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Student attitudes and preferences towards communications from their university – a meta-analysis of student communications research within UK higher education institutions

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ABSTRACT

Whilst the practitioner field around current student communications has developed in recent years, most published research still focuses either on prospective students, theoretical benefits of student communications or usage of individual channels of communication. This paper contributes to policy and practice by providing the first UK-wide look at current students' communications preferences and behaviours through a meta-analysis of 17 student communications surveys (total students surveyed 20,134). Results show that students expect their universities to utilise a range of channels (including email, social media and student portals) – i.e. an integrated marketing theory approach. Most students feel that they receive the right level of information; however, overall satisfaction with communications has decreased in recent years. This paper provides recommendations for practice, as well as a template to improve consistency in future institutional student communications evaluations.

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Introduction

Within the last decade, many UK universities have introduced dedicated student communications functions. These teams are usually created so that institutions can take a more strategic approach to informing and communicating with their current students, in response to students' increased expectations around support and utilisation of digital technologies (Temple et al., 2014). The University of Manchester is generally considered to be the first UK university that implemented a strategic student communications function following an audit of its existing provision (Waddington, 2010). Within this review, student communication was defined as including 'provision of key course information', 'input into running of course and University decisions', 'updates on corporate matters' and 'access to information about student support services'

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(Waddington, 2010, p. 2). These topics are still considered core parts of student communications remits today.

Despite the rise of this practical area of work, academic research looking at communications with current students has focused more on the relationships between academics and students (Byrd et al., 2011, Childers & Levenshus, 2016; Dobbins & Denton, 2017; Jones and Wilkie, 2010; Traxler, 2010), rather than approaches for strategic student communications functions. However, there is significant research looking at higher education marketing with prospective students, which could provide lessons for those then communicating with students once they have enrolled at university. Furthermore, research has also pointed to the potential benefits of strategic communications approaches with current students to increase retention, satisfaction and further study (Elliott & Healy, 2001; Miller & Bell, 2016; Ogunmokun et al., 2022). Where academic research does exist that specifically looks into students' communications preferences and behaviours it is often quite narrow, focusing on the potential of individual channels of communication, rather than taking an integrated marketing approach or considering how effective communications can aid student support strategies.

In years that followed the University of Manchester student communications review (Waddington, 2010), other institutions have conducted their own reviews and started to include the usage of bespoke student communications surveys to provide quantitative data on students' preferences. Some institutions ran these surveys a single time, whilst other institutions began introducing these as regular questionnaires. The nature of these surveys being internal allowed institutions to develop question sets that could be adapted to fit their own priorities and structures, however this has meant that there is a lack of available sector comparison or benchmarking. The purpose of this paper is to summarise what we know about UK students based on their responses to institutional student communications surveys over the last decade. Through this analysis, student communications practitioners will have access to a set of benchmarks around students' communication preferences, as well as a template for future evaluation. The research questions for this study are:

- What are the communications preferences and attitudes of university students in the UK?
- Have student communications preferences and attitudes changed over time?

Literature review and theoretical frameworks

Lessons from higher education marketing research

There is extensive research into students' communications behaviours and preferences focusing on their engagement with the recruitment process – i.e., prospective student communication (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2021; Rabenu & Shkoler, 2022). As this paper focuses on communications with current students, the review of literature around marketing to prospective students is not exhaustive. Instead, literature has been included and reviewed where findings and theories may be applied or transferable for a current student audience.

Existing research argues that the whilst the ultimate goal of higher education recruitment marketing is positive outcomes in terms of increased enrolments (Pedro et al., 2018), this is achieved through the development of strong customer-brand relationships with prospective students (Hashim et al., 2020). Interactivity of content (Royo-Vela & Hünermund, 2016) and communications that utilises storytelling (Cassar & Caruana, 2021) are just two of the various techniques that are utilised to help build these relationships. However, most research looks into each approach separately and also often in narrow contexts which limits the ability to compare or evaluate which marketing approaches best achieve the goal of developing strong customer-brand relationships. The theory of customer-brand relationships has been explored in research with current students with positive connections being found between loyalty and brand attachment and positive student outcomes in the form of continuation, completion and student satisfaction (de Rosa & de Oliveira, 2022; Dennis et al., 2016).

Another challenge faced in higher education marketing that is relevant to current student communications is the question of which channels should be utilised. Digital communications channels allow universities to segment messages to target students with different needs and attitudes, however this personalised approach to marketing needs additional resourcing (Gilani et al., 2022; Goodrich et al., 2020). This is especially important given the unique needs and questions students will have during the process of deciding where to study (Le et al., 2019). Research that has attempted to evaluate which specific channels of communication are most effective in recruiting students has resulted in conflicting results. In their 2019 paper, Shields and Peruta found that student sentiment on whether social media engagement was an important factor in deciding which university to attend varied depending on the research methodology. Others argue that no single channel of communication can effectively maximise student recruitment and so an integrated marketing approach is required that balances a mixture of channels for different purposes (Sands & Smith, 2000).

Benefits of strategic student communications

Whilst research into current student communications is still developing, a body of research has already begun to show how this practice can support desirable student outcomes within the higher education context. Current student communications strategies, targeting low engaging students have been shown to increase continuation rates (Gilani et al., 2022; Miller & Bell, 2016). Strategic communications functions and strategies are also seen as increasingly necessary in order to quickly respond to crises that affect students. Situational Crisis Communication Theory proposes that post-crisis communications that considers the needs of stakeholders can be used to manage organisational reputations (Coombs, 2007). This can be seen in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, where research has shown that the advice, guidance and support communicated to students had a significant effect on their levels of trust in their university and subsequent withdrawal intentions (Ogunmokun et al., 2022). Even outside of crisis settings, students' perceived effectiveness of communications channels affects the 'campus climate', which is a significant predictor of student satisfaction (Elliott & Healy, 2001). More recent research has also shown the important role that university

communications plays in shaping students' ability to identify with their institution, and thus their engagement and levels of student satisfaction (Naheen & Elsharnouby, 2021).

Given increased expectations on universities to support students (Temple et al., 2014), strategic student communication forms a vital part of making sure that students know how to access support. Through their qualitative research, Picton and Kahu (2021) argue that student communication provides a mechanism to position student support services as 'integral to every student's experience, with students taught to use services proactively to build skills and abilities rather than reactively to solve problems' (p. 10). Proactive communications about available support is especially important for students who may not have equal access to in-person support services, such as distance learners (Lister et al., 2023). Effective communication about support services can also ensure that students know where to go to get their queries answered, which results in faster answers for students and reduced workload for academic staff, who are otherwise often the first port of call for student queries (Adria & Woudstra, 2001).

Developing an integrated marketing approach

As already discussed in the context of prospective student communications approaches (Sands & Smith, 2000), utilising integrating marketing theory may be a vehicle for current student communicators to ensure that their array of channels and messages are combined effectively towards the intended benefits outlined above. Integrated marketing theory suggests that utilising similar visuals and messaging across a range of channels or media improves brand recognition. Even if integrated marketing approaches do not always improve audiences' recollection of the messages that they have seen, studies suggest that it improves how positively people perceive that brand (Mcgrath, 2005; Reinold & Tropp, 2012).

In order to effectively utilise these marketing theories, student communications practitioners must first understand the potential influence of the different channels available to them. Although somewhat dated, Hamer's (2001) research on communicating with distance learning students found that almost all channels of communication were seen positively by students – the one notable exception in this study was video calling, however this may not be the case today, especially since the increased prevalence of video calls in teaching and learning activity during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. Ammigan and Laws (2018) research into the communications preferences of International students in a US university provides one of the few examples of a study that investigates students' preferences across different channels of communication, finding that email communications are used most commonly by students. Other studies have looked at the promise of individual channels of communication: such as the usage of text messaging for crisis communications (Sheldon, 2018), interactive content on websites, portals and apps (Royovela & Hünermund, 2016), social media's prevalence amongst students who identify as 'digital natives' (Palmer, 2013; Wong et al., 2022) and telephone phone calls and emails as methods for supporting low-engaging students (Gilani et al., 2022).

Beyond these more typical channels, 'word of mouth' or student-to-student knowledge sharing can become one of the most effective routes of sharing information with students (Gamlath & Wilson, 2022). When planning communications, relatedness to students' course content, the degree of closeness between students and formality of the

content can all be considered to better encourage informal sharing of information by students to their peers (Gamlath & Wilson, 2022). Finally, given that students’ unions are also communicating with students, there may be overlap in the messages communicated or opportunities to share channels of promotion (Alterline, 2022). Understanding students’ views and trust in their students’ union communications channels is thus an important part of developing an institutional integrated marketing approach.

Methodology

Before conducting a call-out across the sector, an online search was conducted for published works using the terms ‘student communications’ and ‘research’ or ‘survey’. A subsequent call-out was made to those working around the UK Higher Education sector in student communications and student experience roles to provide data of any student communications surveys that they had run. This was primarily carried out by utilising a variety of Jiscmail email lists and social media promotion. The Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), who run an annual student communications conference for European practitioners, was also utilised to promote the call for participation. Institutions were also encouraged to supply quantitative data on any questions related to student communications within wider student experience surveys. Raw data was not required as long as institutions could provide overall results for each question and numbers of respondents.

Data was excluded if the research focused on students’ communications preferences or behaviours before they enrolled at their institution or after they graduated. Data was excluded if not from a UK-university to allow consistency of comparison in terms of educational contexts. All entries met the criterion of having taken place within the last ten years. Data was not excluded based on response rates, even though these did vary significantly across institutions. Instead, within the analysis, weighted averages have been provided that consider the variations in response rates. Qualitative question data was excluded from the analysis for scope feasibility purposes.

In total, 17 surveys were included from 10 different institutions all based in the UK (Figure 1). Some of these surveys could be described as polls as they had fewer questions and also often had lower response rates. However, for ease of understanding, all entries will

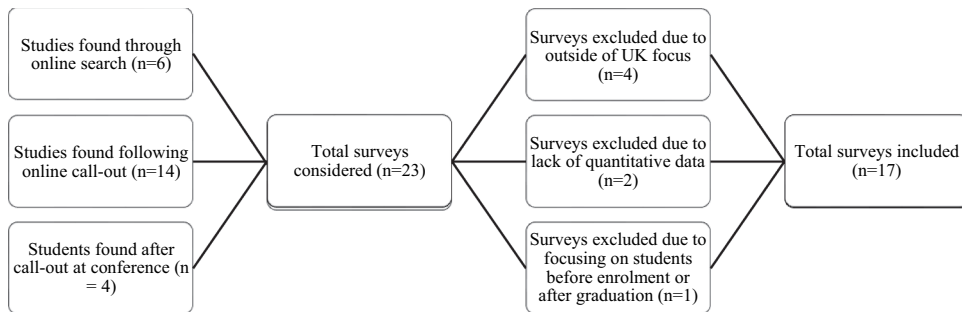


Figure 1. Survey search approach, as well as inclusion and exclusion stages.

be referred to as surveys. There were 20,134 respondents across these 17 surveys (mean = 1184, standard deviation = 639.1).

Once all surveys had been submitted for the meta-analysis, question sets from each survey were reviewed to evaluate where there was overlap for analysis. As expected, given the independence of how each survey was created, the exact wording of questions often varied; however, there was often significant overlap in the sentiment of what was being asked. For example, 'Based on your experiences as a [University name] student so far, how do you feel about the level of information you receive?' was seen as asking essentially the same thing as 'How much information do you feel you currently receive from the University?' and categorised accordingly. Findings were only included that used multiple data points from across multiple surveys. Seven question areas were found to exist with comparative wording, with each of these questions drawing data from at least four separate surveys:

- Which social media platforms do you regularly use?
- Do you follow or interact with University social media accounts on any of these platforms?
- How important is it to you that the University communicates to you about the following (topics)?
- How frequently do you check or use the following communications channels?
- Through which channel of communication would you prefer to receive information about the following topics?
- How much information do you feel you currently receive from the University?
- How satisfied are you with how the University currently communicates with you?

Qualitative questions were considered as part of a separate analysis and so are out of the scope of this study. Once such questions were excluded, there were a total of 273 questions across the 17 surveys submitted (Mean = 16.1, Standard Deviation = 14.2). In total 47 'data points' (i.e., questions from institutions) were utilised across the 7 question areas analysed within this meta-analysis, meaning that roughly 17% of all questions asked within the collective surveys were similar enough to be utilised in this analysis.

Results

This results section compiles findings from the meta-analysis that address the seven comparable question areas, as noted within the above Methodology section. This includes students' usage of channels, preferences around topics of content, and satisfaction with communications that they receive from their university.

Social media

On average, Facebook is the platform that most students used regularly (87%). However, its usage has slightly decreased over time. Usage of WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube has all increased over time (Figure 2 – data tables that underpin figures can be found in the appendices). TikTok only appeared as an option in the two surveys carried out since

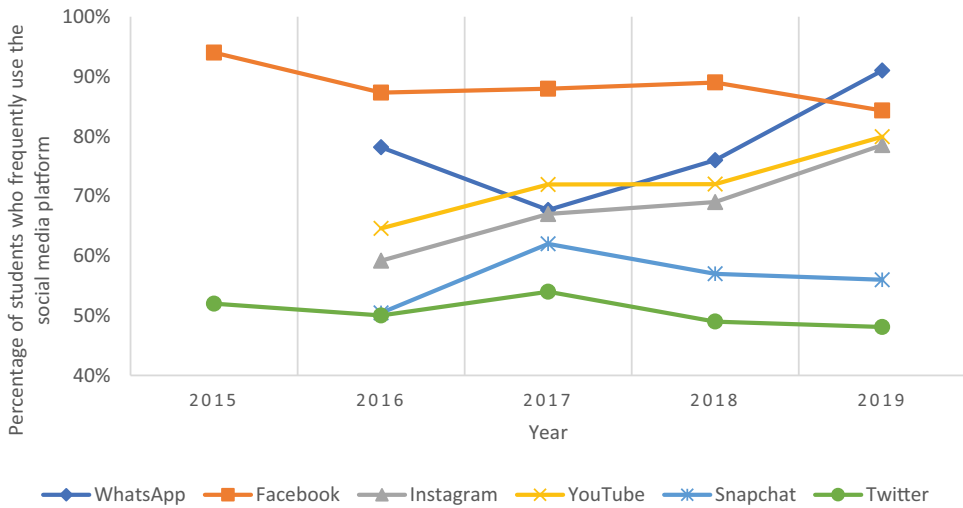


Figure 2. Changes in students' social media usage over time.

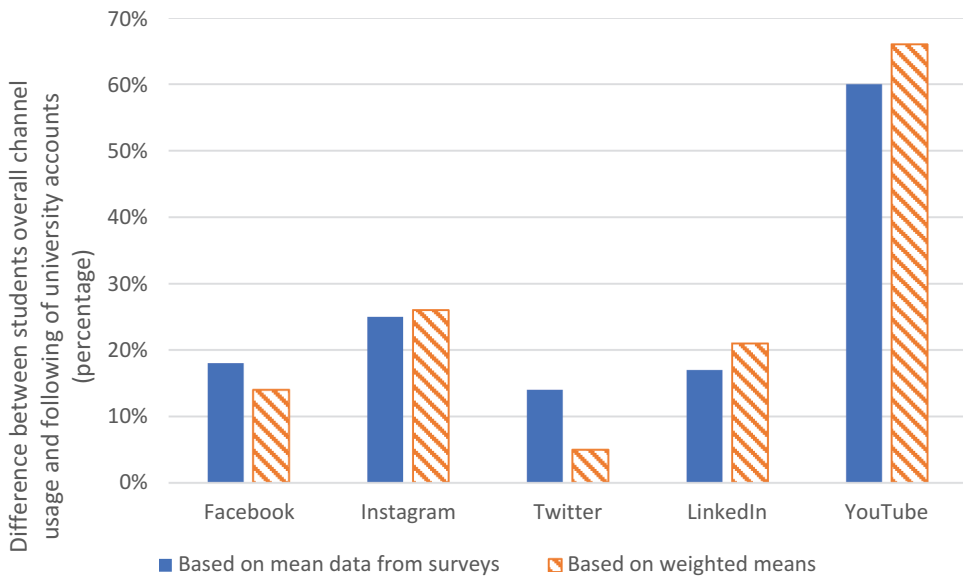


Figure 3. Percentage of students who use social media channels but do not follow university accounts on that platform.

2019 that have asked about social media usage, however neither was worded in a way that was comparable with other surveys.

Various surveys asked more specifically about whether students interacted with university accounts on social media (Figure 3). Unsurprisingly, given the higher overall level of usage, Facebook was the platform where students were most likely to follow or interact with institutional accounts. However, YouTube was the channel that had the biggest gap between general usage and usage to follow institutional accounts.

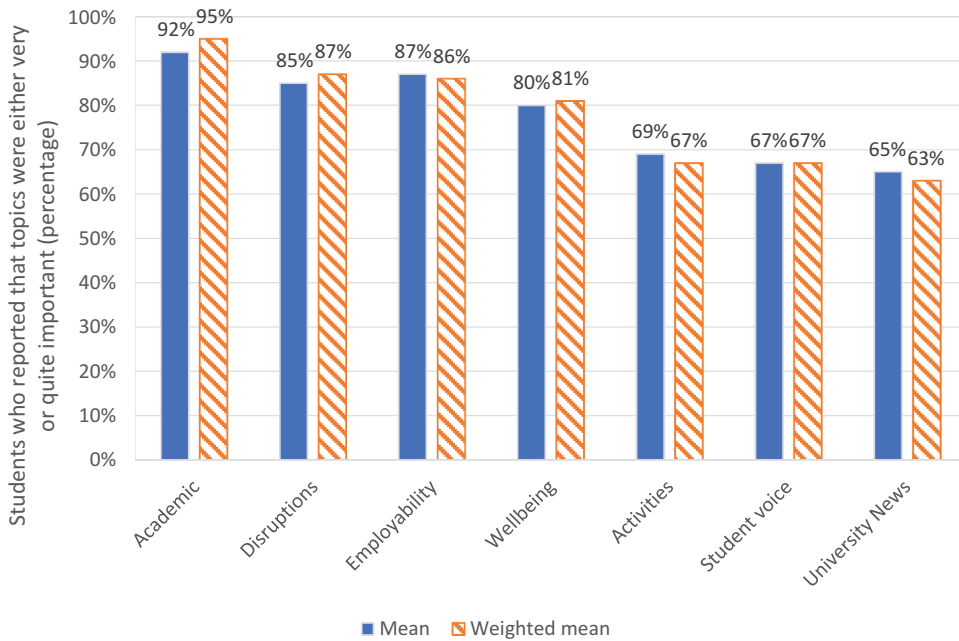


Figure 4. Proportion of students who said that the following topics of information were either very important or quite important.

Content priorities

Different surveys asked students what topics of information for student communications were most important to them. Whilst a majority of students felt that all topics were important, communications related to academic matters were seen as important by more students than any other topic (Figure 4). Some sorting was required for ‘categories of information’ as terminologies varied across the different questionnaires. Surveys often gave different examples to explain what was meant by certain categories of information. For example, in one survey ‘learning resources’ was given as an example of what was meant by ‘academic information’, which in another survey ‘assessment details’ was given as the example. These different examples may have had some influence on the levels of importance given by students.

Institutions have also asked questions around whether there are any specific types of content that are underpromoted to students. The format of these questions varied. Some provided a list of content topics and then asked students whether they have received ‘too much’, ‘about right amount’, or ‘too little’. Some asked about awareness levels by different topics. Some asked on certain topics whether students would like to see more information. Despite this variety in format, there were a few topics which consistently appeared at the top of such lists for what was ‘under-communicated’. These were: ‘Events and activities’, ‘Student societies and sports teams’, ‘University news and events’, ‘Accommodation and housing’, and ‘Wellbeing and support service information’.

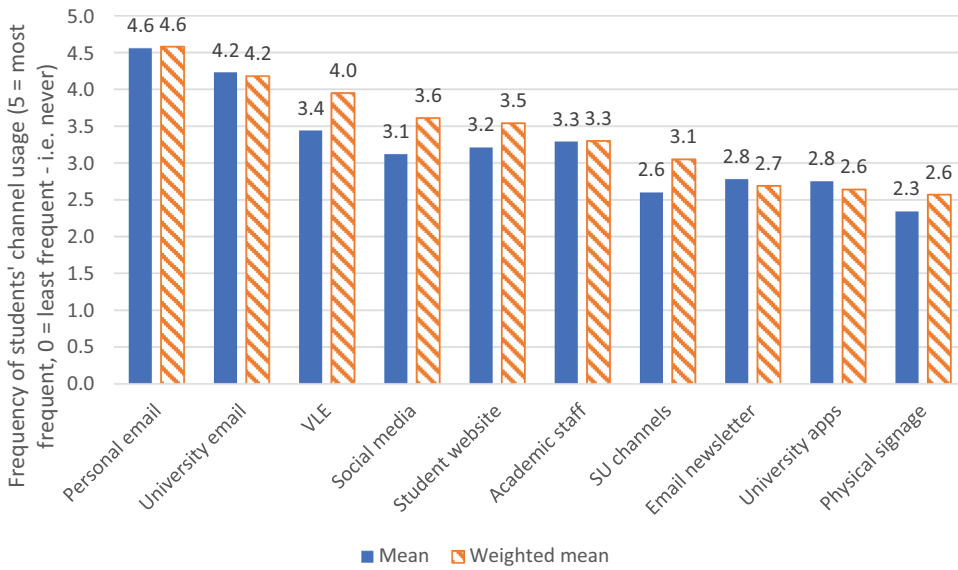


Figure 5. Students’ frequency of channel usage. VLE refers to virtual learning environment.

Channel usage and priorities

Most surveys asked students about how frequently they check or use different communications channels. The wording for these questions was very similar; however, some surveys used a different set of options for students to select with regard to frequency. This means that it is not possible to compare consistently across surveys in terms of absolute markers of frequency (such as ‘daily’) – instead, Figure 5 shows channel usage from ‘most frequent’ to ‘least frequent’.

For other institutions who asked students about channel usage in a way that could not be consistently analysed with the above data, the top three channels were consistently – student emails, text messaging and social media.

What types of channels do students prefer for certain types of content? Many institutions have used some form of this question as a way to help better segment content across their different available channels. Unsurprisingly, given the higher frequently usage of email by students, this appears as the most preferred channel for all but two categories of information (Table 1).

Overall sentiment

Some of the surveys included within the analysis had questions (often near the end) asking students for levels of satisfaction with current communications. Whilst this is hard to compare across institutions, as students will inherently be reflecting on local practice, there were enough institutions asking these questions to include the data within this meta-analysis.

Firstly, students were asked about whether they felt they received the right level of information from their institution. Promisingly, most students reported that they

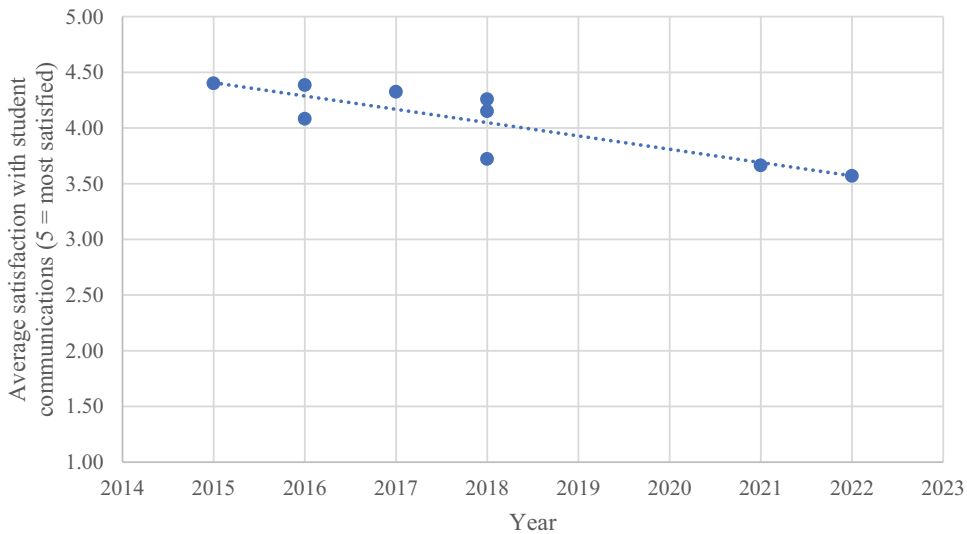


Figure 6. Changes over time in average student satisfaction with the communications that they receive from their university on a 5-point Likert scale (with 5 being most satisfied).

Table 1. Students’ channel preferences for receiving information about different subjects.

	Academic	Support	Events	News	Service disruption	Feedback	Average
1st choice	Email (31%)	Email (30%)	Social media (20%)	Social media (19%)	Email (29%)	Email (39%)	Email (28%)
2nd choice	VLE (24%)	Website (18%)	Email (19%)	Email/website (17%)	Text messaging (16%)	Website/VLE (10%)	Website (14%)
3rd choice	Student app (15%)	Student app (11%)	Website (17%)	Student app/physical signage (11%)	Website (15%)	Social media/student app (9%)	Student app/social media (11%)

received the right amount of information (75%). There were twice as many students across all surveys analysed who said that they received too little, compared to too much, information.

Furthermore, some institutions included a question about general satisfaction with communications practices (Figure 6). On a five-point Likert scale, the average score was 3.98, however this increased to 4.14 when weighted by survey response rates, as some surveys with smaller sample sizes depressed the unweighted average. The highest score was 4.40, and the lowest was 3.23. When plotting these results against the years in which the individual surveys took place, it shows a notable decrease in satisfaction over time.

Discussion

Previous research on current student communications has only ever focused on the potential of individual channels (Gilani et al., 2022; Sheldon, 2018; Wong et al., 2022) or how effective communications more generally can lead to positive student outcomes

(Miller & Bell, 2016; Naheen & Elsharnouby, 2021). This meta-analysis contributes to theory, policy and practice by evaluating how students perceive the value of different approaches to student communications, within the UK context. This discussion captures how integrated marketing theory could be utilised by student communications leaders.

Students' communications preferences and behaviours

This meta-analysis of students' usage of social media platforms aligns closely with findings from recent external research by the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) in the UK (UCAS, 2022), although there are some differences. Most notable is that the proportion of students who say that they use Facebook regularly was significantly lower in the UCAS data compared with this meta-analysis. The UCAS data is more current and only surveys new undergraduate students, which may explain the variance.

What is most notable in the social media analysis is the significant difference between the proportion of students who use YouTube and Instagram on a regular basis and those who follow University social media accounts on these platforms. These variances suggest that there is an opportunity for universities to better engage with their own students on YouTube and Instagram and thus improve positive associations with their University 'brand' (Folkvord et al., 2019; Sashittal & Jassawalla, 2021) and subsequent levels of engagement (Naheen & Elsharnouby, 2021).

Whilst it could be tempting to look at the results of the analysis around students' content priorities and reduce the amount of information communicated on the topics lower down the list, all topics were still considered to be important by a majority of students. This is especially important to consider given the curious overlap between the topics that fewer students said were important and the topics that students often reported as being under-communicated to them (such as 'Events and student activities' and 'University news and research'). Even topics not seen as important by all students are still important to some. One option to address this disparity in preferences could be to introduce opt-in or opt-out options for more frequent messages on certain topics to allow personalisation of communications, based on students' preferences (Le et al., 2019; Goodrich et al., 2020). However, this should be done with caution, as students' preferences and priorities may change over time. In particular, students may not realise the importance of knowing about wellbeing and support information until they need it in a crisis (Lister et al., 2023; Picton & Kahu, 2021).

Anecdotally, student communications practitioners often comment on how little students check their emails; however, within these student communications surveys, emails (both personal and University accounts) consistently came up as the channel that students self-reportedly checked most frequently. This is consistent with the findings of student communications surveys in the US context, where email is consistently the preferred channel of communication (Ammigan & Laws, 2018; California Stan State, 2022; Ohio State University, 2017; University of Waterloo, 2021). However, for regular email newsletters, which are often introduced to reduce the number of emails sent to students, readership is much less frequent. This analysis questions the rationale for reducing emails, given the small proportion of students who feel they receive 'too much' information.

Beyond students' usage of emails, there are a plethora of other channels which are being used frequently by students – again supporting the use of integrated marketing theory in the context of current student communications, where student communications functions utilise a mix of channels to reach students with important information. These findings support that approach and suggest that whilst email may still be the channel that students overall expect to be used the most, a wider channel-mix can reach students more frequently than using any one channel alone. Students want different types of messages through different channels, which necessitates universities utilising a wider channel-mix if they are to satisfy these preferences.

When looking at how frequently students say that they use certain channels of communication and which topics are most important to them, there is an interesting internal consistency. Students want the topics that they say are most important to them – such as 'Academic info' – to be communicated primarily via email, which is the channel they reportedly check most frequently.

Change in responses over time

Unfortunately, given the lack of comparable data, there were only two question areas (social media and overall satisfaction) where responses over time could be analysed. As already discussed above, the changes in social media usage as reported within student communications surveys mirrors similar results from UCAS (2022). The lack of comparable question data in any surveys since 2019 also makes it harder to assess how much students' behaviours have changed over the pandemic. The most recent surveys have reported usage of Tik Tok by students, but this data is not in a form comparable to pre-pandemic question sets.

The other area where some comparison was possible over time was the overall satisfaction questions. The downward trend in satisfaction is influenced by two data points from surveys that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. In these years, student satisfaction was down and there was a much higher proportion of students who felt that their experience was worse than expected compared to pre-pandemic years (Neves & Brown, 2022; Office for Students, 2021). These findings support Ogunmokun et al. (2022) argument for the relevance of Situational Crisis Communication Theory as a lens to emphasise the importance of student communications – and higher expectations upon universities – during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations for practice

- Consider strategies for social media platforms where student usage far exceeds University-level engagement (such as with YouTube and Instagram)
- Allow students to opt-in to receiving messages on topics not seen as important by as many students. This could be done through the introduction of a certain channel that focuses on such messages or through segmentation of messages via an existing platform
- Avoid relying too heavily on newsletters as the sole method of utilising email communications with students

- Utilise an integrated marketing approach to leverage a mix of communications channels, prioritised by frequency of usage by students and preferences for content for each channel
- Students' expectations of communications matter, so utilise 'meta-communications' – i.e., tell students how they will be communicated with throughout their studies

Limitations and future research

There are a number of limitations to consider for this meta-analysis. Due to the limited published data, many surveys included within this analysis came through invitation to participate by the author – which adds a subjective element to the data search, hindering reproducibility. It is likely that there are other completed surveys available that met the inclusion criteria, but these were not supplied within the window of the call-out and so could not be considered or included. Furthermore, there is a gap in data collected during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. A future analysis that evaluates how students' behaviours and preferences vary before and after the pandemic could be very useful, given the fast-changing expectations of students in this space (Wong et al., 2022).

Across most of the questions that were analysed, there was variation between the exact wording that was used, as is commonly found within meta-analyses (Lipsey & Wilson, 2001). Future research around student communications preferences could look into the responses to qualitative questions, as this was considered out of scope for this analysis.

Due to not having access to the raw data from each institution, more complex analysis methods had to be discarded in place of a simpler, top-level analysis. As this meant most analyses within the study were run at an institutional level, rather than student level, weighting of results was introduced to account for the variance in response rates. Whilst most institutions did include demographic questions within their surveys, not having access to raw survey data meant that demographic analyses could not be conducted as part of this meta-analysis. This is important to address in future research, given the varying communications needs of different students, such as international students (Gresham & Clayton, 2011).

It is also important to address the inherent limitations in surveying students about their communications preferences and behaviours. Firstly, the methods of promotion that institutions choose to encourage completion of such surveys will naturally bias the results (Bellman & Varan, 2012). There is no method that can avoid skewing such results completely, but institutions can try to mitigate this issue by promoting student communications surveys through a variety of channels, utilising an integrated marketing approach, as they would for their wider student communications efforts. Students are likely to undervalue how frequently they check or use some channels – such as posters and digital screens – where usage of such channels is relatively passive. For other channels students may consciously underreport their usage if they want to present a certain image of themselves to their university – for example lower social media usage (Simiyu et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2022). Furthermore, results in student communications surveys are likely to be biased by the channels of communication that students have been used to using through their studies so far. This expands on earlier research by Picton and Kahu (2021), by suggesting that student

communications can not only address students' existing expectations and behaviours, but change them over time, towards those that will support their successful completion of their degrees.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the policy and practice in higher education by analysing current students' communications preferences and behaviours through an integrated marketing approach. The results from this meta-analysis provide an opportunity for practitioners to move beyond anecdotal assumptions and towards a more data-driven understanding of students' needs. Students have clear preferences about the channels of communication that they wish to receive information through and the topics that are most important to them. Institutions that understand these preferences and are able to tailor their student communications approaches accordingly will be most likely to enhance how students engage with these approaches and thus contribute to successful student outcomes. Whilst institutions that have already conducted their own student communications surveys will have had access to such data, the findings can support evaluation efforts by providing industry-wide benchmarking.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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