in study-destination decision-making.

Implications for universities and alignment with prior studies

Consistent with Reddy (2014) and Kumar and Raman (2020), the findings highlight that New Zealand universities need to move towards strategic content creation. Blogs, forums, virtual tours, and authentic student-generated content were strongly preferred by respondents, reflecting the collaborative and engaging features identified by Aichner et al. (2021). These findings support the idea that social media effectiveness depends not only on platform selection but also on how well universities custom-fit digital communication strategies to meet students' information needs at different stages of their decision-making process.

Contribution to the research field

This study adds to the existing literature in several key ways. First, it offers context-specific empirical evidence on how international students utilise social media platforms when choosing New Zealand as a study destination, filling a gap in previous research that has mostly concentrated on broader global contexts rather than country-specific dynamics. Second, the study broadens existing models of international student decision-making by emphasising the increasing importance of digital and social media channels alongside traditional information sources, showing that decision-making is becoming

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more hybrid and digitally mediated. Third, the findings enrich the literature on higher education marketing by identifying which platforms (e.g., university websites, Google, and social media) are considered most influential, thereby providing a more detailed understanding of platform effectiveness. Finally, the study provides practical contributions by turning these insights into tangible implications for universities, particularly regarding targeted digital engagement strategies and content development. In so doing, it bridges the gap between the theoretical understanding of student choice behaviour and real-world institutional practices (Peruta & Shields, 2018).

Limitations of the study

This study has several limitations that should be recognised when interpreting the findings. First, the research used a convenience sampling method, which may restrict the representativeness of the sample. The respondents were chosen based on accessibility, and as a result, the findings may not fully reflect the wider population of international students in New Zealand or other countries. Second, the sample size (n = 119), although suitable for exploratory analysis, remains relatively small. This could influence the generalisability of the results, especially when attempting to apply the findings to larger or more diverse international student populations. Third, the study relied on self-reported questionnaire data, which may be subject to response bias, including social desirability and recall bias. Participants' perceptions of social media influence may not always accurately reflect their actual behaviour when making decisions. Fourth, the research employed a cross-sectional design, collecting data at a single point in time. As a result, the study does not capture how students' preferences or use of social media may shift across different stages of their decision-making process. In addition, because the data were collected at a single point in time, the findings may not fully reflect the dynamic and rapidly evolving nature of social media platforms, whose features and patterns of use can change quickly. Finally, while the study highlights the most commonly used and influential platforms, it does not thoroughly explore the specific types of content (e.g., videos, testimonials, advertisements) or the quality of engagement that influences decision-making. These aspects require a more detailed qualitative or mixed-method investigation.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that social media plays a central role in how international students in New Zealand search for information and evaluate potential universities. While institutional websites remain important, platforms such as YouTube and Facebook provide authentic, peer-generated content that shapes perceptions of campus culture, programme suitability, and overall institutional fit. These findings extend existing research by showing how specific platforms support information seeking within the New Zealand context and highlight the relational and experiential dimensions of digital engagement. The study contributes to higher education marketing by illustrating how social media functions not only as an informational resource but also as a space where students form impressions of credibility, belonging, and multicultural inclusiveness.

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Together, these insights deepen understanding of digitally mediated student decision-making at a time when online engagement has become integral to international recruitment strategies.

Future research directions

Future research could build on these findings in several ways. First, studies involving larger and more diverse samples across multiple countries would enable meaningful cross-cultural comparisons and provide a broader understanding of how social media influences international student decision-making in different contexts. Second, longitudinal designs would offer valuable insight into how students' engagement with digital platforms evolves across the various stages of their decision journey, from initial exploration to final enrolment. Third, qualitative approaches – such as interviews, digital ethnography, or focus groups – could provide deeper understanding of how students interpret and evaluate different forms of online content.

Further research might also examine the influence of emerging platforms, including TikTok and AI-driven recommendation systems, which increasingly shape information exposure and user behaviour. Investigating the effectiveness of specific content formats – such as virtual tours, student-generated videos, or influencer-based messaging – would help clarify which digital strategies most strongly support institutional visibility and trust. Finally, integrating behavioural analytics or platform-level data could offer more precise insights into patterns of engagement, enabling researchers to move beyond self-reported measures and develop a more nuanced understanding of how digital interactions contribute to study-destination decisions.

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