

Communication channels consumption across awareness building, information search and school choice - perspectives from the VET sector in Kosovo

Prof. Ass. Dr. Art Shala¹, Prof. Assoc. Dr. Xhevat Sopi²⁺

¹ Faculty of Economy, University of Gjilan "Kadri Zeka", Albania

² Faculty of Economy, University of Gjilan "Kadri Zeka", Albania

Abstract. *This study aims at understanding the channels through which the students have become aware, the channels which they used to search for information on the schools, and the key factor that pushed them to apply for a given school. Through primary data research with n=788 respondents who are currently enrolled in VET across eight schools in Kosovo, the study has identified the critical importance of word-of-mouth through family & relatives, and friends in generating awareness for a given school and sharing information on the school offering. As critical elements to decide to apply for the school have been considered the applicants visit directly to the school to get informed more on the offering and the desire to get equipped with the given qualification the school offers. It is important to note the impact that parents have across all levels from brand awareness development to information search and decision making. The study provides pragmatic recommendations to school management on better optimizing their marketing efforts from a communication channel perspective, such as the importance of the open-days events of the school and the usage of the social media channels (especially Facebook) to communicate their offering.*

Keywords: Marketing, Education, School Choice, Communication channels

JEL Codes: M31, I25, M37

1 Introduction

Selecting a career and enrolling in a specific school is a good indicator of success for all young men and women. In principle students within a municipality in Kosovo, have free access through application to any of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) schools as well as gymnasiums. There is only the aspect of the quotas set per school which position the renowned schools to be filled first and have a pre-selection of students due to the higher demand than the supply. The good reputation schools reach their quota based on the selection of students who have success during elementary school and the scores on the matura exam (a standardized test which needs to be passed by any candidate in grade 9 to be eligible to go to high school). This phenomenon is common only to gymnasiums - as VET schools most commonly are not considered a successful career path (Gashi & Mojsoska-Blazevski, 2016), hence; mainly considered as the second alternative if the student can not get to a gymnasium. These schools must rely on the preferences and the willingness of the students to apply to the school. There are as well students who wishfully apply to VET schools as they perceive a good career potential, but this number is not satisfactory. With regards to career path post-VET secondary school, the student can end up in the labour market or at university studying a field that is not aligned to its VET qualification. This is all due to the fact of the nationwide matura standardized test at the end of the secondary school which is mandatory for any student from any school. The number of students enrolled in VET schools in 2016/17 accounted for a total of 42,600 students, whereas in 2020/21 the

⁺ Corresponding author email address : xhevat.sopi@uni-gjilan.net

total number of students enrolled amounted to 37,858 students. The difference between 2016/2017 from the academic year 2015/16 to 2020/21 has seen a decrease 11.3% when compared year over year (Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2021). On the other hand, the school network in Kosovo for VET is composed of 68 public VET providers. This number has not changed since 2016 and hence the role of marketing efforts in upkeeping or increasing the number of enrolled students has become a very important topic for VET schools' management.

The process during which a student applies for school, school choice, and school preference have been for a long time a focus of academia and practitioners. Previous studies have analyzed the system or school-related activities that influence school choice, such as the impact that school ranking publications have on shaping the decision to apply for a school studied by Ghazala & Montalvo (2012). School ranking publications were used as a metric to guide the information search process for the students and parents in the community to get informed about the educational offer. It was proved that parents who were educated happened to push their children to apply for highly ranked schools. This is supported as well by the findings from Hastings & Weinstein (2008). Such a ranking publication could serve as a reliable source of information to evaluate the school's offer, but such a platform or publication is non-existent within Kosovo. Therefore, students and parents must rely on their sources to find adequate information about the school. As well, as the role of parents in the information search for schools in an effort of pivotal impact on school choice (Burgess et al., 2015). The study analysed the role of parents in information search and the desire of pushing their children to apply for admission to a given school towards they had preferences. The impact of parents and family members on the career path has consistently been a key driver of impact throughout the information search and school selection process. These are areas that have been studied by previous researchers and therefore this study aims to support the area of research through a different prism; by understanding better from a communication channel point of view the source through which a student has become aware of the school has searched for information, and the factors that have pushed them to decide to apply for the school.

Many researchers have focused on understanding the decision-making process related to school choice for students, but no previous research has been concluded within the Kosovan context. Ho & Law (2020), analysed the impact of the 7Ps in marketing and the coordination of the 7Ps to make a more appealing offering to the market. This is an inverted looking of how the school shall design its marketing efforts. On the other hand, Hossler & Gallagher (1987) analyzed the process through which the students go through to decide to apply for a specific school. They proposed the three-phase choice model consisting of the first phase; the predisposition, which mainly focusing on the intentions to get equipped with a qualification; the search step, during which the student collects information on the institution and the qualification it; and the choice, which represents the key factors that have driven the decision to apply for a given educational offer. The steps foresee that the student needs to have a condition of preference towards attending a school.

According to Keller (2001), awareness refers to customers' ability to recall and recognize a certain brand. It is usually referred to as the first step before considering for consumption of a product or a service. Becoming aware of a brand does not only indicate knowing the brand but as well getting familiar with certain brand elements and the offering of the organization. In this sense, the study aims at understanding how the student became aware of the school. Understanding the "how" can lead to a rationalization of communication efforts by the school management to be more effective and have their school and offering renown within their context.

The information search process represents the in-depth assessment of the school offer (Ruijs & Oosterbeek, 2019; Hastings & Weinstein, 2008). The search is not only conducted by the student but as well

the school searches for potential students by promoting their offering and targeting students to lure them with an appealing offer (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Being aware that schools are communicating to students and parents and that the amount of channels through which they can consume information is various, it is interesting to understand the top 3 channels used to conduct the information search for the school. An important view with regards to channels relates to the engagement level that the audience has with the content communicated. Hence, any organization has channels that it pays for, channels that they own - which are directly controlled and monitored by the communication/marketing department, and channels which they have earned - or user-generated content. In this respect, the engagement level of the audience with the brand points out the close or distant relationship they feel towards the organization itself (Dickinson-Delaporte et al., 2018; Colicev et al., 2018)

Apart from searching for information on the market offers, the students come to the point when they have to choose the school or schools to apply. Hossler & Gallagher (1987) see this school choice phase as the identification of the key-value offering to which students see value and to which they want to apply to. Other studies as well support this complex process by analysing the variety of alternatives explored and the school choice success (Hastings & Weinstein, 2008); or willingness to search and choose the best alternative or opt for the most obvious choice (Lovenheim & Walsh, 2017). It is important to note that a key reason for applying is evident and this study aims to understand the key reason why students decided to join a specific school.

This study aims at understanding the channels through which the students have become aware, the channels which they used to search for information on the schools, and the key factor that pushed them to apply for a given school.

2 Methodology

This is a descriptive study that uses primary data collected and it does not aim to test or validate a previous model. The data was collected from grade 10 students - entry academic year for Vocational schools in Kosovo. We disseminated a total of 800 questionnaires, which were filled by 788 students - across eight schools located in six municipalities. The study was conducted from mid-September to end-October 2021, as the students enrolled in Grade 10 from the first week of September. In coordination with the school management, the authors have visited the schools and invited students to compile and submit the questionnaires directly on the online form. From the total number of students enrolled in Grade 10 in Kosovo (Sistemi Menaxhimit te informatave ne Arsim, 2021), the sample size is highly reliable at a confidence level of 95% with a margin of error of 3.438%. There is a total of 68 Public Vocational schools in Kosovo offering VET qualifications.

School selection was done through purposive sampling by depicting schools that were considered large (>1,500 students) and schools that were highly specialized in nature, usually schools that are small (<400 students). Large schools operate more than four departments in the areas of construction, engineering & technology, transportation, and tailoring - where a total n=584 respondents - across five schools has been achieved. Schools that are specialized operate less than two departments mainly in engineering & technology, hotels management, woodworking and automotive - a total sample of n=203 respondents / across three schools.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections, being the background part and the school selection process. In the Background section the collected data related to the current VET school the respondent attends, the profile of studies, the place where they currently live, information on siblings, parents' occupation, the GPA from Grade 9 and the Elementary school they attended. In the School selection process part, the data

collected related to awareness generation about the school, the channels students engaged with to conduct the information search, and the factors that made the student apply to the school.

As this study focuses on the process of understanding the channels through which students go through to become aware of the school, search for information and decide which school to select.

Considering that the study focuses mainly on the channels used by students to become aware and search for information on the school, we confirm that all the schools which were part of this study use the following marketing efforts to lure students with their offer: school website, school official Facebook page, school Instagram page, yearly open days event (which happens to be a municipality organized event for all schools), brochures and leaflets printed out for distribution, and visiting of several elementary schools to present their offering.

2.1 Sample description

The sample of 788 respondents represents a scattered sample across Kosovan schools, whereby there is a mix of departments and profiles which the students attend; 33.29% of the sample attend a Technology related profile, 16.26% attend an Engineering profile, 14.99% attend a Construction profile, 12.20% attend a Tailoring profile, 12.05% attend a Transportation profile, 5.46% attend a Hotels management profile, 2.54% attend a Wood Working profile, 2.03% attend a Retail profile and 1.14% attend an Automotive profile. With regards to the location of the VET school that they attend, 40.91% of the sample are based in Prishtina, 12.96% attend a school in Suhareke, 12.07% attend a school in Peje, 11.94% attend a school in Ferizaj, 11.56% attend a school in Vushtrri and 10.55% attend a school in Gjilan. In Prishtina, as it is the capital city and the largest city in the country the sample was collected by visiting three schools; whereas in the other municipalities one school per municipality was visited.

Considering that parents play a critical role in the career selected by 14-15 year-olds, the study aimed at understanding as well the parents' occupation. Regarding the Fathers' occupation of the respondents, in 20.44% of the sample, the father was engaged in the construction sector, 10.37% of the fathers were unemployed, 7.26% were drivers, 6.81% were entrepreneurs and security guards, respectively, 6.07% were salesman, 4.89% were managers in private sector organizations, 4.15% were engaged in agriculture, 3.11% were auto-mechanics, 2.67% were traders, 2.22% were engineers, 2.07% were electrical installers, and a total of 48 other professions represented a total of 23.11% of the sample. With regards to Mothers' occupation, 78.00% of the mothers were home-stay mothers with no specific occupation, 3.33% were engaged in hotel management, 2.46% were cleaners and teachers, respectively, 2.03% were hairdressers, 1.74% were saleswomen, 1.45% were tailors, and 23 other occupations accounted for the remaining 8.54% of the sample.

3 Results and Discussions

In this section, the results are split into three main categories, being: Awareness generation for the school, information search process, decision-making criteria that influenced the student to apply for the school.

3.1 Awareness generation for the school

On the set of questions relating to how the student first become aware of this VET school?, Family and relatives scored of highest frequency accounting for 45.13% of the cases, followed by Friends 37.63%, Visits from the VET school personnel to our primary school to present the school offer in 4.87% of the cases, school Facebook page sponsorships in 4.61% of the cases, school website 2.89% of the cases, Education

fairs 2.37% of the cases, Newspapers and magazines 1.18% of the cases, printed ads on brochures and leaflets 0.92% of the cases.

Table 1 How did you first hear about the school?

Alternatives	Frequency (cases)	Frequency (%)
Family and Relatives	343	45.13%
Friends	286	37.63%
Visit from the VET school personnel	37	4.87%
School Facebook Page	35	4.61%
School website	22	2.89%
Fairs	18	2.37%
Newspapers and Magazines	9	1.18%
Brochures and leaflets	7	0.92%
Basketball trainer	2	0.26%
"Busulla"	1	0.13%
Blank response	18	
Total	760	100.00%

As per the awareness-building activities related to the school brand recognition for the potential school to apply a discussion seems to happen mainly through word-of-mouth, within families, and in peer discussions. As well channels that are controlled by the school such as the visits from the VET school personnel or advertisements on social media have played a role to raise brand awareness of the school. Nevertheless, word-of-mouth marketing seems to be the key driver for brand awareness development. Following this, we wanted to understand if the respondents have had a family relative that has or is currently attending this particular school, so in the question Are you the first person in your immediate family to attend this school?; 54.46% of the cases the respondents pointed out that they were the first person in their immediate family to attend the school, whereas in 45.54% of the cases they confirmed having had or currently having a family member attending this particular school. For students which did not have an immediate family member who previously attend the school the key channel of becoming aware of the school was Friends for 43% of the cases; whereas the other group with a significant advantage was Family & Relatives for 50.90% of the cases.

3.2 Information search process

In the information search process, the aim is at understanding which channels have been utilized to source information on the school and the profiles before the application. In this respect, the split has been to prioritize which channel has been the most significant, denoted with 1st choice and followed-up with the 2nd and the 3rd choice. As represented in Table 2, respondents pointed out 983 at three different levels where they sourced information on the school. The most frequent channel of sourcing information on the school and its offer was through Friends which overall consisted of 31.2% of the cases. On the Other hand, this was as well the most frequent channel ranked as the primary source of information by 206 cases or 27.47% of the frequency as 1st selection of channels. Followed-up by Family and Relatives as a channel of sourcing information on the school and its offer, 292 respondents ranked this as the 2nd most frequent channel or 29.7% of the cases, As a primary selection, this was the most highly ranked consisting of 237 cases or 31.60% of the 1st selection of channels. School-owned channels such as a Facebook page of the school, the

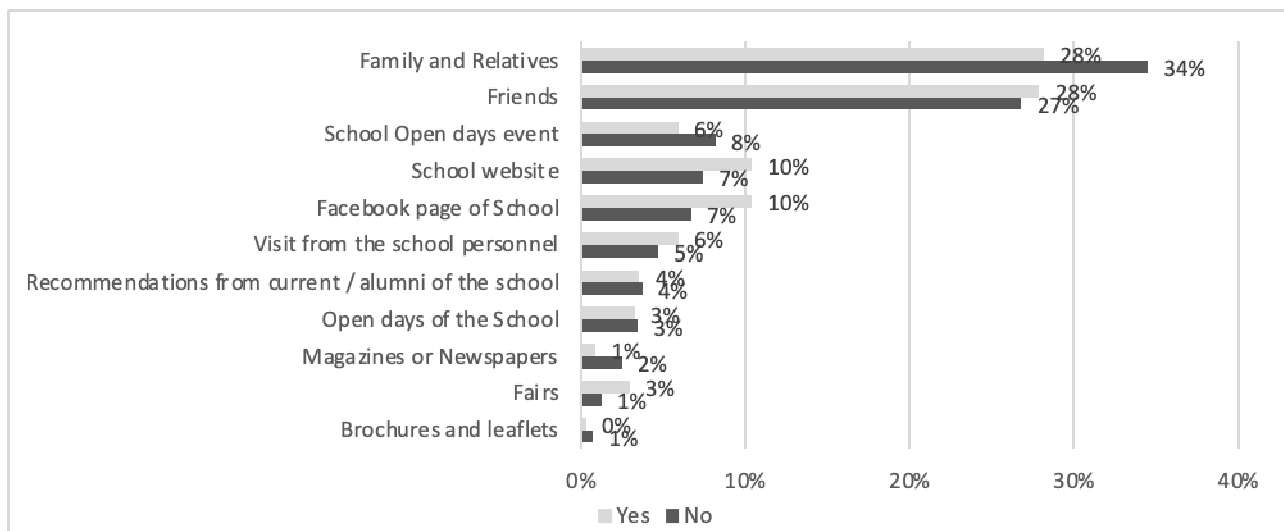
School WEBSITE, and School open days events were frequent channels used by respondents to source data on the school and its offer, 79 cases or 8.0%, 67 cases or 6.8%, and 63 cases or 6.4%, respectively.

Table 2 Channels used to conduct the information search process about the school

Channel	Frequency (%)	Frequency (cases)	1st selection	2nd selection	3rd selection
Friends	31.2%	307	206	68	33
Family and Relatives	29.7%	292	237	50	5
Facebook page of the School	8.0%	79	63	14	2
School website	6.8%	67	66	1	
School Open days event	6.4%	63	54	8	1
Recommendations from current / alumni of the school	5.2%	51	27	9	15
Visit from the school personnel	5.2%	51	39	9	3
Open days of the School	2.5%	25	25		
Fairs	1.9%	19	15	4	
Magazines or Newspapers	1.6%	16	13	3	
Brochures and leaflets	1.2%	12	4	6	2
Blank response (788 respondents)			38	616	727
Total	100.0%	983	750	172	61

In line with Ruijs & Oosterbeek (2019), the peer effect for students that enroll in the VET school is significant. Considering the age-sensitiveness of the applicant the parents play a crucial role in the school choice (Burgess et al., 2015). In this study, it is critical to understand that the students have mainly been restructuring sources of information mainly through Family members, Relatives, and Friends. On the other hand, the digital and social channels have scored highly considering the convenience to access the

Figure 1 Information search results / split by Are you the first person in your immediate family to attend the School



information and reviewing information on the school. Shields & Perutab (2018), have concluded on the remarkable impact that social media channels have the information search process for potential students. A special focus is on the usage of Facebook as Social media to search for information on the school.

Relating the answer received to the question "Are you the first person in your immediate family to attend the school?", presented in Figure 1, we notice a slight shift in the information search channels used when students were the first person in the family to attend the school or when they had a sibling or immediate family member attend the school before. The students that have had an immediate family member part of the school, have a higher tendency to use word-of-mouth channels such as Family & Relatives and Friends, 34% and 27% respectively. Or as cumulative at 61% of the cases, they have considered these channels as the primary way to search for information about the school. On the other hand, students that have not had an immediate family member part of the school, in a cumulative 56% of the cases have used "word-of-mouth" based conversations to search for information on the school such as discussions with Family & Relatives and Friends.

3.3 Decision-making criteria

This dimension focuses on the key factor which has convinced the respondent to apply to the school. In this regard from the reasons acquitted during the research, the authors clustered responses into eight groups. The following results are presented in Table 3. The most important factor that made the respondents to apply for the school was the Physical visit to the school to receive further information in 239 of the cases or 31.82%; followed by the interesting profiles being offered in 219 of the cases or 29.16%, and influence from parents to apply for the school/profile in 100 cases or 13.32%.

Table 3. The most important factor that made you decide to apply to this school

Dimensions	Frequency (cases)	Frequency (%)
My visit to the school to receive further information	239	31.82%
Interesting profiles offered	219	29.16%
Influence from parents	100	13.32%
Professional staff of the school	73	9.72%
Location of the School	73	9.72%
New infrastructure of the school	17	2.26%
Interaction with school personnel	15	2.00%
Interaction with current students	15	2.00%
Total	751	100.00%

The valuable output of this stage is the fact that students need to have direct contact with the school to best understand the value they can receive from the school. As this study targets specifically students, according to Oplatka (2007) parents have not seen the "open-house" type of marketing effort organized by the school as a critical element for success that supports the school choice process. In this study, students and parents were looked at as a whole rather than as separate entities. Albeit expecting that the open-days event would rather empower information-seeking it seems that it has had a direct impact on the decision to apply for the school. The role of parents in the decision-making process seems to be of high importance and according to Ghazala & Montalvo (2012), the influence from parents on school choice is of pivotal effect on

the quality of the school selected by the student. On the other hand, students have considered as well alternative schools within the municipality. On the question "have you applied for admission to other schools as well?"; 22.2% of the respondents acknowledge having applied to other schools as well; whereas 77.8% have only applied to a specific school.

4 Discussion & Conclusions

In this discussion part, we think it is of high importance to understand the journey of students from becoming aware to applying for the school from a communication channel perspective. Hence, it is critical to point out the difference between channels that are owned and controlled by the school and the channels which are curated by the general public (Lovett & Staelin, 2016). From this point of view, the study points out that the awareness-building process has mainly been invoked by channels that are user-generated or word-of-mouth through family & relatives, and friends. This could derive as well from the limited communication budget with which the public schools in Kosovo are faced. As well the information search process is mainly owned and curated on the willingness of the public to discuss and share opinions on the school with one another. A rise in the importance of school-owned channels such as their open-day events, a social media page and website is starting to bring in results. Whereas the channels which is owned and could be controlled by the school and that seem to be of high importance to support the decision for application of the student to the school is the physical visit of the student to explore the school offers. The use of new advanced technologies such as Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality, and Mixed Reality nowadays are becoming more cost-effective and could be used as tools to enhance the experience between the applicant and the school (Pînzariu, 2020).

This study has specifically targeted already enrolled students in the VET schools to analyse the type of channels they have utilized to become aware of the school, search for the school offering, and the key differentiating factors that have made them apply to the school. An interesting area for future research is to understand the type of content which appeals to students. This is an area that could contribute furthermore to the efficiency and effectiveness of marketing efforts from the school.

The main and the most relevant channel either at generating brand awareness or information search remains the work-of-mouth that students have with their Parents & Family Relatives and Friends. Hence, when planning communication activities to generate awareness and communicate the benefits of the school, the management of the school shall carefully target not only the students but as well their parents.

With regards to the key factor which drives the decision to apply for the school, it is evident that students opted to visit in-person the school and create a more tangible perception about the school as well as their personal desire for the qualification portfolio offered by the school. Only at the third level was considered the influence of their parents to apply for the school.

During the search process, the school management is recommended to carefully review the audience engagement level by mapping the earned media to best assess the sentiments and the user-generated content. On the other side, we have noticed that the owned media - the channels moderated and controlled by the organization have proved to be a consistent performer when it comes to informing the audience on the school offering. This means that marketing initiatives such as school open day events, the school website, and the school Facebook page have proved to be significant channels that are utilized by students during their search process. Coordination of activities to deploy an open-days event seems of relatively high importance as a factor that has a direct impact not only on information search but rather on the decision to apply for the school. On this matter, the school management shall ensure the funnel development (the higher attendance in

such an event might bring in a higher number of applicants) which would directly impact the number of students applying at the school.

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