THE INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHOICE OF COURSE OF STUDY ABROAD AND PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Appendices

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this thesis:

AACSB – Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business

ABS – Association of Business Schools

AMBA – Association of MBAs

EFMD – European Foundation for Management Development

EQUIS – European Quality Improvement System

FCO – The Foreign and Commonwealth Office

GMAT – Graduate Management Admission Test

HE – Higher Education

IELTS – International English Language Testing System

IS – Information Systems

ISAC – The Information Systems work & Analysis of Change

IFIP – The International Federation for Information Processing

MBA – Master of Business Administration

OECD – Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

OSNs – Online Social Networks

QS TopMBA – Quacquarelli Symonds TopMBA

TOEFL – Test Of English as a Foreign Language

UCAS – The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

UKBA – The UK Border Agency

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Abstract

This thesis examines how the choice of course of study abroad interrelates with participation in online social networks, and provides an application of semiotics to research in choice and decision making in higher education and information systems research. The study itself is justified by the increasing need to consider students' choice of course of study as a separate phenomenon from their choice of institution or host country. Alongside the adoption of a more nuanced view of student selection, the author also recognises the need to understand the role of online social networks within the decision-making process for selecting higher education courses. This work adopts an interpretivist philosophy and utilises a comparative case study method, drawing upon semi-structured interviews with international MBA students in addition to relevant documentation. The thesis finds a strong interplay between the choice of course of study abroad and participation in online social networks.

Chapter 1
Introduction to the Research

1.1 Introduction

This thesis examines how the choice of course of study abroad interrelates with participation in online social networks. This study is justified by the need to examine the choice of a course of study as a phenomenon distinct from the choices of institution and host country (Maringe, 2006), and the need to understand the role of online social networks in the process of decision-making about higher education from the perspectives of the consumers of higher education services (Nyangau and Bado, 2012). Furthermore, this study provides an applicant of semiotics to research in choice and decision making in higher education and information systems research. Research in higher education to date has tended to focus on the application of semiotics in the area of teaching and learning (e.g. Bayne, 2008; Cunningham, 1984; Groisman *et al.*, 1991; Gwyn-Paquette, 2001; Lemke, 1984, 1989; Presmeg, 1998; Ryan., 2011), and less attention has been paid to use of semiotics in the area of choice and decision-making in higher education. Moreover, calls have been made for the application of semiotics to the endeavour of understanding information systems (Clarke, 1992, 2001a).

This chapter is structured in the following manner: The motivation for the research is discussed in section 1.2, followed by the research question in section 1.3. The research problem is identified and contextualized in section 1.4, followed by the research aims and objectives in sections 1.5 and 1.6. This study will contribute to knowledge and practice in a number of ways. The research contributions to knowledge and practice are discussed in section 1.7. Finally, the structure of the thesis is presented in section 1.8 using chapter headings and summaries.

1.2 The motivation for the research

The motivation for the research arose from my own experience as an international student in the UK. In 2008, I created a Facebook page to connect full-time MBA students at the University of Salford. Within the first four months, this Facebook page had reached 160 members including past and current students, higher education (hereinafter referred to as 'HE') aspirants and applicants interested in enrolling on the Salford MBA and members of

staff. I was particularly interested to have been contacted by several international HE aspirants and applicants from different countries enquiring about the full-time MBA course offered at the University of Salford. Some of these countries, including Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Japan have never had a strong student presence in UK HE. It was interesting to explain how the choice of course of study abroad interrelates with participation in online social networks (hereinafter referred to as 'OSNs'). In the context of this research, HE aspirants are those who have an interest in studying but have not yet taken any active steps other than conducting general research, which distinguishes them from the general public. HE Applicants are those who have applied to one or more institutions but who have not yet satisfied entry conditions and are not yet an enrolled student (or registrant) of an institution.

My personal knowledge of the full-time MBA and universities offering this course in the UK was the basis for selecting this course as the case study. However, the intention of this research is to provide a set of findings and conclusions that could equally apply to any HE course in the UK, and potentially beyond. The selection of the UK full-time MBA as the case study was also motivated by the secondary data collected from Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) TopMBA, which is the leading global career and education network for ambitious professionals looking to further both their personal and professional development. A comparison of QS TopMBA surveys from 2008 to 2012 reveals an increasing trend in use of OSNs during the MBA selection process (

Figure 1). The list of OSNs presented in QS TopMBA surveys is not fully comprehensive but recognizes the most popular OSNs.

Figure 1 Use of online social networks during the MBA selection process. Raw data from QS TopMBA 2008-2012 surveys, data collation and analysis by the author.

2
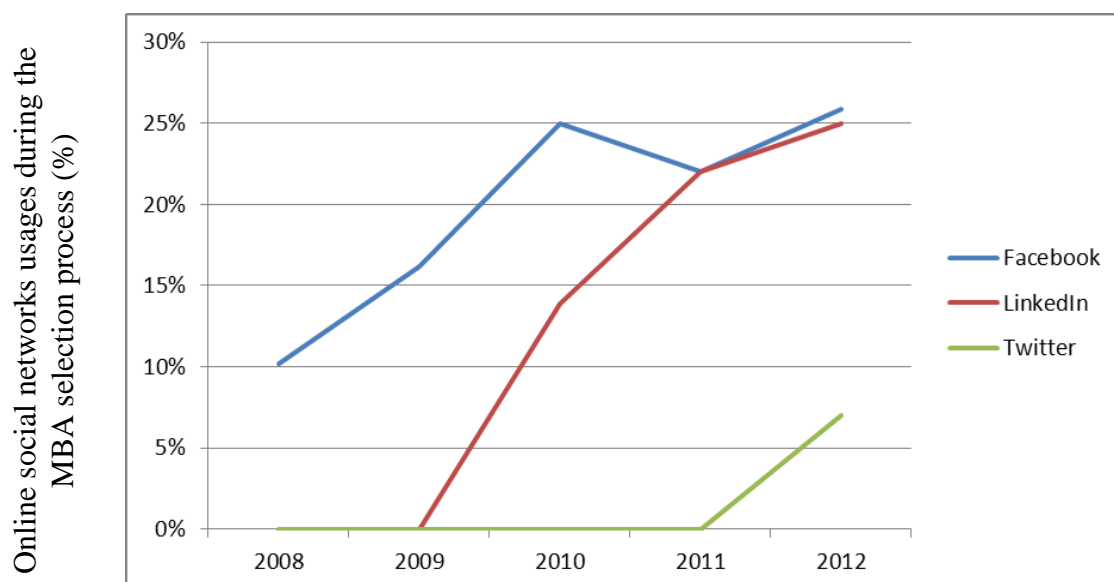
1.3 Research question

Leading on from both my motivations and the gaps identified, this study will be centred on the following key question:

- How does the choice of course of study abroad interrelate with participation in online social networks?

1.4 Research problem overview

The research problem is identified and contextualized in this section, which is divided into four parts. Part one outlines the recent trends in international student mobility and the need for HE institutions to market themselves in a climate of international competition. Parts two and three highlight the need to examine the choice of course of study as a phenomenon distinct from the choices of institution and host country, and the need to find out the role that OSNs may play in course selection decisions of HE aspirants and applicants. Part four provides an overview of the application of semiotics in educational research and information systems (hereinafter referred to as 'IS') research.

1.4.1 Trends in international student mobility

The HE market is well established as a global phenomenon (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006), and around the world individuals have more options for HE studies than they ever had before (Kramer and Easton, 2007). In the context of increasing competition for home-based and overseas students, HE institutions now recognise that they need to market themselves in a climate of international competition (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). Data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2012 survey reveals that a contemporary environment of budgetary cuts and increasing competition is forcing many institutions to become more strategic and deliberate in their recruitment efforts. Effective international recruitment practices are dependent more than ever on a deep understanding of student mobility patterns and decision-making processes (OECD, 2012).

The number of students travelling internationally for educational purposes continues to grow (OECD, 2012). Over the past three decades, the number of students enrolled outside their country of citizenship has risen dramatically, from 0.8 million worldwide in 1975 to 4.1 million in 2010, more than a fivefold increase (OECD, 2012). The rise in the number of students enrolled abroad since 1975 stems from various factors, from an interest in

promoting academic, cultural, social and political ties between countries, to a substantial increase in global access to tertiary education, to reduced transportation costs (OECD, 2012). The internationalisation of labour markets for highly skilled individuals has also given people an incentive to gain international experience as part of their studies. The increase in the number of foreign students can be associated with the increase in tertiary enrolment worldwide. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 177 million students participated in formal tertiary education around the world in 2010, an increase of 77 million students since 2000, or 77% (UNESCO, 2011). During this same period, the number of foreign students increased from 2.1 to 4.1 million students, an increase of 99%. Consequently, the proportion of overseas students amongst tertiary students grew by more than 10% between 2000 and 2010 (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Long-term growth in the number of students enrolled outside their country of citizenship, 1975-2010 in millions. Raw data from OECD and UNESCO Institute of Statistics, data collation and analysis by the author.
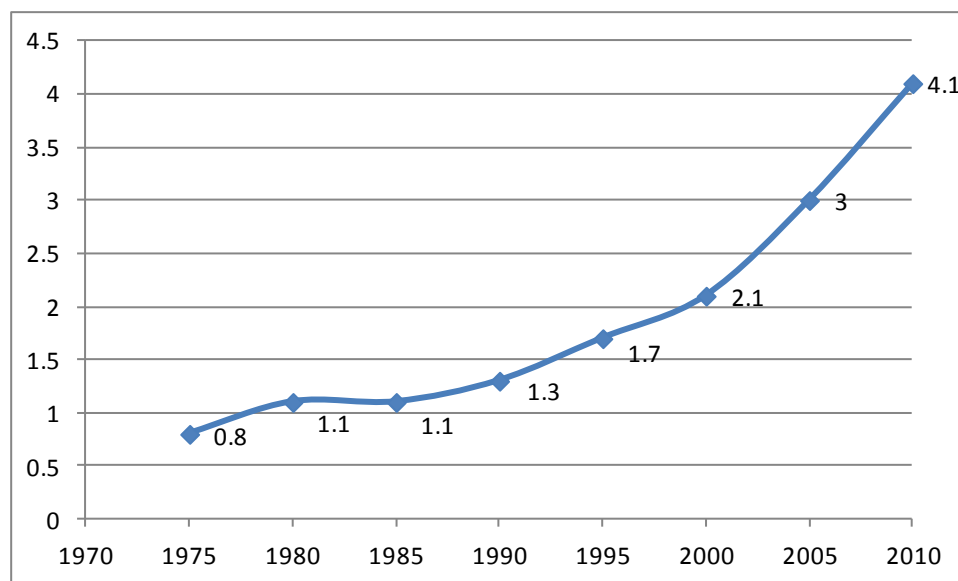
1.4.2 Choice and decision-making research in higher education

A considerable amount of literature has been published on choice and decision-making in HE. The decision to enter HE is a complex process (Litten, 1982; Stein *et al.*, 2009). Studies of influences on the choices of HE were initially conducted in the 1970s and 1980s by researchers including Miller and Radner (1975), Hanson and Litten (1982), Chapman (1984) and Kotler and Fox (1985). The decision to enter HE may be regarded as a multi-stage process involving a series of decisions finally resulting in enrolment in a course

(Cosser, 2009; Hossler *et al.*, 1989). Different theoretical models have been developed by scholars over the last decade to capture these complex decision-making processes (e.g. Arambewela and Hall, 2006; Cubillo *et al.*, 2006; Gatfield and Chen, 2006; Kitsantas, 2004; Srikatanyoo and Gnoth, 2002).

According to Maringe (2006, p. 469), "broadly, there are three levels at which choice and decision-making research in HE has been conducted. First is the global level, which shows why individuals select to study abroad, second is the national level where individuals' choice of university is the main focus. The third level which has received relatively little attention is the choice of course of study". Research to date has focused largely on the choice of institution (e.g. Price *et al.*, 2003; Soutar and Turner, 2002; Whitehead *et al.*, 2006) and host country (e.g. Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Shanka *et al.*, 2005), and less attention has been paid to the choice of course of study as a separate phenomenon. The current research investigates the choice of course of study as a phenomenon distinct from the choices of institution and host country.

1.4.3 The role of Information Systems in choice and decision-making in higher education

IS are becoming ubiquitous in people's daily life (Pereira, 2010). Pereira (2010, p. 1) states that "nowadays more and more people rely on IS to help them in their daily life. Whether for work or entertainment, IS are gaining an increasingly ubiquitous presence in people's life". As a result, there is a critical need for researchers and practitioners to learn how to increase the benefits obtained from IS (Burton-Jones and Grange, 2012). Intuitively, much of the benefits stem from how effectively IS are used (Burton-Jones and Grange, 2012). It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the most heavily studied topic in IS research has been when and why people use IS (Burton-Jones and Grange, 2012; Venkatesh *et al.*, 2003). However, despite a great deal of research on when and why IS are used, very little research has examined the role of modern IS, such as OSNs, in choice and decision making in higher education. The intersection of OSNs and choice and decision making in higher education represents a promising space for future IS research.

IS researchers have demonstrated considerable interest in measuring personal intentions in traditional IS adoption where the usage experience does not depend on other users (Davis

5

et al., 1989). In OSNs in contrast, social interaction and connection is the objective (Cheung *et al.*, 2011). The digital innovations of the last decade have made it possible for audiences to talk back and talk to each other effortlessly (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009). Indeed, the rise of OSNs has fundamentally changed the ways in which people communicate with each other, how they gather information about products, and how they obtain and consume them (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Beer and Burrows (2007) refer to OSNs as "a new rhetoric of democratisation", pointing to the way in which they are constructed rather than conceptualising OSNs as a democratising force. From this perspective, OSNs present opportunities for our thoughts to be heard, our videos to be seen, and our music to be listened to (Beer and Burrows, 2007).

Studies of information seeking have found that most people prefer informal, personal forms of information to formal information and this also holds true for HE aspirants and applicants (O'Connor and Lundstrom, 2011). According to Fagerstrøm and Ghinea (2013), OSNs provide a significant opportunity for HE institutions to exchange the notion of customers as passive with a view of them as active agents, in which HE aspirants and applicants are invited to use their own initiative rather than simply reacting to predetermined marketing activities. Nyangau and Bado (2012) argue that most research on the usefulness of OSNs has been conducted from an administrative perspective, from the standpoint of admissions officers. However, it is important to understand the role of OSNs in the process of decision-making about HE from the perspectives of the consumers of HE services (Nyangau and Bado, 2012). The current research contributes to the fields of IS and choice and decision making in HE by providing both researchers and practitioners with insight into the role of OSNs in course selection from the perspectives of the consumers of HE services.

1.4.4 Application of semiotics in educational research and information systems research

Meaning in the commercial world is essential in the sense that marketers are continually seeking to strategically facilitate meanings that contribute positively to brand image, likelihood of purchase and customer satisfaction (Mick *et al.*, 2004). For their part, consumers are continually acquiring, using and sharing experiences in accordance with the meanings they attribute to products, adverts and purchase sites (Mick *et al.*, 2004). Over

the last two decades, marketing and consumer researchers have taken a more intense interest in meaning (Belk, 2002) and in this respect a number of studies have, to varying degrees, been based on semiotics (e.g. Holbrook and Hirschman, 1993; McQuarrie and Mick, 1999; Nöth, 1988; Oswald, 2012; Thompson and Haytko, 1997; Umiker-Sebeok, 1987). Research in HE to date has tended to focus on the application of semiotics in the area of teaching and learning (e.g. Bayne, 2008; Cunningham, 1984; Groisman *et al.*, 1991; Gwyn-Paquette, 2001; Lemke, 1984, 1989; Presmeg, 1998; Ryan., 2011), and less attention has been paid to use of semiotics in the area of choice and decision-making. Moreover, calls have been made for the use of semiotics to better understand IS (Clarke, 1992, 2001a). Semiotics has been mentioned in a number of IS papers (e.g. Land, 1985; Rzevski, 1985; Tully, 1985) as being relevant to the IS discipline. There is considerable debate about what constitute the core criteria that define semiotics, and this appears to discourage many IS scholars and practitioners from applying semiotic approaches, even though some acknowledge its potential relevance (Clarke, 1992). The fundamental nature of semiotics, its multiple theoretical traditions and its diverse applications may account for the slow infusion of semiotics into the IS discipline (Clarke, 1992). However, "the transdisciplinary nature of semiotics makes it eminently suitable for the study of IS precisely because it [semiotics] is concerned with examining the ways meanings are made" (Clarke, 1992, p. 67). Clarke (1992) argues that:

> "...semiotics examines the processes of the production and consumption of meanings and their underlying mechanisms through the analysis of patterns or signs and how they articulate and inform the meanings attached to self and others. Semiotics also proposes that rules or social conventions govern the choices and constraints that determine expressions of meaning in specific cultural, social, economic and historical contexts. The study of the production of meanings and values, that is the way these are institutionalized within organizations and become constitutive of our own subjectivity, is highly relevant to the information systems discipline."
>
> (Clarke, 1992, p. 67)

This study contributes to the fields of IS and choice and decision making in HE by illustrating how semiotics can be utilised to analyse the make-up and the interrelationships which constitute a given phenomenon. Semiotics can be used in the analysis of the development, use and application of IS in organizational, institutional and social contexts and their influence in these contexts. Semiotics can be also used to analyse the popularity

of educational services among consumers of HE services. This can help institutions in designing, branding and positioning their educational services.

1.5 Research aims

This study seeks to achieve a number of primary and secondary aims. The primary aim is:

- To explain how the choice of course of study abroad interrelates with participation in online social networks.

The secondary aim is:

- To provide an application of semiotics to research in choice and decision making in higher education and information systems research.

1.6 Research objectives

In order to answer the research question in section 1.3 and achieve the aims of the research, three research objectives were formulated. The research objectives derived from a review of relevant literature and semiotic concepts. Based on semiotic concepts, this research introduces the concept of 'course identity' as a semiotic sign system, and utilises the semiotic model of course identity as a theoretical framework to analyse the interrelationship between selection of a course abroad and participation in OSNs, and also to guide the fieldwork and subsequent analysis. The rationale behind the research objectives is discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

The objectives were to obtain sufficient data in order to:

- Define the 'paradigmatic course identity'.

  This objective enabled identification of the sources of information that international HE aspirants and applicants use during the course selection process, and to discover whether OSNs are among these sources. This objective also helped to reveal the core factors influencing selection of a course abroad. Results from this objective contributed to the discussion of findings, particularly discussions surrounding the significance of online and offline sources on course selection decisions and the level of influence of OSNs on final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources.

- Define the 'syntagmatic course identity' as observed through online social networks.

  This objective contributed to an understanding of the popularity of using OSNs as part of the course selection process, the stages at which OSNs are used during the course selection process, OSNs most commonly used during the course selection process, information-gathering methods employed when using OSNs, what information is available on OSNs, information needed most from OSNs during the course selection process, and the benefits and downsides of using OSNs for individuals' course selection decisions.

- Compare and contrast the levels of influence of 'paradigmatic course identity' and 'syntagmatic course identity' on the 'perceived course identity'.

  This objective supported comparison of the level of influence of OSNs on final course selection decisions with other sources of information available during the course selection process.

The main sources of information used in this study are interviews, complemented by reports collected from QS TopMBA, Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAT), Association of MBAs (AMBA), Ignite Social Media and eMarketer. The primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 33 international students studying on three distinct MBA courses in the UK. It was felt that international students could be expected to have a full understanding of the course selection process as prior to becoming a student an individual would pass through 'aspirant' and 'applicant' stages. Each of the three research objectives apply independently to each of the three participating courses, however, the intention of this research is to provide a set of findings and conclusions that could equally apply to any HE course in the UK, and potentially beyond.

1.7 Contributions to knowledge and practice

This study contributes to knowledge and practice in the following ways:

- This study contributes to the field of IS in two areas. First, despite a great deal of research on when and why IS are used (e.g. Burton-Jones and Grange, 2012; Venkatesh *et al.*, 2003), very little research has examined the role of modern IS,

such as OSNs, in choice and decision making in higher education. The intersection of OSNs and choice and decision making in higher education represents a promising space for future IS research. Second, calls have been made for the use of semiotics to better understand IS (e.g. Clarke, 1992, 2001a). This study illustrates how semiotics can be utilised to analyse the make-up and the interrelationships which constitute a given phenomenon. Semiotics can be used in the analysis of the development, use and application of IS in organizational, institutional and social contexts and their influence in these contexts.

- This study contributes to the field of choice and decision making in HE in three areas. First, research in choice and decision making in HE has focused largely on the choice of institution (e.g. Price et al., 2003; Soutar and Turner, 2002; Whitehead et al., 2006) and host country (e.g. Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Shanka et al., 2005), and less attention has been paid to the choice of course of study as a separate phenomenon. This study focuses on the choice of course of study as a phenomenon distinct from the choices of institution and host country. Second, research in HE to date has tended to focus on the application of semiotics in the area of teaching and learning (e.g. Bayne, 2008; Cunningham, 1984; Groisman et al., 1991; Gwyn-Paquette, 2001; Lemke, 1984, 1989; Presmeg, 1998; Ryan., 2011), and less attention has been paid to use of semiotics in the area of choice and decision-making. This study illustrates how semiotics can be utilised to analyse the make-up and the interrelationships which constitute a given phenomenon. Semiotics can be used to analyse the popularity of educational services among consumers of HE services. Third, this study introduces the concept of '*course identity*' and uses this concept as a theoretical framework to analyse the interrelationship between selection of a course abroad and participation in OSNs. The introduction of the concept of '*course identity*' is a direct contribution to knowledge, while also providing a theoretical framework which enables practitioners and scholars to acknowledge the externally oriented aspects of the course in the same way that teaching and learning represent the internal practices and theorisation of the course.

- This study also contributes to the field of semiotics. This study utilises Peircean semiotics in conjunction with Saussurean semiotics to analyse the phenomenon under study. Utilising Peircean Semiotics in conjunction with Saussurean semiotics in studying semiotic sign systems is a direct contribution to knowledge.

The research contributions to knowledge and practice are discussed in detail in section 7.5. The following section provides an outline of the remaining chapters of this thesis in order to introduce the reader to the structure of this research project.

1.8 Thesis structure

The remaining chapters of this thesis are organized as follows:

Chapter 2 'Course identity' as a semiotic sign system

This chapter introduces the concept of course identity as a semiotic sign system. It begins with a review of Saussurean and Peircean semiotic traditions. Following this, a triadic model of the sign will be developed that will act as a basis for introducing the concept of course identity. The semiotic model of course identity will be used as a theoretical framework to analyse the interrelationship between selection of a course abroad and participation in OSNs, and also to guide the fieldwork and subsequent analysis. The chapter concludes with discussion of a conceptual framework that will be used at the beginning of succeeding chapters to put the chapters in context and highlight the specific issues addressed therein. This chapter is aimed particularly at researchers in the areas of educational research, IS and social semiotics.

Chapter 3 Existing bodies of knowledge

This chapter discusses the relevant literature and secondary data drawn from various sources, which provides a context for the research project. Guided by the research question and the semiotic model of course identity developed in Chapter 2, the focus of this review is specific to choice and decision-making in HE and to OSNs. The literature and secondary data discussed in this chapter contribute to the analysis of the research data and the discussion of findings.

Chapter 4 Research design and implementation

This chapter appraises the main philosophical assumptions, research methods and data collection techniques. Based on the given research setting, the research question and my epistemological viewpoint, decisions made in relation to the research process are explained and justified. Following this, the chapter provides a detailed account of the way in which this research was implemented in practice.

Chapter 5 Analysis

This chapter presents the analysis of the findings. It begins with a detailed discussion of the approach to analysis adopted in this research followed by presentation of the analysis of the data from the pilot study and the main study. This chapter is aimed particularly at researchers interested in semiotic analysis of texts.

Chapter 6 Findings and discussion

This chapter is concerned with answering the research question for this study. It presents and discusses the findings that emerged from the data analysis and how these relate to the literature. Findings that support the literature are identified, as are differences, enabling the current work to contribute new insights. This chapter provides both researchers and practitioners with insights into how the choice of course of study abroad interrelates with participation in OSNs. The findings suggest several courses of action for education marketers and policy makers who wish to invest in their student recruitment strategies.

Chapter 7 Conclusions

This chapter presents the conclusions of the study. It reviews the research aims and objectives, and summarises the overall findings of the research. This chapter is also concerned with the principles used to guide the conduct and evaluation of the study. The thesis closes by highlighting the limitations of the study, future study directions and the overall conclusions of the study.

1.9 Summary

This chapter has laid the foundation for this research. It has explained the research question that forms the foundation of the study. The aims and research objectives have been

introduced and contributions to the body of knowledge briefly discussed. The next chapter will discuss the theoretical framework of the study.

Chapter 2
'Course Identity' as a Semiotic Sign System

2.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the concept of 'course identity' as a semiotic sign system. The semiotic model of course identity is used as a theoretical framework to study and analyse the interrelationship between selection of a course abroad and participation in OSNs, and also to guide the fieldwork and subsequent analysis. Semiotics is a huge field, and therefore no treatment of it can claim to be comprehensive (Chandler, 2007). There are divergent schools of thought in semiotics, and there is remarkably little consensus among contemporary theorists regarding the scope of the subject, core concepts or methodological tools (Chandler, 2007).

This chapter concludes with a conceptual framework that will be used at the beginning of succeeding chapters to put the chapters in context and highlight the specific issues addressed therein. This will also provide the reader with a holistic view of the research process and how the individual sections relate to each other. The following section provides an overview of the field of semiotics.

2.2 Semiotics defined

The shortest definition of semiotics is that it is "the science of signs" (Silverman, 2011) or "the study of signs" (Chandler, 2007). "Signs take the form of words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, acts or objects, but such things have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we invest them with meaning" (Chandler, 2007, p. 13). "Anything can be a 'sign' as long as someone interprets it as 'signifying' something-referring to or standing for something other than itself" (Chandler, 2007, p. 13). We interpret things as signs largely unconsciously by relating them to familiar systems of conventions. It is this meaningful use of signs which is at the heart of the concerns of semiotics (Chandler, 2007). In his book Foundations of the Theory of Signs, Charles Morris wrote: "human civilization is dependent upon signs and systems of signs, and the human mind is inseparable from the functioning of signs-if indeed mentality is not to be identified with

such functioning" (Morris, 1938, p. 1). According to Morris, "it doesn't seem fantastic to believe that the concept of sign may prove as fundamental to the sciences of man as the concept of atom has been for the physical sciences or the concept of cell for the biological sciences" (Morris, 1938, p. 42). Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure are regarded as the co-founders of semiotics (Chandler, 2007; Innis, 1985). They established two dominant contemporary models of what constitutes a 'sign'. Saussurean semiotics has heavily influenced Continental European semiotics, especially in France (e.g. Barthes, 1967; Durand, 1987; Mick *et al.*, 2004). Peircean semiotics is based strongly on logic (Atkin, 2010). In marketing and consumer research, some of the earliest influences of Peircean semiotics were studies by Holbrook and Hirschman (1993), Verba and Camden (1987), Kawama (1985) and Kloepfer (1987). The following section discusses the key concepts of Saussurean and Peircean semiotic traditions.

2.3 Saussurean and Peircean semiotic traditions

This section begins with a review of the sign theories of Saussure and Peirce. Following this, based on Saussure's concepts of 'paradigm' and 'syntagm', the value of Peirce's 'representamen' (i.e. the signifying element of Peirce's sign theory) is discussed in terms of its definition in relation to its 'paradigmatic' and its 'syntagmatic' relations. This section concludes with a triadic model of the sign that acts as a basis for introducing the concept of course identity as a semiotic sign system.

2.3.1 Saussurean dyadic model of the sign

In 1916, Bally and Sechehaye published a book entitled 'Course in General Linguistics', on the basis of notes taken from Saussure's lectures in Geneva. According to Saussure, "language is a system of signs that express ideas, and is therefore comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc." (Bally and Sechehaye, 1916, p. 16). Saussure's model of the sign is of the dyadic tradition. Focusing on linguistic signs (such as words), Saussure defines a sign as being composed of a 'signifier' and 'signified' (Figure 3). The signifier is the form which a sign takes. In relation to linguistic signs, this meant a non-material form of the spoken word. Subsequent semioticians have treated the signifier as the material (or physical) form of the sign, something which can be seen, heard, felt, smelt or tasted (Chandler, 2007). For Saussure, the signified is one of the two parts of the sign such that Saussure's signified is

the mental concept represented by the signifier (and not a material thing). This does not exclude the capacity for signs to reference physical objects in the world as well as abstract concepts and fictional entities, however the signified is not itself a referent in the world (Chandler, 2007). The relationship between the signifier and the signified is referred to as 'signification', and this is represented in the Saussurean diagram by arrows. The horizontal broken line marking the two elements of the sign is referred to as 'the bar' (Chandler, 2007).

Figure 3 The linguistic sign as two-sided entity. Adapted from Saussure, cited in Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye 1916
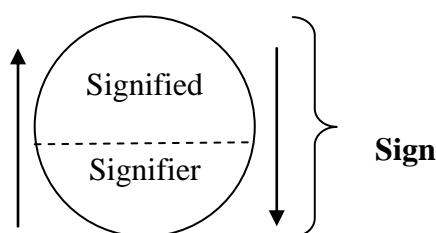
Contemporary commentators tend to describe the signifier as the form which the sign takes, and the signified as the concept to which it refers. Saussure makes the distinction in these terms:

> *"...a linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept [signified] and a sound pattern [signifier]. The sound pattern is not actually a sound; for a sound is something physical. A sound pattern is the hearer's psychological impression of a sound, as given to him by the evidence of his senses. This sound pattern may be called a 'material' element only in that it is the representation of our sensory impressions. The sound pattern may thus be distinguished from the other element associated with it in a linguistic sign. This other element is generally of a more abstract kind: the concept..."*

> (Saussure 1983, p. 66)

Signs in the Saussurean semiotic tradition are organized in two ways: as paradigms and as syntagms (Realubit and Lilia, 2011). A syntagm is an orderly combination of interacting signifiers within the same paradigm and a paradigm is a set of associated signifiers which are all members of some defining category (Chandler, 2007). The semiotic paradigms differ depending on the context in which they are initiated. In the context of the current research, paradigms are online and offline sources of information available to international HE aspirants and applicants during the course selection process. The concepts of

'paradigm' and 'syntagm' will be discussed in further detail in section 2.3.3. The following section provides an overview of Peirce's triadic model of the sign.

2.3.2 Peirce's triadic model of the sign

Contemporaneously with Saussure, the pragmatist philosopher and logician Charles Sanders Peirce formulated his own model of the sign (Chandler, 2007). Peirce's analysis of signs and of semiotics has become an indispensable starting point for a number of later sign theories including those of linguists such as Vološinov, Bühler, Jakobson, Langer, Levi-Strauss, Bateson, Morris and Barthes (Innis, 1985). Whilst for the linguist Saussure semiology is a science that studies the role of signs in social life, in Peircean semiotics the formal doctrine of signs is closely related to logic. Peirce spent the greater part of his intellectual life developing semiotics in the form of a methodologically aware, general, quasi-formal theory (Innis, 1985). Peirce's framework is logical in the sense ultimately derived from scholastic philosophy, where logic is understood as the general theory of representation, that is, a theory of the ways in which a mental product is able to veridically reflect or mirror the world (Innis, 1985). In contrast with Saussure's model of the sign as a self-contained dyad (i.e. signifier and signified), Peirce offers a triadic (three-part) model. In his semiotic writings from the late nineteenth century, Peirce describes the signifying, or semiosis, as a dynamic relation between three elements: object, representamen and interpretant. The representamen is similar in meaning to Saussure's signifier whilst the interpretant is similar in meaning to the signified. Peirce describes the relations as follows:

> *"A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of representamen".*
>
> (Peirce 1931-58, p. 228)

According to Chandler (2007), the sign as a whole is a unity of what is represented (object), how it is represented (representamen) and how it is interpreted (interpretant). To qualify as a sign, all three elements are essential. The Peircean model is illustrated in the following figure.

Figure 4 Peirce's sign model (Chandler, 2007)
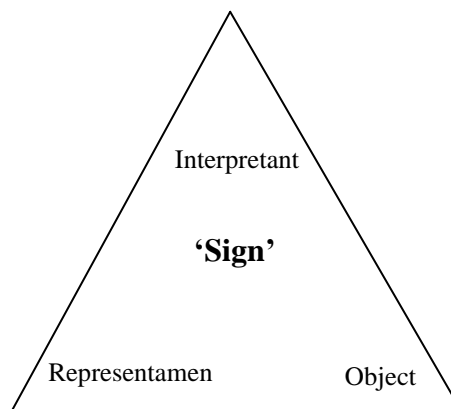
Each element of the Peirce' triadic model of the sign will be discussed in turn.

Representamen (the signifying element)

There are some potential terminological difficulties here because as noted by Atkin (2010), we appear to be saying that there are three elements of a sign, one of which is 'sign'. This is confusing and does not fully capture Peirce's idea. According to Atkin (2010, p. 2), "strictly speaking, for Peirce, we are interested in the signifying element, and it is not the sign as a whole that signifies. In speaking of the sign as the signifying element, then, he is more properly speaking of the sign restricted to those elements most crucial to its functioning as a signifying element of the sign". Peirce uses numerous terms for the signifying element including 'representamen', 'representation', and 'ground'. In the current research, that element of the sign responsible for signification is referred to as the 'representamen'. Peirce's idea of the sign as a whole and the sign as the representamen, is best made clear in an example by Atkin (2010):

> *"Consider, for instance, a molehill in my lawn taken as a sign of moles. Not every characteristic of the molehill plays a part in signifying the presence of moles. The colour of the molehill plays a secondary role since it will vary according to the soil from which it is composed. Similarly, the sizes of molehills vary according to the size of the mole that makes them, so again, this feature is not primary in the molehill's ability to signify. What is central here is the causal connection that exists between the type of mound in my lawn and moles: since moles make molehills, molehills signify moles. Consequently, primary to the molehill's ability to signify the mole is the brute physical connection between it and a mole. This is the signifying element [or the representamen] of the sign."*
>
> (Atkin, 2010, p. 2)

For Peirce, then, it is only some elements of a sign that enable it to signify its object, and when speaking of the signifying element of the sign (i.e. the representamen) it is this qualified sign that he is referring to (Atkin, 2010).

The object

The object is something beyond the sign to which it refers (Chandler, 2007). Cousins (2012, p. 149) argues that " the object is what the representamen stands for, and in Peirce's scheme this is an actual referent in the world, the thing itself—material object, event, mental state—rather than a concept of it". Atkin (2010) states that not every characteristic of the object is relevant to signification and only certain features of an object enable a sign to signify it. Going back to the earlier example about moles and molehills, the object of the sign (i.e. the molehill) is the mole.

The interpretant

The interpretant is the sense made of the sign (Chandler, 2007). Atkin (2010) proposes that the interpretant is the understanding we reach of some sign/object relation, which is more properly thought of as the translation or development of the original sign. In our earlier example, the interpretant is the understating we reach of the relationship between moles and molehills. The interpretant provides a translation of the sign, allowing us a more complex understanding of the sign's object. Indeed, Liszka (1996) and Savan (1988) both emphasize the need to treat interpretants as translations, with Savan even suggesting that Peirce should have called it the "translatant" (Savan, 1988).

The most obvious difference between the Saussurean and Peircean models is that the latter is triadic rather than dyadic (Chandler, 2007). Peirce's model of the sign features a third term; an object (or referent) beyond the sign itself. Saussure's signified is not an external referent but an abstract mental representation. Although Peirce's object is not confined to physical things and, like Saussure's signified, can include abstract concepts and fictional entities, the Peircean model explicitly allocates a place for materiality and for a reality outside the sign system which Saussure's model does not directly feature (Chandler, 2007). For Peirce the object is not just another variety of "interpretant" (Bruss, 1978), but is crucial to the meaning of the sign: 'meaning' within his model includes both 'reference'

and (conceptual) 'sense', or more broadly, representation and interpretation. Peircean semioticians argue that the triadic basis for his model enables it to operate as a more complete model of the sign than the Saussurean dyadic model can (Bruss, 1978). In the current research, Peirce's triadic model is adopted as it clearly features the object beyond the sign itself. However, based on Saussure's concepts of 'paradigm' and 'syntagm', it will be argued that the value of Peirce's representamen (i.e. the signifying element of Peirce's sign theory) is determined by its 'paradigmatic' and its 'syntagmatic' relations. This is justified by Chandler's (2007, p. 84) claim that "the value of a sign is determined by both its paradigmatic and its syntagmatic relations" and that "syntagms and paradigms provide a structural context within which sign makes sense". This will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

2.3.3 Peirce's representamen: paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations

Saussure emphasizes that meaning arises from the differences between signifiers (or representamens in Peircean semiotics); these differences are of two kinds: syntagmatic and paradigmatic (Realubit and Lilia, 2011). Culler states that "paradigmatic relations are the oppositions between elements that can replace one another...syntagmatic relations define combinatory possibilities; the relations between elements that might combine in a sequence" (Culler, 1976, p. 40). Chandler (2007) proposes that a syntagm is an orderly combination of interacting representamens within the same paradigm and that a paradigm is a set of associated representamens which are all members of some defining category. "The value of a sign is determined by both its paradigmatic and its syntagmatic relations" (Chandler, 2007, p. 84). "Syntagms and paradigms provide a structural context within which a sign makes sense" (Chandler, 2007, p. 84). In the context of linguistic sign systems, according to Chandler (2007, p. 84), "the plane of the syntagm is that of the combination of 'this-and-this-and-this' as in the sentence 'the man cried' [Figure 5], while the plane of the paradigm is that of the selection of 'this-or-this-or-this' (e.g. the replacement of the last word in the sentence 'the man cried' with 'died' or 'sang')".

Figure 5 Paradigms and Syntagms, (Chandler, 2007)
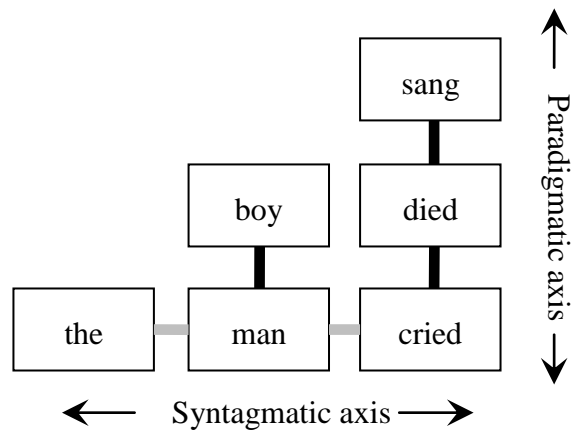
Based on Chandler's (2007, p. 84) argument that "the value of a sign is determined by both its paradigmatic and its syntagmatic relations", and that "syntagms and paradigms provide a structural context within which sign makes sense", it could be argued that the value of Peirce's representamen is determined by both its paradigmatic and its syntagmatic relations. As illustrated in Figure 6, the 'representamen' in Peirce's triadic model can be divided into 'paradigmatic representamen' and 'syntagmatic representamen'.

Figure 6 Peirce' triadic model in conjunction with Saussure's concepts of paradigm and syntagm
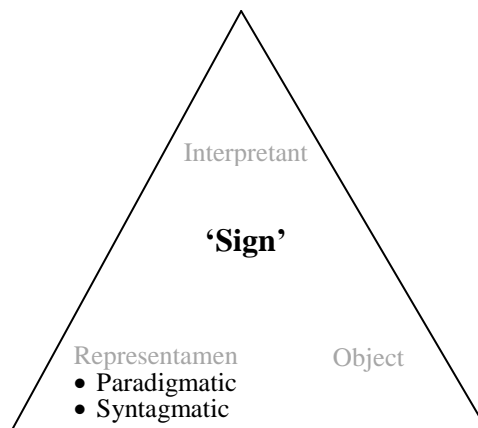
Semiotic paradigms differ depending on the context in which they are initiated. For example, in the context of media studies, Chandler (2007) argues that the medium or genre is also paradigm, and particular media texts derive meaning from the ways in which the medium and genre used differs from the alternatives. In the context of the current research, paradigms include online and offline sources of information available to international HE

aspirants and applicants during the course selection process, for example family members and friends, education agencies, OSNs, ranking websites, accreditation bodies, the British Consulate website, amongst others. Syntagmatic relations in the context of the current research refers to the orderly combination of interacting representamens within OSNs only (i.e. the same paradigm), and paradigmatic relations refers to a set of representamens which are all members of different sources of information (i.e. different paradigms). Saussure's concepts of paradigm and syntagm enable a distinction to be made between representamens within OSNs and representamens within other sources of information available during the course selection process. In the forthcoming sections the triadic model of the sign illustrated in Figure 6 will be used as a logical tool to introduce the concept of course identity as a semiotic sign system. However, prior introducing the concept of course identity, the following section provides an overview of the term 'identity' and its diffusion in the social sciences.

2.4 An overview of the term 'identity' in the social sciences

'Identity' comes from the Latin root 'idem', meaning 'the same', and has been used in English since the sixteenth century (Gleason, 1983). According to Brubaker and Cooper (2000, p. 2), "identity and cognate terms in other languages have a long history as technical terms in western philosophy, from the ancient Greeks through contemporary analytical philosophy". The introduction of the term 'identity' into social analysis and its initial diffusion in the social sciences and public discourse occurred in the 1950s (Gleason, 1983). Erik Homburger Erikson, a Danish-German-American developmental psychologist, was the key figure who brought the term 'identity' into circulation through his discussion of identity crises in adolescence (Gleason, 1983). Erikson was Sigmund Freuds's student (Langley, 2000), and like others among Freud's followers, Erikson initially felt that his own theory was simply an elaboration of Freud's own psychoanalytic theory (Langley, 2000).

In recent years, scholars within a range of social science and humanities disciplines have taken an intense interest in questions concerning identity (Fearon, 1999). However, Fearon (1999) argues that despite this vastly increased and wide-ranging interest in identity, the term itself remains something of an enigma. The Oxford English Dictionary (Website, 2012) gives the definition of the term 'identity' as "the fact of being who or what a person

or thing is" or "the characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is". Fearon (1999, p. 2) notes that "our present idea of identity is a fairly recent social construct, and a rather complicated one at that. Even though everyone knows how to use the term properly in everyday discourse, it proves quite difficult to give a short and adequate summary statement that captures the range of its present meaning".

A broad review of literature from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, social anthropology and philosophy reveals that the term 'identity' is complex and different meanings are evident in different contexts. Examples of the application of the term 'identity' in different contexts include: national identity (Ranganathan, 2003), cultural identity (Williams *et al.*, 2002), political identity (Allen and Bagozzi, 2001), place identity (Proshansky *et al.*, 1983), sexual identity (Brewster and Moradi, 2010), ethnic identity (Phinney, 1990), gender identity (Baker, 1980), age identity (Kaufman and Elder, 2002, 2003), family identity (Gillis, 1996), language identity (Block, 2007), religious identity (Griffith and Griggs, 2001), work identity (Buche, 2006), corporate identity (Rekom, 1997), brand identity (Gylling and Lindberg-Repo, 2006), digital identity (Hovav and Berger, 2009) and online identity (Hovav and Berger, 2009; Kim *et al.*, 2011). Based on the triadic model of the sign illustrated in Figure 6, the following section introduces the concept of 'course identity' as a semiotic sign system and provides a semiotic model of course identity in the context of this research.

2.5 Introducing the concept of 'course identity' as a semiotic sign system

According to Fearon (1999, p. 33), "individuals are not the only entities that can be described as having identities, whether in ordinary language or social science writing. So too, can states, churches, firms, political parties, universities, indeed, particularly any corporate actor". In the current research it is assumed that a course of study can be described as having an identity and that it can be treated in ordinary language and social scientific practice as a metaphorical individual with will and agency. The multidisciplinary nature of the term 'identity' can lead to various definitions of the concept of course identity. The definition proposed in this research is: "the means by which a course distinguishes itself from other courses". The concept of course identity attaches meaning to the course in its totality. It is this course identity that influences course selection decisions of international HE aspirants and applicants.

23

For course identity to qualify as a semiotic sign system all three elements of the sign including 'object', 'representamen' and 'interpretant' are essential. The course identity is a synthesis of what is represented (object), how it is represented (representamen) and how it is interpreted (interpretant). The development and diffusion of course identity can be viewed from internal and external stakeholder perspectives. The initial development of course identity starts with internal stakeholders of the course, from the assumptions and beliefs held by internal stakeholders such as policy makers, course designers, course directors, marketing and student recruitment specialists, and reflects the identity that these internal stakeholders wish to acquire for the course. Assumptions and beliefs of internal stakeholders influence the initial formation of course identity. These assumptions and beliefs determine, for example, the tuition fees for the course, the mode of study, and the course structure and curriculum. The course identity as shaped by internal stakeholders is then communicated in the form of the 'representamen' to external stakeholders through a variety of resources (e.g. official university websites, OSNs, education agencies, ranking websites, family and friends) from which external stakeholders such as international HE aspirants and applicants generate certain perceptions, or 'interpretants' about the course. The semiosis of course identity can lead to different elements of the sign (i.e. object, representamen and interpretant) depending on the context. The flexibility of the concept of course identity makes it a powerful logical concept that can be utilised by researchers in different contexts. The introduction of the concept of course identity as a semiotic sign system is a direct contribution to knowledge. It is also valuable as a theoretical framework which enables practitioners and scholars to acknowledge the externally oriented aspects of the course in the same way that teaching and learning represent the internal practices and theorisation of the course. The following section discusses the semiosis of course identity in the context of this research.

2.6   Semiosis of 'course identity'

The concept of course identity is perceived as a semiotic sign system (i.e. as a whole). Guided by the research question in section 1.3, the semiosis of course identity led to two representamens (or signifying elements), two objects, and one interpretant (Figure 7).

Figure 7 Semiotic model of course identity in the context of this research

Perceived course identity

- Paradigmatic course identity
- Syntagmatic course identity
  as observed through OSNs
- Course of study
- OSNs
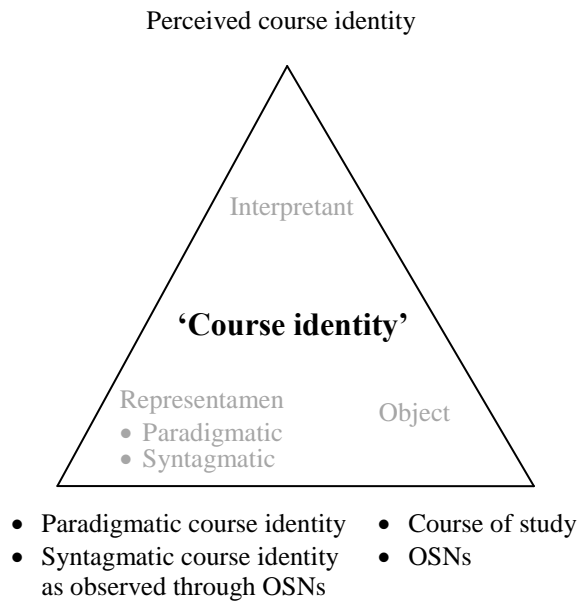
The elements of the semiosis of course identity will be discussed in turn.

The representamen (the signifying element of course identity)

The representamen, or the signifying element, of course identity is determined by both its paradigmatic and its syntagmatic relations as discussed below:

- *Paradigmatic course identity* is the overall identity of the course communicated in the form of the 'representamen' to international HE aspirants and applicants through a variety of resources (e.g. official university websites, education agencies, family and friends) from which international HE aspirants and applicants generate certain perceptions, or 'interpretants', about the course.

- *Syntagmatic course identity as observed through OSNs* is the identity of the course communicated in the form of the 'representamen' to international HE aspirants and applicants only through OSNs, from which international HE aspirants and applicants generate certain perceptions, or 'interpretants', about the course.

The object

The semiosis of course identity in the context of the current research led to two objects:

- *Course of study* is the object for both 'paradigmatic course identity' and 'syntagmatic course identity'.

- *OSNs* is the object for the 'syntagmatic course identity'.

The interpretant

The interpretant is the course identity perceived by international HE aspirants and applicants. It is this identity of the course that influences final course selection decisions of international HE aspirants and applicants. I refer to this identity as *'perceived course identity'*. Just as with the representamen/object relation, Peirce believes the representamen/interpretant relation to be one in which the representamen determines the interpretant (Atkin, 2010). Therefore, the perceived course identity is determined by the paradigmatic course identity and the syntagmatic course identity (i.e. the two signifying elements of course identity).

In order to answer the research question in section 1.3 and achieve the aims of the research, three research objectives were formulated. The research objectives derived from a review of relevant literature and the semiosis of course identity discussed in this section. The objectives were to obtain sufficient data in order to:

- Define the paradigmatic course identity.

- Define the syntagmatic course identity as observed through OSNs.

- Compare and contrast the levels of influence of paradigmatic course identity and syntagmatic course identity on the perceived course identity.

The following section provides an overview of the role and timing of the development and use of the semiotic model of course identity in the context of this research.

2.7 The role and timing of the development and use of the semiotic model of course identity

The semiotic model of course identity is used as a theoretical framework to study and analyse the interrelationship between selection of a course abroad and participation in OSNs, and it has driven the design of the method and the subsequent analysis of the interview data, amongst others. The theoretical framework presented in Figure 7 strengthened the current research in a number ways, the details of which are as follows:

- **To contextualize the study within the current body of knowledge**

  The theoretical framework developed in section 2.6 helped to connect the researcher to the relevant literature and secondary data, which provided a context for the research. Guided by the research question and the semiotic model of course identity, the focus of the literature review was specific to choice and decision-making in higher education and to OSNs, of which a full account is given in Chapter 3.

- **To formulate the research objectives**

  In order to answer the research question in section 1.3 and achieve the aims of the research, three research objectives were formulated. The research objectives derived from a review of relevant literature and the semiosis of course identity. The objectives were to obtain sufficient data in order to: define the paradigmatic course identity, define the syntagmatic course identity as observed through OSNs, and compare and contrast the levels of influence of paradigmatic course identity and syntagmatic course identity on the perceived course identity.

- **The choice of research paradigm and research methods**

  Semiotics gave the researcher a basis for the choice of research paradigm and research methods. Semiotics, as a textual analysis approach, is commonly used under interpretive research methodology as a means of understanding meanings in texts (Imbeau, 2009; Wharton, 2013). According to Imbeau (2009, p.262), "semiotic analysis in its conventional form is a qualitative-interpretive practice since it rests upon the assumption that meaning is not a fixed and self-contained entity that can be analysed as an objective property". In ontological terms, an

interpretive semiotic approach aims to document a research setting by identifying, exploring and explaining the relationships and dependencies between different themes. This subjective interpretation results in a methodology that relies a rich descriptions of actors studied in their everyday settings.

- **To guide the fieldwork**

  The theoretical framework helped the researcher in guiding the fieldwork. Guided by the semiotic model of course identity, the interview questions grouped under three major categories: 'paradigmatic course identity', 'syntagmatic course identity', and 'perceived course identity'. The aim of data collection was to obtain sufficient data in order to achieve the objectives of the research.

- **To structure and analyse the interview data**

  Since the research question in this study is concerned more about how meaning is generated within a network of concepts rather than the content of a discourse, semiotic analysis is an ideal candidate for such as endeavour (Imbeau, 2009). Signs and relations are the key elements of semiotic analysis. The interview data as a whole can be seen as a triadic sign system made of object, representamen and interpretant. In the context of this research, this triadic sign system is the course identity and the semiotic model of course identity is used to structure and analyse the interview data in Chapter 5. A full account on the semiotic analysis and how it is utilised to structure and analyse the interview data is given in section 5.2.

The semiotic model of course identity presented in Figure 7 has been revised a number of times as a result of the use of evaluative principles for interpretive filed studies proposed by Klein and Myers (1999) to guide the progress of the study. The ideal semiotic model of course identity has been developed prior to commencing the fieldwork in light of the 'principle of dialogical reasoning' which requires sensitivity to possible contradictions between the theoretical preconceptions guiding the research design and actual findings with subsequent cycles of revision (Klein and Myers, 1999). The key points at which the semiotic model of course identity has been altered as a result of study are discussed in detail in section 7.6.5.

2.8 Conceptual framework

A conceptual framework has been developed to illustrate diagrammatically the main themes being investigated and their interrelationships. These themes are connected using "cross links" (Novak and Cañas, 2008), which are labelled to indicate their relationships. At the top of the conceptual framework is a "focus question" (Novak and Cañas, 2008). This aids in differentiating the conceptual framework or map from others and provides a context for the assumptions adopted for this work. This conceptual framework will be used at the beginning of succeeding chapters to place the chapters in context and highlight the specific issues addressed therein. This will also provide the reader with a holistic view of the research process and how the individual sections relate to each other.

Figure 8 Conceptual framework
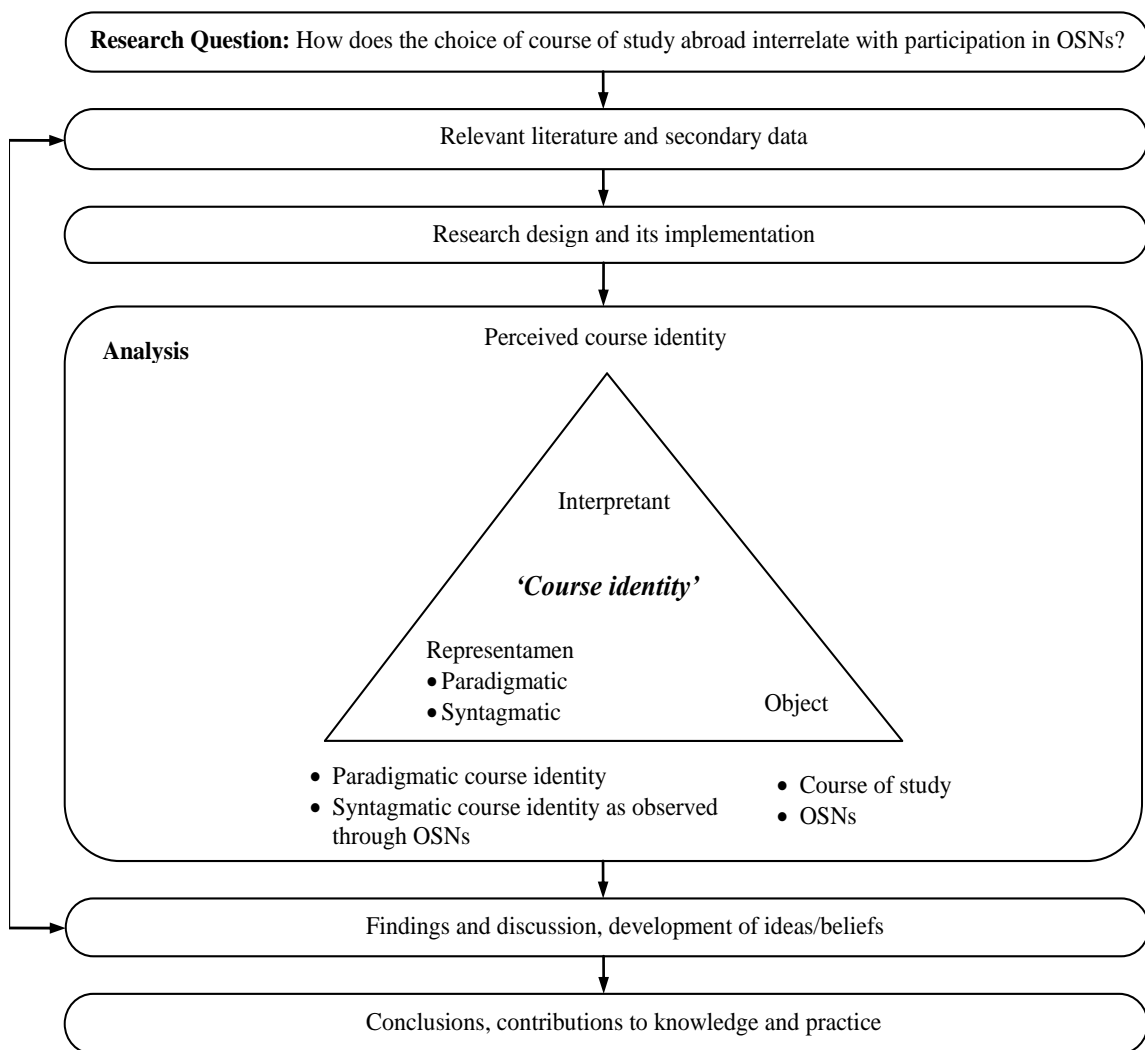
Usually qualitative work is described as starting from an inductive position, seeking to build up theory, with the conceptual framework being "emergent", because existing literature and theories might mislead (Miles and Huberman, 1994). However, Miles and Huberman (1994) also note that researchers have some idea of what will feature in the study, a tentative rudimentary conceptual framework, and it is better to have some idea of what you are looking for/at even if that idea changes over time. This is particularly true for time-constrained or inexperienced researchers (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In this respect building a framework involves generating a number of general constructs that force the investigator to identify the variables and relationships of greatest concern (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

2.9 Summary

This chapter has discussed the theoretical framework of the study. Based on semiotic concepts, the chapter has introduced the concept of course identity as a semiotic sign system. The semiotic model of course identity is used as a theoretical framework to study and analyse the interrelationship between selection of a course abroad and participation in OSNs, and also to guide the fieldwork and subsequent analysis. The chapter has concluded with discussion of a conceptual framework that will be used at the beginning of succeeding chapters to place the chapters in context and highlight the specific issues addressed therein. The next chapter will review the relevant literature and secondary data drawn from various sources.

Chapter 3

Existing Bodies of Knowledge

3.1 Introduction

As highlighted below, this chapter discusses the relevant literature and secondary data drawn from various sources, which provides a context for the research. Guided by the research question and the semiotic model of course identity presented in Figure 7, the focus of this review is specific to choice and decision-making in HE and to OSNs. The literature and secondary data discussed in this chapter contribute to the analysis of the research data in Chapter 5 and the discussion of findings in Chapter 6.

Figure 9 Conceptual Framework: Chapter 3
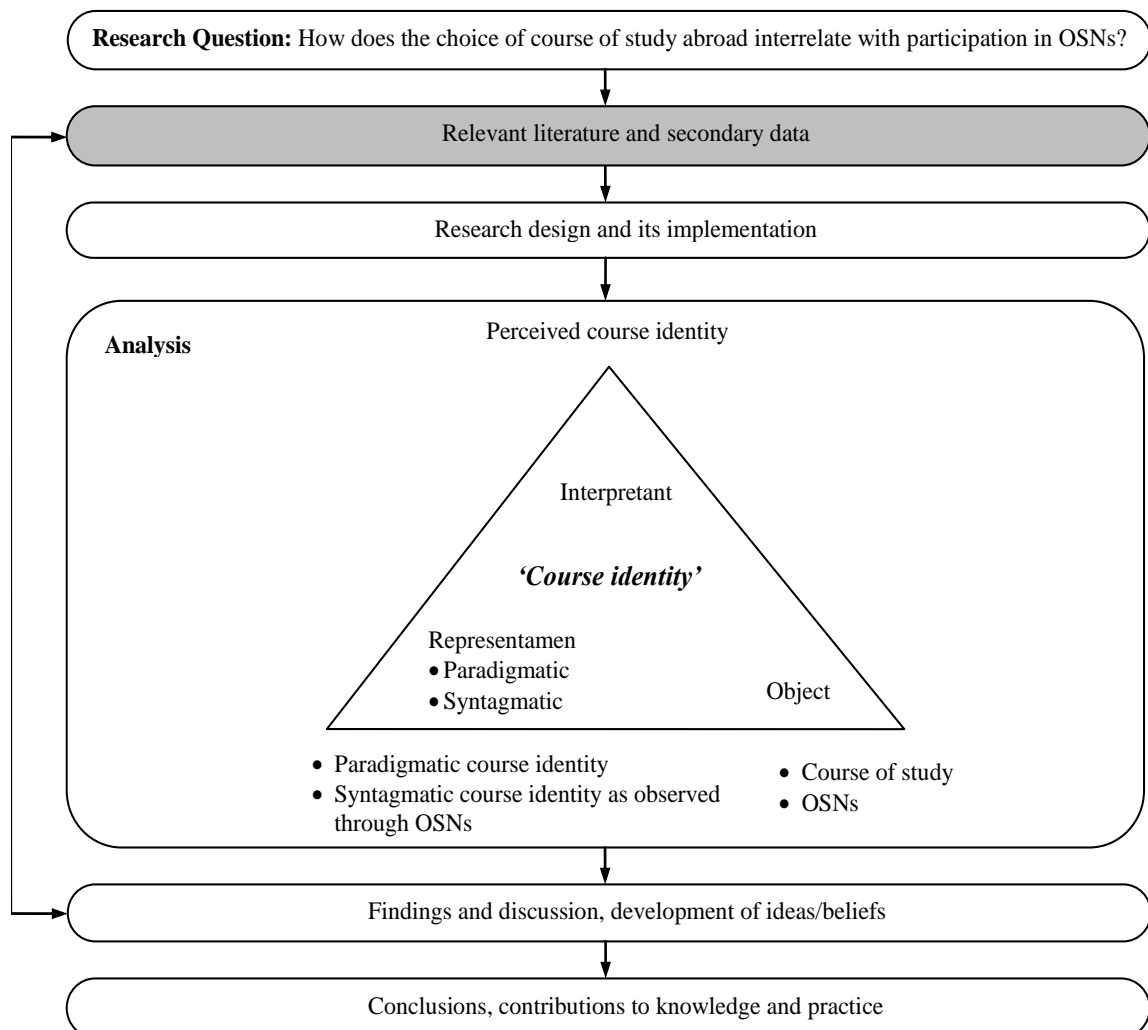
To begin, it is important to shed some light on the broad context of marketing in education, for which a general overview is given in section 3.2. The marketing mix models designed

specifically for HE institutions (e.g. Ivy and Naude, 2004; Kotler and Fox, 1995) are holistic strategy models that address marketing issues from the perspective of the institution. In other words, the marketing mix model shows just one side of the formula of an effective marketing strategy (Al-Fattal, 2010). There is therefore a need for a means to explore "student choice", and this is approached in the current research in the context of the "course selection decisions of international HE aspirants and applicants".

The decision to enter HE is a complex process and involves various stages and various factors that influence the choice of HE (Litten, 1982; Stein *et al.*, 2009). Section 3.3 discusses models of decision-making processes for HE and provides a review of factors that influence the choice of HE. A review of the literature in section 3.3 reveals that research to date has tended to focus on the choice of institution and host country, and less attention has been paid to the choice of course of study as a distinct phenomenon.

The primary data for the current research are collected from three distinct full-time MBA courses in the United Kingdom. Section 3.4 provides an overview of the MBA in the UK and presents the secondary data collected from various sources. The secondary data presented in section 3.4 provides a basis for comparison of the primary data that is collected to define the paradigmatic identities of the three participating MBA courses, which is discussed in Chapter 5, although it does not fully account for the interrelationship between the choice of MBA and participation in OSNs.

Section 3.5 reviews the existing literature on OSNs in relation to theoretical underpinnings, criticisms and controversies surrounding them, and their geographic and demographic distribution. The secondary data in section 3.5.4 contribute to a greater understanding of OSNs and the discussion of findings in Chapter 6.

The chapter concludes with a review of recent studies that focus on OSNs and choice of HE.

3.2 Marketing and education

Making a direct comparison between a university and a business would have been shocking a few decades ago (Kotler and Fox, 1995). However, Kotler and Fox (1995)

argue that in order to educate students, HE institutions rely on money from tuition fees and donations to pay teachers' salaries and the other expenses of operating their programmes. The aim of such institutions is to impart knowledge and skills that will improve the lives and work opportunities of their graduates. Businesses, in contrast, aim to make a profit, defined in narrowly financial terms. Education and business have been considered distinct "worlds", with little or nothing in common (Kotler and Fox, 1995). There has been considerable debate over whether HE institutions should be involved in marketing (Bartlett *et al.*, 2002; Bok, 2004; Newman *et al.*, 2010). One controversy is over the labelling of students as "customers" and courses as "products" (Cuthbert, 2010; Owens and Loomes, 2007; Szorenyi-Reischl, 1998). In an exploratory study, Conway *et al.* (1994) find that the majority of institutions tended to be predominantly product-driven, with their products defined narrowly as their courses, or in some instances more broadly as 'education'. Academics often resist these commercial imperatives and voice misgivings about viewing students as customers and courses as products (Sharrock, 2000; Winter and Sarros, 2002). According to Bay and Daniel (2001), institutions should not regard the student as a customer, because the 'student as customer' paradigm may encourage institutions to focus on short-term, narrowly-defined student satisfaction, rather than meeting the long-term needs of a range of stakeholders. Svensson and Wood (2007) argue that students are citizens of the university community, and that the customer metaphor is inappropriate to describe students' relationships to universities. In contrast, East (2001) argues that there is a need to analyse students' perspectives in the light of customer expectations about quality of service, particularly as mature students, whether local or international, expect a high standard of service delivery (Mavondo *et al.*, 2000).

Marketing is now at the forefront of activities for most HE institutions (Fagerstrøm and Ghinea, 2013). Today's consumers of HE are increasingly active information seekers and are no longer dependent solely on information from the institution (Fagerstrøm and Ghinea, 2013). There is a number of articles which encourage institutions to use marketing mix models to increase, not only enquiries regarding courses, but also applications, and indeed enrolment (e.g. Bayne, 2008; Cunningham, 1984; Groisman *et al.*, 1991; Gwyn-Paquette, 2001; Ivy, 2008; Lemke, 1984, 1989; Presmeg, 1998; Ryan., 2011). The marketing mix is a set of controllable marketing tools that an institution uses to produce the response it wants from its various target markets. "It consists of everything that the

university can do to influence the demand for the services that it offers" (Ivy, 2008, p. 289). Kotler and Fox (1995) have developed a version of a marketing mix specifically tailored to HE institutions, and their model consists of seven marketing tools, the "7Ps": programme, price, place, promotion, processes, physical facilities, and people (Figure 10). There are suggestions for other elements to be included in the marketing mix, for example, Ivy and Naude's (2004) "7Ps" and Ivy's (2008) "7Ps" comprising: programme, prospectus, price, prominence, people, promotion and premiums. All these models have similar component elements; nonetheless, they are clustered and grouped differently (Al-Fattal, 2010). According to Al-Fattal (2010), the marketing mix model proposed by Kotler and Fox (1995) encompasses all of the elements mentioned by other models.

Figure 10 7Ps marketing mix model for higher education institutions (Kotler and Fox, 1995)

Course of study

Price

Place

Promotion

Processes

Physical Facilities

People

This section briefly reviews Kotler and Fox's (1995) marketing mix model. The first element of the marketing mix model is the 'course of study'. The most basic decision an institution makes is what courses it will offer to its students, alumni, donors, and other markets and publics (Kotler and Fox, 1995). An institution's mix of offerings establishes its identity, positions the institution vis-à-vis other institutions in the minds of consumers, and determines how consumers will respond. Universities with similar courses will find their markets and public differentiating between them on the basis of their courses and their quality (Kotler and Fox, 1995). The second element of the marketing mix is 'price'. The price element is principally related to tuition fees (Al-Fattal, 2010). Pricing has major influence on marketing strategies as most students and their parents are concerned about

the financial implications of attending university (Pugsley, 2004). The third element of the marketing mix is 'place'. This element refers to the system of delivery and channels of service distribution (Brassington and Petitt, 2006). According to Kotler and Fox (1995), the basic service-delivery question for an institution is, how can we make our courses and services available and accessible to our target consumers? Kotler and Fox (1995) argue that the location and scheduling of courses can determine their success. Offering a high quality, appropriately priced course is not enough (Kotler and Fox, 1995), as students may avoid classes in rundown, dangerous urban areas because the surroundings are unpleasant and unsafe (Kotler and Fox, 1995). Likewise, they may avoid rural campuses that seem isolated and boring (Kotler and Fox, 1995). The fourth element of the marketing mix is 'promotion'. Promotion captures an institution's ability to communicate with its markets. Kotler and Fox (1995) argue that developing good courses and services, pricing them attractively, and making them readily available to target consumers is not enough to successfully market them. The institution must also inform consumers and others about its goals, activities and offerings and motivate them to take an interest in the institution. Palmer (2001) breaks down promotion into four distinct elements: advertising, sales promotion, public relations and personal selling. There are various sets of tools within each of these elements which are available to an institution for communicating with its customers, including web-advertising, search engine optimisation, direct mail, educational show exhibits, open days and conferences (Al-Fattal, 2010; Blumenstyk, 2006; Constantinides and Stagno, 2011; Constantinides and Stagno, 2012; Fagerstrøm and Ghinea, 2013). The fifth element of the marketing mix is 'processes'. Processes refer to the way an institution does business, and relate to the whole administrative system (Kotler *et al.*, 2002). Processes are how things happen in an institution, including the management, enrolment, teaching, learning, social and even sports activities (Al-Fattal, 2010). Processes may be of little concern to customers of manufactured products, however nonetheless they are of critical concern to high contact services such as education (Palmer, 2001). For this reason, it is recommended that institutions take into consideration how their services are to be offered. For example, teaching methods and assessment systems are aspects which HE aspirants and applicants enquire about most (Ivy and Naude, 2004). The sixth element of the marketing mix is 'people'. 'People' refers to all teaching and administrative staff through which the service is delivered, and through which customer relations are built (Kotler and Fox, 1995). 'People' also includes the institution's past and current students as

HE aspirants and applicants tend to ask about and check with past and current students on their views (Al-Fattal, 2010). The final element of Kotler and Fox's (1995) marketing mix model is 'physical facilities and evidence', which refers to the physical, tangible resources which an institution makes available to customers ranging from brochures to infrastructure including buildings and teaching facilities (Al-Fattal, 2010). Physical facilities, as an element of the mix, play a major role as it is the means by which an institution is likely to increase the tangibility of its offering, particularly because there is usually little of a tangible nature which can be inspected before purchase (Gibbs and Knapp, 2002).

The marketing mix models designed specifically for HE institutions (e.g. Ivy and Naude, 2004; Kotler and Fox, 1995) are holistic strategy models that address marketing issues from the perspective of the institution. In other words, the marketing mix model shows just one side of the formula of an effective marketing strategy (Al-Fattal, 2010). There is therefore a need for a means to explore "student choice" (Figure 11), and this is approached in the current research in the context of the "course selection decisions of international HE aspirants and applicants".

Figure 11 Marketing strategy synthesis (Al-Fattal, 2010)

Maringe (2006) suggests that a useful way of understanding a market is to investigate the choice and decision-making processes of HE aspirants and applicants. It is apparent from the discussion above that understanding the course selection decisions of HE aspirants and applicants is crucial to developing an effective marketing strategy. The focus of the following section is on choice and decision-making of students entering HE.

3.3 Choice and decision-making in higher education

The field of choice and decision-making, or what Kotler and Fox (1985) call "consumer buying behaviour" studies how individuals, groups and organizations select, buy, use and dispose of goods or services to satisfy their needs and desires, and what factors affect this behaviour (Kotler and Armstrong, 2009). As the aim of marketing is to satisfy consumers' needs and desires, researching choice and decision-making in HE may be of value in guiding policy makers and admissions officers in institutions towards more effective approaches to marketing their courses and institution (Whitehead *et al.*, 2006). Briggs (2006) suggests that if universities are able to predict where HE aspirants and applicants will come from, scarce resources can be focused on marketing in geographic areas that will give the highest return.

The following section is divided into two parts. It begins with a discussion of the stages involved in the process of decision-making about HE, followed by discussion of the factors that influence the choice of HE.

3.3.1 Stages involved in the process of decision-making about higher education

The literature in this section develops an understanding of the stages involved in the process of decision-making about HE, which feeds into the analysis of the research data in Chapter 5 and the discussion of findings in Chapter 6.

Different models have been developed in recent decades to capture the complex decision-making processes of HE aspirants and applicants (e.g. Chapman, 1986; Hanson and Litten, 1982; Jackson, 1982; Kotler and Fox, 1985). Jackson's (1982) and Chapman's (1986) models are the best-known theoretical models and therefore I will briefly review these. Jackson's (1982) model proposes that there are three stages prior to making a choice of HE. The first is 'the preference' stage where, it is suggested, academic achievement has the strongest correlation with educational aspirations. The second stage is 'the exclusion stage' whereby an individual goes through a process of eliminating a number of options for HE studies. The final stage is 'the evaluation stage' where an individual is faced with different choices from which makes her or his final choice, using a rating scheme (Jackson, 1982).

Chapman's (1986) model consists of five stages as illustrated in Figure 12.

Figure 12 Decision-making process for higher education (Chapman, 1986)

Pre-search behaviour

↓

Search behaviour

↓

Application decision

↓

Choice decision

↓

Matriculation decision
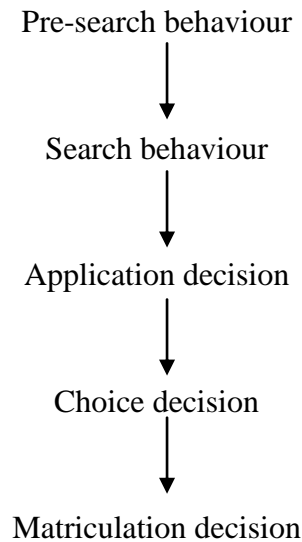
The 'pre-search behaviour' stage begins with recognizing the possible need for and desirability of acquiring a higher level of education, with demographic factors playing a major influencing role. Pre-search activities involve assessment of the costs and benefits associated with pursuing HE studies in general (Chapman, 1986). Given the recognition of the possible need for a higher level of education, individuals continuously scan their environment for sources of information and in doing this they become aware of key information sources and what kind of content those sources provide. The 'search behaviour' stage is characterized by extensive and active acquisition of information on potential HE options. According to Chapman (1986), 'knowledgeable others' are consulted in depth and with great frequency. 'Knowledgeable others' may include family members and friends attending universities. At this stage individuals enquire directly with a number of universities to get information. HE selection is an important milestone, and as such extensive and involved search efforts are to be expected (Chapman, 1986). The search behaviour stage ends when the decision is made about which institutions to apply to. Chapman (1986) argues that at this point the pursuit of a HE becomes serious and the number of university alternatives has been narrowed down to a few. During the 'application decision' stage individuals narrow their focus to those options that they are

more interested in and to which they are more likely to be admitted. By definition, the 'choice decision' stage involves all those universities to which an individual is offered a place. It is important to note that this is another point where some uncertainty enters into the applicant's selection process, namely, the uncertainty with regard to whether an applicant will be admitted to a university (Chapman, 1986). The choice decision phase usually ends with the selection of a specific university to attend. The last stage in Chapman's (1986) model is the 'matriculation decision'. At this stage the applicant arrives for registration, however many turn the offer down again after a few days in the institution, reflecting the early post-purchase feelings applicants often have at the time of committing themselves to the institution (Maringe, 2006). Most universities aim to provide exciting welcome week activities and a variety of support services to fulfil students' needs as far as possible, in order to retain students beyond the initial few weeks. The following section provides an overview of factors that influence the choice of HE.

3.3.2 Factors influencing the choice of higher education

The literature in this section contributes to a greater understanding of the factors influencing the choice of HE, and contributes to the analysis of the research data in Chapter 5 and the discussion of findings in Chapter 6. A review of the literature in this section reveals that the research to date has tended to focus on the choice of institution and host country, and less attention has been paid to the choice of course of study as a distinct phenomenon.

In a quantitative study, Whitehead *et al.* (2006) sought to identify the factors that encourage or discourage the choice of a given university. Their study focused on the University of Cambridge as a prestigious UK university. The authors suggest that the course structure has the greatest impact on encouraging or discouraging selection of the University of Cambridge. Individuals are dissuaded from applying to Cambridge because of the bureaucratic "hassle" involved (Whitehead *et al.*, 2006). However, there are challenges to this interpretation which include the difficulty of gaining a place, the fear of not "fitting in" and the applicant's belief that they would have to work too hard to succeed once at Cambridge (Whitehead *et al.*, 2006). The findings from Whitehead *et al.* (2006) are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Factors that encourage or discourage individuals to select Cambridge University (Whitehead et al., 2006)

Factors that encourage individuals to select Cambridge	Really liking the course structure in the subject I wanted to study
	Liking the way the course is structured in the subject I wanted to study
	Getting a place at Cambridge will be regarded as an achievement
	The earning power of a Cambridge degree
	Believing that a degree from Cambridge will greatly enhance my career prospects
	The fact that the University of Cambridge is very prestigious both nationally and internationally
	Liking the way the teaching is organized, particularly the college-based supervision system
	The fact that I will make contacts with influential people
	The fact that I would meet a lot of interesting people
	Being confident that I would fit in at Cambridge
	Seeing Cambridge city as an attractive place to be at university
Factors that discourage individuals to select Cambridge	The fact that I did not really like the content of the course in the subject I wanted to study
	The fact that I did not really like the way the course was structured in the subject I wanted to study
	The fact that I would have to be interviewed before being offered a place
	The possibility that I might have to sit further tests or examinations in order to be considered
	The possibility that I would have to send in some of my academic work for consideration
	The difficulty of actually getting a place because of the high number of applicants
	Being worried about not fitting in with the other students at Cambridge
	Findings the whole application process overly complicated and confusing
	The feeling that I would have to work too hard academically in order to succeed while at Cambridge

In another study, Soutar and Turner (2002) examined the choice of university using a form of conjoint analysis. The results from their quantitative study indicate that the four most important determinants of university preferences are course suitability, academic reputation, job prospects, and the quality of teaching. Soutar and Turner's (2002) findings provide support for the study conducted by Whitehead *et al.* (2006), suggesting that the course of study itself is the most important factor in determining choice of institution. Soutar and Turner's (2002) findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Individuals' preferences for university (Soutar and Turner, 2002)

Individuals' preferences for university	Course suitability
	Academic reputation
	Job prospects
	Quality of teaching
	Campus atmosphere
	Type of university (is a new university or traditional university)
	Distance from home
	Family opinion
	Ability to articulate/transfer units between further education and higher education
	Friends at the university

In an exploratory study, Briggs (2006) identified the factors influencing the choice of university in Scotland, suggesting that this is largely determined by ten factors. The top

three factors are academic reputation, distance from home and location. Briggs (2006) distinguishes between factors identified for post-1992 universities[1] in Scotland (or 'new' universities) and pre-1992 universities[2]. Respondents from pre-1992 universities saw academic reputation as the overriding influential factor and, not surprisingly, factors that related to academic quality, including academic reputation, quality of faculty and teaching reputation, also feature strongly. Significantly, respondents from two of the three post-1992 universities considered entry requirements as the most influential factor in the choice of university. Briggs's (2006) findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 A comparison between factors influencing the choice of pre-1992 and post-1992 universities (Briggs, 2006)

Pre-1992 Universities		**Post-1992 Universities**	
	Academic reputation		Entry requirements
	Distance from home		Distance from home
	Location		Location
	Own perception		Academic reputation
	Social life nearby		Own perception
	Quality of faculty		Graduate employment
	Graduate employment		Social life nearby
	Teaching reputation		Teaching reputation
	Entry requirements		Quality of faculty
	Information supplied		Information supplied

One of the few studies that investigates the choice of course of study as a phenomenon distinct from the choice of institution, is that of Maringe (2006). However, unlike the current research, Maringe's (2006) study focuses on the choice of course of study within one's own country. In the quantitative study, Maringe (2006) explores the factors influencing choice of university and course of study in England. His findings suggest that career considerations have the greatest impact on the choice of course of study and few courses are selected because they are perceived to be easy. Among the external influences, Maringe (2006) argues that school teachers have the strongest influence on the choice of course of study, while parents have the least. Formal career guidance in schools is considered of much less value in influencing the choice of course of study, especially for males. Maringe's (2006) findings are presented in Table 4.

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[1] In the United Kingdom the post-1992 universities formed from polytechnics or colleges of higher education.

[2] Pre-1992 universities include ancient universities founded between the 12th and 16th centuries and the large civic universities chartered at the beginning of the 20th century before World War I.

Table 4 Factors influencing university choices and course choices (Maringe, 2006)

Factors influencing university choices	Course of study (e.g. field of study, majors, course structure and degree organisation)
	Price (e.g. fees, flexibility in payment, effort needed to qualify, opportunities sacrificed, distance from home, transport and living costs, opportunities for part time work)
	Place (e.g. campus accommodation, degree credits, facilities, racial diversity, residential requirements, class sizes)
	Prominence (e.g. institutional reputation, staff reputation, press reviews by national newspapers, institutional websites, league tables)
	Promotion (e.g. advertising in local and national press, publicity about academic research, publicity about teaching excellence, electronic media and networking communications)
	Prospectus (e.g. the university prospectus, course booklets)
	People (e.g. gender composition, tutors credentials, alumni and contacts, graduate profiles)
Factors influencing course choices	Career opportunities
	Ability and performance in subject
	Advice from teachers
	Interest in subject
	Staff profiles
	Course prestige
	Friends on course
	Advice from careers
	Advice from parents
	Easy course to do

Selecting amongst options for HE study abroad is a complicated process as compared with selecting HE within one's own country (Nicholls *et al.*, 1995). There is scarce literature analysing the choice of HE abroad (Cubillo *et al.*, 2006). The studies conducted by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) and Shanka *et al.* (2005) are among the few that focus on the choice of host country and the choice of institution abroad.

In a mixed methods study, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) identify the factors influencing the choice of host country and institution aboard. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) base their findings on primary data collected from international students from Indonesia, Taiwan, China and India. The authors argue that economic and social forces within the home country serve to push individuals abroad, however, the decision about which host country to select is dependent on a variety of factors. Investigations of the factors that motivate the decision to study overseas highlight four influences: a perception that an overseas course is better than a local one, ability to gain entry to local programmes, lack of course availability in the home country, a desire to gain a better understanding of the West, and an intention to migrate after graduation (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). The findings from Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 Factors influencing the choice of host country and the choice of institution abroad (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002)

Main categories	Factors
Factors influencing individuals' decision to study overseas	Overseas course better than local
	Desire to gain a better understanding of the West
	Difficult to gain entry at home. This factor is related to a student's ability to gain entry to local programs.
	Course not available at home
	Intention to migrate after graduation.
The importance of knowledge and awareness of the host country	Quality of education in the host country
	Host qualification recognized
	Easy to obtain information on host
	Knowledge of host country
The importance of recommendations from friends and relatives	Reputation of institution
	Parents/relatives recommended
	Agents recommendation
The importance of cost issues	Established population of overseas students
	Job opportunities
	Institutions government run
	Safe (low crime) environment
	Low racial discrimination
	Entry qualifications accepted
	Lower cost of living
	Lower fees
	Lower travel cost
The importance of environment	Quite-studious environment
	Comfortable climate
	Exciting place to live
The importance of social links and geographic proximity	Friends/relatives study there
	Friends/relatives live there
	Geographic proximity
Factors influencing choice in selection of institution	Has a reputation for quality
	Was willing to recognize my previous qualifications
	Has a reputation for quality and expertise of its staff
	Has a large number of international students enrolled
	Has links to other institutions known to me
	Has a strong alumni through which I learnt about it
	Offers qualifications that will be recognized by employers
	Offers a broad range of courses
	Makes use of the latest information technology
	Has a reputation to being responsive to students needs
	Is well known for innovation in research and teaching
	Has a large campus and excellent facilities
	Offers flexible entry throughout the year
	Is financially stable

In another quantitative study focusing on the choice of host country, Shanka *et al.* (2005) find that the proximity of the host country where the institution is located to individuals' home countries, in addition to the cost of living, quality and variety of courses, friends who

study there, family recommendation and safety of the education destination are the main factors which influence selection of the host country. Shanka *et al.* (2005) suggest that individuals have different preferences with respect to host country based on where they come from and their cultural backgrounds. For example, cost of living is the most important factor for those coming from Malaysia and other Asian countries, proximity to the home country is uppermost for those from Singapore and Indonesia, and quality and variety of education is most important among those coming from outside of Asia (Shanka *et al.*, 2005).

3.4 Master of Business Administration

The primary data for the current research are collected from three distinct full-time MBA courses in the United Kingdom. This section provides an overview of the MBA in the UK and presents secondary data collected from various sources. The secondary data presented in this section provides a basis for comparison of the primary data that is collected to define the paradigmatic identities of the three participating MBA courses in Chapter 5, although it does not fully account for the interrelationship between the choice of MBA and participation in OSNs.

3.4.1 MBA in the United Kingdom

The MBA as a course was introduced for the first time in the US, and the course title 'MBA' was in use within management education from the 1960s. It has been argued that "management education emerged in the military institution at West Point and then within the development of the Pennsylvania railroad in the middle of the 19th century" (Currie and Knights, 2003, p. 28). The history of the growth of the MBA in the UK has been somewhat dissimilar to the US. As noted by Mant (1981), the main growth in British management education occurred after World War II in two phases, as a result of industrial nations' need to have skilled managers available for the administration of business and industry in Britain. Two reports produced during the 1960s, the Robbins Report (Robbins, 1963) and Franks Report (Franks, 1963), highlighted the importance of British Management education. In 1963 Lord Franks (Franks, 1963) was asked to give advice on the choice of suitable universities for introducing management education. "The Franks report proposed the establishment of two business schools, finally settling on London and Manchester as locations" (Lock, 1996). Manchester Business School took its first students in 1965 and the

first London MSc (the course was retitled as an MBA in 1985) started in 1966 (Lock, 1996). Today, more MBA students are graduated from UK than the rest of Europe put together (British Council, 2005). According to the QS TopMBA 2011 Applicant Survey, the UK is the second most popular MBA study destination after the US, followed by France, Spain, Canada, Australia, Germany, Switzerland, Singapore, Italy and the Netherlands. The MBA is a widely accepted qualification in business management, recognized around the globe (Kang and Sharma, 2012) and it offers business schools both academic status and credibility within the business community (Golzen, 1995). The following sections present the secondary data collected from various sources.

3.4.2 MBA study modes

There are a number of different formats of varying duration in which the MBA may be studied: full-time, part-time, distance learning, blended learning and modular. The full-time MBA is an intensive one-year course usually starting in September and is suited to those who wish to either take a career or significantly change direction in their career (British Council, 2005). A high percentage of full-time MBA students are from overseas and it is not unusual to find many different nationalities represented on a course (British Council, 2005). The part-time MBA usually takes around 3 to 4 years to complete, however the part-time option is not available to international students (British Council, 2005). Many students now successfully study for their MBA through distance learning and most distance learning courses require attendance at workshops and residential weekends, often held at different locations throughout the world, and may take three to five years to complete (British Council, 2005). The blended learning MBA is the most flexible option, allowing students to take courses at their own pace and in formats of their choosing (on-campus or online classes, or a combination of the two). The modular MBA is available for UK and EU students only and is highly flexible in its format, typically designed around one week teaching blocks complemented by self-directed study (British Council, 2005). There are several entry points for the modular MBA each year and students take an average of three years to complete it (the minimum is two years and the maximum eight). A varied set of elective modules in the modular MBA enables students to focus on areas of particular interest or relevance to them. All modules are self-contained and students can also choose when to do them (British Council, 2005). The latest data from the Association of MBAs (AMBA) reveals that in 2010 there were 12,375 graduations from MBA courses

in Europe, among which 48.67 % were full-time MBA, followed by 22.26% part-time, 10.02% distance learning, 15.97% blended learning and 4.46% modular modes of study.

3.4.3 Accreditation bodies for the MBA

Most UK MBA courses are now accredited by one or more accreditation bodies, each of whom stipulate a core curriculum which must be covered. One of the consequences of accreditation is the development of a form of league table for business schools, which is able to be used by both employers and those who are interested in doing an MBA. Widespread external accreditation has therefore standardised much of the course structure across different MBAs, although not around the teaching styles and delivery formats, which remain extremely diverse (e.g. Brocklehurst *et al.*, 2007). The Association of MBAs (AMBA) is the international authority on postgraduate business education, which was established in 1967. Apart from providing loans for students and organising seminars, events and opportunities to network, one of the AMBA's main functions is to provide a system of accreditation for MBA courses that operates with the aim of ensuring a certain level of quality. The Association of Business Schools (ABS) was formed in 1992 as a result of the merger between the former Council of University Management Schools and the Association for Management and Business Education. ABS is concerned with the full range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses in business schools including the MBA. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) is a global, non-profit membership organization of HE institutions, businesses, and other entities devoted to the advancement of management education. Established in 1916, AACSB provides its members with a variety of products and services to assist them with the continuous improvement of their business courses and schools (AACSB Website, 2012). The European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) is the leading international system of quality assessment, improvement, and accreditation of HE institutions in management and business administration. EQUIS is run by the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) based in Brussels, Belgium.

3.4.4 MBA curriculum

Almost all MBA courses have three components: a core taught course, a range of electives chosen by the student as relevant to his or her career path, and a dissertation or work-based project (British Council, 2005). The taught component is made up of core subjects needed

to understand the operations of any organisation, including: accountancy and financial management, operations management, marketing, organisational behaviour, human resource management, information technology and strategy. Some MBA courses are specially designed for particular industries (such as finance or retailing), or sectors (such as the public sector) (British Council, 2005). In a study jointly conducted by Durham Business School and AMBA in early February 2009, respondents were asked to rate the importance of a number of topics within their MBA, from 1: very unimportant to 5: very important. The most important topics, with the highest average out of 5, were: Business Policy and Strategy (4.37), Organizational Theory (3.93), Change Management (3.86), External factors affecting organizations (3.94) and Leadership and Entrepreneurship (3.91). Those which received the lowest average ratings were: Sustainability (2.72), Corporate Governance (2.94) and Corporate Social Responsibility (2.74).

3.4.5 MBA admission requirements

The minimum qualification MBA applicants could be asked for is an honours degree or a professional qualification (British Council, 2005). Usually an MBA will also require three years' management experience prior to entry, although there are a few UK business schools that will accept newly qualified graduates or which value any work experience at all. A few business schools offer a preliminary qualification that can be converted to an MBA after the candidate has gained the necessary experience. Business schools require applicants to have a good understanding of both written and spoken English (IELTS level 6-7) and, depending on the overall profile of the candidate, some strongly encourage all full-time MBA applicants to take the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), which is especially advised for overseas candidates. However, if the applicant's entrance profile is good the business school may not insist on the GMAT (British Council, 2005). A few schools in the UK do not rely on the GMAT at all, and several more use it at their discretion in the light of their knowledge about an applicant's overall profile. Applicants' characteristics are also important, and an academic reference and several essays may also be part of the requirement (British Council, 2005).

3.4.6 Tuition fees for the MBA

Studying for an MBA involves a significant investment of time and money (AMBA, 2010), and it is therefore to be expected that international HE aspirants and applicants want

to compare and contrast full-time MBA courses in different countries in order to reduce the uncertainly associated with their decision-making, and to select an MBA which best suits their needs. Regardless of the delivery format, the direct and indirect costs of an MBA to individuals and organisations can be very high. Tuition fees for MBA courses in the UK start from £10,000 for a full-time course of 12-16 months in length. MBA courses at what are considered the most prestigious business schools in the UK can routinely cost £53,900 for full-time courses of 15-21 months in length, and taking into account the opportunity costs of missing a year of working, this makes an MBA an extremely expensive undertaking. Therefore, for both sponsoring corporations and individuals, the MBA is clearly viewed as a major investment of time and money.

3.4.7 Sources of information used during the MBA selection process

QS TopMBA 2011 data reveals that ranking websites such as the Financial Times, BusinessWeek, TopMBA and Economist have vied for top place in the league table of MBA ranking websites. QS TopMBA 2011 data shows that OSNs such as Facebook and LinkedIn are also among the online sources used during the course selection process.

Table 6 Sources of Information, QS TopMBA Applicant Survey 2011

Online sources	2011	Rankings	2011
Google	77%	Financial Times	62%
TopMBA.com/Scorecard	47%	Bloomberg Businessweek	52%
GMAC.com	41%	QS TopMBA career Guide/TopMBA.com	47%
Businessweek	39%	The Economist	45%
FinancialTimes.com	34%	QS World University Rankings	39%
Economist.com	31%	U.S News and World Report	27%
Facebook	22%	The Wall Street Journal	26%
LinkedIn	22%	Academic Ranking of World Universities	14%
Yahoo!	13%	National Rankings in destination country	12%
Studyabroad	12%	Other	3%
WSJ.com	11%	America Economia	3%
MSN	5%	Webometrics Ranking Web of World Universities	3%
Timesonline.com	5%	CHE/DAAD	2%
Studylink.com	4%	Far Eastern Economic Review	1%
Other	4%		
Chasedream.com	4%		
AMEInfo.com	1%		
Myspace	1%		
Bait	1%		

3.4.8 Geographic and demographic data

The very nature of the MBA as an internationally recognised, post-experience generalist degree attracts a wide spectrum of individuals from a variety of backgrounds (AMBA, 2011). This enriches the classroom experiences and broadens the perspectives of students who will go on to become leaders and influential decision-makers in the increasingly diverse global economy (AMBA, 2010). On average, 70% of total MBA applicants and students in Europe and UK are male and 30% are female. The average age of entering full-time MBA students is 30. Due to the nature of the MBA, which is a post-experience generalist degree, it is unsurprising to find the average ages of students are in the 30s. Full-time students are the youngest, whilst those studying by the more flexible modular, distance and blended delivery modes are the oldest (AMBA, 2010). On average, on a global scale, the majority of MBA applicants have between 0 to 4 years' work experience. MBA applicants' employment backgrounds are diverse (AMBA, 2010). On a global scale, the most common employment backgrounds are: finance, technology, consulting, engineering, manufacturing/production, education, telecoms, government/public sector, consumer goods, energy/environment/ utilities, retail/wholesale, media/advertising and non-profit/charity (AMBA, 2010).

As shown in Figure 13, European business schools have a large proportion of foreign nationals enrolling in MBAs, with 82% of the total non-national pool coming from outside the region. In contrast, students from Europe do not comprise a large percentage of the enrolment pool at MBA courses outside the Europe. 71% of the total foreign student population enrolling in MBA in Europe studied in the UK. This is followed by France (11%), Spain (7%), the Netherlands (3%) and Greece (2%).

Figure 13 MBA enrolments of non-nationals at business schools in Europe, raw data from the Association of MBA's (2010) report, Diversity on the MBA, data collation and analysis by the author
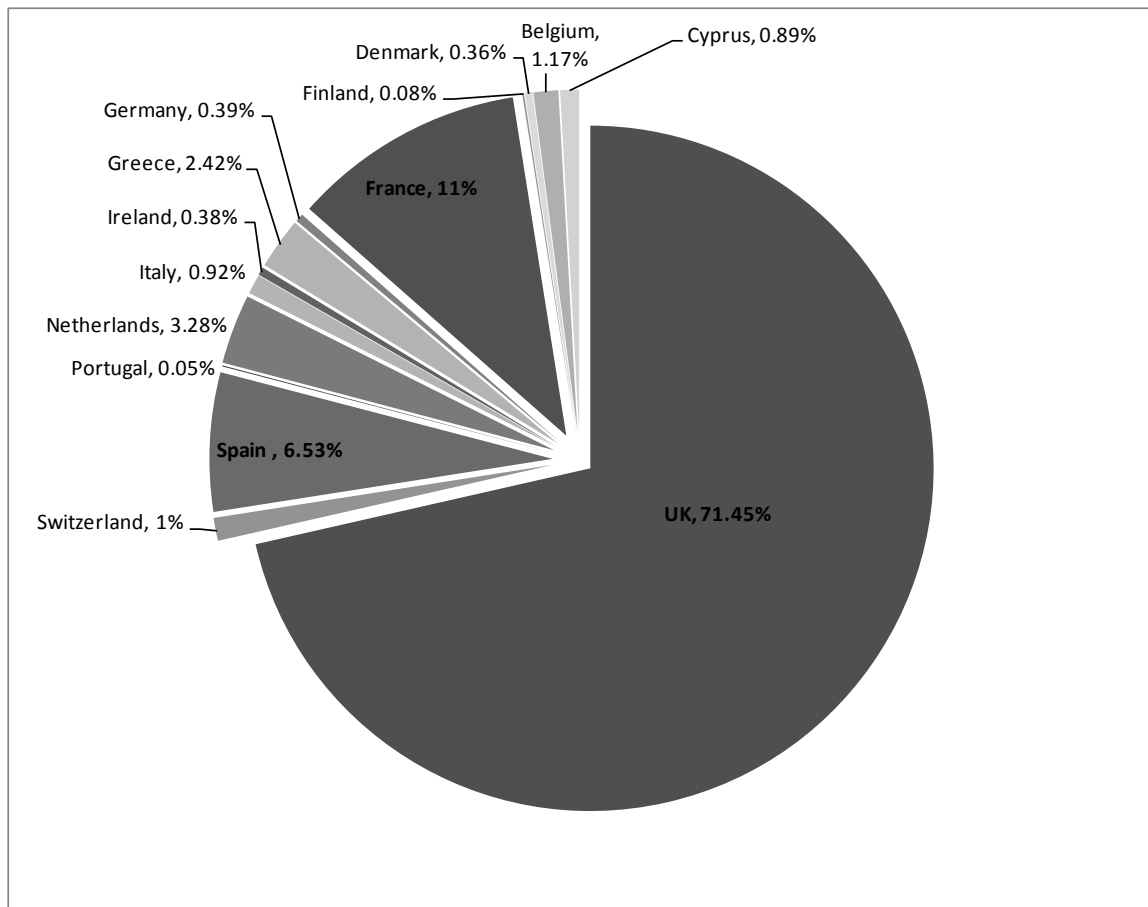
The UK is a popular host country for most Indians and Europeans. As shown in Figure 14, UK MBA courses are most popular for those from India (18.99%), Europe (16.80%), Africa (14.48%), Asia (14.23%), the Middle East (11.12%), North America (10.17%), China and Hong Kong (6.98%), Eastern Europe and Russia (5.17%), Central and Latin America (1.05%) and Australasia (0.96%). [3].

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[3] 142 accredited MBA courses in the UK which reported figures on international students.

Figure 14 MBA enrolments of non-nationals at business schools in the UK, raw data from the Association of MBA's (2010) report, Diversity on the MBA, data collation and analysis by the author
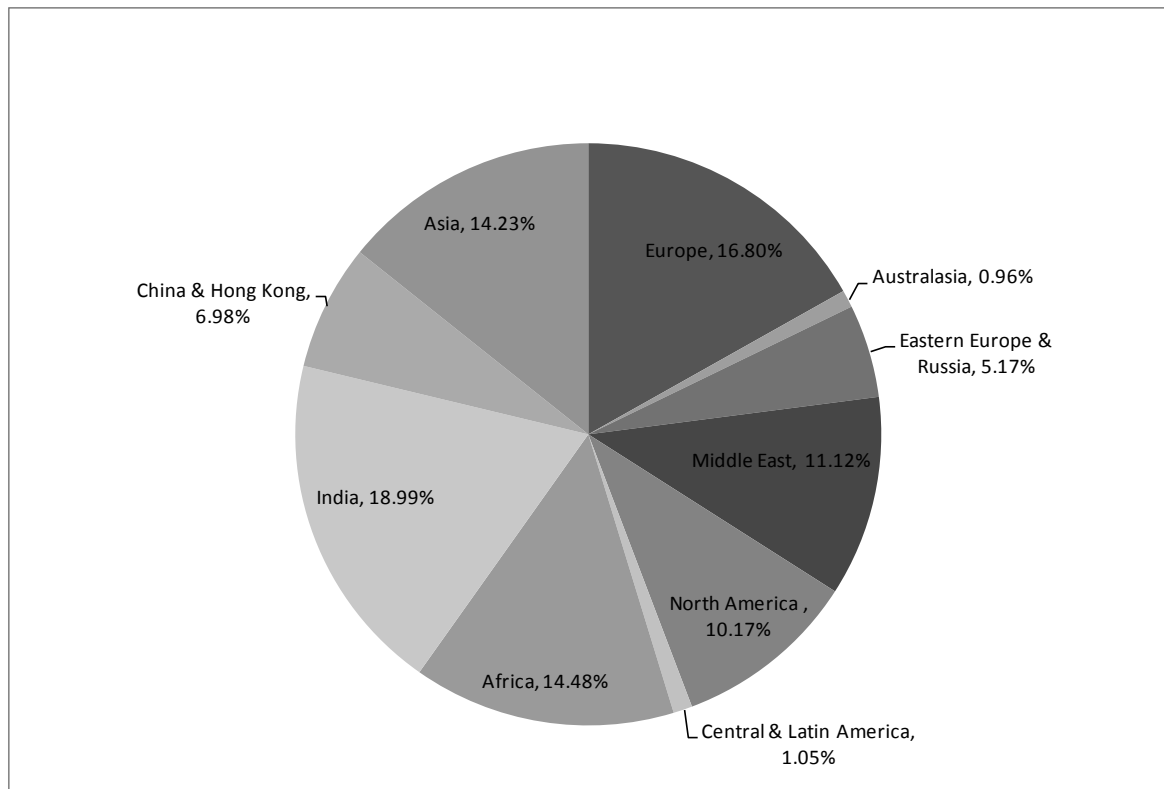
3.4.9 Motivations for taking an MBA

The QS TopMBA 2010 applicant survey is the largest survey of the perceptions and aspirations of MBA applicants ever conducted. The 68,000 applicants who registered for the QS World MBA Tour in the fall of 2009 and spring 2010 were surveyed and responses received from 3,895 (5.7%). Those surveyed were from Asia Pacific (36.3%), Africa/Middle East (18.3%), Latin America (17.6%), Eastern Europe (17.4%), Western Europe (5.5%) and US/Canada (4.8%). The QS TopMBA 2010 applicant survey reveals that an MBA remains a vocational degree for individuals seeking to further their careers with an MBA qualification, although a quarter of MBA applicants seek an MBA primarily for the purpose of education. Data from QS TopMBA shows that improving career prospects is the most important motivator for taking an MBA in 2010, followed closely by learning new skills, attaining a leadership position, building a professional network and enabling a career change. For the first time, in 2010, starting one's own business was as important a motivator as boosting salary (QS TopMBA, 2010). In another study jointly conducted by Durham Business School and AMBA in early February 2009, an electronic

questionnaire was sent to 158 accredited business schools, and MBA alumni who were current members of AMBA. Findings revealed that career progression remains the single most important motivator for taking an MBA, followed in descending order by personal development, gaining more detailed knowledge and improving skills, broadening knowledge/skills and gaining credibility.

3.4.10 Reasons for top choice of host country

QS TopMBA 2010 data reveals that international recognition of qualifications remains the single most important reason for selecting a host country. This is followed by cultural interest and lifestyle, scholarship/financial aid availability, career opportunities after graduation, improving language skills, developing a network, family connections, and the visa situation. The availability of scholarships and bursaries has increased in importance in recent years (QS TopMBA, 2010). The increase in need for financial aid and scholarships is partly as a result of more difficult access to credit, as well as the increasing rarity of companies financially supporting their staff to study for an MBA (QS TopMBA, 2010).

3.4.11 Criteria for selecting the institution

QS TopMBA 2010 data reveals that, MBA applicants around the world will choose a particular institution if they are offered a scholarship, with other selection criteria for an institution being the reputation of the institution, the career placement record, the academic background of staff, return on investment, affordability, teaching style, school specialisations, recent school ranking, the profiles of students/alumni, whether it is attended and respected by peers, employer's recommendation, the course length and the convenience of its location. However, in each region there are big differences in what makes an MBA applicant select an institution, with North Americans selecting institutions based on reputation (first), career placement record (second), return on investment (third) and student/alumni profile (fourth), with MBA rankings (fifth), and this is the only region in which rankings feature in the top five factors (QS TopMBA, 2010). Interestingly, the quality of faculty is far less important to North Americans than to HE aspirants and applicants from any other region. The availability of scholarships and bursaries are a primary factor in institution selection for MBA applicants from Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe and Latin America.

The next section reviews some of the existing literature on OSNs.

3.5 Online social networks

The primary aim of this study is to explain how the choice of course of study abroad interrelates with participation in OSNs. Guided by the research question in section 1.3, the focus of this section is specific to OSNs. The literature in this section contributes to a greater understanding of OSNs, to the analysis of the research data in Chapter 5 and to the discussion of findings in Chapter 6. It must be acknowledged that there are potential challenges arising from the terminology used to describe new media in the literature, and this is discussed in the following section.

3.5.1 Potential terminological difficulties

While a variety of terminologies have been suggested to describe the new media, the term 'online social networks' is used in the current research. Popular terms to describe new media include "social software" (e.g. Bächle, 2006; Fuchs *et al.*, 2010; Shirky, 2003), "read/write Web" (e.g. Bridgewater and Borrelli, 2008), "social computing" (e.g. Parameswaran and Whinston, 2007) and "Web 2.0" (e.g. O'Reilly, 2005). There is still huge disagreement about just what these terminologies mean. The term Web 2.0 is slightly different in that it includes more technologies within its scope and does not bind itself closely with the social aspect (O'Reilly, 2005; Parameswaran and Whinston, 2007). The decision to use the term 'online social networks' in the current research is influenced by existing studies which suggest that OSNs support pre-existing social relations and are used to maintain existing offline relationships or solidify offline connections (boyd and Ellison, 2007). These relations may be weak ties, but typically there is some common offline element among individuals (boyd and Ellison, 2007).

There are many types of creative new media. In the current research, the term 'online social networks' is used as an umbrella term to cover those categories of new media (e.g. social networking sites, blogs, sharing for videos, sharing for photos) which allow individuals to log on, create a profile, connect with others, see what information others have posted and contribute information. The decision to use the term 'online social networks' as an umbrella term is influenced by several sociological and psychological similarities identified in both literature and the primary data collected for the current research. For example, a number of research participants stated that they used video

sharing websites, such as YouTube, and social networking sites, such as Facebook, to acquire information about different courses. There are arguably several sociological and psychological similarities between YouTube and Facebook, which both allow individuals to log on, create a profile, connect with others, see what information others have posted and contribute information. The following section discusses the theoretical underpinnings of OSNs.

3.5.2 Theoretical underpinnings

A review of the literature reveals that there are four major theoretical perspectives developed by scholars to explain OSNs. They include the sociological and psychological needs approach, the content-based approach, the co-creation and co-production approach, and viral growth. This categorization is inspired by the work of Fisher *et al.* (2011), Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), Wigand *et al.* (2008), Kuznetsov (2006) and Gangadharbatla (2010). The theoretical perspectives discussed in this section will contribute to the discussion of findings in Chapter 6.

3.5.2.1 The Sociological and psychological needs approach

Early in the history of communications research, an approach was developed to study the 'gratifications' which attract and retain audiences for the kinds of media and the types of content which satisfy their social and psychological needs (Simoni and Balla, 1977). This approach to mass communication argues that individuals bend the media to their needs more readily than the media overpower them, and therefore that the media are at least as much agents of diversion and entertainment as of information and influence (Katz *et al.*, 1973). The selection of media and content, and the uses to which they are put, are influenced considerably by an individual's social role and psychological predisposition (Katz *et al.*, 1973). Katz *et al.* (1973) developed a comprehensive list of sociological and psychological needs said to be satisfied by exposure to mass media:

- Needs related to strengthening information, knowledge, and understanding, which can be called cognitive needs.
- Needs related to strengthening aesthetic, pleasurable and emotional experience, or affective needs.

- Needs related to strengthening credibility, confidence, stability, and status, which combine both cognitive and affective elements and can be labelled integrative needs.

- Needs related to strengthening contact with family, friends, and the world. These can also be seen as performing an integrative function.

- Needs related to escape or release of tension, which we define in terms of the weakening of contact with self and one's social roles.

(Katz *et al.*, 1973)

One can identify a number of changes in the context of communication with the invention of the Internet. Behaviour on the Internet, as in other areas of life, is motivated by our desires to fulfil our basic human needs, and OSNs have allowed us to satisfy these needs in more complex ways (Wigand *et al.*, 2008). A review of the literature reveals that a number of human needs can be said to be satisfied by use of OSNs. These are listed in Table 7.

Table 7 Human needs satisfied by exposure to online social networks

Human needs	Authors
Need for autonomy	Kuznetsov (2006)
Need for entertainment	Wigand *et al.* (2008)
Need for relatedness or need to belong	Gangadharbatla (2010)
Exhibitionism	Fisher *et al.* (2011)
Voyeurism	Fisher *et al.* (2011)
Need to acquire information	Wigand *et al.* (2008)
Need to acquire goods	Wigand *et al.* (2008)
Need for competence-related feedback	Wigand *et al.* (2008)
Altruistic needs	Kuznetsov (2006)

In terms of the "need for autonomy", the freedom to make independent decisions attracts many individuals to the arena of OSNs (Kuznetsov, 2006). With respect to the "need for entertainment", Wigand *et al.* (2008) argue that the need for entertainment is a behaviour that is strongly represented on the Internet, entire sites and applications have been developed and used to meet the need to be entertained. Previous research has shown that being playful and entertained in the context of the Internet leads to fulfilment of different basic human needs, depending upon an individual's personality characteristics (e.g. Ryan *et al.*, 2006a). For instance, players who engage in Multi-Player Gaming may find that they have their need for relatedness satisfied (Ryan *et al.*, 2006b). As regards to the "need for relatedness", OSNs allow members not only to find out information, but also to connect to

others by linking to their profiles, joining and creating groups, and to send public and private messages to their friends (Gangadharbatla, 2010). For decades social and personality psychologists have argued that people have an intrinsic motivation to affiliate and bond with each other (e.g. Carvallo and Pelham, 2006; Maslow, 1968; McClelland, 1987; Murray, 1938). OSNs offer a space in which people can address the need to belong by using functionalities that enable conversations and information-gathering, along with the possibility of gaining social approval, expressing opinions, and influencing others (Gangadharbatla, 2010). Therefore, individuals' attitudes and behaviour in relation to OSNs may stem from their need to belong. Gangadharbatla (2010) argues that the need to belong can be understood on the basis of a fundamental orientation towards interpersonal relations, in which there are three basic needs which underlie individuals' group-seeking behaviour:

- Inclusion, which pertains to the need to belong to or include others in a circle of acquaintances.
- Affection, or the need to love or be loved by others.
- Control, which encompasses the need to exert power over others or give power over the self to others.

(Gangadharbatla, 2010, p. 8)

Joining OSNs can meet all three of the above needs (Gangadharbatla, 2010). In terms of the "need for exhibitionism" and the "need for voyeurism", Fisher *et al.* (2011) argue that the architecture and the culture of OSNs promote digital emotional exhibitionism and associated voyeurism, with individuals projecting their (sometimes imagined) identities in the dynamic and free floating digital world and offering opportunities for others to look in an observe them. Individuals demonstrating exhibitionism, for example, upload photos, post comments, and update statuses in the hope that others will view and interact with their displays (Fisher *et al.*, 2011). Individuals exhibit voyeuristic behaviour when they access this content and engage in new social exchanges about it (Fisher *et al.*, 2011). Motivations for exhibitionism on OSNs could possibly include self-validation, the desire to manage one's self-identity, the development of new relationships, and the desire to exert social control (Calvert, 2004). With respect to the "need to acquire information", "need to acquire goods" and "need for competence-related feedback", Wigand *et al.* (2008) argue

that an individual may decide to purchase an item because they believe it will make them fit in with others (in order to better relate to others) or may seek information on the Internet about average scores on a test in order to compare themselves with others (i.e. the need for competence-related feedback). Finally, in terms of "altruistic needs", many contributions to OSNs can be characterized as altruistic acts (Kuznetsov, 2006). An individual who acts out of altruism aims solely to benefit others without any intent to gain or improve his or her own situation (Kuznetsov, 2006). For example, many contributions to Wikipedia can be characterized as altruistic acts, and Wikipedians who are motivated by altruism invest time and effort into their work without any desire for compensation except for the satisfaction of sharing their knowledge (Kuznetsov, 2006).

3.5.2.2 Content-based approach

Research shows that individuals frequently rely on the open information resources available on the Web (e.g. Gardner and Eng, 2005; Holliday and Li, 2004). OSNs exhibit a rich variety of information sources (Roth *et al.*, 2008). In addition to the content itself, there is a wide array of non-content information available, such as links and consumer product ratings and reviews (Agichtein *et al*., 2008). User-generated content comes from those who voluntarily contribute data (Krumm *et al.*, 2008), and for content suppliers the process can be rewarding through the recognition they receive for their contributions (Krumm *et al.*, 2008). User-generated content is among the largest and fastest growing aspects of OSNs (Fisher *et al.*, 2011), in part because user-generated content is relatively inexpensive to create (Fonio *et al.*, 2007; Krumm *et al.*, 2008). The character of much user-generated content is dynamic, fluid and always open to adaptation (Munar, 2010). The lack of full control over one's own production is part of the essence of user-generated content, and this assumption of lack of control over user-generated content is part of the system architecture of OSNs (Munar, 2010). Clever *et al.* (2007) argue that contrary to the expectations one would usually have in relation to incentives for creating and sharing content, users of OSNs are not motivated by remuneration but by a variety of reasons including enjoyment of the creative process, a desire to entertain others, a desire to express themselves, to share experiences and document their lives, and a desire to be part of OSNs, thereby making new friends and staying in touch with old ones. Moreover increased availability of platforms for the creation of user-generated content (e.g. for creating,

editing and hosting content) are bringing down the entry barriers to creating content (Clever *et al.*, 2007).

3.5.2.3 The Co-creation and co-production approach

Today's consumers are increasingly active information seekers and are no longer dependent on information from organisations (Fagerstrøm and Ghinea, 2013). Furthermore, consumer-to-consumer communications provide consumers with an alternative source of information and different perspectives (Fagerstrøm and Ghinea, 2013). The co-creation of value provides a shift from an organisation-centric view to a more balanced view of an organisation and its clients interacting and co-creating experiences with each other (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Co-creation and co-production in OSNs have recently become important topics of discussion in IS literature, for example in Fisher *et al.* (2011) and Sawhney *et al.* (2005). Co-creation allows stakeholders to actively co-construct their own consumption experiences through individualized interaction and the unique value is in the co-creation experience itself (Fisher *et al.*, 2011). This is a shift in perspective from creating value for stakeholders to creating value with stakeholders where the knowledge, resources and equipment possessed by stakeholders are complementary (e.g. Normann and Ramirez, 1993; Wikstrom and Normann, 1994). Co-created value provides mutual benefits for both the organization and stakeholders. Organizations benefit from a large membership of stakeholders who can provide a range of benefits, such as brand awareness and idea generation, while stakeholders benefit from the ability to better fulfil their needs and interests. Sawhney *et al.* (2005) distinguish between the traditional conceptualisation of stakeholder engagement in physical environments and the idea of co-creation in OSNs. Their findings are presented in Table 8.

Table 8 Key differences between stakeholder collaboration in physical and online social network environments (Sawhney *et al*., 2005)

	Traditional notion of stakeholder engagement in physical environments	Co-creation notion of stakeholder engagement in OSN environments
Innovation perspective	Organization centric	Stakeholder centric
Role of the stakeholder	Passive-stakeholder voice as an input in creation and testing of products/services	Active stakeholders as partners in the innovation process
Direction of interaction	One-way interaction with stakeholders	Two-way dialogue with stakeholders
Intensity of interaction	One-off contingent basis	Continual dialogue
Richness of interaction	Focus on inter-organizational knowledge	Focus on social and experiential knowledge
Size and scope of audiences	Direct interaction with current stakeholders	Direct as well as mediated interactions with stakeholders

Sawhney *et al.* (2005) argue that in the physical world, communicating (and absorbing) rich information requires physical proximity and interactions between different individuals. These constraints limit the number of stakeholders that the organization can have a dialogue with. Moreover, the organization can interact with a large number of stakeholders through surveys, but this type of interaction does not allow for rich dialogue. According to Sawhney *et al.* (2005), OSNs allow the organization to engage with a much larger number of stakeholders without significant compromises to the richness of the interactions. This makes stakeholders highly involved in the joint experience of co-creation.

3.5.2.4 Viral growth

Online viral growth is said to be the electronic version of traditional word-of-mouth (Bidgoli, 2004). Word-of-mouth can be defined as the sharing of information (Bashar and Wasiq; Ltifi and Gharbi, 2012; Wahab and Norizan, 2012). Word-of-mouth is a successful method of sharing information because it fosters familiarity, connection, care and trust and because many individuals like to share information for a variety of reasons, including sharing experiences in order to help others (Abedniya and Mahmouei, 2010). According to Abedniya and Mahmouei (2010, p. 140), "viral messages can reach and potentially influence many receivers, and are usually perceived by consumers to be more reliable and credible than firm-initiated ones, since the senders of viral are mostly independent of the market". The spread of a message on OSNs is similar to the spread of a virus (Fisher *et al.*, 2011). On OSNs viral messages are actively transmitted in the form of information on

services, new features or benefits of services (Fisher *et al.*, 2011). OSNs are particularly suited for the spread of viral messages as many individuals can join them easily and free of charge (Abedniya and Mahmouei, 2010), and the "social network" element embedded in them makes it easy to transmit a message to a large group of individuals (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011). Research has shown that individuals have many different motivations for spreading messages about organizations, including extreme satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the organization (Anderson, 1998; Bowman and Narayandas, 2001; Dichter, 1966; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002; Richins, 1983), commitment to the organization (Dick and Basu, 1994), length of the relationship with the organization (Wangenheim and Bayón, 2004), and novelty of the product or service (Dahl and Moreau, 2007). Ho and Dempsey (2010) examine individuals' motivations for passing on a viral message, identifying four potential motivations including: the need to be part of a group, the need to be individualistic, the need to be altruistic, and the need for individual growth. Ho and Dempsey (2010) find that those individuals who are more individualistic and/or more altruistic tend to forward more viral messages than others. The following section provides an overview of the criticisms and controversies surrounding OSNs.

3.5.3 Criticisms and controversies surrounding online social networks

The growth of OSNs has also met criticisms on a range of issues. Trust and online privacy are most important areas of concern for critics (Acquisti and Gross, 2006; Dwyer *et al.*, 2007). A review of the literature reveals that users disclose a lot of information on OSNs, and they are often not particularly aware of privacy options or of who can view their profiles (Acquisti and Gross, 2006). It is not well understood how concerns about privacy and trust influence interactions within OSNs and further research is needed in order to "understand the development of relationships in the online social environment and the reasons for differences in behaviour on different sites" (Dwyer *et al.*, 2007, p. 339). In their online survey of Facebook and MySpace users, Dwyer *et al.* (2007) find that in online interactions trust is not as necessary in the building of new relationships as it is in face to face encounters. Dwyer et al. (2007, p. 339) suggest that "in an online site, the existence of trust and the willingness to share information do not automatically translate into new social interactions".

The co-creation of value and viral growth in OSNs can be risky because organizations have previously relied on business models focused on creating a tangible product and/or service

and if an organization fails to provide a positive experience for stakeholders negative consequences can occur, such as negative publicity among stakeholders (Wesch, 2008). Co-creation of value with stakeholders requires organizations to become more directly involved with them. Much of the concern surrounding the online viral growth concerns the inability to control the viral message where anonymous individuals can post and edit a viral message (e.g. Payne *et al.*, 2011). Unfortunately, in many cases, the motivations of the creator of the viral message are often ambiguous and this ambiguity can cause significant problems (Payne *et al.*, 2011). The following section discusses the geographic and demographic distribution of OSNs.

3.5.4 Geographic and demographic distribution of online social networks

The secondary data presented in this section are collated and analysed by the author. The secondary data in this section contributes to a greater understanding of OSNs, and contributes to the analysis of the research data in Chapter 5 and the discussion of findings in Chapter 6. Data from the Ignite Social Media (2012) report reveals that there are five global OSNs: Facebook, LinkedIn, Flickr, Twitter and YouTube. Table 15 provides a list of OSNs and their relative popularities in different regions. This list is not complete, however it recognizes the most important OSNs. Based on a simple design, broad demographic appeal and a focus on connecting, Facebook has become the largest OSN globally (Nielsen Report, 2009; eMarketer Report, 2010). Facebook has the greatest reach in the UK, followed by Italy, Australia and USA (Nielsen Report, 2009).

Table 1 Online social networks top regions, raw data from Ignite Social Media (2012), data collation and analysis by the author.

Top Regions	Global	Algeria	Argentina	Armenia	Australia	Belarus	Belgium	Brazil	Bolivia	Cambodia	Canada	Chile	China	Colombia	Croatia	Czech Republic	Ecuador	Estonia	Ethiopia	Fiji	Finland	France	Georgia	Germany	Hong Kong	India	Indonesia	Ireland	Israel	Italy	Jamaica	Japan	Kuwait	Laos	Malaysia	Mexico	Myanmar	Netherlands	New Zealand	Norway	Pakistan	Peru	Philippines	Poland	Portugal	Puerto Rico	Russian Federation	Singapore	Slovenia	South Africa	Spain	Switzerland	Taiwan	Thailand	Trinidad and Tobago	Tunisia	Turkey	Turkmenistan	Ukraine	United Arab Emirates	United Kingdom	United States	Venezuela
Badoo.com																														X																					X					X						X
Bebo.com																				X																			X																						X	X
Digg.com					X						X																																																			X	
Douban.com	X												X												X																							X					X									X	
Facebook.com	X																																																														
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Hyves.nl							X																															X																									
Identi.com											X											X		X																												X						X						X
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Last.fm.com												X			X	X	X		X																									X																			X
Linkedin.com	X																																																														
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Meetup.com					X						X																																																			X	X
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Mixi.jp								X																								X																															
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Newsvine.com					X						X																																																			X	X
Ning.com																											X									X							X																					
NK.pl																																									X			X																			
Odnoklassniki.ru				X																			X																																				X	X			
Plaxo.com							X																																											X												X
Plurk.com													X												X					X													X										X				X					X
QQ.com													X																																																	
Reddit.com											X																X																																			X	
Renren.com							X																																																								
Reunion.com											X											X																																								X	
Skyrock.com					X		X															X																																						X			
Sonico.com								X					X																																																		X
Stumbleupon.com											X																									X													X													X	X
Tagged.com																		X	X																																												
Taringa.com			X								X																																																				
Tribe.com					X						X																																																			X	X
Tuenti.com																					X																		X									X				X											
Tumblr.com																																											X																			X	
Twitter.com	X																																																															
Vkontakte.ru					X																																										X													X			
Wayne.com											X																									X							X																			X	
Weibo.com													X														X								X																	X											
Wer-kennt-wen.de																								X			X																										X										
Xanga.com											X																X																					X															X
Yelp.com																																																																X
YouTube.com	X																																																															

62

Data from the Ignite Social Media 2012 report shows that, on average, the proportion of males using OSNs (51%) is slightly greater than that of females (49%). However, there is a significant difference between the proportions of males and females using different OSNs as shown in Table 10.

Table 10 Gender breakdown of online social network usage, raw data from Ignite Social Media (2012), data collation and analysis by the author.

	Female	Male		Female	Male
Badoo.com	52%	48%	Ning.com	60%	40%
Bebo.com	69%	31%	NK.pl	31%	69%
Digg.com	33%	67%	Odnoklassniki.ru	21%	79%
Douban	21%	79%	Plaxo.com	52%	48%
Facebook.com	61%	39%	Plurk.com	50%	50%
Fark.com	23%	77%	QQ.com	21%	79%
Flickr.com	54%	46%	Reddit.com	24%	76%
Flixster.com	50%	50%	Renren.com	23%	77%
Fousquare.com	60%	40%	Reunion.com	25%	75%
Friendster.com	57%	43%	Skyrock.com	55%	45%
Habbo.com	66%	34%	Sonico.com	60%	40%
Hi5.com	60%	40%	Stumbleupon.com	52%	48%
Hyves.nl	57%	43%	Tagged.com	64%	36%
Identi.com	45%	55%	Taringa.com	42%	58%
IMVU.com	70%	30%	Tribe.com	52%	48%
Kaixin001.com	19%	81%	Tuenti.com	57%	43%
Last.fm.com	50%	50%	Tumblr.com	59%	41%
Linkedin.com	45%	55%	Twitter.com	57%	43%
Livejournal.com	52%	48%	Vkontakte.ru	21%	79%
Meetup.com	57%	43%	Wayne.com	48%	52%
Metafilter.com	50%	50%	Weibo.com	71%	29%
Mixi.jp	57%	43%	Wer-kennt-wen.de	81%	19%
Multiply.com	50%	50%	Xanga.com	69%	31%
MySpace.com	65%	35%	Yelp.com	55%	45%
Netlog.com	48%	52%	YouTube.com	52%	48%
Newsvine.com	45%	55%			

Overall gender breakdown (average)	
Male	51%
Female	49%

OSNs are most popular, on average, among 25-34 year olds, with a 33% penetration, and least popular among those aged 56 and over. The proportion of users in different age groups differs from one OSN to another. This is illustrated in Table 11.

Table 11 Online social networks age breakdown, raw data from Ignite Social Media (2012), data collation and analysis by the author

	0-17	18-24	25 -34	35-44	45-54	55-64	56 +		0-17	18-24	25 -34	35-44	45-54	55-64	56 +
Badoo.com	10%	12%	23%	23%	21%	8%	3%	Ning.com	5%	10%	24%	27%	21%	10%	3%
Bebo.com	24%	18%	21%	18%	15%	3%	1%	NK.pl	3%	5%	72%	8%	10%	2%	0%
Digg.com	4%	10%	26%	35%	16%	6%	3%	Odnoklassniki.ru	2%	6%	31%	46%	11%	3%	1%
Douban	0%	19%	71%	6%	4%	0%	0%	Plaxo.com	1%	2%	14%	30%	29%	16%	8%
Facebook.com	7%	11%	24%	22%	26%	8%	2%	Plurk.com	0%	16%	36%	38%	10%	0%	0%
Fark.com	1%	5%	24%	38%	16%	12%	4%	QQ.com	2%	12%	71%	7%	6%	2%	0%
Flickr.com	4%	9%	26%	29%	19%	10%	3%	Reddit.com	2%	14%	29%	35%	12%	6%	2%
Flixster.com	6%	9%	25%	31%	19%	7%	3%	Renren.com	0%	19%	73%	5%	3%	0%	0%
Fousquare.com	1%	8%	32%	36%	15%	6%	2%	Reunion.com	2%	3%	15%	29%	31%	14%	6%
Friendster.com	11%	14%	30%	23%	17%	3%	2%	Skyrock.com	9%	20%	42%	20%	9%	0%	0%
Habbo.com	50%	11%	12%	11%	10%	6%	0%	Sonico.com	4%	7%	62%	13%	11%	2%	1%
Hi5.com	7%	12%	50%	15%	11%	4%	1%	Stumbleupon.com	3%	15%	27%	27%	17%	8%	3%
Hyves.nl	0%	0%	34%	40%	26%	0%	0%	Tagged.com	8%	15%	32%	16%	24%	4%	1%
Identi.com	0%	12%	28%	41%	19%	0%	0%	Taringa.com	6%	18%	53%	12%	9%	2%	0%
IMVU.com	34%	17%	23%	12%	11%	2%	1%	Tribe.com	5%	7%	23%	28%	23%	11%	3%
Kaixin001.com	0%	10%	80%	6%	4%	0%	0%	Tuenti.com	0%	40%	36%	24%	0%	0%	0%
Last.fm.com	8%	15%	21%	26%	21%	7%	2%	Tumblr.com	6%	26%	26%	23%	12%	5%	2%
Linkedin.com	1%	3%	17%	34%	28%	13%	4%	Twitter.com	4%	12%	27%	29%	18%	8%	2%
Livejournal.com	5%	17%	27%	27%	14%	8%	2%	Vkontakte.ru	1%	10%	32%	49%	7%	1%	0%
Meetup.com	1%	4%	21%	34%	25%	12%	3%	Wayne.com	0%	6%	32%	26%	24%	9%	3%
Metafilter.com	3%	8%	21%	35%	20%	10%	3%	Weibo.com	0%	20%	68%	8%	4%	0%	0%
Mixi.jp	0%	73%	11%	10%	6%	0%	0%	Wer-kennt-wen.de	0%	0%	48%	22%	30%	0%	0%
Multiply.com	5%	12%	26%	26%	18%	9%	4%	Xanga.com	7%	24%	26%	22%	16%	4%	1%
MySpace.com	11%	18%	28%	20%	17%	4%	2%	Yelp.com	2%	5%	22%	32%	24%	12%	3%
Netlog.com	4%	9%	44%	16%	16%	7%	4%	YouTube.com	10%	13%	23%	23%	21%	7%	3%
Newsvine.com	1%	2%	13%	37%	25%	15%	7%								

Overall age breakdown	
0-17	5%
18-24	13%
25-34	33%
35-44	25%
45-54	16%
55-64	6%
56+	2%

On average, 46% of individuals using OSNs have some college education, followed by Bachelor's degree (20%), graduate degree (11%), high school (11%) and less than a high school diploma (11%) (Table 12).

Table 12 Online social networks education breakdown, raw data from Ignite Social Media (2012), data collation and analysis by the author

	Less than HS diploma	High School	Some College	Bachelors degree	Graduate degree		Less than HS diploma	High School	Some College	Bachelors degree	Graduate degree
Badoo.com	8%	16%	64%	7%	5%	Ning.com	8%	9%	54%	20%	9%
Bebo.com	21%	8%	60%	9%	2%	NK.pl	47%	6%	29%	8%	10%
Digg.com	8%	7%	45%	31%	8%	Odnoklassniki.ru	6%	38%	22%	29%	5%
Douban	10%	16%	13%	6%	55%	Plaxo.com	2%	9%	44%	34%	11%
Facebook.com	10%	11%	56%	16%	7%	Plurk.com	8%	6%	38%	16%	32%
Fark.com	3%	7%	31%	50%	9%	QQ.com	22%	19%	19%	6%	34%
Flickr.com	9%	9%	46%	27%	9%	Reddit.com	9%	6%	34%	42%	9%
Flixster.com	9%	9%	50%	23%	9%	Renren.com	11%	18%	17%	5%	49%
Fousquare.com	2%	6%	52%	33%	7%	Reunion.com	3%	10%	51%	26%	10%
Friendster.com	14%	9%	59%	13%	5%	Skyrock.com	13%	13%	54%	14%	6%
Habbo.com	49%	4%	42%	3%	2%	Sonico.com	9%	19%	62%	6%	4%
Hi5.com	11%	13%	65%	8%	3%	Stumbleupon.com	6%	8%	55%	23%	8%
Hyves.nl	0%	12%	66%	22%	0%	Tagged.com	8%	10%	75%	5%	2%
Identi.com	0%	0%	77%	23%	0%	Taringa.com	15%	18%	58%	7%	2%
IMVU.com	32%	5%	58%	4%	1%	Tribe.com	7%	10%	52%	21%	10%
Kaixin001.com	8%	15%	12%	9%	56%	Tuenti.com	36%	0%	64%	0%	0%
Last.fm.com	12%	9%	52%	20%	7%	Tumblr.com	11%	6%	57%	20%	6%
Linkedin.com	3%	8%	33%	40%	16%	Twitter.com	6%	8%	51%	25%	10%
Livejournal.com	14%	11%	44%	24%	7%	Vkontakte.ru	7%	50%	21%	17%	5%
Meetup.com	2%	9%	42%	36%	11%	Wayne.com	4%	10%	55%	21%	10%
Metafilter.com	6%	8%	41%	34%	11%	Weibo.com	11%	16%	16%	7%	50%
Mixi.jp	10%	12%	25%	50%	3%	Wer-kennt-wen.de	19%	14%	53%	14%	0%
Multiply.com	12%	13%	49%	18%	8%	Xanga.com	11%	9%	59%	13%	8%
MySpace.com	11%	8%	69%	9%	3%	Yelp.com	4%	8%	36%	38%	14%
Netlog.com	13%	10%	51%	18%	8%	YouTube.com	12%	10%	51%	18%	9%
Newsvine.com	3%	8%	38%	38%	13%						

Education breakdown	
Less than HS diploma	11%
High School	11%
Some College	46%
Bachelor's Degree	20%
Graduate Degree	11%

The following section reviews recent studies that focus on OSNs and choice of HE.

3.6 Online social networks and choice of higher education

Existing studies confirm that HE institutions can benefit from OSNs in a number of domains including academic publishing (e.g. Kaye *et al.*, 2013; Pochoda, 2010; Swan and Carr, 2008; Thompson, 2005), distance education (e.g. Kesim and Agaoglu, 2007; Poellhuber *et al.*, 2013), knowledge management (e.g. Mason and Ford, 2013), libraries, repositories and archiving (e.g. Maness, 2006), and teaching and learning (e.g. Dunn, 2013; Tess, 2013; VanDoorn and Eklund, 2013). Recent studies suggest that HE institutions show an increased interest in the potential of OSNs as tools for student recruitment (Constantinides and Stagno, 2011; Constantinides and Stagno, 2012). In a

quantitative study, Barnes and Mattson (2010) examined the use of OSNs among admissions officers at American HE institutions. Their findings suggest that the use of OSNs among admissions officers continues to increase and the majority of admissions officers use at least one form of OSN. In a more recent study, Barnes and Lescault (2011) find that Facebook is the most popular OSN among admissions officers for recruitment purposes, followed by YouTube and Twitter.

Nyangau and Bado (2012) argue that most research on the usefulness of OSNs for student recruitment has been conducted from an administrative perspective, from the standpoint of admissions officers. However, it is important to understand the role of OSNs in the process of decision-making about HE from the perspectives of the consumers of HE services (Nyangau and Bado, 2012). The current research provides both scholars and practitioners with insights into how OSNs are currently being utilised by international HE aspirants and applicants during the course selection process.

The role of OSNs in the process of decision-making about HE is a relatively new phenomenon and not much academic literature exists in this area. Research conducted by Fagerstrøm and Ghinea (2013), Stageman (2011), Constantinides and Stagno (2011) and Stagno (2010) are among the few recent studies that have addressed the role of OSNs in the choice of institution. Fagerstrøm and Ghinea (2013) find that the conversion rate for applicants who use OSNs is considerably higher than those who do not use OSNs. According to Fagerstrøm and Ghinea (2013), OSNs provide a significant opportunity for institutions to exchange the notion of customers as passive with a view of them as active agents, in which applicants are invited to use their own initiative rather than simply reacting to predetermined marketing activities.

In another study, Stageman (2011) suggests that incoming freshmen find university-sponsored OSNs useful in helping them to establish two-way communications with university officials, building a network of friends, establishing a personal identity, and making a smooth transition from home life to campus life.

In a quantitative study, Stagno (2010) investigates the use of OSNs by 403 students in the Netherlands and the role that OSNs played in their decision-making processes in choosing

a particular university. Stagno (2010) finds that the majority of participants had at least one OSNs profile and that the most widely used OSNs were Facebook and YouTube. However, Stagno (2010) also finds that OSNs were last on the list of sources of information used by the participants. Instead, students still tend to use university websites and brochures as primary sources of information. Stagno (2010) perceives this as a failure in universities' marketing strategies. Stagno (2010) argues that having a presence on OSNs is not a marketing strategy in itself; instead institutions should develop a clear marketing strategy for OSNs, define their goals, and make decisions based on them.

Within the same line of research, Constantinides and Stagno (2011) investigate the use of OSNs by 400 Danish students and the role that OSNs played in their decision-making processes for choosing a particular university. Constantinides and Stagno (2011) find that OSNs play a secondary role in the choice of institution, and that the impact of OSNs on the choice of institution is relatively low in comparison with other sources of information such as family and friends (Constantinides and Stagno, 2011). A possible explanation for the low importance of OSNs could be the lack of relevant content, due to the low levels of engagement with OSNs by universities as public relations and direct marketing tools. (Constantinides and Stagno, 2011). Creating attractive OSN applications and staying connected with users are major challenges for HE institutions (Constantinides and Stagno, 2011). The authors further argue that this requires the allocation of resources, an organizational structure which somehow supports OSN use and a consistent policy that keeps the content up to date (Constantinides and Stagno, 2011).

3.7 Summary

This chapter has discussed the relevant literature and secondary data drawn from various sources, which has provided a context for the research project. Guided by the research question, the focus of the review has been specific to choice and decision-making in HE and to OSNs. The literature and secondary data discussed in this chapter contribute to the analysis of the research data in Chapter 5 and to the discussion of findings in Chapter 6. The next chapter will discuss the research design and it will provide a detailed account of the way in which this research was implemented in practice.

Chapter 4

Research Design and Implementation

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the relevant literature and secondary data drawn from various sources. This chapter is concerned with the research design and its implementation, as outlined in Figure 15.

Figure 15 Conceptual Framework: Chapter 4
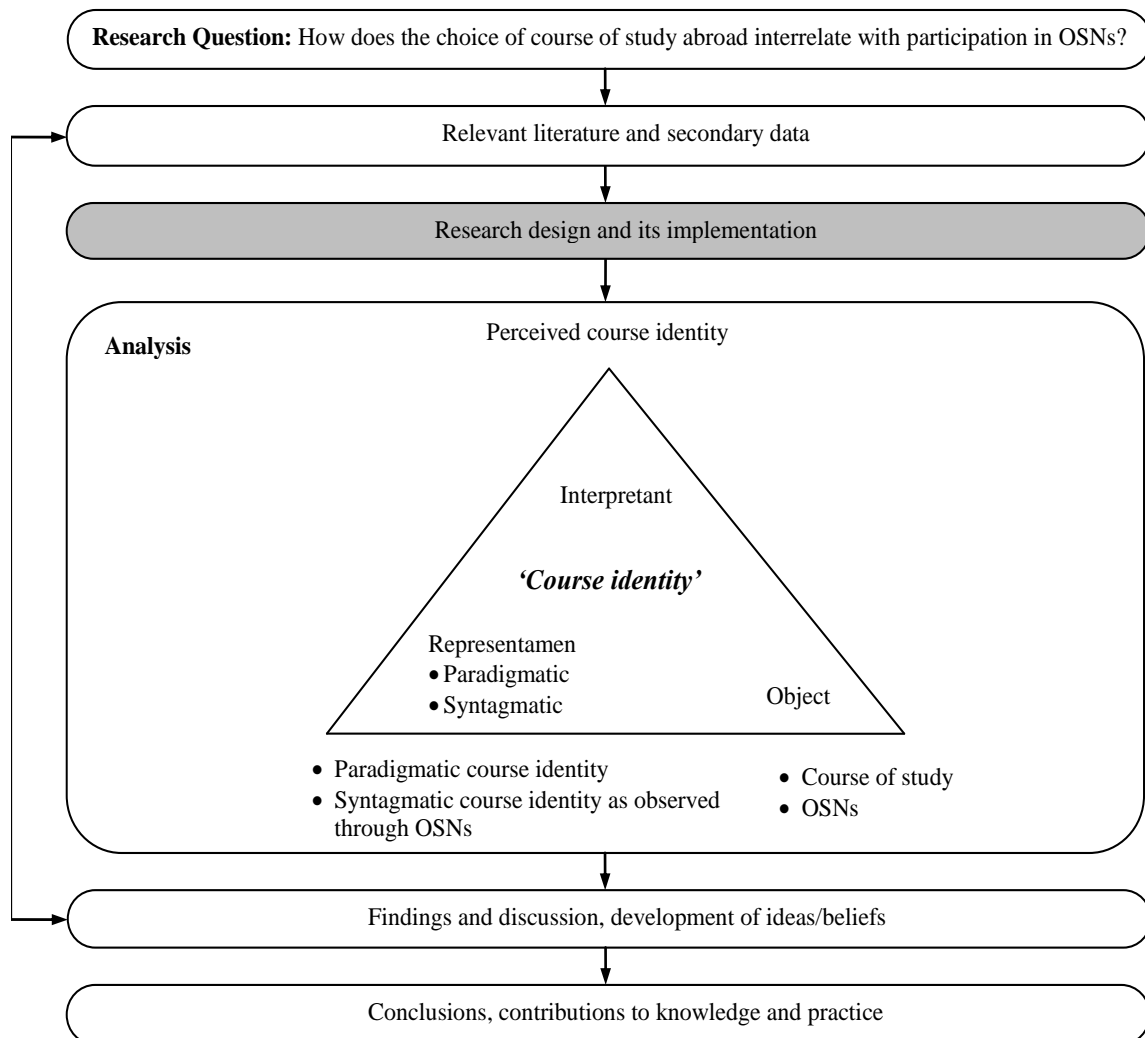
The chapter begins with a review of the philosophical assumptions, the three research paradigms; positivist, interpretive and critical, and discusses their application in the current research. The interpretive paradigm will be adopted for this work and this decision will be

justified in this chapter. Selection of the case study method as an appropriate research method will be discussed and justified. A detailed comparison will be made between case study and other qualitative research methods, followed by defining the case and unit of analysis, and discussion of case selection. Following this, the options for data collection are examined and decisions in the context of this research explained. From section 4.5, the chapter provides a detailed account of the way in which this research was implemented in practice. There is discussion of my role as a researcher, the features of participant cases, gaining access to sites and data, data collection, fieldwork, and preparation for analysis.

4.2 Philosophical paradigms

A philosophical paradigm can be considered a set of fundamental beliefs that represent a worldview that define, for its holder, the nature of the world, an individual's place in it and the possible relationships to that world and its parts (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Moreover, it has been argued that the fundamental beliefs of inquiry paradigms can be summarised by the responses given to three inextricably linked questions; the ontological, epistemological and the methodological question (Bryman, 2008; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Locke *et al.*, 2010; Silverman, 2011). These questions are shown in Table 13.

Table 13 Fundamental questions for determining inquiry paradigms (Guba and Lincoln, 1994)

---

1. **The ontological question.** What is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it? For example, if a "real" world is assumed, then what can be known about it is "how things really are" and "how things really work." Then only those questions that relate to matters of "real" existence and "real" action are admissible; other questions, such as those concerning matters of aesthetic or moral significance, fall outside the realm of legitimate scientific inquiry.

2. **The epistemological question.** What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known? The answer that can be given to this question is constrained by the answer already given to the ontological question; that is, not just any relationship can now be postulated. So if, for example, a "real" reality is assumed, then the posture of the knower must be one of objective detachment or value freedom in order to be able to discover "how things really are" and "how things really work."

3. **The methodological question.** How can the enquirer (would-be knower) go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known? Again, the answer that can be given to this question is constrained by answers already given to the first two questions; that is, not just any methodology is appropriate. For example, a "real" reality pursued by an "objective" inquirer mandates control of possible confounding factors, whether the methods are qualitative (say, observational) or quantitative (say, analysis of covariance).

(Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 108).

Ontology, epistemology and methodology offer a framework for thinking, and facilitate the exposition of my characteristics as a researcher that, in turn, set the boundaries for what is deemed to be legitimate inquiry. The two disciplinary domains encompassed by this research, those of IS and educational research, have a common social background (Mahmood, 2005), making the findings of the current research relevant to both. Although the current research is interdisciplinary, shared underlying philosophical principles unite the two domains, and provide a coherent structure for a contribution to knowledge. Research in both IS and education is founded on three philosophical paradigms: positivism, interpretivism and critical research (e.g. Klein and Myers, 1999; Mack, 2010; Oates, 2006; Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991; Taylor and Medina, 2013). The following section discusses the three philosophical paradigms and justifies the chosen option.

4.2.1 Positivism

The two main characteristics of positivism are the assumptions that the world is ordered and that it can be studied objectively (Oates, 2006). Proponents of positivism assert that scientific knowledge is only obtainable from data that can directly experienced and verified between independent observers (Bullock *et al.*, 1988; Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991; Susman and Evered, 1978). Referring to Table 13, it can be argued that in terms of ontology the positivist researcher is assumed to be objective and detached from the objects of research. Epistemologically, at the heart of this assumption is the belief that it is possible to collect objective data, which represents the real world. Methodologically positivism is based on reductionism and repeatability of studies (Oates, 2006). Despite its success in the natural sciences, it has been suggested that the positivist paradigm is not the only, or indeed always the most appropriate basis for IS and educational research (e.g. Galliers and Land, 1987; Mack, 2010). The positivist paradigm has been criticised for applying the scientific method to research of human affairs (Mack, 2010). For example, in the context of educational research, Mack (2010) argues that uniform causal links that can be established in the study of natural science cannot be made in the world of the classroom where teachers and learners construct meaning. According to Galliers and Land (1987), the phenomena that can be studied under laboratory conditions are limited and that there are difficulties in reproducing a 'real world' environment. Galliers and Land (1987) suggest that a study of the influence of decision-making aids on the decision-making behaviour of, for example, a manager can only be properly studied in a real world decision-making

environment, which may, for instance be noisy and stressful. Moreover, Galliers and Land (1987) propose that the requirement to give variables values, leads to the elimination of factors that are difficult to assign value to.

4.2.2 Interpretivism

In contrast to positivism, the interpretive position considers the methods of natural science to be inappropriate where human beings are concerned, mainly because different people will interpret the same situation differently (Braa and Vidgen, 1999). A fundamental premise of the interpretivist paradigm is that social reality is not fixed, rather it is subjective and always subject to interpretation (Denzin, 1989; Hughes and Sharrock, 1997). Walsham (1993) argues that research of an interpretive nature adopts the position that our knowledge of human action is a social construction, and therefore an objective reality cannot be discovered by researchers or replicated by others. Theories about reality are ways of making sense of the world and shared meanings that occur are a form of intersubjectivity rather than objectivity (Walsham, 1993). Referring to Table 13, in ontological terms interpretivists aim to document a research setting by identifying, exploring and explaining the relationships and dependencies between different themes. This subjective interpretation results in a methodology that relies a rich descriptions of actors studied in their everyday settings. Interpretivists assume that reality cannot be studied without reference to the social actors involved, including both the research subjects and the researcher (Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991; Walsham, 1993, 1995a, 1995b):

> *"In this view, value-free data cannot be obtained, since the enquirer uses his or her preconceptions in order to guide the process of enquiry, and furthermore the researcher interacts with the human subjects of the enquiry, changing the perceptions of both parties. Interpretivism contrasts with positivism, where it is assumed that the objective data collected by the researcher can be used to test prior hypotheses or theories"*

> (Walsham, 1993:76)

However, interpretivism is not without critique. For example, Mack (2010) argues that one of the limitations of interpretive research is that it abandons the scientific procedures of verification and therefore results cannot be generalized to other situations. However, from an interpretive position, the validity of an extrapolation from one case or cases to others depends not on the representativeness of such cases in a statistical sense, but on the

plausibility and cogency of the reasoning used in describing the results from the cases, and in drawing conclusions from them (Walsham, 2006).

4.2.3 Critical

Having discussed the positivist and interpretive paradigms, I will briefly discuss the third paradigm, namely the critical paradigm. When considering the critical paradigm from an IS perspective the following can be observed:

> *"IS research can be classified as critical if the main task can be seen as being one of social critique, whereby the restrictive and alienating conditions of the status quo are brought to light. Critical research seeks to be emancipatory in that it aims to help eliminate the causes of unwarranted alienation and domination and thereby enhance the opportunities for realizing human potential. "*
>
> (Klein and Myers, 1999, p. 69)

> *"...to make this possible, critical theorists assume that people can consciously act to change their social and economic conditions. They do, however, recognize that human ability to improve their conditions is constrained by various forms of social, cultural, and political domination as well as natural laws and Resource limitations..."*
>
> (Klein and Myers 1999, p. 69)

Therefore, similar to interpretivism, the critical paradigm rejects positivist assumptions and starts from the epistemological assumption that social reality is shaped by individuals. However, unlike the interpretive approach, which places great emphasis on subjectivity, the critical paradigm holds that there are also objective aspects of reality that influence our perceptions, in the form of political, economic and cultural powers (Oates, 2006). Critical research is seen by some researchers as too theoretical and esoteric and as such has been criticized for asking unanswerable questions (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). Richardson and Robinson (2007, p. 265) argue that "critical research is likely to remain the preference of a minority of IS researchers for the foreseeable future". Avgerou (2005, p. 103) attributes this to the "emphasis on methodological accountability [that] may well inhibit criticality". Moreover, Cecez-Kecmanovic *et al.* (2008) argues that the low use of critical research is related to researchers' background knowledge, beliefs, and positions, as well as to the structures that support such research:

"Being 'critical' in IS research also means subscribing to a much broader historical, social and political view of the IS discipline and the role of IS across all institutional levels of society. Critical research draws attention to the ways in which economic and managerial interests, ideologies and discourses, assisted by educational and research funding institutions, shape and construct IS research."

(Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2008, p. 123)

4.2.4 Paradigm choice

The preceding sections have outlined the main principles surrounding the three philosophical paradigms and the resulting differences in their characteristics. This section discusses the choice of paradigm as the analytical framework for the current research. The choice of paradigm must be approached with an open mind, since there is no one paradigm that is superior to others (Mahmood, 2005), and moreover there are also options for multi-paradigm research projects (Mingers, 2001). The choice of paradigm is usually based on the given research question (s), the context, the tradition of the discipline and the researcher's willingness to take risks and challenge the traditional beliefs both of the discipline and themselves (Oates, 2006).

The research question for this study is *How* does the choice of course of study abroad interrelate with participation in OSNs? In other words, it is concerned with *how* certain events take place. This is likely to lead to multiple explanations and therefore does not favour a positivist epistemological position, which assumes that there should be one generalisable explanation of the truth. A positivist approach to the domains encompassed by this research, those of IS and educational research, is possible but would not be able to provide the desired richness in explanation and account for the messiness of the real life situation. The critical and the interpretive epistemological positions are more suitable. However, the current research is misaligned with the critical paradigm because there is no interest in the challenging of power structures for this research. This leaves the interpretive paradigm as the most appropriate option.

At the start of this research project my worldview tended towards the belief that it is possible to find a single solution to any problem, and ontologically I subscribed to the belief in an objective world (associated with the positivist paradigm). However, in the initial stages of this research and through exposure to the literature on philosophical paradigms my worldview shifted to recognise that the current situation is subjective and dependent on individuals. My epistemological viewpoint is influenced by the interpretive

standpoint, which is therefore adopted for this work. Table 14 indicates the alignment between my philosophical beliefs in relation to the research and the interpretive paradigm.

Table 14 Paradigm comparison table adapted from Chua (1986)[4]. Amendments to Chua's table are italicised.

Paradigm / Assumptions	Positivist	Interpretive	Critical	*This research*
A. Beliefs about knowledge				
Epistemological (*nature of the researcher-research relationship*)	Theory is separate from observations that may be used to verify or falsify a theory. Hypothetico-deductive account of scientific explanation accepted.	Scientific explanations of human intention sought. Their adequacy is assessed via the criteria of logical consistency, subjective interpretation, and agreement with actors' common-sense interpretation.	Criteria for judging theories are temporal and context-bound.	*Researcher believes in subjective reality and actor's common sense interpretations.*
Methodological (*how can the enquirer find out*)	Quantitative methods of data analysis and collection which allow for generalization favoured.	Ethnographic work, cases studies, and participant observation encouraged.	Historical, ethnographic research and case studies more commonly used.	*Subscribes to pragmatist beliefs in real life case studies.*
B. Beliefs about physical and social reality.				
Ontological (*form of nature and reality*)	Empirical reality is objective and external to the subject. Human beings are also characterized as passive objects; not seen as makers of social reality.	Social reality is emergent, subjectively created, and objectified through human interaction.	Human beings have inner potentialities which are alienated (prevented from full emergence) through restrictive mechanisms.	*Human interaction is essential to understanding social reality.*
Human intention and rationality	Single goal of utility-maximization assumed for individuals and firms. Means-end rationality assumed.	All actions have meaning and intention that are retrospectively endowed and that are grounded in social and historical practices.	Human intention, rationality, and agency are accepted, but this is critically analysed given a belief in false conscious-ness and ideology.	*Reflexive examination of actions and social practices.*
Societal order/conflict	Societies and organizations are essentially stable; *in the context of choice and decision-making in higher education*, "dysfunctional" conflict may be managed through the design of appropriate *information systems* control.	Social order assumed. Conflict mediated through common schemes of social meanings.	Fundamental conflict is endemic to society. Conflict arises because of injustice and ideology in the social, economic, and political domains which obscure the creative dimension in people.	*Assumes social order.*
C. Relationship between theory and practice				
	In the context of choice and decision-making in higher education, information systems specify means, not end. Acceptance of extant institutional structures.	Theory seeks only to explain action and to understand how social order is produced and reproduced.	Theory has a critical imperative: the identification and removal of domination and ideological practices.	*Aims to acquire explanations of the situation studied.*

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[4] Chua's (1986) original ideas are based on the accounting discipline. Due to the acceptance of Chua's work in information systems and educational research, it is assumed that on a philosophical level the accounting discipline is similar to the information systems and education disciplines, allowing us to build on Chua's views and modify these to the main paradigmatic characteristics for information systems and educational research.

4.3 Research method considerations

Having discussed the philosophical foundations of this work in the interpretive paradigm, I will now discuss the choice of research method. It is important to clarify the terminology used in association with research methods, particularly since in the field of IS and educational research the term "method" is often assumed to have the same meaning as "methodology" (Dillon and Wals, 2006; Venters, 2003). Methodology is primarily concerned with the theoretical underpinnings of a method (Venters, 2003). Thus, research methodology operates at a higher level of abstraction level that research method. This section begins with a review of research methods in interpretive IS and educational research, and discusses the main options for the current research, then goes on to discusses the chosen methodology and its variations in detail.

4.3.1 Research method selection

Research methods used in interpretive IS and educational research include: design and creation, experiments, surveys, ethnographies, case studies and action research (e.g. Hohmann, 2006; McMillan and Schumacher, 2009; Oates, 2006). In the following section each of these methods is explored in relation to its suitability for the research question.

The design and creation method involves development of a software artefact or a software development method (Oates, 2006), and as neither of these elements are applicable to the current research this option is dismissed. Usually relying on the use of quantitative data and statistical methods, experiments aim to make generalizations and devise laws or theories (Oates, 2006). Experiments are usually carried out in controlled environments such as laboratories, where the intervention effects can be certain to stem from specific changes (Kaplan and Duchon, 1988). In the current research, experiments are rejected because of the social complexity of the given research setting; and because we are dealing with social phenomena, culture, amongst others, which are difficult to control. It would not be possible to state exactly which variable caused which effect. Survey research, unlike experiments, is not able to confirm causal relationships between variables, but rather suggests general associations between them (Oates, 2006). Researchers select a representative data sample which allows the testing of a hypothesis, using statistics (Stycos, 1981). Similar to experiments, surveys also aim to establish generalizations,

usually relying on the positivist paradigm (Oates, 2006). Although an interpretive survey could lend itself to the current research, a survey would not be able to provide a deep understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, as the current research focuses on a contemporary phenomenon where exploration is an essential component of the process.

Grounded theory has grown in importance and recognition since the seminal work of Glaser and Strauss (1967). Martin and Turner (1986, p. 141) define grounded theory as an "inductive theory discovery methodology that allows the researcher to develop a theoretical account of the general features of the topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations of data". Criticisms of grounded theory include charges of naive inductionism (Bryant, 2002; Goulding, 2001) and limitations on a priori knowledge (Bryant, 2002; Goulding, 2001). In grounded theory the literature review is conducted after the emergence of substantive theory (Eisenhardt, 1989) and it is then, and not before theory generation, that data from the extant literature contributes to the study (Eisenhardt, 1989). Glaser (1998) cannot be more specific in this regard:

> *"Grounded theory's very strong dicta are; a) don't do a literature review in the substantive area and related areas where the research is done, and b) when the grounded theory is nearly completed during sorting and writing up, then the literature search in the substantive area can be accomplished and woven into the theory as more data for constant comparison."*

> (Glaser, 1998)

Grounded theory does not fit with the current research since it lacks emphasis on preliminary literature review, which, was needed to help identify the research problem.

The three research methods considered in most depth are ethnography, action research and case study. Ethnography, unlike experiments and surveys, is generally used in interpretive research, and to some extent in critical research (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Concerned primarily with the understanding of culture and the differing interpretations that people have of the same situations, ethnographers rely on 'thick descriptions' of situations and also acknowledge their own influence on the situation (Goulding, 2005). Ethnographies usually require the researcher to spend a long period of time in the field and emphasize detailed, observational evidence (Myers, 1997; Yin, 1994). The longer duration required by the ethnographic method was not my primary concern to use this method as for most

people the best time to do ethnographic research is during one's doctoral studies (Myers, 2008). The predominant method of data collection in ethnography is through participant observation, where an ethnographer aims to become part of the subject group and records observations without making any kind of analysis (Myers, 2008). This is evident in a study conducted by Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991) in which they studied a large multinational software consulting firm, employing participant observation as the primary method of data collection. The ethnographic method does not fit with the current research since in-depth interviews were needed, as the primary method of data collection, in order to allow me to explore the research participants' complex course selection decisions and to collect detailed information on their experiences with OSNs.

Action research was at first an attractive method. Action research can be traced back to Lewin's (1946) work (Blichfeldt and Andersen, 2006). Lewin (1946) perceives action research as a way in which researchers can bridge the gap between theory and practice (Dickens and Watkins, 1999). Lewin emphasized change and the investigation of change as key contributions of action research (Hendry, 1996). Action research has been criticized for its lack of methodological rigor (Cohen and Manion, 1980) and its lack of distinction from consulting (Avison, 1993). Several authors argue that action research should rely on the case-study method in order to enhance the acceptability of action research as a research method (e.g. Blichfeldt and Andersen, 2006; Cunningham, 1993). Action research does not fit the current research, since it lacks an emphasis on my ability to control processes and outcomes as well as the freedom to pick and select problems.

Case study is defined as a research method which involves empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real world context using multiple sources of evidence (Robson, 2002; Yin, 1994). The main sources of information for case studies are interviews that are complemented by documents such as reports (Myers, 1997). The case study method was used by Walsham (1993) in a study of a building society in the United Kingdom. The principal method of data collection was in-depth interviews with a range of organizational participants. Similar to action research and ethnography, it is difficult to generalise results from case studies. However, case researchers do not experience this difficulty to the same extent, because case researchers have opportunities to select the contexts that facilitate analytical generalization i.e. generation of abstractions

based on empirical material (Blichfeldt and Andersen, 2006). A further difference between case study, action research and ethnographic methods relates to the researcher's stance on how and to whom they disseminate their results. Action researchers and ethnographic researchers have an obligation to feed data back to the participant community with which they collaborated to identify and solve a practical problem (Blichfeldt and Andersen, 2006). In privileging a particular target audience, action researchers and ethnographic researchers may neglect the other relevant audiences (Blichfeldt and Andersen, 2006). Although case study researchers may disseminate their findings to those who participated in the study, findings are primarily targeted at the academic community (Blichfeldt and Andersen, 2006). Action research and ethnography are fundamentally about telling a story as it happens. Blichfeldt and Andersen (2006) argues that apart from storytelling, case study researchers also try to enrich and expand our understanding of phenomena beyond the level at which individual stories are constructed. Action researchers leave it to the reader to decide "what can be taken from the story" (Coghlan, 2002), whereas case study researchers seek to arrive at analytical generalizations of their work. The case study method therefore seems to be an appropriate method for the given research question and fits with my epistemological viewpoint. The choice of case study method for the current research is further justified for the following reasons:

- The research question is of "how" type. It has been well argued in the existing literature that case studies are more appropriate to research questions of the "how" and "why" types (Yin, 1994).

- A further distinction among case study and other research methods is the extent of the researcher's control over and access to actual behavioural events (Yin, 1994). The current research takes place in a real-world context in which I have not been able to control course selection decisions and participation in OSNs, and, as noted by Yin (1994), this is a criterion of case studies.

- The phenomenon that the current research seeks to explain is contemporary, according to Yin (1994), this is another criterion of case studies.

The remaining subsections in this section expand upon the methodology through a more detailed discussion of the case study method adopted for the current research.

4.3.2 Defining case study research

The origin of the term 'case study' is linked to that of 'case history' (Hamel *et al.*, 1993). The latter is widely used in clinical fields such as psychology and medicine (Hamel *et al.*, 1993). "Sociological case studies have proved to be investigations of particular cases" (Hamel *et al.*, 1993, p. 1). Seminal case studies in sociology have been popularized in social science for their rich, thick descriptions of phenomena in specific contexts. Whyte's (1995) Street Corner Society is the classic case study that examined the subculture of a Chicago neighbourhood. Case study research was subsequently taken up by other disciplines as a method of teaching in professional schools of social work, law, business administration, and other social sciences (Berg, 2004; Reinharz, 1992).

Through the work of researchers such as Yin (1994), Benbasat *et al.* (1987) and Walsham (1993, 1995a, 1995b) case studies are accepted as a legitimate and useful method of IS research. The case study is also one of the most frequently used research methods in educational research (e.g. Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier, 2012; Merriam, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Criticisms of the case study method tend to focus on the non-representativeness and lack of statistical generalizability arising from the work, and concern over the lack of rigor. However, Walsham (1993, p. 15) argues that "from an interpretive position, the validity of an extrapolation from an individual case or cases depends not on the representativeness of such cases in a statistical sense, but on the plausibility and cogency of the logical reasoning used in describing the results from the cases, and in drawing conclusions from them". The following subsection provides an overview of the type of case study adopted for the current research.

4.3.3 Interpretive case study

Case study research can be positivist, interpretive, or critical, depending upon the underlying philosophical assumptions of the researcher (Myers, 1997). The type of case study adopted for the current research is interpretive in-depth case study. According to Walsham, one of the pioneers of the interpretive case study, "the most appropriate method for conducting empirical research in the interpretive tradition is the in-depth case study" (Walsham, 1993). Drawing on the work of Kling (1987), Giddens (1977) and Pettigrew (1990), Walsham (1993) uses the interpretive case study method to provide detailed interpretations of three in-depth case studies of IS in specific organizational and cultural contexts.

In interpretive case studies, the researcher is directly involved in the process of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2007; Klein and Myers, 1999; Morse, 1994), however, in the latter, the researcher, through a close interaction with the actors, becomes a "passionate participant" (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 115). Even though this could be regarded as a pitfall, it provides an opportunity to gain a deep insight into the problem under study because an interpretive explanation documents the [participant's] point of view and translates it into a form that is intelligible to readers (Andrade, 2009; Neuman, 1997). Indeed, interpretive research makes it possible for the researcher to present their own constructions as well as those of the participants (Andrade, 2009; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Walsham, 1995a).

4.3.4 Defining the case and unit of analysis

The case study method adopted for the current research is the multi-case, embedded design. Yin (1994) categorizes case studies into four main types as shown in Table 15.

Table 15 Four types of case study design (Yin, 1994)

Single-case study	Holistic design
Multi-case study	Embedded design

The first pair of categories consists of single-case study and multi-case study. The second pair, which can be combined with either of the first pair, refer to the unit, or units, of analysis to be covered, and distinguishes between holistic and embedded (more than one focus) design (Yin, 1994). Single and multi-case studies demand different design considerations and within these case studies there may be unitary or multiple units of analysis (Yin, 1994). The case study method therefore contains four types of designs based on the different permutations: 1) single-case, holistic design; 2) single-case, embedded design; 3) multi-case, holistic design; 4) multi-case, embedded design.

In relation to single versus multi-case study categories it was necessary to evaluate whether the primary data for the current research should be collected from a single course offered at one university or several courses offered at different universities. Investigating a greater number of courses, in multiple universities, and over a longer period of time, would

present a wider and a more saturated perspective on the phenomenon under investigation, therefore I decided to collect the primary data from three distinct courses offered at three universities in the UK (i.e. multi-case study). It is suggested that multiple cases increase the methodological rigor of the study through "strengthening the precision, the validity and stability of the findings" (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Yin (1994) argues that "evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling". In relation to the case study design, a decision had to be made about whether the research problem should focus on a holistic unit or embedded units of analysis. There may be subunits of analysis incorporated within the multi-case study, such that the research design comprises more than one research focus (Yin, 1994). These subunits often offer the possibility for extensive analysis (Nielsen, 2004). The semiosis of course identity in Chapter 2 led to identification of three subunits that deserve particular attention: 'paradigmatic course identity', 'syntagmatic course identity' and 'perceived course identity'.

4.3.5 Case selection

Methodological guidelines for case selection differ between single and multiple case designs (Shakir, 2002). When the study involves more than one case, the focus shifts to the external validity of the case inquiry (Shakir, 2002). External validation, in terms of the limited generalizability of the findings can be established through the replication logic which applies to the multiple case study design (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 1994). The two approaches for establishing the replication logic in a multiple case design are "literal replication" and "theoretical replication" (Shakir, 2002) as shown in Table 16.

Table 16 Selection strategies for multi-case designs (Shakir, 2002)

Literal replication	Theoretical replication
• Cases selected to predict similar results • When rival theories are grossly different • Three to four cases	• Cases selected to predict contrasting results • When rival theories have subtle differences or to increase the degree of certainty of results • Two (or three) sets of three to four cases to pursue two (or three) patterns of theoretical replications

The approach adopted for the current research is theoretical replication. Shakir (2002) argues that the theoretical replication approach should be used when cases have different

settings and are expected to achieve different results. In the current research, the decision was made to select the MBA courses on the basis of a range of measures including course ranking, ranking of the university offering the course and geographical location. This provided a better chance of identifying patterns of difference or similarity. Features of the participant courses in this research are discussed in section 4.6.

4.4 Data considerations

So far this chapter has outlined the philosophical foundations of this work, which is grounded in interpretivism. This discussion sets out the paradigm which, together with the research question and research setting, informed the choice of research method; interpretive case study. This section further expands on the methodology through discussion of the types of data and data sources used in the current work. However, before this matter is explored in more detail, it is prudent to raise a point of clarification. Interpretive research is often equated with qualitative methods and this association is widespread. However, this combination of philosophy and methodological choice is not the only possibility, and this highlights a popular misconception in IS and educational research. There are examples of interpretive research which use quantitative methodology (Kaplan and Duchon, 1988; Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991) and positivist research based upon qualitative methodology (Wastell et al., 2001).

4.4.1 Data type

Interpretive case study research tends to be labelled as qualitative research (Myers., 1994; Walsham and Waema, 1994). The pragmatic roots of interpretive case study imply the use of interviews as the primary method of data collection (Myers, 1997). However, interviews can be of different types, for example, semi-structured and unstructured interviews are usually non-numeric, and structured interviews are usually numeric (Bryman, 2010; Fredriksson and Larsson, 2012; Jaakkola, 2010; Rowley *et al.*, 2010). This leads to the basic differentiation between qualitative and quantitative data. The latter is primarily concerned with numbers and the former with words (Miles and Huberman, 1994). A more elaborate differentiation between qualitative and quantitative data can be made in relation to their use within a research method (Siegel and Dray, 2003). This has been done below in the form of a table that compares qualitative and quantitative data in the context of research characteristics and relates this to the imperatives of the current research. As

shown in Table 17, there are a number of characteristics that are associated with both types of data. Overall, it appears that the characteristics of qualitative data align more closely with the current research.

Table 17 Data type considerations for the given research adapted after (Siegel and Dray, 2003). Additions are italicised.

	Quantitative	**Qualitative**	*This research*
Method, design	Predetermined	Ad hoc, opportunistic	*Ad hoc, opportunistic with limited level of predomination*
Sampling	Large, representative, random	Small, strategic	*Small, only three courses are examined*
Data analysis	• Standardized measures allow efficient data reduction • Facilitates combining and comparing across cases	• Volume of raw data overwhelming, often of unclear pertinence • Data reduction not straight-forward • Data not standardized across cases	*Semiotic analysis, drawing on participants' beliefs*
Evaluation of quality	Standards of quality exist, looks objective, degree of support for inferences open to scrutiny	Inferences can seem too come from "invisible" intuitions, hard to assess quality	*Quality is based on participants' interpretations and related literature*
Focus	• Questions should be specified in advance based on theory • Must be narrowed, sometimes ridiculously, to isolate variables, or it takes "black box" approach	• Open the possibility you don't know the right questions to ask in advance • Broad, holistic, explanatory, tries to grasp complex interactions of factors	*Explores complex course selection decisions and collects detailed information on participants' experiences with OSNs.*
Aimed at	• Understanding "what?" • Numerical Abstractions • Characterizing the population	• Understanding "how" and "why"? • Realistic representations • Characterizing the "design space".	*Research question focus on understanding of "How"?*
Values	Statistical validity	Practical implications	*Emphasis on practical implications*

4.4.2 Data sources

The main sources of information for case studies are interviews that are complemented by documents such as reports (Myers, 1997). The principle sources of information used in this study are interviews, complemented by reports collected from QS TopMBA, Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAT), Association of MBAs (AMBA) and Ignite Social Media. According to Yin (1994), interviews are an essential source of case study evidence because most case studies are about human affairs or behavioural events. The

following section discusses the approach to interviewing and the documentation used in the current research.

Semi-structured interviews

There are three key types of interview based on the degree of structure imposed by the researcher: structured, unstructured and semi-structured (Oates, 2006). In structured interviews, only predetermined questions are asked (Bade, 2011). In contrast, unstructured and semi-structured interviews use general questions in no specific order and encourage participants to converse (Bade, 2011). This means that participants can raise the issues that are important to them and so divulge their own terms of reference (Polft and Hungler, 1993). Both semi-structured and unstructured interviews allow interviewees to speak their minds and so they are used where the primary purpose is discovery, rather than checking (Oates, 2006). They are therefore used for in-depth investigations, especially those aimed at exploring personal accounts and feelings (Oates, 2006). Given the exploratory nature of the current research, both semi-structured interviews and unstructured interviews were appropriate options. I decided to use semi-structured interviews in order to provide some structure to encourage focus on the research topic whilst permitting scope for exploration of new insights. Semi-structured interview permits prompting and probing during the actual interview to check meaning and encourage elaboration of participants' views (May, 1993).

Interviews have limitations, which include the risk of participants telling the researcher what they think she/he wants to hear, resulting in bias and false consensus (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The researcher can also steer participants by asking leading questions and/or emphasising a certain theme or topic. The actual data collection and interpretation is subject to three judgmental heuristics in relation to 'representativeness', 'availability', and 'weighting' (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Hence, the researcher has to be on their guard when it comes to interpreting events, checking extreme cases and be generally critical of the data collection process with the aim of managing these potential biases.

Documentation

The primary data in this work is complemented by the secondary data collected from various sources. The secondary data presented in section 3.4 provides a basis for comparison of the primary data that is collected to define the paradigmatic identities of the

three participating MBA courses in Chapter 5, although it does not fully account for the interrelationship between the choice of MBA and participation in OSNs. The secondary data in section 3.5.4 contributes to a greater understanding of OSNs and to the discussion of findings. Secondary data can be generated from a setting or be relevant to research questions about it (Lofland and Lofland, 1995). Secondary data are commonly used to describe the research setting in terms of individual, group, organizational and environmental factors (Rousseau and Fried, 2001), thereby giving shape to the issues being studied. I used a range of relevant secondary data, which were manually scrutinised for their relevance and stored for later reference. A list of secondary data collected for this work is presented in the table below.

Table 18 List of documents collected for the current research

QS Top MBA	Applicant survey 2011
QS Top MBA	Applicant survey 2010
Graduate Management Admission Council	Application Trends Survey 2011
Graduate Management Admission Council	Application Trends Survey 2010
Association of MBAs	Diversity On The MBA 2010
Association of MBAs	The Post Downturn MBA 2008
Association of MBAs	Economic Downturn Survey 2009
Association of MBAs	The MBA Employment Market 2009
Association of MBAs	Criteria for the Accreditation
Association of MBAs	Career Survey 2008
Association of MBAs	Intake and Graduate Survey 2010
Association of MBAs	Intake and Graduate Survey 2007
Ignite Social Media	Social Network analysis 2012
Ignite Social Media	Social Network analysis 2011
Ignite Social Media	Social Network analysis 2010
eMarketer Report	Robust Outlook for UK Ad Spend Growth 2012
eMarketer Report	Social Network Ad Spending 2010

Summary of data sources

The semi-structured interviews undertaken in the current research and secondary data were guided by a rationale template shown in Table 19.

Table 19 Overview of data sources and rationales behind them

Data sources	Why?	How?
Course A[5]- Individual interviews (pilot) × 3 *Course A* - Individual interviews × 10 *Course B*- Individual interviews × 10 *Course C*- Individual interviews × 10	To explore research participants' complex course selection decisions and to collect detailed information on their experiences with OSNs.	Interviews were conducted with 33 international students studying on *Courses A*, *B* and *C*.
Secondary data (documents)	To provide a basis for comparison with the primary data and to describe the research setting.	The raw data collated and analysed by the author.
Literature	To get a better appreciation of general issues surrounding choice and decision-making in HE and OSNs.	Literature search was conducted in the University of Salford library, via electronic database searches.

4.5 Role of the researcher

I am an international student studying in the UK. In 2008 I created a Facebook page to connect full-time MBA students at the University of Salford and within the first four months it had reached 160 members. I was particularly intrigued that I had been contacted by several international HE aspirants and applicants from different countries enquiring about the full-time MBA course offered at the University of Salford. Some of these countries, including Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Japan have never had a strong student presence in UK HE. Therefore, it was interesting to examine how the choice of course of study abroad interrelates with participation in OSNs.

In the current research I became both an 'insider' and an 'outsider' researcher. Insider research refers to research conducted with populations of which the researcher is also a member (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Kanuha, 2000), so that the researcher shares an identity, language, and experiential base with the study participants (Asselin, 2003; Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). In contrast, outsider research refers to research where researchers do not belong to the group under study (Breen, 2007). I became an insider researcher when I

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[5] *Course A*, *Course B* and *Course C* are pseudonyms used to protect the anonymity of three participating courses in the current research. The pseudonyms used within the current research are shown in Table 20 on page 86.

decided to conduct research with other international students in the UK, and an outsider researcher with respect to my research with those international students who used OSNs during the course selection process. As an international student, I have been through the course selection process at various times, but I had never used OSNs as a source of information. I became more aware of my status as an outsider researcher when I was asked by some of my participants whether I used OSNs during my own MBA selection process. The majority of participants in my research did not seem to perceive this as an impediment to the research process and they did not express concern about my outsider status or question my capacity to appreciate their experiences with OSNs. The external stance of the outsider researcher is thought to offer a different lens through which to capture participants' experiences (Merry *et al.*, 2011). Spicer *et al.* (2004) argue that in general, outsider researchers are perceived as unbiased and their findings are more likely accepted by the public.

In the case of my role as an insider researcher, I realized that I sometimes shared experiences, opinions, and perspectives with my participants, and at other times I did not. This was not due to seeing myself sometimes as an outsider instead of an insider, rather, it was because populations are not homogeneous, so differences are to be expected. The status of insider frequently allows researchers more rapid and more complete acceptance by their participants (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009), and therefore, participants may be more open and as a result there may be a greater depth to the data gathered.

4.6 Features of participating courses

The primary data for this research are collected from three distinct full-time MBA courses offered at three universities in the UK. This section provides a general overview of these three courses. The information presented in this section is gathered from administrative staff and official University websites. For confidentiality purposes, those characteristics which could make the courses easily identifiable are not discussed.

4.6.1 An overview of *Course A*

Course A is offered at a post-1992 university (or new university). In the UK, post-1992 universities formed from polytechnics and colleges of HE. According to ranking websites, *Course A* ranks roughly in the middle of the MBA rankings in the UK. The city in which

this course is taught is small and it is not among the most internationally recognized British cities. The city infrastructure is average and the cost of living such as accommodation and transportation is lower than in larger and more internationally-recognized cities. The duration of this course is one year, and the student intake is around 25 students each year. *Course A* is accredited by AMBA. The fees for this course are not expensive but not cheap and previous alumni are eligible to receive a scholarship to a value of 10% to 20% of tuition fees. There are also other types of scholarships available such as the Vice Chancellor's scholarship of £5,000 and a £1,000 bursary for students from certain countries designated by the World Bank as 'low' and 'low to middle' economies.

Applicants are required to have a degree in any discipline, or alternative professional qualifications of an equivalent level, plus at least three years' managerial or professional work experience. International applicants are usually required to have an IELTS score of 6.5. The course curriculum is organized into three parts. Taught modules are delivered in stage one and students will be assessed through examinations, multiple choice tests and coursework. Modules taught during stage two tend to adopt a more problem-based learning approach to learning and assessment. The skills are put into practice during stage three of the course where students carry out a project within the organisation. Students are also offered a two weeks residential at an overseas location.

4.6.2 An overview of *Course B*

Course B is offered at a post-1992 university and it is an average within the MBA rankings in the UK. Unlike *Course A, Course B* is offered in a large, internationally-recognized British city. The city infrastructure is modern and the cost of living is average when compared to other large and internationally-recognized British cities. The duration of *Course B* is one academic year and the student intake is around 50 students each year. *Course B* is accredited by AMBA and the fees for this course are not expensive but not cheap, and similar to the fees for *Course A*. There are a number of scholarships and bursaries available for international students including British Council Chevening Scholarships, and a limited number of scholarships of up to £1,500 per person that are available to self-funded students who have accepted their offer and confirmed their place.

Applicants are required to have a good honours degree in any subject from a UK University, or an equivalent academic or professional qualification, plus a minimum of

three years management experience and an IELTS score of 6.5. The course curriculum is organized into three parts. During the first stage students are introduced to core concepts in management and they are assessed through group assessments, dissertation (or consultancy) project and examinations. Students select optional units during the second stage, and subject material becomes more applied in the second semester and the course considers different aspects of strategic management. In the final stage students complete either a consultancy project based in a real organization, or a dissertation.

4.6.3 An overview of *Course C*

Course C is offered at a pre-1992 university. In the UK, pre-1992 universities include ancient universities founded between the 12th and 16th centuries and the large civic universities chartered at the beginning of the 20th century before World War I. *Course C* is among the top ranked MBA courses in the world. The city in which *Course C* is offered is large and it is among the most internationally-recognized British cities. The city infrastructure is modern and the cost of living is average when compared to other large cities in the UK. The duration of *Course C* is usually longer than one year and the student intake is around 100 students each year. *Course C* is accredited by several accreditation bodies including AMBA, AASCB and EQUIS. The fee for *Course C* is very high in comparison with *Course A* and *Course B.* There are a number of scholarships and bursaries available for international students including a £10,000 scholarship awarded on individual merit, for which all applicants are automatically considered. Previous alumni are also eligible to receive a scholarship to a value of 10% to 20% of tuition fees.

Course C is very competitive and the admissions requirements are high. Applicants are usually required to have a first class honours degree, or the equivalent, from any academic discipline. Students who do not have a first class degree may be eligible for a place if they have significant managerial experience with a strong record of achievement. International applicants are usually required to have an IELTS score of 7 and pass the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT). The course curriculum is organized into three parts and students are involved in practical projects at different stages. Stage one is focused on strengthening students' interpersonal, teamwork and communication skills. The intensive, flexible core curriculum during the first stage gives students a foundation of broad management skills. Stage two includes practical projects and taught modules. During the

third stage, students complete several entrepreneurship projects. At different stages students can also travel internationally as part of consulting for multinational companies.

4.7 Gaining access to site and data

Before data collection could begin, a number of steps needed to be taken in order to gain access to the research setting, in order to obtain ethical approval and to gain consent from participants. This section considers these issues in turn and elaborates the implementation of the research protocol in practice.

4.7.1 Gaining access in practice

Despite being in academia and having broad access to the target universities, there was a need to redefine this access in view of my role as a researcher. I obtained a formal ethical approval memorandum from the Research Ethics panel at the University of Salford (see the copy of ethical approval memorandum in Appendix *2*). Agreement was acquired from the three participating institutions by contacting administrative staff and course directors. I already had support from one of the participating institutions, which was beneficial in facilitating communications with course directors and administrators at the other two institutions. According to Punch (1994), having the backing of a well-regarded academic institution can be beneficial to gaining access.

Approvals to undertake the study were gained from each university subject to conditions about maintaining an informal but close working relationship with the course directors. In order to minimize the access problem, I ensured minimal interruptions to participants' working patterns and to protect the confidentiality of the participating institutions, courses and interviewees. The pseudonyms used for the participating institutions, courses and interviewees are presented in Table 20.

Table 20 Pseudonyms used within the current research

Courses	Institutions	Interviewees	
Course A	*University A*	Pilot study	*PS1 – PS3*
		Main study	*A01 – A10*
Course B	*University B*	Main study	*B01 – B10*
Course C	*University C*	Main study	*C01 – C10*

One formal element of the agreement to participate related to the exact procedure by which international students will agree, and whether they will feel pressured by their institutions to participate in the research. It was agreed that administrative staff and course directors should not be involved directly in asking students to take part in the research, and that I should contact the students directly. I obtained permission from *University A* to contact international students via an internal mailing list held by their postgraduate office. The replies to this email came directly to me, so that members of staff did not know who was participating in the research. The information sheet for the study was attached to the email (see the copy of the information sheet in Appendix 3). The information sheet stated, amongst other things that, I am looking for volunteers, participation or non-participation would not be communicated to members of staff, details of what the research is about and what participants would be asked to do. The main communication opportunity at *University B* was through my attendance at one of the MBA teaching sessions. This was a regular session every weekday and an ideal forum for two way communication with international MBA students. The course director at *University B* asked me to deliver a short presentation about my research and include explanation about what I would want from the international students. The meeting presented a valuable opportunity to circulate the information sheet, and to request that the international students contact me if they were willing to participate. Staff at *University C* introduced me, by way of email, to their MBA student representative in order that they could facilitate an introduction to the international students. The MBA student representative at *University C* acted as one of my key contacts, and he assisted me with the circulation of information sheets and scheduling of interviews.

4.7.2 Participants consent

A vital component of the ethical discourse on research involving human subjects is the process of informed consent, which recognizes the autonomy of research subjects by

sharing the power of decision-making with them (Frankel and Siang, 1999). In the current research, it was made clear to participants that their participation was entirely voluntary. Consent forms were given, a few days before the interviews, to those international students who had agreed to participate (see the copies of research participant consent form and revocation of consent in Appendix 4 and Appendix 5).

4.7.3 Confidentiality and anonymity

Harm to human subjects can occur due to invasion of subjects' privacy and the violation of confidentiality (Frankel and Siang, 1999). Invasions of privacy may occur when research participants do not have control over the personal information revealed during the research process. Frankel and Siang (1999) argue that privacy provides individuals with some protection against harmful or unpleasant experiences, against punishment and exploitation by others, against embarrassment or lowered self-esteem and against threats to their integrity and autonomy as individuals. Invasions of privacy can increase the likelihood of harm because they deprive the individual of that protection (Kelman, 1997). In the current research, confidentiality and anonymity issues were addressed in consultation with interviewees at a preparatory meeting prior to the study commencing. My need to use a voice recorder, to maintain field notes and interview transcripts, and what these would comprise, were discussed. In view of my plans to store field notes and interview transcripts securely, it was considered acceptable to use pseudonyms for the interviewees. It was acknowledged that some conversations might be of a sensitive nature, such as a comment about a lecturer, although in practice, this happened rarely. Where this did happen, I did not note the name of the member of academic staff in order to protect their anonymity, and instead I referred to them as 'a member of academic staff'. Interview transcripts were stored separately from consent forms. Digital voice recordings were individually password protected and stored in a password-protected folder on my laptop. I agreed with participants that research data in the form of recordings and transcripts would only be accessed by me. Interviews were usually held in library meeting rooms at the respective universities. It was further agreed that interviewees would have the right to request amendment of what they had said, cut out sensitive text completely or withdraw from the research at any time without having to give any reason. Having given assurance to participants and gained their trust in the ways described, no requests to make omissions from my records were received.

4.8 Sampling

This section is divided into two, the first part discusses the sampling strategies employed, and the second is concerned with the sample breakdown.

4.8.1 Sampling strategy

This interpretive research attempts to understand the phenomenon under study through the meanings that international students assign to it. However, as the potential research population was very large there was a need to select a subset of it. The research population can be described as a set of people, products, firms, and markets, which is of concern to the reader (Dillon *et al.*, 1994). In the current research, non-probability sampling was applied through a combination of 'convenience sampling' and 'purposive sampling'. I used the convenience sampling technique initially followed by purposive sampling. I circulated an information sheet to all of the 180 international students studying on *Courses A*, *B* and *C*. Through this document, international students were invited to take part in the research. 55 international students volunteered to participate in the research. Subjects were selected on the basis of their nationality to ensure that as many diverse nationalities as possible are presented. It can therefore been seen that although I focused on recruiting available subjects (convenience sampling), specific types of individuals (i.e. on the basis of their nationality) were also recruited for the study, such that the sampling approach was also purposive in nature (Babbie, 2004; Goodwin, 1995; Rossouw, 2003). Convenience sampling is one of the most commonly used sampling techniques (Russell and Gregory, 2003). In convenience sampling, participants are primarily selected on the basis of ease of access for the researcher and, secondarily, for their knowledge of the subject matter (Russell and Gregory, 2003).

4.8.2 Sample breakdown

In total, 33 international students were selected representing 22 countries from four continents: Europe (France, Germany, Latvia and Turkey); America (Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Bahamas, Mexico and USA); Asia (Japan, China, Hong Kong, Thailand, India, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia); Africa (Egypt, Cameroon, Mali, Nigeria and Zimbabwe). The sample breakdown for the current research is presented in Figure 16. A full breakdown is given in Table 21.

Figure 16 The sample breakdown for the current research
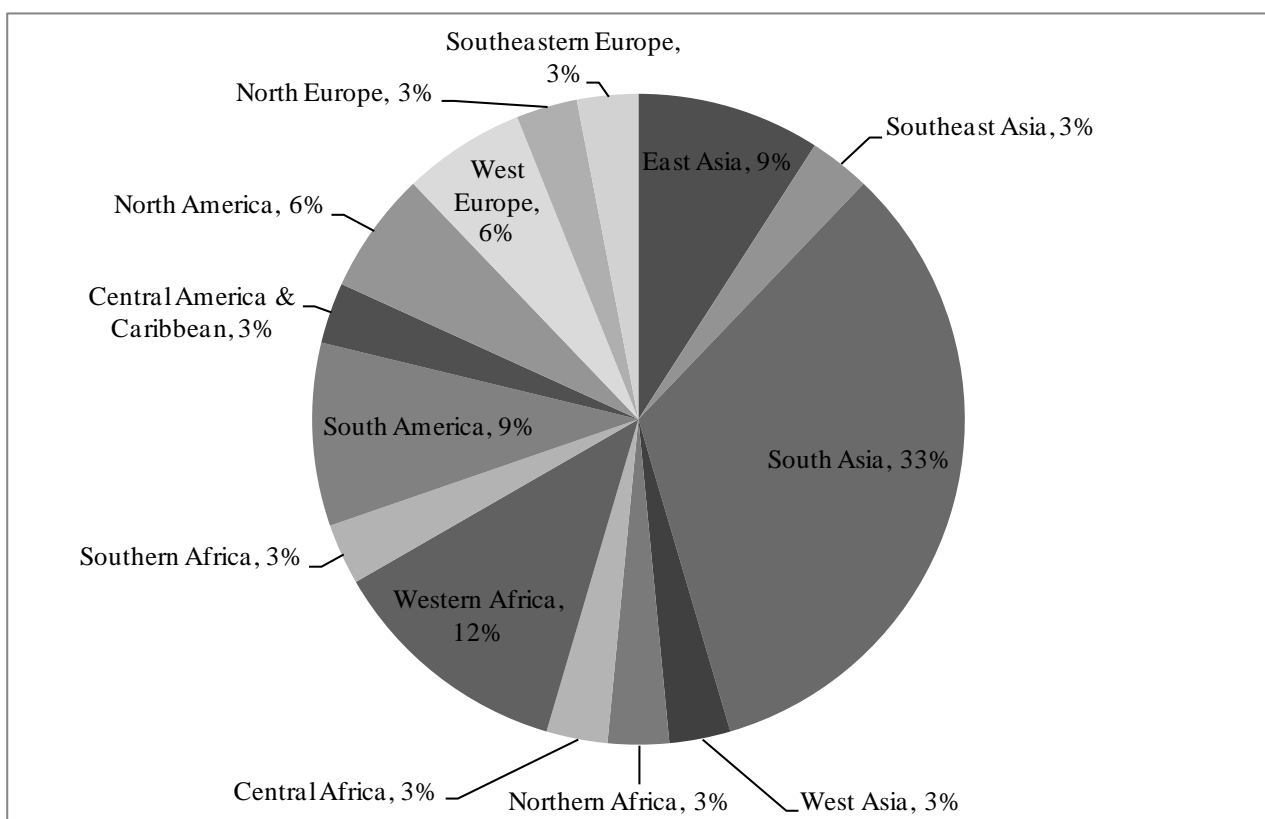
Table 21 The full sample breakdown for the current research

Geographical Zone	Total Regions	Total Countries	Pilot study	Main Study		
			Course A	Course A	Course B	Course C
Asia	East Asia	Japan, China, Hong Kong		Hong Kong (1)	China (1)	Japan (1)
	Southeast Asia	Thailand				Thailand (1)
	South Asia	India, Pakistan	India (1)	India (4)	India (3)	India (3)
	West Asia	Saudi Arabia			Saudi Arabia (1)	
Africa	Northern Africa	Egypt				Egypt (1)
	Central Africa	Cameroon			Cameron (1)	
	Western Africa	Mali, Nigeria		Nigeria (3)		Mali (1)
	Southern Africa	Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe (1)			
America	South America	Chile, Argentina, Brazil	Brazil (1)		Argentina (1)	Chile (1)
	Central America and Caribbean	Bahamas				Bahamas (1)
	North America	Mexico, USA		USA (1)	Mexico (1)	
Europe	West Europe	France, Germany			Germany (1)	France (1)
	North Europe	Latvia			Latvia (1)	
	South-eastern Europe	Turkey	Turkey (1)			

4.9 Fieldwork

Having discussed the sampling choices made, the following section describes the procedures followed for both the pilot study and the main study.

4.9.1 Piloting the interview questions

I conducted a pilot study to test the interview questions with three international students studying on *Course A*. The pilot study took place over a one week period starting on 16th June 2011. The pilot study deemed a success as no questions were misunderstood and no amendments needed to be made to the interview guide (see the copy of interview guide in Appendix 6). At the beginning of each interview session, I prepared the room environment as much as possible to ensure seating was comfortable and appropriately placed with other furniture to encourage conversation. The risk of interruptions was minimized by conducting interviews in library meeting rooms at the respective universities. I adopted a friendly but professional manner. The study information sheet was again given to interviewees to read and questions were invited. Once satisfied, interviewees handed in signed consent forms. All interviewees were happy to have their interviews voice recorded. I explained that the interview would be informal and I offered reassurance that they should take their time and not worry about pausing to think whilst the digital voice recorder was running. Interviewees were encouraged to elaborate their responses fully and not to be selective. At this point the digital voice recorder was positioned and a sound check performed. Interviewees were encouraged to relax and ignore the equipment as much as possible. The first questions had been designed to encourage them to ease into the conversation. Interviews lasted between approximately 40 minutes and 1 hour and were timed to suit students' availability. Notes were taken on ideas and points of interest arising from the interviews. These are known as "analytical memos" and aid the process of making sense of the data (Kaplan *et al.*, 2005). I regularly referred to the analytical memos and compared them with emerging findings. This is a process that is sometimes forgotten when immersed in the process of data collection (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995).

4.9.2 Main study

The main fieldwork was conducted between 25th June 2011 and 9th December 2011. Individual appointments were made to meet with 30 international students studying on *Courses A*, *B* and *C*. Similar considerations were made for the main study as when

undertaking the pilot study. The same interview guide and sequence of questions were used as in the pilot study. The interview schedule is presented in Table 22.

Table 22 Schedule for the interviews − Main study

Participating courses	Number of interviewees	From	Until
Course A	10	25th June 2011	30th July 2011
Course B	10	30th September 2011	14th October 2011
Course C	10	5th November 2011	9th December 2011

4.10 Preparation for analysis

The purpose of data preparation is to organize the data to facilitate easier retrieval for analysis. In the current research, the qualitative data are in the form of words, that is, language in the form of extended text. Data in the form of words are not usually immediately accessible for analysis, and require some processing (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Therefore the following steps were carried out:

- All 33 voice recordings were transcribed personally. Transcribing was usually done within 24 hours of the interview and a maximum of 48 hours after. Transcription took between six to eleven hours to complete, depending on the length of each recording (see a sample of interview transcript in Appendix 7).

- I got to know my data by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts and comparing the interview transcripts with analytical memos. One hard copy of each transcript was printed and I examined each line. This process of immersion in the data is recognized as valuable in highlighting persistent themes or phrases within the data (Morse and Field, 1996). Bogdan and Biklen (1992) recommend reading over data several times in order to begin to develop a coding scheme.

- All interview transcripts were anonymised by assigning each one a code, in the form of a number known only to me, and were stored separately from the consent forms. Transcripts and digital recordings were individually password protected and stored in a password-protected folder on my laptop.

- Copies of transcripts were sent to participants to check, amend any errors and elucidate any of the inaudible words highlighted. This also served to promote

participants' sense of control over the data (McDonnell *et al.*, 2000). The use of a quality digital recorder and microphone resulted in clear recording.

A full account on the method of data analysis employed in the current research is given in Chapter 5.

4.11 Summary

This chapter has been concerned with the research design and implementation, with particular reference to the needs of the current research. The discussion started at a high level of abstraction with philosophical paradigms, then moved on to research methods and the details of data collection. The development of an appropriate research design has taken into account the research question, research context, traditions within choice and decision-making research in HE and IS research, possible data collection tools and the researcher's epistemological viewpoint. The decision was taken to adopt an interpretivist philosophy and to use the case study method, drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews in addition to relevant documentation. This chapter has been also concerned with detailed description of the implementation of the research process. The main themes discussed were the role of the researcher, features of participant cases, gaining access to sites and data, sampling, fieldwork and preparation for analysis. The next chapter will present the analysis of the findings.

Chapter 5
Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis of the findings as highlighted in Figure 17. It begins with a detailed discussion of the approach to analysis adopted, followed by presentation of the analysis of the data from the pilot study and the main study. This chapter is aimed particularly at researchers interested in semiotic analysis of texts.

Figure 17 Conceptual Framework: Chapter 5
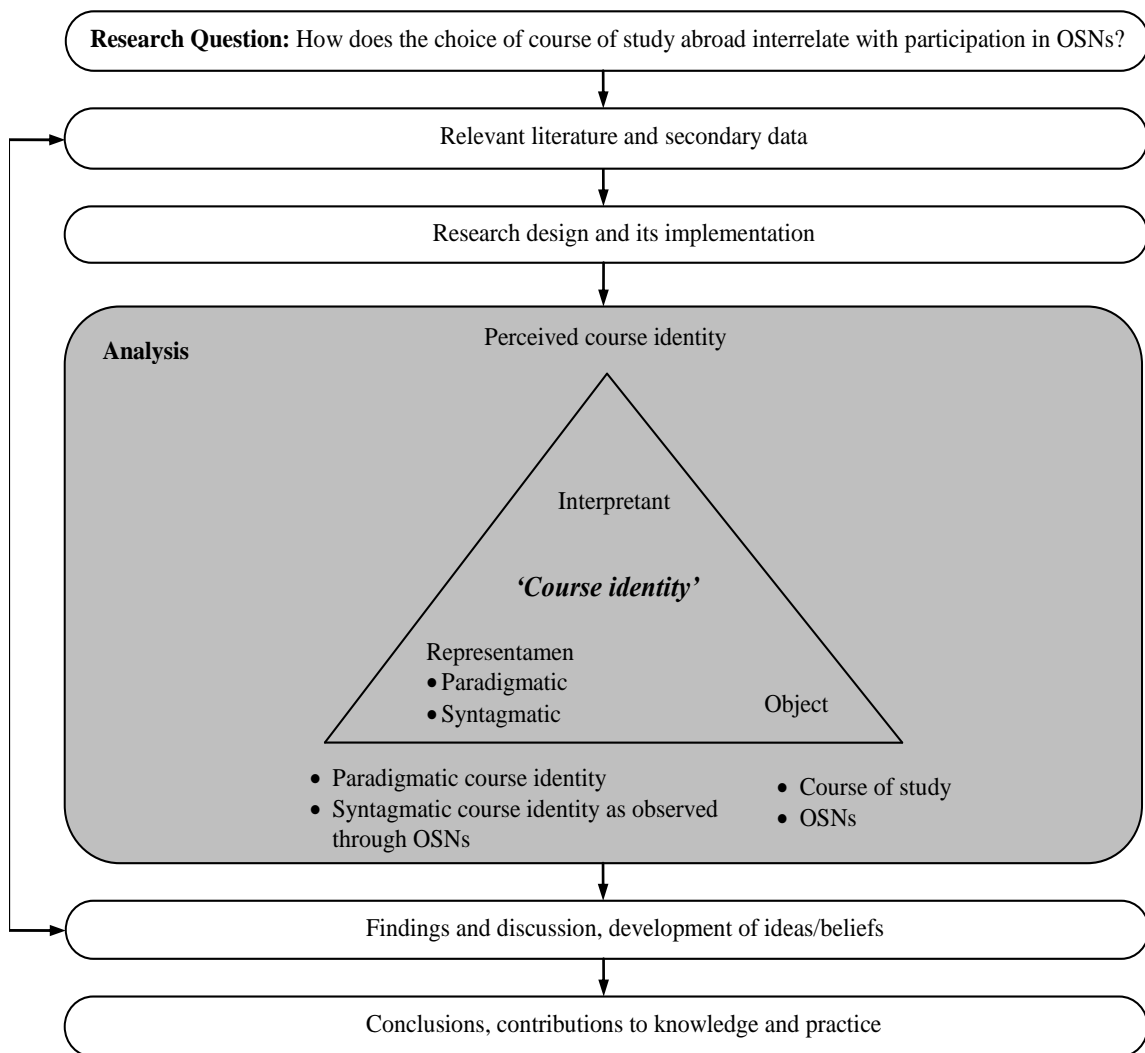
5.2 Approach to analysis

The analysis was informed by a number of texts on qualitative and semiotic analysis, particularly the work of Miles and Huberman (1994), Chandler (2007), Cobley (2001), Innis (1985), Merrell (1995), Zeman (1977) and Jakobson (1971a, 1971b). Due to the complex nature of qualitative analysis, the three stages of qualitative analysis identified by Miles and Huberman (1994) were adopted to provide the structure for the analysis. As shown in Figure 18, the three stages identified by Miles and Huberman (1994) are; data reduction, data displays, and conclusion drawing/verification. These will each be discussed in turn.

Figure 18 Components of data analysis: flow model (Miles and Huberman, 1994)
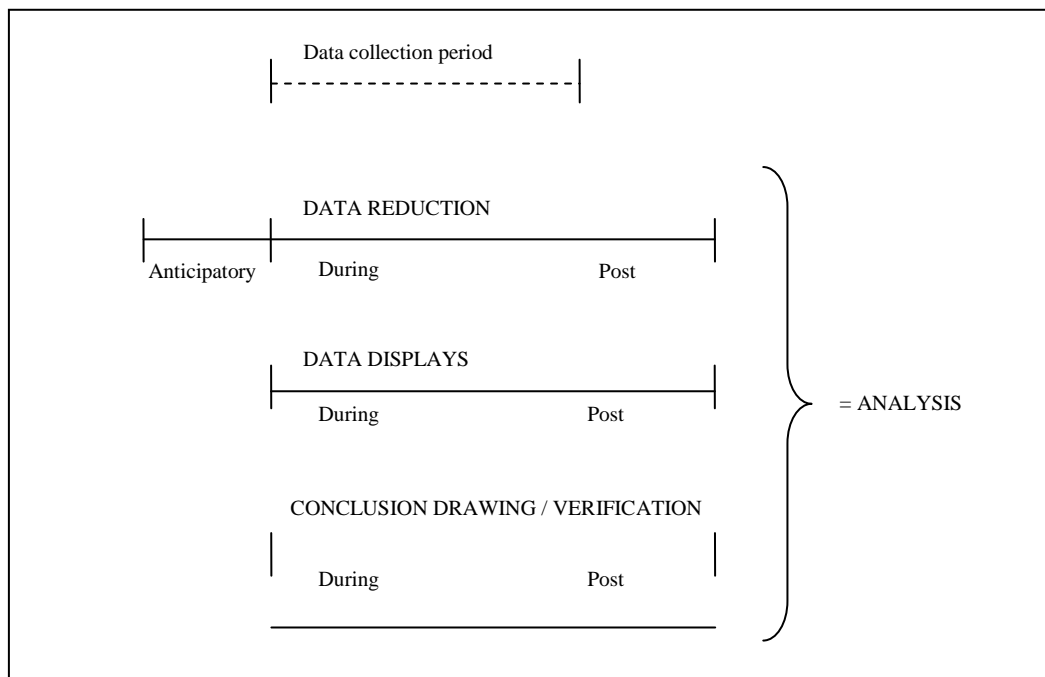
5.2.1 Data reduction

Data reduction sharpens, sorts, focuses, discards, and organizes data in such a way that final conclusions can be drawn and verified (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Data reduction occurs continuously throughout the life of any qualitatively-oriented project (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Even before the data are collected, anticipatory data reduction is occurring as the researcher decides (often without full awareness) which cases, which research questions, and which data collection approaches to select.

The structure of this section is as follows: First the method of textual analysis employed to analyse the interview transcripts is described. In doing this, Peirce's theory of signs and the semiotic model of course identity developed in Chapter 2 are revisited. Secondly, there will be a discussion of how categories and codes are developed. Finally, there will be a discussion of how codes, representamens and interpretants are identified within the text.

5.2.1.1 Semiotic analysis

Semiotic analysis is a qualitative method (Danesi, 2007; Hamed and El-Bassiouny, 2013) often employed in the analysis of texts (Chandler, 2007; Opeibi and Oluwasola, 2013; Short, 2005). Semiotic analysis is the way by which people seek to analyse and identify hidden messages and meanings in texts (Danesi, 2007). A 'text' may be verbal, non-verbal, or both (Chandler, 2007). The term 'text' usually refers to a message which has been recorded in some way (e.g. writing, audio and video-recording) so that it is physically independent of its sender or receiver (Chandler, 2007). In the context of this research, the term 'text' refers to interview data recorded in the form of transcripts.

Peirce's theory of signs is used as a method of textual analysis to analyse the interview transcripts. At the heart of Peirce's theory of signs is the idea of interpretation (Short, 2007). Peirce's theory of signs is distinctive and innovative for its breadth and complexity, and for capturing the importance of interpretation to signification. (Atkin, 2010). In Peircean semiotics, the sign as a whole is a unity of what is represented (object), how it is represented (representamen) and how it is interpreted (interpretant) (Chandler, 2007). The interview transcripts as a whole can be seen as a triadic sign system made of object, representamen and interpretant. In the current research, this triadic sign system is the 'course identity'. The semiotic model of course identity developed in chapter 2 was used to structure the analysis of interview transcripts – see Figure 19.

Figure 19 Semiotic model of course identity in the context of this research

Perceived course identity

- Paradigmatic course identity
- Syntagmatic course identity as observed through OSNs
- Course of study
- OSNs
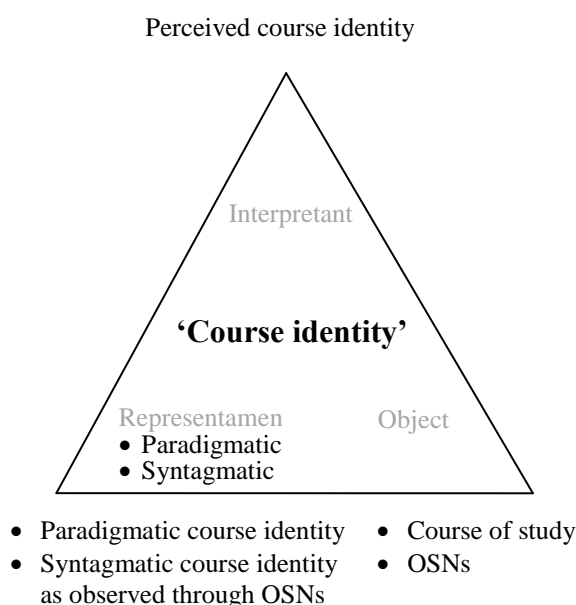
Guided by the research question and the research aims, the aims of the analysis, as outlined in Table 23, are threefold. Each of the three research objectives apply independently to each of the three participating courses of study, however, the intention of this research is to provide a set of findings and conclusions that could equally apply to any HE course in the UK, and potentially beyond.

Table 23 Aims of the analysis

Research objectives	Aims of the analysis
Define the paradigmatic course identity	First, to discover the 'representamens' within codes that constitute the paradigmatic course identity.
Define the syntagmatic course identity as observed through online social networks	Second, to discover the 'representamens' within codes that constitute the syntagmatic course identity.
Compare and contrast the levels of influence of paradigmatic course identity and syntagmatic course identity on the perceived course identity	Third, to discover the 'interpretants' within codes that constitute the perceived course identity.

Like any method of textual analysis, such as rhetorical analysis or content analysis, there are strengths and limitations with semiotic analysis (Anderson *et al.*, 2006). In terms of strengths, semiotic analysis is invaluable for looking beyond the manifest content of texts (Chandler, 2007). Semiotic analysis helps researchers to explore behind

or beneath the surface of what is observed in order to discover the underlying organizational relations (Chandler, 2007). The more obvious the structural organization of a text may seem to be, the more difficult it may be to see beyond such surface features, however searching for what is hidden beneath the obvious can lead to fruitful insights (Chandler, 2007). With respect to drawbacks, semiotic analysis is heavily dependent upon the skill of the analyst; thus a researcher with considerable experience is more likely to generate a more comprehensive and informed analysis than a less experienced researcher (Anderson *et al.*, 2006).

In the following section, I describe how categories and codes were developed in this study.

5.2.1.2 Categories and codes

The process of coding and category development was in itself part of the analysis process. Technically, coding has associations with semiotics (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The production and interpretation of texts depends upon the existence of codes or conventions for communication (Jakobson, 1971a). Codes provide a framework within which the elements of a sign make sense (Jakobson, 1971a). The concept of the code is fundamental to the current research as the elements of course identity are not meaningful in isolation, but only when they are situated within codes. Guided by the semiotic model of course identity developed in section 2.6, the codes grouped under three major categories: 'paradigmatic course identity', 'syntagmatic course identity', and 'perceived course identity' (Table 24). I refined the draft coding schemes on several occasions so that some codes were subsumed into others or further broken down into smaller groupings.

Table 24 Major categories and codes

Paradigmatic course identity		*PAI*
Initial sources of information		*PAI.FSI*
Sources of information available		*PAI.SIA*
	Offline sources of information	*PAI.SIA.OFF*
	Online sources of information	*PAI.SIA.ONL*
Core factors influencing selection of a course abroad		*PAI.CF*
Syntagmatic course identity as observed through OSNs		***SYI***
Participants did not use OSNs		*SYI.PDU*
	Reasons for not using OSNs	*SYI.PDU.RNU*
	Subsequent changes in perceptions about OSNs	*SYI.PDU.SCP*
Participants used OSNs		*SYI.PUS*
	Stages at which OSNs are used during the course selection process	*SYI.PUS.S*
	OSNs most commonly used during the course selection process	*SYI.PUS.MCU*
	Information-gathering methods using OSNs	*SYI.PUS.IGM*
	Information available on OSNs	*SYI.PUS.IAO*
	Information needed most from OSNs during the course selection process	*SYI.PUS.INM*
	Benefits of using OSNs for individuals' course selection decisions	*SYI.PUS.BOC*
	Downsides of using OSNs for individuals' course selection decisions	*SYI.PUS.DOC*
Perceived course identity		***PEI***
The level of influence of OSNs on final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources of information.		*PEI.LIF*

The original coded interview transcripts were imported into NVivo to ensure consistency and accuracy. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software produced by QSR International. NVivo has been designed for qualitative researchers working with very rich text-based and/or multimedia information, where deep levels of analysis on small or large volumes of data are required (QSR Website, 2012). The 'codes' are referred to as 'nodes' in NVivo. Creating nodes enabled cataloguing of ideas and collecting of material by topic or case. As shown in Figure 20, NVivo supported the organisation of categories and nodes into hierarchies, moving from general to more specific topics. NVivo proved to be a highly efficient means of managing and retrieving information in the form of a database. It also proved to have two additional advantages, in confirming impressions concerning common patterns and relationships between nodes, and it also assisted in uncovering additional links for further exploration. Several advantages of NVivo have been recognized in the

literature, for example, the software's capacity to handle large volumes of data and provide analytical tools that support a variety of analysis processes (Bazeley, 2007).

Figure 20 Screenshot of QSR NVivo illustrating Nodes
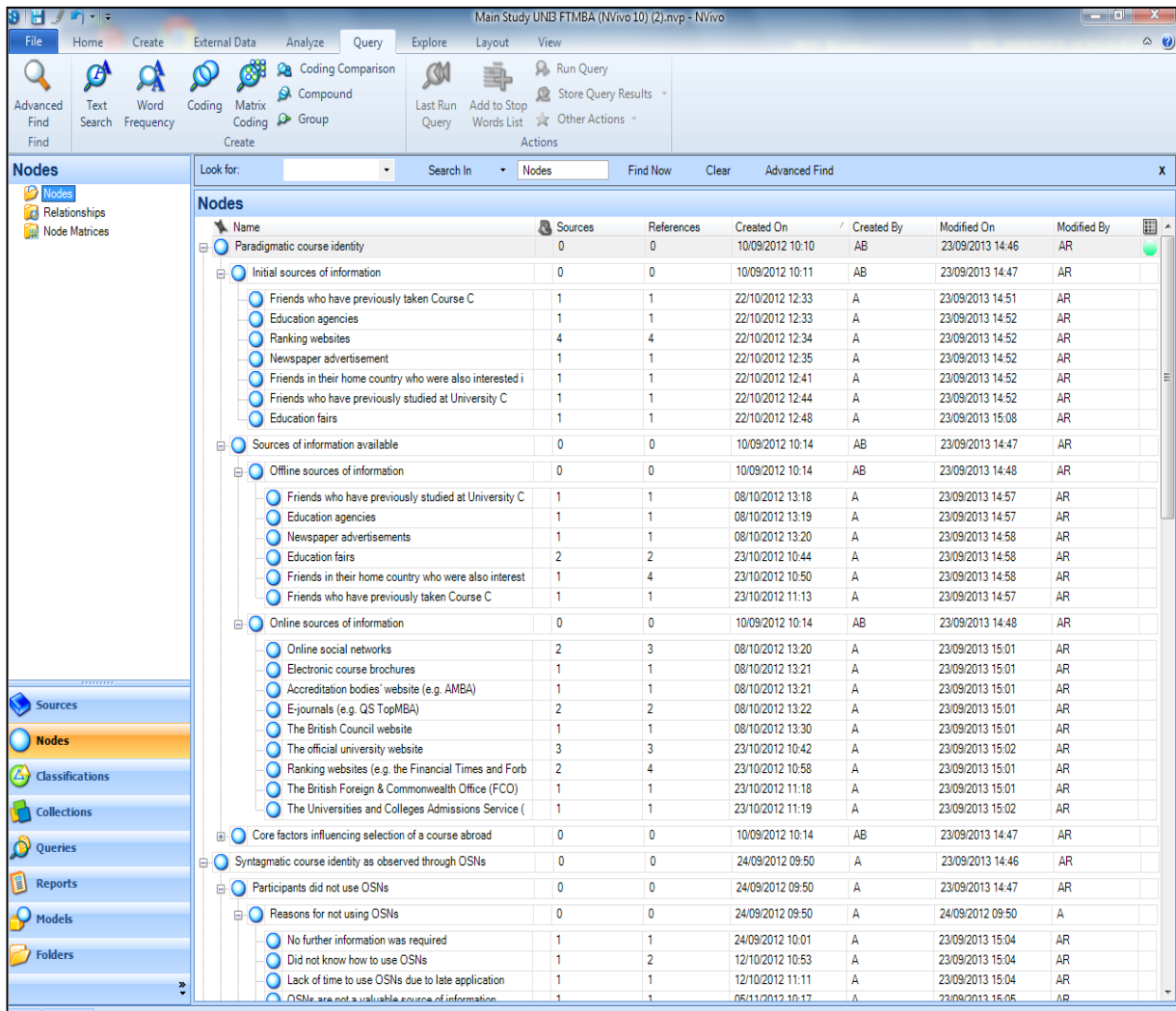
5.2.1.3 Filtering codes, representamens and interpretants

The act of discovering codes, representamens and interpretants within the text demanded that I apply an analytical lens and use different types of filter. In addition to the preliminary review of literature, the selection of codes, representamens and interpretants were derived from my research participants (i.e. taken directly from the transcribed data). Furthermore, my level of personal involvement as an insider or outsider researcher filtered my selections, as did the types of questions I asked, the detail and structuring of field notes, the gender and race/ethnicities of research participants. An example of how codes,

representamens and interpretants were selected for this study are presented in Table 25. The data in Table 25 comes from an international student who describes the information that was available about *Course B* on OSNs, and how influential OSNs were on his final course selection decision in comparison with other sources. All quotations cited in this chapter are exact transcriptions of international students' own words. I made no attempt to correct diction or grammar, although I have attempted to split the student's responses into logical sentence units.

Table 25 An example of how codes, representamens and interpretants are selected

	Questions and Responses		Analysis
Researcher	What information was available on OSNs?	**Category**	Syntagmatic course identity
Participant	*"...I found information on teaching quality and assessment and how easy it is to pass the exams and assignments...I wanted to find these information more and that is why I searched more about these information...I also found information on student service and attitude of lecturers, and if they are helpful or nice, there are lots of comments about these things on OSNs ..." (B05)*	**Code**	Information available on OSNs: *SYI.PUS.IAO*
		Representamen (s) (or 'R')	- The quality of teaching [R1] - Information on assessment [R2] - The level of student support and care [R3] - Personalities and attitudes of academic and administrative staff towards students [R4] - Information on exams and assignments [R5]
Researcher	In comparison with other sources of information, how influential were OSNs on your final course selection decision?	**Category**	Perceived course identity
Participant	*"...If I want to rate how influential they [OSNs] have been in selecting [Course B] I would say 50% in my case..." (B05)*	**Code**	The level of influence of OSNs on final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources of information: PEI.LIF
		Interpretant (s)	OSNs have a moderate influence on final course selection decisions [I1]

5.2.2 Data displays

The second major flow of analysis activity is through data displays (Miles and Huberman, 1994). I used data displays to enhance the ability to draw and verify valid conclusions. As with data reduction, the creation and use of displays has not been separate from analysis in the current research. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), for qualitative researchers,

the typical mode of display has been extended and unreduced text. However, extended and unreduced text alone is a weak and cumbersome form of display, and is difficult for analysts to manage because it tends to be spread over multiple pages and not easy to see as a whole (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Miles and Huberman (1994) argue that valid analysis requires, and is driven by, displays that are focused enough to permit a view of the full data set in the same location, and arranged systematically to answer the research questions at hand. An example of the data display used in the current research is presented in Figure 21.

Figure 21 An example of data display from the main study - *Course B*
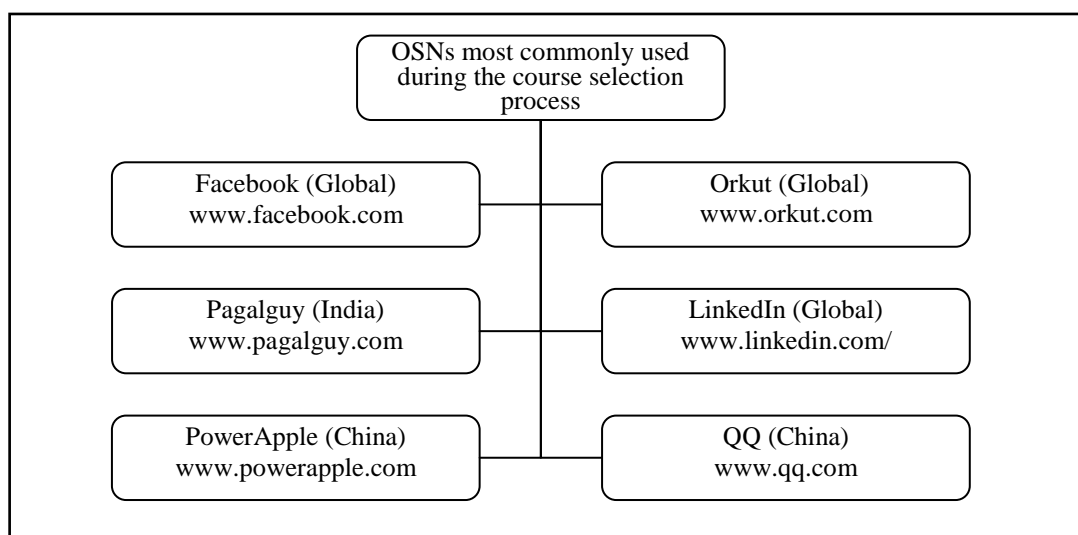
5.2.3 Conclusion drawing/verification

The drawing of conclusions and their verification involves interpreting data and answering research question (s) (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The research question in the current research is "how does the choice of course of study abroad interrelate with participation in OSNs?" Combining semiotic analysis with use of NVivo, and using data displays enhance the ability to draw and verify valid conclusions that could equally apply to any HE course in the UK, and potentially beyond.

Having discussed the approach to analysis adopted for this work, the remainder of this chapter presents the analysis of the data from the pilot study and the main study.

5.3 Pilot study

A pilot study was conducted to test the interview questions with three international students studying on *Course A*. The pilot study took place over a one week period starting on 16th June 2011, and was deemed a success. No questions were misunderstood and no amendments were made to the interview guide. The findings from the pilot study are included in the overall findings of the research in Chapter 6. The demographics of pilot study interviewees are presented in the table below.

Table 26 The demographics of interviewees – Pilot study

Interviewees	Age	Marital status	Gender	Country	The highest level of education before MBA	years of work experience	professional position	Industry
PS1	27	Single	Male	Turkey	Bachelor's degree	3	Marketing manager	Retail
PS2	30	Single	Female	Brazil	MSc	10	Sales Manager	Pharmaceutical
PS3	28	Married	Female	India	MSc	3	Lecturer	Higher education

In line with the aims of the analysis, as shown in Table 23, this section is divided into three. The first subsection presents 'representamens' within codes that constitute the paradigmatic identity of *Course A*. The second subsection presents 'representamens' within codes that constitute the syntagmatic identity of *Course A* as observed through OSNs. Finally, the third subsection presents 'interpretants' within codes that constitute the perceived identity of *Course A*.

5.3.1 Paradigmatic identity of *Course A*

This section presents 'representamens' within codes that constitute the paradigmatic identity of *Course A*. The 'paradigmatic identity of *Course A'* is the overall identity of this course, communicated to international HE aspirants and applicants in the form of the representamen through a variety of resources from which international HE aspirants and applicants generate certain perceptions (or interpretants) about *Course A*. Following the stages of qualitative analysis outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994), data displays will be used to support the drawing and verification of valid conclusions.

Initial sources of information

Responses to the interview question 'how did you first find out about *[Course A]*?' include comments that suggest there are two representamens (or 'R' as abbreviation of the representamen) within code PAI.FSI. Participants first heard about *Course A* from their family members [R1], or from friends [R2] who have previously studied at *University A*. The following comments capture these two representamens.

> *"...I first heard about this course from my wife because she studied here previously..." (PS1)*

> *"...one of my friends graduated from this university, he told me for the first time about this course..." (PS2)*

Figure 22 Initial sources of information available during the course
selection process – Pilot study
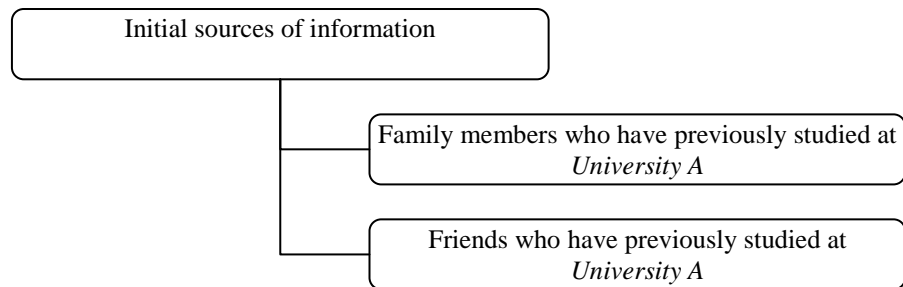
Offline sources of information

Responses to the interview question 'what offline sources of information did you use to obtain information about *[Course A]*?' include comments that suggest there are three representamens within code PAI.SIA.OFF. They include family members who have previously studied at *University A* [R1], friends who have previously studied at *University A* [R2], and education agencies [R3]. The following comment captures some of these representamens.

> *"...one of my friends graduated from this university, he told me for the first time about this course...I also contacted some education agencies back home...I first heard about this course from my wife because she studied here previously..." (PS1)*

Figure 23 Offline sources of information available during the course
selection process – Pilot study
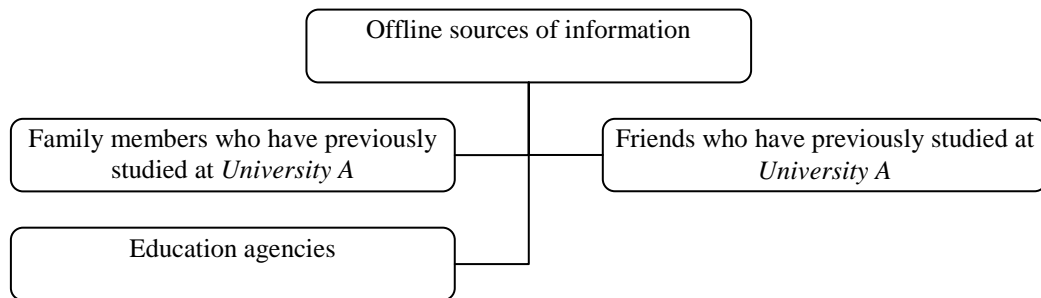
Online sources of information

Responses to the interview question 'what online sources of information did you use to obtain information about *[Course A]*?' include comments that suggest there are three representamens within code PAI.SIA.ONL. They include information obtained via email exchanges with the MBA director [R1], electronic course brochures [R2], and OSNs [R3].

> "...I downloaded the online version of MBA brochure from the official Website. I contacted admission office and MBA director via email...I also used OSNs..." (PS1)

> "...I also used OSNs to contact current and past MBA students, and I looked at their online profiles..." (PS3)

Figure 24 Online sources of information available during the course
selection process – Pilot study

Core factors influencing the choice of *Course A*

Responses to the interview question 'why did you select *[Course A]* as your preferred course of study abroad?' include comments that suggest there are seven representamens within code PAI.CF. These representamens will be discussed in turn.

- **Future job and career prospects after graduation [R1]**

109
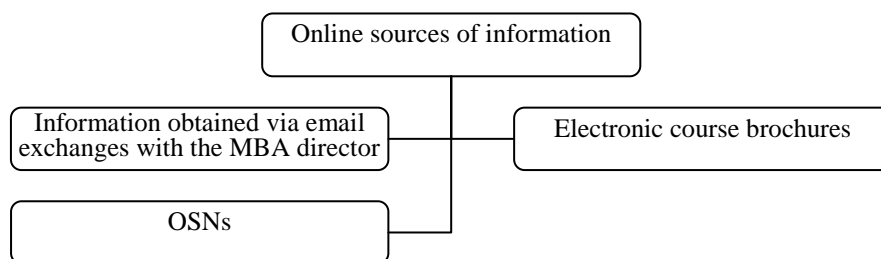
PS1 stated that studying for an MBA helps him to be competitive in the international job market and to develop his career towards more senior managerial positions.

> "...I believe the MBA is a really suitable course for international students who want to be competitive in the international job market...MBA helps me to develop my career towards managerial positions..." (PS1)

- **One-year course duration [R2]**

The one-year duration of *Course A* was perceived as an advantage by PS2. This participant stated that her employer would only sponsor a one-year MBA and no longer, as she would be able to return to work more quickly.

> "...I selected this course because it is only 1 year course...my employer back home only sponsored a one-year MBA because I can return to work quicker..." (PS2)

- **The UK education system is internationally recognised [R3]**

The preliminary findings indicate that the USA and Canada are also popular education destinations, however, PS1 decided to study for his MBA in the UK because the UK education system is well known worldwide.

> "...at first I wanted to go to the USA or Canada because I have some relatives who live in those countries. Then I found lots of positive information on the reputation of British HE..." (PS1)

- **The UK MBA is more practice-based than those of other popular study destinations [R4]**

PS3 suggested that the UK MBA is more practice-based than the MBA in other popular study destinations such as the USA.

> "...the course structure and curriculum of the MBA in the UK is more practice based in compare to other popular study destination such as the USA..." (PS3)

- **The cost of accommodation in the city is low [R5]**

PS2 stated that the cost of accommodation in the city in which *Course A* is offered is low in comparison with large and internationally recognized British cities.

> "...this city is small and the cost of accommodation is cheaper in compare to large and famous British cities" (PS2)

- **Accreditation by AMBA [R6]**

The following comment captures the AMBA accreditation of *Course A* as a representamen that determined PS3's course selection decisions.

> *"...I had several offer letters but this course was the only course which was accredited by AMBA..." (PS3)*

- **Lower admission requirements than high ranked MBA courses in terms of work experience and academic background [R7]**

PS3 selected *Course A* because she believed it would be easy for her to fulfil admission requirements for this course. This participant stated that *Course A* had lower admission requirements in terms of work experience and academic background.

> *"...I don't have very strong professional and academic background and it wasn't possible for me to select a very high ranked MBA, this was one of the main reasons that I decided to select the MBA from this university..." (PS3)*

Core factors influencing the choice of *Course A* are displayed in the following figure.

Figure 25 Core factors influencing selection of a course abroad – Pilot Study
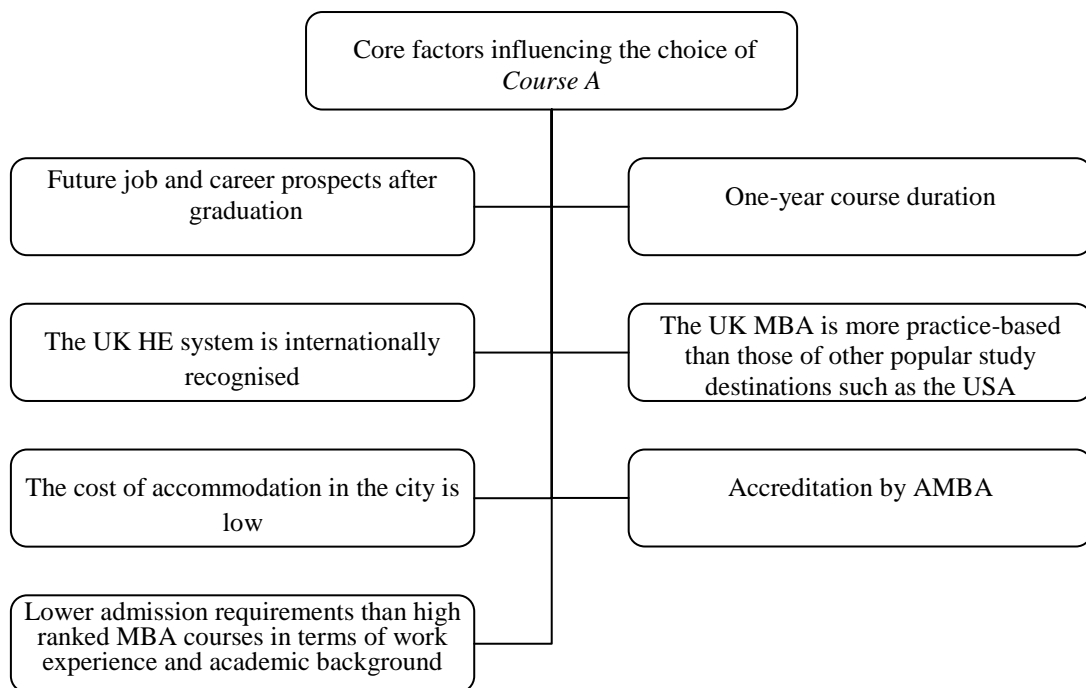
5.3.2 Syntagmatic identity of *Course A* as observed through online social networks

This section presents 'representamens' within codes that constitute the syntagmatic identity of *Course A* as observed through OSNs. This identity of *Course A* is communicated in the form of the representamen to international HE aspirants and applicants through OSNs,

from which international HE aspirants and applicants generate certain perceptions (or interpretants) about *Course A*.

Participants did not use OSNs

PS1 from Turkey was the only participant who did not use OSNs during the course selection process. PS1's reasons for not using OSNs and subsequent changes in his perceptions about OSNs are discussed below.

Reasons for not using OSNs and subsequent changes in perceptions about OSNs

PS1's responses to the interview question 'why didn't you use OSNs during the course selection process?' include comments that suggested there were two representamens within code SYI.PDU.RNU. They include privacy concerns [R1] and the participant's cultural and personality traits discouraged him from using OSNs [R2]. PS1 stated that OSNs endanger individuals' career prospects by exposing their personal life, for example through personal photos, to future employers or head-hunters. Moreover, this participant did not use OSNs because he did not want to contact people he has never met. PS1 indicated that other people in his country have a similar approach to OSNs.

> "...I don't want my future employer or head hunters to see my personal photos, especially when I know these days there are many head-hunters and employers who seek information on candidates on OSNs... I don't like to contact people I never met before... It is my personal characteristic...this is also because of my cultural background...I also think other people in my country will do the same..." (PS1)

Figure 26 Reasons for not using online social networks – Pilot study
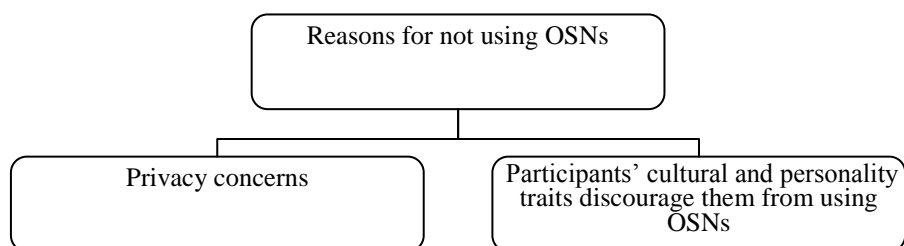
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            ┌─────────────────────────────┐
            │  Reasons for not using OSNs  │
            └─────────────────────────────┘
                           │
            ┌──────────────┴──────────────┐
  ┌──────────────────┐      ┌────────────────────────────┐
  │ Privacy concerns │      │ Participants' cultural and  │
  │                  │      │ personality traits discourage│
  │                  │      │    them from using OSNs     │
  └──────────────────┘      └────────────────────────────┘
```

PS1's responses to the interview question 'do you still have the same approach towards OSNs?' included comments that suggest his perceptions towards OSNs changed [R1] while he was studying MBA in the UK. PS1 stated that students are more honest in their responses and it is always better to have insights from students as official sources only portray positive information.

"...but now I am changed because I learnt about OSNs while I have been doing my MBA in the UK...It is always better to have insights from students, because you have the official information from the recruitment and marketing team which is always very positive..." (PS1)

Participants used OSNs

Two out of three research participants in the pilot study used OSNs during the course selection process: PS2 from Brazil and PS3 from India. Although the sample size for the pilot study was small, this finding revealed the popularity of OSNs as a source of information.

Stages at which OSNs are used during the course selection process

The literature in Chapter 3 contributes to a greater understanding of the stages involved in the choice of HE. Chapman's (1986) model is used in the current research to discuss the different stages at which international HE aspirants and applicants use OSNs during the course selection process. Chapman's (1986) model was discussed in section 3.3.1 and therefore I do not intend to repeat it here.

Responses to the interview question 'at what stages in your course selection process did you use OSNs?' include comments that suggest there are two representamens within code SYI.PUS.S. They include the search behaviour stage [R1] and the choice decision stage [R2]. PS2 used OSNs at the search behaviour stage, and PS3 used OSNs at the search behaviour and choice decisions stages.

"...after when I decided to do my MBA, I used OSNs to search for different MBA courses and to find information on them...OSNs helped me to shortlist my MBA options...". (PS2)

"...I used OSNs to make my final decision" (PS3)

Table 27 Stages at which online social networks are used during the course selection process – Pilot study

Interviewees	PS2	PS3
The search behaviour stage	✓	✓
The choice decision stage		✓

OSNs most commonly used during the course selection process

Responses to the interview question 'can you please name all the OSNs that you used to obtain information about *[Course A]*?' include comments that suggest there are two representamens within code SYI.PUS.MCU. They include Facebook [R1] and LinkedIn [R2].

> *"...I met some people on the LinkedIn and Facebook who did their MBA in this university... Facebook was still new for me in Brazil. However, I could find more information on Facebook than other OSNs. I found several Facebook pages and groups for this course..." (PS2)*

Figure 27 Online social networks most commonly used during the course selection process – Pilot study

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        ┌─────────────────────────┐
        │  OSNs most commonly used │
        │ during the course selection│
        │         process          │
        └─────────────────────────┘
    ┌──────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────┐
    │ Facebook (Global)│   │ LinkedIn (Global)│
    │ www.facebook.com │   │ www.linkedin.com │
    └──────────────────┘   └──────────────────┘
```
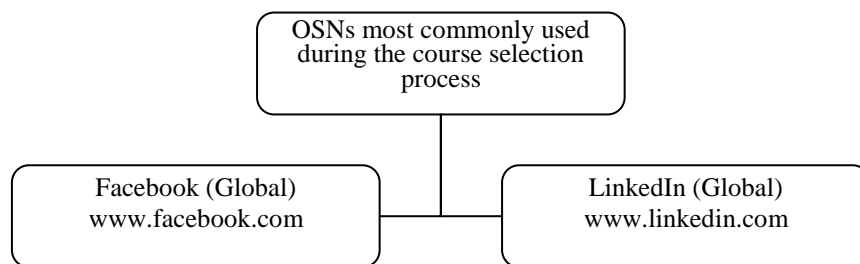
Information-gathering methods using OSNs

Reponses to the interview question 'how did you gather information using OSNs?' include comments that suggest there are two representamens within code SYI.PUS.IGM. Participants obtained information by viewing online profiles [R1], or reading comments from other users [R2].

Figure 28 Information-gathering methods using online social networks – Pilot study
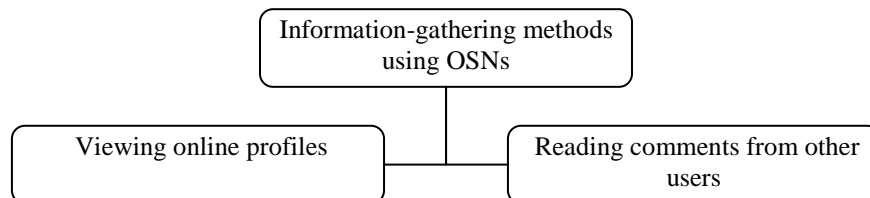
```
        ┌─────────────────────────┐
        │ Information-gathering methods│
        │       using OSNs         │
        └─────────────────────────┘
    ┌──────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────┐
    │ Viewing online   │   │ Reading comments from│
    │    profiles      │   │    other users       │
    └──────────────────┘   └──────────────────────┘
```

Information available on OSNs

Responses to the interview question 'what information was available on OSNs?' include comments that suggest there are ten representamens within code SYI.PUS.IAO. By

viewing online profiles, PS2 acquired information on the nationality [R1] and ages [R2] of other HE aspirants and applicants interested in *Course A*.

> *"...I could get lots of information on the people who wanted to attend this course, I looked at their profiles on the LinkedIn and Facebook, I just wanted to know what countries they are coming from and how old they are…" (PS2)*

PS2 stated that by viewing online profiles she obtained information about the professional backgrounds [R3] and the age range of past and current students [R4].

> *'...I also checked the profiles of past and current students to get information on their aging profile and working experience…" (PS2)*

By reading comments from other users, PS3 acquired information about the student-friendliness of the city [R5], cost of living in the city [R6], social life in the city [R7], university accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city [R8], the diversity of past and current students [R9] and sports facilities in the city [R10].

> *"...there were several useful comments on how to rent an apartment in this city and availability of student accommodation...comments on how student friendly the city is…what is the social life here…I found some comments that there are many students studying in this university from different nationality…the cost of living for me was very important, I didn't want live in a very expensive place, I read some comments that past students were happy with the cost of living here and this city isn't a very expensive city…apart from studying I wanted to find out what sports facilities are available here in the city…" (PS3)*

Figure 29 Information available on online social networks – Pilot study
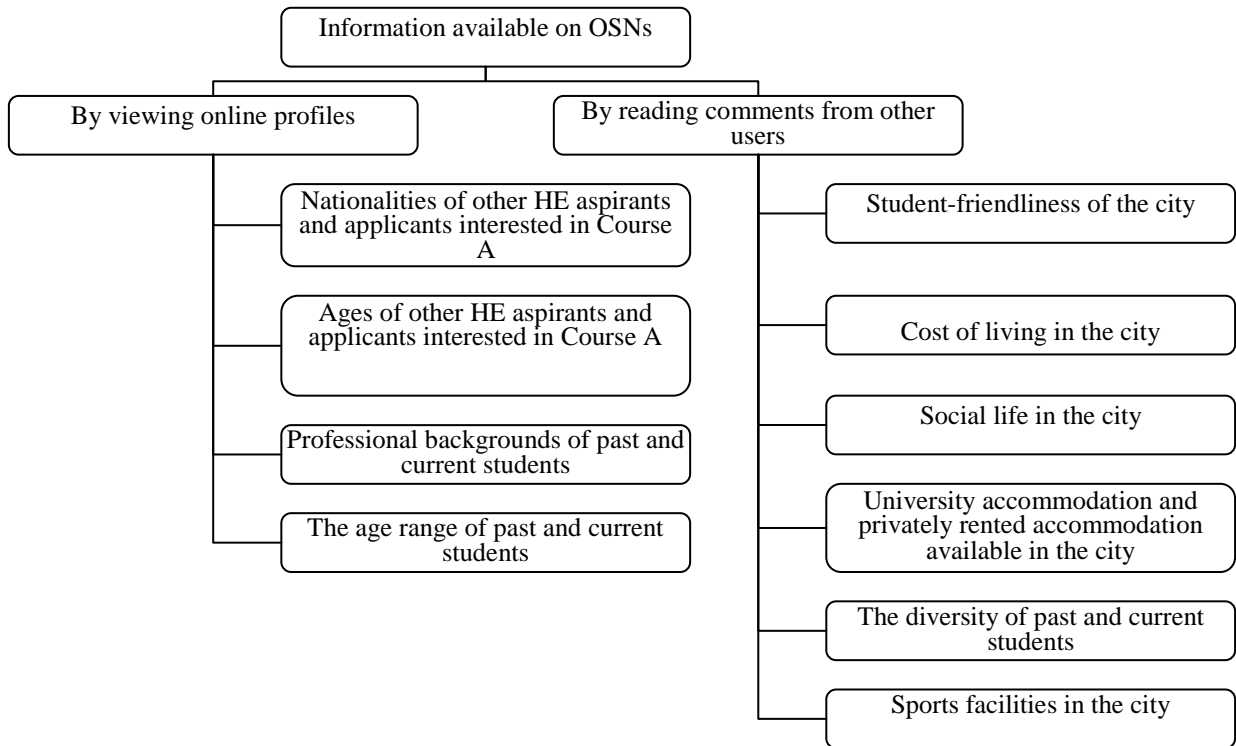
The information needed most from OSNs during the course selection process

Responses to the interview question 'what is the information that is needed most during the course selection process that you search for on OSNs?' include comments that suggest there are three representamens within code SYI.PUS.INM. They include information about the student visa and application process [R1], future job and career prospects after graduation [R2] and how *University A* can support them in finding a job [R3]. PS2 was not clear about the student visa and she faced difficulties in obtaining up to date information from the UK Border Agency (UKBA). It is evident from the data that the main challenge was to stay updated with the latest changes relating to the student visa and application process.

> "...I had several problem with the visa application process, the immigration rules were changing really fast and I was very confused...that would be good if the university could provide some information on the student visa on OSNs and how students can apply for the Visa, other students can also share their experiences about Visa process..." (PS2)

> "...the crucial information that was missing was what kind of opportunities you have after doing your MBA here, is it too easy or too difficult to find a job here or what kind of opportunities you are open to, does the university offer

116

any placement assistants , what role does the university play in helping you to find a job after graduation…" (PS3)

Figure 30 Information needed most from online social networks during the course selection process – Pilot study
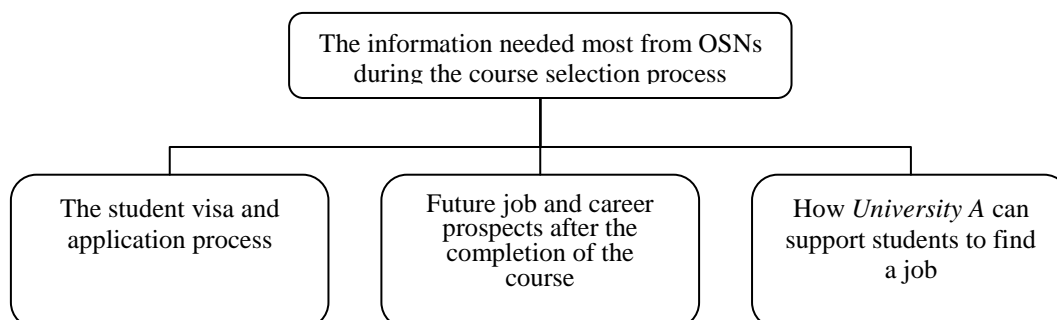
Benefits of using OSNs in course selection

Responses to the interview question 'what are the benefits of using OSNs in comparison with other sources?' include comments that suggest there are five representamens within code SYI.PUS.BOC. OSNs facilitate connections between and information sharing with past and current students [R1], and other HE aspirants and applicants interested in *Course A* [R2]. PS2 claimed that OSNs helped her to contact a past MBA student from her own country, Brazil. Speaking to this person significantly helped PS2 to gain more confidence in selecting *Course A*. In terms of connections and information sharing, PS3 stated that OSNs helped her to get to know about other HE aspirants and applicants, and to acquire information that would not normally be available via other sources.

> *"…OSNs such as Facebook allowed me to contact other people… I tried to contact someone from my country, because when you contact somebody from your country you feel more comfortable…I was looking the name of people in the group, there were many different names, with the name you can see if the person is from your country or no, and I remember I contacted a person with a very South American name…I just wanted to contact somebody that is neutral, and somebody that is from my country, because when you contact somebody you want somebody to be honest with you , you really want to have a real feedback , you want to know the truth…" (PS2)*

Unlike official sources, such as the Financial Times that only provide general information on MBA courses, PS3 claimed that OSNs helped her to gather detailed information about *Course A* [R3] and to send direct messages to past and current students [R4]. PS3 also noted that it was very easy to access the information available on OSNs [R5].

"...I can personalize more through Facebook...I can get more insights, I can get the information that I want, I can make specific questions for people, if I look at a table in full-time I can get some insights, but maybe, this table isn't going to answer all my questions. For example I want to know if this course going to teach specifically leadership, maybe I cannot have this answer in full-time because it is very, how I can say, it is very superficial. They just give some data...some numbers some figures, but through Facebook I can explore more, I can personalize my questions...moreover it was really easy to access the information, some of them were posted on the wall and it was also very easy to contact other people..." (PS3)

Figure 31 Benefits of using online social networks in course selection – Pilot study
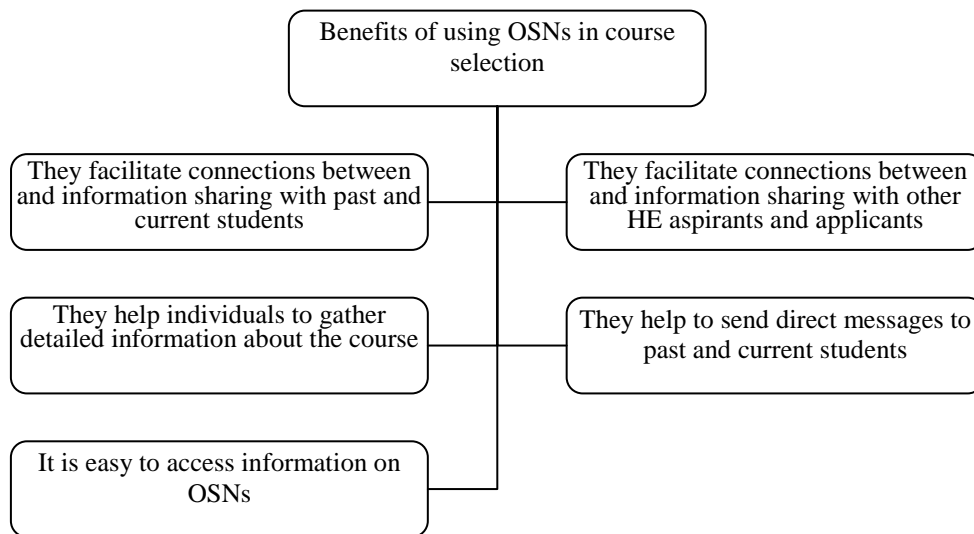
Downsides of using OSNs in course selection

Responses to the interview question 'what are the downsides of using OSNs in comparison with other sources?' include comments that suggest there are two representamens within code SYI.PUS.DOC. PS2 stated that it was difficult to distinguish between advertising messages and more neutral information [R1]. In some instances, this participant became doubtful about *Course A* when she saw members of staff posting positive comments or uploading photos and videos. PS2 suggested that photos and videos uploaded by students are more reliable than those uploaded by members of staff.

"...you have to be careful who you are talking to on OSNs, for example if you talk with a member of staff, you have to be a little bit carful because they only pose things that are beneficial for the course to attract new students, it is like advertising...It was difficult to distinguish between neutral messages and advertising messages, you have to see who is the person putting the photos...if a member of staff put a lot of advertising you just become a little bit suspicious..." (PS2)

118

PS2 could not completely rely on all of the information available on OSNs and she perceived the information on OSNs as potentially unreliable [R2]. PS2 claimed that OSNs have their own benefits and drawbacks similar to other sources of information.

> *"... sometimes the information on the Internet isn't reliable. I would recommend my friends to use different sources, including OSNs, Financial Times, education fairs. I would say yes use OSNs, but just be very careful to analyse what people say…" (PS2)*

Figure 32 Downsides of using online social networks in course selection – Pilot study
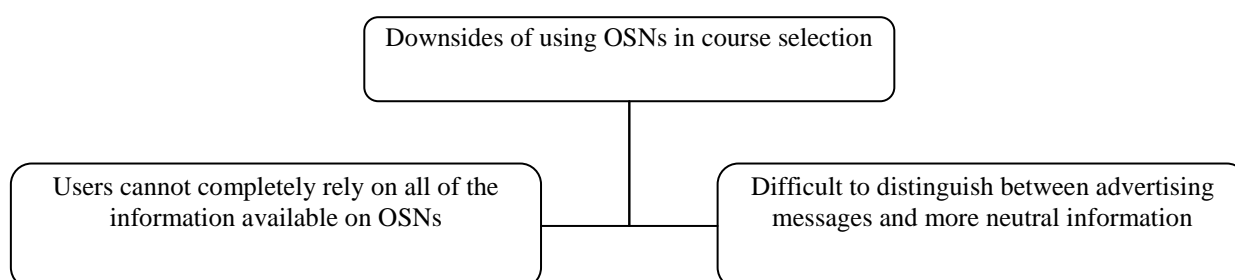
5.3.3 Perceived identity of *Course A*

This section presents 'interpretants' within codes that constitute the perceived identity of *Course A*. The perceived identity of *Course A* is determined by the paradigmatic identity of *Course A* and the syntagmatic identity of *Course A,* and influences the final course selection decisions of international HE aspirants and applicants.

The level of influence of OSNs on final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources

Responses to the interview question 'how influential were OSNs on your final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources?' include comments that suggest there are two 'interpretants' (or 'I' as abbreviation of the interpretant) within code PEI.LIF. These representamens will be discussed in turn.

- **OSNs have a strong influence on final course selection decisions [I1]**

PS2 did not gain much insight from official sources, such as education agencies. This participant indicated that she did not trust information provided through official sources and wanted to acquire less biased feedback from past and current students who had already

experienced studying *Course A*. PS2 also stated that *Course A* was not listed in ranking websites, and without OSNs she could not get access to much information on this course.

> *"...OSNs Influenced my final decision a lot...I didn't get so much information and insight from university website...the information that come from the university is always biased because they want to sell the course, they always say the course is the best...I wanted to talk to people who has already experienced the course...so when you contact ex-students you can have a real feedback, it is more close to the reality...so I would say OSNs such as Facebook really influenced my decision...OSNs were very important because this course isn't in the ranking websites, so I could not get so much information...so it was necessary to contact other people to get more insights..." (PS2)*

- **OSNs have a moderate influence on final course selection decisions** [I2]

OSNs had a moderate influence on PS3's final course selection decision. PS3 became more confident in selecting *Course A* only when she saw the presence of *Course A* on OSNs. This participant was not fully convinced by the information provided through official sources such as official university websites and education agencies, and she used OSNs to clarify areas where she had information gaps.

> *"...they influenced my decision 60%...as I said earlier I become more confident only when I started finding the presence of this course on OSNs, and when I started getting to know people...that is exactly when my decision was influenced...after the proposal by the consultant and going through the official Website I was not completely convinced, I was convinced only we I spoke to students online..." (PS3)*

Table 28 The level of influence of online social networks on final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources – Pilot study

Interviewees	Strong level of influence	Moderate level of influence
PS2	✓	
PS3		✓

5.4 Main study

The data for the main study were collected from 30 international students studying on *Courses A*, *B* and *C*. This section begins with the analysis of the data collected from *Course A*. This is followed by the analysis of the data collected from *Course B*. Finally, the analysis of the data collected from *Course C* is presented.

5.4.1 Course A

A sample of 10 international students studying on *Course A* was selected for the main study. The demographics of interviewees are presented in the table below.

Table 29 The demographics of interviewees – Course A

Interviewees	Age	Marital status	Gender	Country	The highest level of education before MBA	years of work experience	professional position	Industry
A01	25	Single	Male	India	BA	4	Business consultant	Consulting
A02	28	Single	Male	India	BA	6	IT team leader	IT
A03	32	Married	Female	India	BA	10	Assistant Manager	IT
A04	26	Married	Male	Zimbabwe	MSc	6	Business Developer	Real States/ property
A05	35	Married	Female	Nigeria	HND	12	Internal auditor	Finance
A06	45	Married	Female	Hong Kong	MA	18	Self-employed /Accountant	Finance
A07	29	Married	Female	United States	BA	5	Sales development/broker	Consumer Goods
A08	45	Single	Male	Nigeria	Professional accountancy	15	Consultant	Consulting
A09	28	Married	Male	Nigeria	BA	4	Marketing executive	Pharmaceuticals
A10	29	Single	Female	India	BA	10	Chief Executive Officer (CEO)	Engineering

In line with the aims of the analysis this section is divided into three. The first subsection presents 'representamens' within codes that constitute the paradigmatic identity of *Course A*. The second subsection presents 'representamens' within codes that constitute the syntagmatic identity of *Course A* as observed through OSNs. Finally, the third subsection presents 'interpretants' within codes that constitute the perceived identity of *Course A*.

5.4.1.1 Paradigmatic identity of *Course A*

This section presents 'representamens' within codes that constitute the paradigmatic identity of *Course A*. The paradigmatic identity of *Course A* is the overall identity of this

course communicated in the form of the representamen to international HE aspirants and applicants through a variety of resources from which international HE aspirants and applicants generate certain perceptions (or interpretants) about *Course A*.

Initial sources of information

Responses to the interview question 'how did you first find out about *[Course A]*?' include comments that suggest there are four representamens within code PAI.FSI. Several participants first heard about *Course A* from education agencies [R1], from friends who have previously studied at *University A* [R2], from family members who have previously studied at *University A* [R3], or from newspaper advertisements [R4]. The following comments capture some of these representamens.

> *"...since my knowledge was on the UK MBA low I went to the agent and the agent had a list of all full-time MBA courses which are accredited by AMBA..." (A01)*

> *"...from my friends who did their MSc here before. Well, if you talk about MBA in general I always had a plan to do MBA, my friend in the UK suggested that we have good universities here..." (A05)*

> *"...I found about it [Course A] myself through searching online, I went to [University A official website], I didn't know anyone who was studying MBA in the UK..." (A04)*

> *"...I only knew about [Course A] because of my husband who came here for surveying course..." (A07)*

> *"...I saw the advertisement in a newspaper back home. I was thinking of the MBA at the time and I said ok let's select this MBA..." (A08)*

Figure 33 Initial sources of information available during the course selection process – Course A
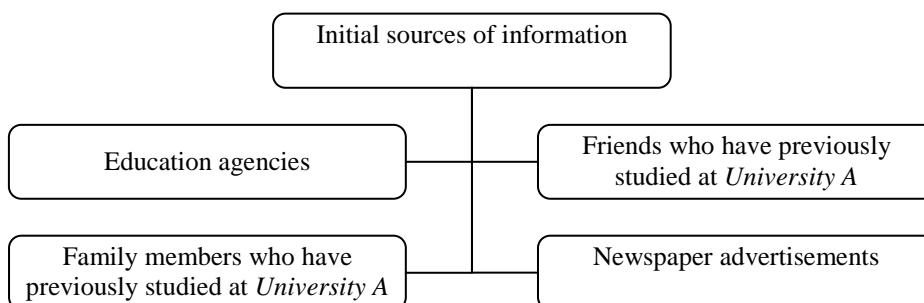
Offline sources of information

Responses to the interview question 'what offline sources of information did you use to obtain information about *[Course A]*?' include comments that suggest there are six representamens within code PAI.SIA.OFF. They include education agencies [R1], friends who have previously studied at *University A* [R2], family members who have previously studied at *University A* [R3], newspaper advertisements [R4], telephone conversations with the admissions office [R5], and telephone conversations with the MBA administrator [R6]. The following comments capture these representamens.

> *"...I contacted my consultant back home...second source was my friends living in and around this city..." (A02)*

> *"...offline sources were from friends, students here and some of them are already graduated....I called [University A] directly and I also called some members of staff and got some information" (A04)*

> *"...the agencies that were doing marketing for universities...also my friend, because he used to live here for 11 years...my friend knows about the education system in the UK, I used to ask my friend how good is the education system, what is the cultural background..." (A05)*

> *"...I called the MBA administrator and she gave me some information about the course..." (A08)*

Figure 34 Offline sources of information available during the course selection process – Course A
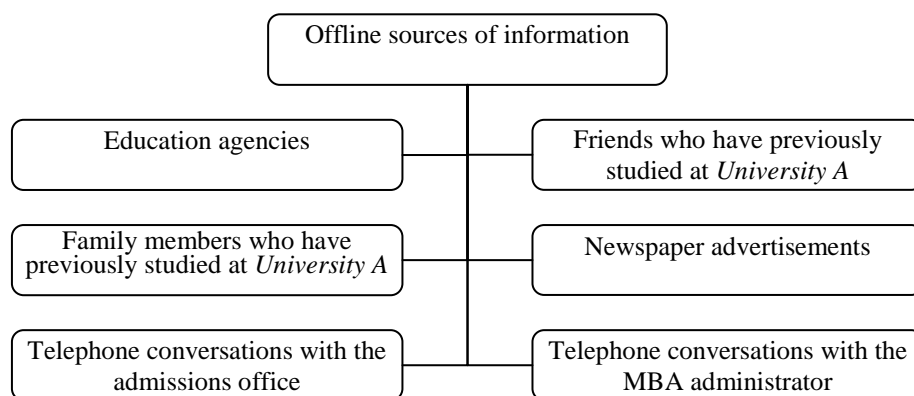
Online sources of information

Responses to the interview question 'what online sources of information did you use to obtain information about *[Course A]*?' include comments that suggest there are eight representamens within code PAI.SIA.ONL. They include OSNs [R1], ranking websites such as the Financial Times [R2], the official university website [R3], information obtained via

email exchanges with the admissions office [R4], electronic course brochures [R5], accreditation bodies' websites such as AMBA [R6], information obtained via email exchanges with the MBA administrator [R7], e-journals such as the Guardian, Newsweek and WhichMBA [R8]. The following comments capture these representamens.

> "...I have been through many sites like pagalguy...I looked for this course on Facebook and Orkut, this is the basic tendency, whenever you hear about something that you aren't sure of and you want to find more details you use these sites..."(A02)

> "...I looked at Financial Times rankings...I also checked the MBA world ranking. I used to search guardian.co.uk to check for the ranking..." (A05)

> "...I looked at [University A official website] and I saw some testimonies from students, saying some nice things... I checked the official Website...via email I contacted admissions staff and I downloaded the online course brochure..." (A04)

> "...I looked at Financial Times, Newsweek and WhichMBA. I also emailed the MBA administrator...I think I got some information from AMBA website..." (A09)

Figure 35 Online sources of information available during the course selection process – Course A
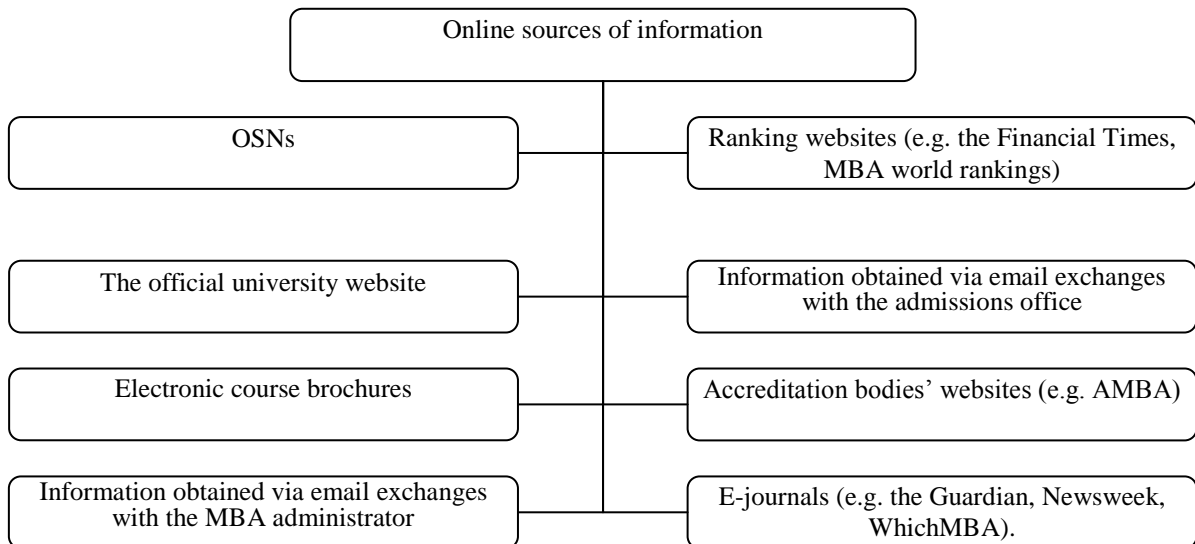
Core factors influencing the choice of *Course A*

Responses to the interview question 'why did you select *[Course A]* as your preferred course of study abroad?" include comments that suggest there are thirty representamens within code PAI.CF. These representamens will be discussed in turn.

- **Future job and career prospects after graduation** [R1]

A number of participants, particularly those from IT backgrounds, noted that they had been in the same position within their industry for many years, and they had gone as far as they could with their technical expertise and did not know how to develop further so they could be promoted. A01, A02 and A03 stated that studying for an MBA helps them to have a better understanding of the business and to raise their profiles and marketability. A01 noted that business studies related courses such as the MBA are very popular amongst employers, and studying these courses will help him to find a job more easily.

> *"...I thought that studying business related courses is something that is popular among future employers and I thought it is easier to find a job with an MBA degree..." (A01)*

> *"... I wanted to have a complete overall picture of how a business functions and for that I needed to get back to school. So getting back to basics is very essential when you are trying to do something beyond your expertise...I spent around 6 years in IT industry, I had a feeling that I was not growing beyond the technical expertise which I have gained all thorough my career..." (A02)*

> *"...I was working as an assistant manager, in corporate world, especially in India, when you have to grow to the next level or to the managerial level you look for a qualification which is more than a graduation level which is the MBA. So I wasn't getting enough response from the interviewers and I thought this is the time I should go for a postgraduate degree and improve my profile..." (A03)*

- **Lower tuition fees than other accredited MBA courses** [R2]

A01, A02 and A04 stated that the tuition fees for *Course A* were lower than for other AMBA accredited courses.

> *"...I was looking at the tuition fees...out of all AMBA accredited courses, [Course A] was among the cheapest ones..." (A01)*

> *"...I have to say that [Course A] was true value for money..." (A02)*

> *"...the tuition fees for [Course A] is more suitable to my income and it was cheaper than other MBAs..." (A04)*

- **Class sizes are not too large** [R3]

A10 gave positive feedback about class sizes on *Course A*. This participant stated that during an education fair she was told that the class size on *Course A* was average and it was about 20 students.

> *"...in the education fair I attended they said that [Course A] has an average class size and the number of students is about 20..." (A10)*

- **The institution supports students with job hunting** [R4]

A03 was told by her consultant that *University A* supports students with job hunting.

> *"...the consultant was saying good things about [University A], they were saying that this university supports students in job hunting...'(A03)*

- **The academic staff are supportive [R5]**

A06 noted that her friends who had done undergraduate degrees at *University A* were satisfied with the level of support they received from the academic staff.

> *"...Some of my friends did their BSc here, they really liked the academic staff...they told me that teachers were very supporting..." (A06)*

- **Learning outcomes from the full-time MBA are better than with other study modes [R6]**

A01 noted that the learning outcomes from the full-time MBA are better than with other study modes. He stated that the full-time MBA facilitates learning from other students through in class discussions and variety of team activities.

> *"...learning outcomes from full-time MBA are more than other study modes such as a part-time MBA... during full-time MBA you also learn from other students and you have many in class discussions and a variety of team activities..." (A01)*

- **The full-time MBA has a greater impact on personality development [R7]**

It was discovered that the full-time MBA has a greater impact on personality development in comparison with other study modes. A02 noted that he did not see much difference, in terms personality development, in some of his colleagues who had studied part-time MBA.

> *"...some of my colleagues studied part-time MBA, I didn't see much difference in them after completing their MBA, the only difference was just gaining a certificate!...I mean difference in terms of their personality after having an MBA..." (A02)*

- **The full-time MBA is more highly valued by employers [R8]**

A03 believes employers value the full-time MBA more than other study modes, and candidates who have studied a full-time MBA have better chances in finding a job.

> *"...in my country, full-time MBA has more weightage than the part-time MBA...I have interviewed many candidates and I was specifically told by my managers to consider candidates who have full-time MBA...I knew if I'm going to study an MBA it is going to be a full-time MBA not part-time which makes me incompetent in compare to other job candidates..." (A03)*

- **The full-time MBA is shorter in duration [R9]**

A05, A06 and A08 stated that the full-time MBA is shorter in duration and therefore they

can return to their professional life more quickly.

> *"...the part-time would have taken me out of the office for three years and I didn't want that, I wanted a course with a shortest possible time, so I could go back to my professional life sooner..." (A05)*

> *"...full-time MBA is quicker...and I wanted to come back to industry faster...." (A06)*

> *"...I had a limited period, within that period I could only do a full-time MBA... part-time or distance learning would take minimum two years..." (A08)*

- **The full-time MBA allows students to focus intensively, and without interruption, on their academic development [R10]**

A04 and A05 noted that studying and working at the same time is distracting and stressful, and therefore studying full-time for an MBA helps them to focus on their studies.

> *"...I didn't want to get distracted, I know if I was both studying and working that would be very distracting..." (A04)*

> *"... in my country I have heard that people doing part-time MBA and working, they aren't able to cope with stress..." (A05)*

- **The MBA in the UK is shorter in duration than the MBA in other popular study destinations [R11]**

The findings reveal that the USA, Australia, Canada, Spain, France and South Africa are among popular study destinations. A01, A03 and A10 decided to study in the UK because the UK full-time MBA is shorter in duration than the MBA in other popular study destinations.

> *"...I had also two other countries in mind, USA and Australia. I chose UK because UK full-time MBA is shorter in duration...if I wanted to do MBA in the USA I had to spend two years..." (A01)*

> *"...my preferred countries were USA, UK, Australia and Canada, but the UK is the only country that you can do 12 months full-time MBA..." (A03)*

> *"...I wanted to study my MBA in the UK because you can do one-year MBA here..." (A10)*

- **The UK education system is internationally recognised [R12]**

A02 decided to study for his MBA in the UK because the UK education system is held in high esteem and well recognized worldwide.

> *"...the educational system in the UK is very popular, for a person like me who has over 5 years working the UK MBA was tailor-made..." (A02)*

- **The UK MBA attracts more experienced candidates than other popular study destinations** [R13]

A01 noted that the UK MBA attracts more experienced candidates than other popular study destinations. A01 believes being in a class in which students have sufficient work experience is important.

> *"...the MBA in the USA is for everybody even if you don't have working experience, but the UK MBA is only for the experienced people … I thought being in a class in which students have sufficient work experience is very important..." (A01)*

- **Geographical proximity to the home country** [R14]

A04 preferred UK to other popular study destinations due to its geographical proximity to his country.

> *"...I also thought about Canada, they have some good MBAs. I think UK was still my preference because it was closer to my home country…5 to 6 hours flight…but USA takes 12 hours, I was concerned about the travelling time and cost..." (A04)*

- **Studying in the UK provides the opportunity for students to visit other European countries** [R15]

A01 stated that studying in the UK allows him to travel to other European countries.

> *"...I like UK a lot, because I like to go to other countries in the Europe, and I felt that in Europe you will have more chances to travel to other countries… "(A01)*

- **The MBA in the UK is less expensive than the MBA in other popular study destinations** [R16]

A02 stated that the MBA in the UK is less expensive than the MBA in other popular study destinations.

> *"...definitely cost was a huge factor in considering an MBA from UK, the UK MBA is less expensive than other popular countries..." (A02)*

- **International students and their dependents are allowed to work in the UK** [R17]

A03 and A05 decided to study their MBA in the UK as they and their dependents are allowed to work in the UK.

> *"... your dependents can work in the UK and you can also work here, so you can recover the fees if you really want to …" (A03)*

> *"...in the UK I have the opportunity to work for 20 hours a week, I can therefore apply my knowledge by working somewhere…" (A05)*

- **Familiarity with British culture** [R18]

A04 decided to study for his MBA in the UK because he was familiar with British culture.

> "...I was not familiar with the Canadian and American cultures...I am more familiar with British culture..." (A04)

- **Studying in the UK helps students to improve their English language skills [R19]**

A09 stated that studying in the UK helps him to improve his English language skills.

> "...I chose UK specifically because of the language, I know how to speak Spanish, but I wanted to improve my English..." (A09)

- **Friends and relatives in the destination country [R20]**

A05 decided to do her MBA in the UK because her friends and relatives were living in the UK.

> "...I have my family and friends over here in the UK, so you have a sense of belonging..." (A05)

- **UK is a culturally and ethnically diverse society [R21]**

A05 and A09 decided to study in the UK because UK is a culturally and ethnically diverse society.

> "...one main reason is cultural diversity, I found that people over here are coming from different countries...so you have more opportunities to work with other people..." (A05)

> "...I would like to live with and study with people from different countries, India, china, Europe in general." (A09)

- **The city has a good transport system [R22]**

A06 believes the city in which *Course A* is offered has a good transport system.

> "...first I wanted to go to another city in the UK but then after discussions I had with my friends I decided to move here because of its good transportation system..." (A06)

- **The city is culturally and ethnically diverse [R23]**

A03 indicated that the city in which *Course A* is offered is culturally diverse.

> "...this city is culturally diverse and I saw this as a good opportunity to get to know different cultures..." (A03)

- **Accreditation by AMBA [R24]**

A01 and A02 selected *Course A* because it is accredited by AMBA and its quality is therefore assured.

> "...I chose only those MBA courses which were AMBA accredited, I heard that AMBA accreditation assures that the quality of education is good..."(A01)

"...accreditation was crucial for me, as you know that is the basic accreditation which every business school strive for their MBA courses ...when I realised [Course A] is accredited I started being more interested..." (A02)

- **Lower admission requirements than high ranked MBA courses in terms of work experience and academic background [R25]**

A02, A03 and A10 selected *Course A* because the entry requirements for this course were lower than those of high ranked MBA courses in terms of work experience and academic background.

"...when I realised that it requires lots of efforts and you have to be really extraordinary to apply for high ranked MBA courses, I started narrowing down my list and thinking about an average MBA such as [Course A]..." (A02)

"...there were many business schools that were asking for GMAT exams, this University didn't ask for GMAT..." (A03)

"...I didn't want to take GMAT, I am not too confident with mathematics and I was very sure that I am not going to get a very high mark, that is why I wanted to come here..." (A10)

- **The availability of scholarships and bursaries [R26]**

A01 and A02 selected *Course A* because they were offered the Vice-Chancellor scholarship and the scholarship for non-EU students.

"...another factor that really motivated me was the Vice-Chancellor scholarship..." (A01)

"...they were also recognising the talent and offering several other scholarships for international students, I was fortunate and I was one of them who was picked for vice chancellor scholarship. This was worth about 5,000 pounds, deducted from my annual fees..." (A02)

- **The course structure and curriculum [R27]**

A04 stated that the course structure and curricula of the UK MBA courses is similar to those of MBA courses offered in his country.

"...another factor was the way MBA was run here in the UK, the way the MBA in the UK was run was similar to back home..." (A04)

- **The focus on entrepreneurship [R28]**

A10 selected *Course A* because of its emphasis on entrepreneurship.

"...also because they were offering an MBA for entrepreneurship so that was another thing..." (A10)

- **Availability of international exchange programmes [R29]**

A03 selected *Course A* because of the availability of an international exchange programme. This participant perceived this as an opportunity to visit other European countries.

> *"...I saw there was an opportunity for you to be an exchange student ... I thought that was a good one to go somewhere else in the Europe..." (A03)*

- **Enhanced business knowledge** [R30]

A06 and A08 decided to study for an MBA predominantly in order to boost their knowledge and understanding about business in general.

> *"...I wanted to learn more about the business, although I did my Master and BSc in business studies which specialized in finance, but I still wanted to know more..." (A06)*

> *"...I wanted to study MBA to get some basic topic and knowledge of business and basic skills of what business is and current trends going on in business locally and internationally..." (A08)*

Core factors influencing the choice of *Course A* are displayed in the figure below.

Figure 1Core factors influencing selection of a course abroad – Course A

Core factors influencing the choice of *Course A*

Future job and career prospects after graduation

Class sizes are not too large

The academic staff are supportive

The full-time MBA has a greater impact on personality development

The full-time MBA is shorter in duration

The MBA in the UK is shorter in duration than the MBA in other popular study destinations

The UK MBA attracts more experienced candidates than other popular study destinations

Studying in the UK provides students with the opportunity to visit other European countries

International students and their dependents are allowed to work in the UK

Studying in the UK helps students to improve their English language skills

UK is a culturally and ethnically diverse society

Availability of international exchange programmes

The availability of scholarships and bursaries

The course structure and curriculum

Enhanced business knowledge

Lower tuition fees than other accredited MBA courses

The institution supports students with job hunting

Learning outcomes from the full-time MBA are better than with other study modes

The full-time MBA is more highly valued by employers

The full-time MBA allows students to focus intensively, and without interruption, on their academic development

UK education system is held in high esteem and well recognized worldwide

Geographical proximity to the home country

The MBA in the UK is less expensive than in other popular study destinations

Familiarity with British culture

Friends and relatives in the destination country

The city has a good transport system

Accreditation by AMBA

Lower admission requirements than high ranked MBA courses in terms of work experience and academic background

The focus on entrepreneurship

The city is culturally and ethnically diverse

132

5.4.1.2 Syntagmatic identity of *Course A* as observed through online social networks

This section presents 'representamens' within codes that constitute the syntagmatic identity of *Course A as* observed through OSNs. This identity of *Course A* is communicated in the form of the representamen to international HE aspirants and applicants through OSNs, from which international HE aspirants and applicants generate certain perceptions (or interpretants) about *Course A.*

Participants did not use OSNs

Four out of ten research participants did not use OSNs during the course selection process: A03 from India, A05 from Nigeria, A06 from Hong Kong and MBA 08 from Nigeria. Their reasons for not using OSNs and subsequent changes in their perceptions about OSNs are discussed below.

Reasons for not using OSNs and subsequent changes in perceptions about OSNs

Responses to the interview question 'why didn't you use OSNs during the course selection process?' include comments that suggest there are four representamens within code SYI.PDU.RNU. They are as follows: OSNs can be a distraction and time-consuming [R1], no further information was required [R2], OSNs are not perceived as a valid source of information [R3] and participants' personality traits discouraged them from using OSNs [R4]. These representamens will be discussed in turn.

- **OSNs can be a distraction and time-consuming [R1]**

A05 and A08 had the opportunity to use OSNs during the course selection process, but did not because they view OSNs as distracting and time-consuming.

> *"...I saw a Facebook page for [Course A] but I never thought of getting into that. Because I have the notion that the kind of discussions you have on these sites is waste of time, for example people eat something and share it with the world!..." (A05)*

> *"...because I believe that these sites take most of your time..." (A08)*

- **No further information was required [R2]**

A05 and A06 already had all of the information they needed in order to make their final course selection decisions. These participants stated that the information they had acquired from official sources, such as the official university website, exceeded their expectations and they were happy to select *Course A.*

"...I had all the information I needed to make my decision, and I only used university website...I didn't use OSNs just because I was happy with the information I collected from official university website ...". (A05)

"...the information I got from official websites were above my expectations...I was very sure to select [Course A]...". (A06)

- **OSNs are not perceived as a valid source of information** [R3]

A08 believes OSNs are not a valid source of information, as a result this participant preferred to use official sources instead.

"...for me OSNs aren't valid sources, if I want to research on a particular thing I rather go to their main website directly..." (A08)

- **Participants' personality traits discouraged them from using OSNs** [R4]

A03 and A08 indicated that they simply do not like OSNs and they are not big fans of them.

"...I am not into these sites, I just don't like them!..." (A03)

"...I am not a big fan of them presently...I registered on Facebook, because some people forced me to do so...when I came here career advisor told us that LinkedIn is the best, and you have to get into the LinkedIn. But if you ask me now to open my LinkedIn account probably I have forgotten my password..." (A08)

Figure 37 Reasons for not using online social networks – Course A
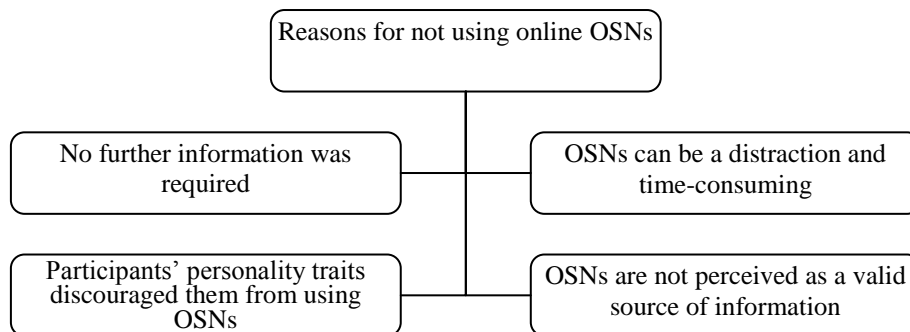
Responses to the interview question 'do you still have the same approach towards OSNs?' include comments that suggest there are two representamens within code SYI.PDU.SCP. These representamens will be discussed in turn.

- **Changed perceptions of OSNs** [R1]

Three out of four research participants who did not use OSNs indicated that their perceptions about using OSNs had since changed such that they would now consider using

them. A03, A05 and A06 stated that through OSNs they were able to contact past and current students and other HE aspirants and applicants interested in *Course A,* and also acquire information on the course structure and curriculum, assignments, academic and administrative staff, fees, professional level of students attending the course, diversity of past and current students, and job opportunities.

> *"...if I was on OSNs I would have been more informative than what I'm now...next time I will definitely consider using OSNs not only for selecting MBA but any kind of decisions that I have to take...about MBA I would have tried to get information on complexity of the course, the contents of the module and about tutors, professional level of students, diversity of students and maybe job opportunities..." (A03)*

> *"...I would definitely join OSNs in order to ask questions from previous MBA students. I would be looking at their overall experience here, I would be looking at quality of lectures and any issues they had with assignments and group works. I would be looking at how they could use their MBA qualification, could they get a job..." (A05)*

> *"...I would definitely use them now...that would be great if before joining this course I could know more about this course... I could get information on fees, place, environment...." (A06)*

- **Perceptions did not change [R2]**

There was one participant whose perceptions about OSNs did not change. A08 indicated that he still prefers to use official sources of information. This participant stated that he gets enough information from official sources of information and therefore does not feel he needs to use any other.

> *"...I still prefer to use official sources. The information from official websites meets my expectations..." (A08)*

Table 30 Subsequent changes in perceptions about online social networks – Course A

Interviewees	A03	A05	A06	A08
Changed perceptions of OSNs	✓	✓	✓	
Perceptions did not change				✓

Participants used OSNs

Six out of ten research participants used OSNs during the course selection process: A01, A02 and A10 from India, A04 from Zimbabwe, A07 from United States and A09 from Nigeria.

Stages at which OSNs are used during the course selection process

Responses to the interview question 'at what stages in your course selection process did you use OSNs?' include comments that suggest there are two representamens within code SYI.PUS.S. These representamens will be discussed in turn.

- **The search behaviour stage [R1]**

The search behaviour stage is characterized by extensive and active acquisition of information about the course of study. All participants who used OSNs during the course selection process stated that OSNs allowed them to acquire information on *Course A*. The following comment by A01 captures this representamen.

> *"...prior selecting this course I used OSNs to get information on different MBA courses in the UK, I used Facebook and Orkut and started getting information from the students..." (A01)*

- **The choice decision stage [R2]**

At the choice decision stage, an individual makes his/her final course selection decision and selects one course of study. A01, A04, A09 and A10 claimed that OSNs helped them in their final course selection decisions. The following comments by A04 capture this representamen.

> *"...I used OSNs to help me to make my final decision, it was when I had two options in my mind and I was trying to get information to help me to select the best one…" (A04)*

Table 31 Stages at which online social networks are used during the course selection process – Course A

Interviewees	A01	A02	A04	A07	A09	A10
The search behaviour stage	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
The choice decision stage	✓		✓		✓	✓

OSNs most commonly used during the course selection process

Responses to the interview question 'can you please name all the OSNs that you used to obtain information about *[Course A]*?' include responses that suggest Facebook [R1], Orkut [R2] and Pagalguy [R3] are popular OSNs to use during the course selection process. Pagalguy is an Indian OSN which is mainly managed by Indian students who provide feedback on various courses. Pagalguy is particularly targeted at course-related feedback.

> *"...we have our own OSNs in India and it is very famous it is called pagalguy. It is the forum for all the MBA aspirants in respect of where you want to do*

your MBA, so all the Indian students who want to do their MBA collaborate on this site and they keep asking questions…I also looked at Facebook and Orkut….” (A02)

“…I looked at Facebook to see what people say about [Course A]… (A07)

Figure 38 Online social networks most commonly used during the course selection process – Course A
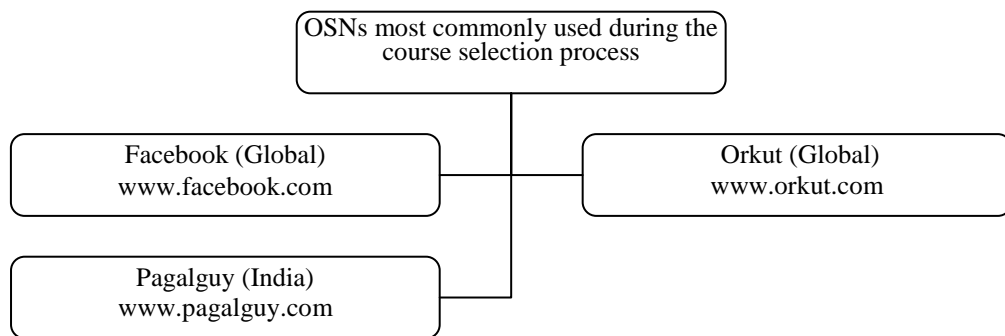
Information-gathering methods using OSNs

Reponses to the interview question 'how did you gather information using OSNs?' include comments that suggest there are five representamens within code SYI.PUS.IGM. Participants obtained information via a variety of means, including viewing online profiles [R1], reading comments from other users [R2], viewing photos and watching videos [R3], contacting users directly via private messages [R4], and reading responses to questions participants posted publicly [R5].

Figure 39 Information-gathering methods using online social networks – Course A
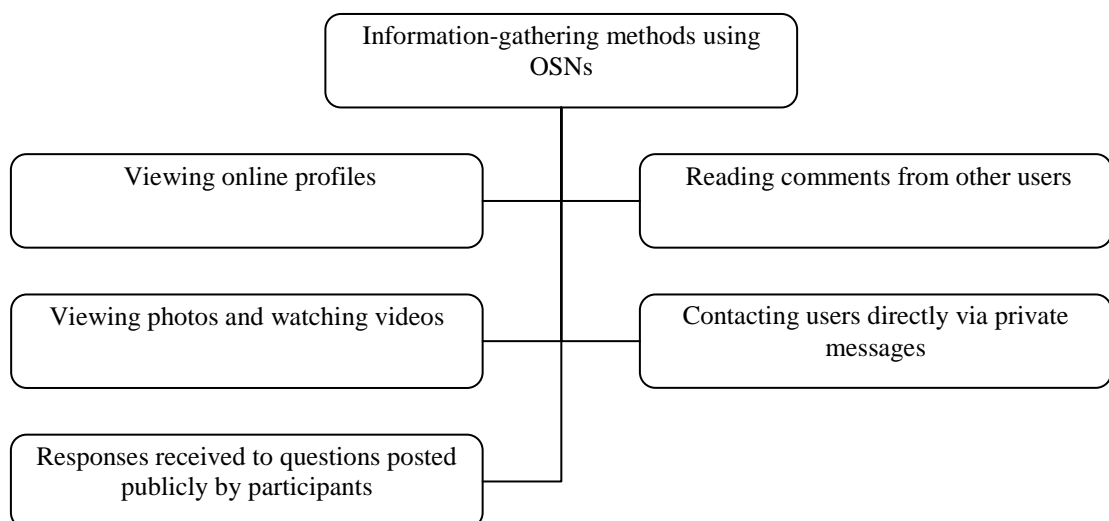
Information available on OSNs

Responses to the interview question 'what information was available on OSNs?' include comments that suggest there are nineteen representamens within code SYI.PUS.IAO. By viewing online profiles, A07 obtained information about the nationality [R1] and ages [R2] of other HE aspirants and applicants interested in *Course A*.

> *"...I got to know other people who were interested in selecting this course, I wanted to know what kind of students were there in terms of their age and nationality..." (A07)*

By reading comments from other users, a number of participants acquired information about university accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city [R3], class sizes [R4], the city in which *Course A* is offered [R5], the institution [R6], past and current students' levels of satisfaction with *Course A* [R7] and new building and campus construction projects [R8].

> *"...the first information I was looking for was about the accommodation, because when you go to a new country it [accommodation] is very important...one interesting factor was that the class size is average almost 20 ... I also started to get information on this city..." (A01)*

> *"...by reading existing comments on the wall I found that previous students and current students had good experience with the course and they are happy here at [University A]..." (A02)*

> *"...I was also reading something about a new building under construction...". (A04)*

By reading comments from other users, A07 and A10 acquired information on the transport system of the city [R9], tuition fees [R10] and the course structure and curriculum [R11].

> *"...I was purely concerned with transportation system, tuition fees and course structure ..." (A07)*

Through viewing photos and watching videos uploaded on OSNs, A10 obtained information about the diversity of past and current students [R12].

> *"...I looked at the photos and videos to find out the diversity of students, because I wanted to share my experiences with people from different countries ...". (A10)*

By contacting users directly via private messages, A01 and A10 acquired information about university accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city [R13], the course structure and curriculum [R14], the institution [R15] and the city [R16].

"…I started sending messages to students…the first information I was looking for was about the accommodation…I got feedback that the university accommodation is very nice…" (A01)

"…I was scared about how the city is going to be…I obtained city related and course related information… I was asking how was the course plan and course structure, and how the results are going to be distributed, and I remember I contacted some students and they said don't worry..." (A10)

From responses received to questions posted publicly by participants, A01 and A10 obtained information about the course structure and curriculum [R17], the city [R18], and university accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city [R19].

"…I just posted my questions on Facebook and there were some students who were answering my questions, for example I posted that hello, I am planning to do my MBA, is there anybody who can help me and give me some information on the course structure and the city? Two students replied to my question and we then became friends…" (A01)

"…I remember people were trying to help me with my answers. I mainly found the information on the course structure and different types of accommodation…" (A10)

Figure 2 Information available on online social networks – Course A

Information available on OSNs

By viewing online profiles
- Nationalities of other HE aspirants and applicants interested in *Course A*
- The age range of other HE aspirants and applicants interested in *Course A*

By reading comments from other users
- University accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city
- The city
- Past and current students' levels of satisfaction with *Course A*
- The city's transport system
- The course structure and curriculum
- Class size
- Information about the institution
- New buildings and campus construction projects
- Tuition fees

Through viewing photos and watching videos
- The diversity of past and current students

By contacting users directly via private messages
- University accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city
- The course structure and curriculum
- Information about the institution
- Information about the city

From responses received to questions posted publicly by participants
- The course structure and curriculum
- The city
- University accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city

140

The information needed most from OSNs during the course selection process

Responses to the interview question 'what is the information that is needed most during the course selection process that you search for on OSNs?' include comments that suggest there are four representamens within code SYI.PUS.INM. They include information about university accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city [R1], leisure activities in the city [R2], the course structure and curriculum [R3] and the quality of *Course A* [4].

> *"...I wanted to get more information on the local accommodation and not only student accommodation... I also didn't get much information on the course structure...." (A01)*

> *"...I wanted to get more information on the quality of the MBA and if they meet my expectations..." (A04)*

> *"...I think they could focus more on course structure, such as the modules covered in the first and second semesters...I know they have this information very systematically on the leaflet, but they should make it more transparent and easier to access..." (A10)*

Figure 41 Information needed most from online social networks during the course selection process – Course A
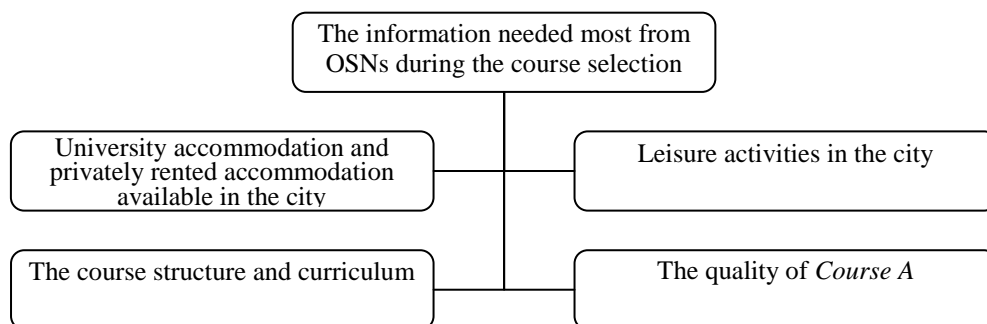
Benefits of using OSNs in course selection

Responses to the interview question 'what are the benefits of using OSNs in comparison with other sources?' include comments that suggest there are nine representamens within code SYI.PUS.BOC. A10 stated that OSNs strengthen an individual's confidence in selecting the course [R1] and that they are less biased and a more credible source of information than official sources [R2]. A10 was not sure about choosing *Course A* until she

managed to find more information about it via OSNs and met other HE aspirants and applicants who were interested in *Course A*.

> *"…OSNs such as Facebook assisted me to be more confident in selecting this course…mostly students were answering the questions so I was getting these answers from those who have already experienced this course and it was not from staff or other official sources…I wasn't sure about this course, and then I saw one page that the owner was one of the previous students, there was a lot of members…I just realized oh! Maybe this MBA is good, there are many people there, I can try to contact some of these people, asking information on the course… and then I remember that it was very busy, a lot of people posted comments and this course is good and this place is good…" (A10)*

A02 and A04 indicated that the information provided on OSNs was less biased and more credible than the information provided through official sources such as education agencies and the official university website. A02 and A04 perceived the information provided by past and current students to be particularly valuable as those people had already experienced the course.

> *"…I think the comments on OSNs were not that much biased same as official website… when my consultant was proposing this course, I was not really sure because I had never heard about it, also the Information on their website was not appealing…I started getting feeling that maybe there is something wrong or maybe my consultant is just trying to force something on me, when I searched on OSNs I started to feel more confident about his course…" (A02)*

> *"……the information which you get on OSNs Is directly from students which makes it more credible because consultants aren't the ones who really experienced the MBA…so the information was actually coming from direct source which is the students…the information was more reliable and more credible than any other sources available…" (A04)*

A10 believes OSNs are more interactive than official sources of information such as ranking websites [R3], and moreover, OSNs help HE aspirants and applicants to gather detailed information about *Course A* [R4].

> *"…OSNs were more interactive and they helped me to collect detailed informaiton, I was posting questions and I was getting replies from several students, even from staff including MBA director and MBA administrator… through sites such as Facebook you have interactions with people, what kind of interaction I'm going to have with the Financial Times or other official sources. I can only read a table statistics on Financial Times…" (A10)*

A04 and A10 stated that it was easy for them to access and use OSNs from their home countries [R5], and they did not need any additional skills in order to use them.

> *"…it was easy to access OSNs from my home country…" (A04)*

"...it was very easy to access OSNs from India..." (A10)

A02 and A09 claimed that OSNs allowed them to find out about past and current students' personal views and experiences of the MBA course [R6], obtain feedback from students from different countries [R7] and contact other students from their home countries [R8].

> *"...when I browsed through the official university website they just gave me general information on the course such as tuition fees, what are the requirements and what to expect from academic point of view. But when I browsed through Facebook, I found more individualist information, or information and comments from students' point of views..." (A02)*

> *"...the most important thing that make them [OSNs] so different and quite resourceful is the fact that you get to know different students from different countries and cultures...you also get to know students from the same country as yours, you know how students from your country think and how it fits with their cultures and their beliefs..." (A09*

Finally, A10 believes OSNs enable faster replies to enquiries in comparison with official sources of information [R9].

> *"...I was getting answers on OSNs much faster than official sources of information, and some of my doubts were cleared..." (A10)*

Figure 42 Benefits of using online social networks in course selection – Course A
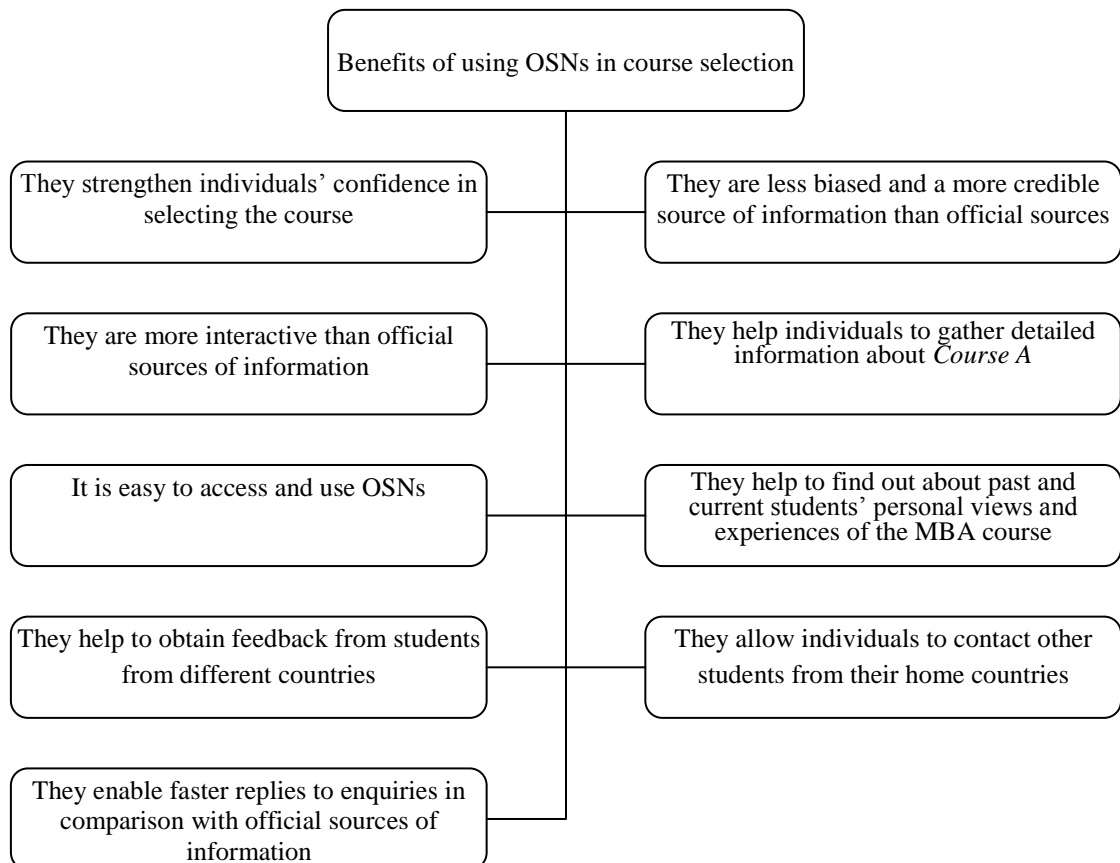
Downsides of using OSNs in course selection

Responses to the interview question 'what are the downsides of using OSNs in comparison with other sources?' include comments that suggest there are four representamens within code SYI.PUS.DOC. A04 and A10 found it difficult to distinguish between posts made on OSNs by members of staff and those made by students [R1] and users cannot completely rely on all of the information available on OSNs, as some information on OSNs can be biased [R2]. The findings indicate that the information provided by members of staff is perceived as advertising. A04 and A10 did not contact academic and administrative staff via OSNs as they believed information provided by them is only ever positive.

> *"...I didn't trust Facebook enough ...I felt that some of the comments on Facebook could be biased..." (A04)*

> *"...I think OSNs could also be negative if a member of staff starts answering the queries...and they can push you to select the course...they are trying to sell the MBA, so you should be careful who you contact on OSNs..." (A10)*

A04 believes some users are apprehensive about sharing information via OSNs [R3].

> *"...because some students don't know me very well they don't feel comfortable to give me the correct information on OSNs... I just felt some of the students on OSNs were current students and they did not want to say something which is not nice about the course..." (A04)*

A07 and A09 indicated that on some occasions past and current students' personal views could negatively influence the course selection decisions of HE aspirants and applicants [R4].

> *"...some students talk negatively on OSNs based on their own experiences...if one person had a bad experience or a personal issue with the course then he/she can negatively influence HE aspirants and applicants..." (A07)*

> *"...you only read what people think about the course and what they have experienced, and it might be in line with their cultures and where they are from...it might be in conflict with your own culture..." (A09)*

Figure 43 Downsides of using online social networks in course selection – Course A
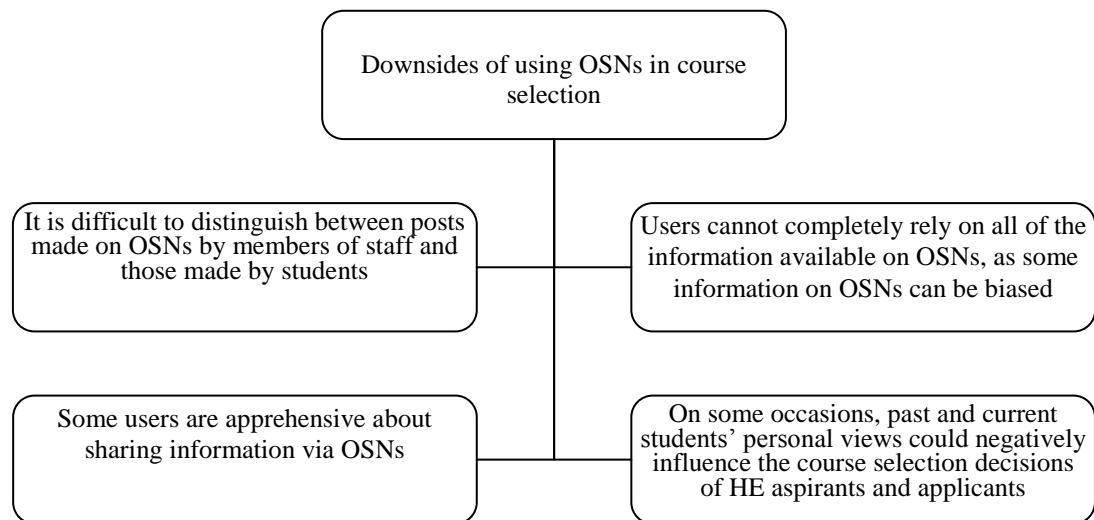
5.4.1.3 Perceived identity of *Course A*

This section presents 'interpretants' within codes that constitute the perceived identity of *Course A*. The perceived identity of *Course A* is determined by the paradigmatic identity of *Course A* and the syntagmatic identity of *Course A,* and influences the final course selection decisions of international HE aspirants and applicants.

The level of influence of OSNs on final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources

Responses to the interview question 'how influential were OSNs on your final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources?' include comments that suggest there are three interpretants (or 'I' as abbreviation of the interpretant) within code PEI.LIF. These representamens will be discussed in turn.

- **OSNs have a strong influence on final course selection decisions** [I1]

A01, A09 and A10 stated that OSNs had a strong influence on their final course selection decisions. Even though these participants obtained a significant amount of information from official sources, they were not fully confident in selecting *Course A* on the basis of this information alone and used OSNs to enhance their confidence.

> *"...minimum 70% to 80% OSNs influenced my final course selection decisions, because they boosted my confidence, even though I could get lots and lots of information from the official university website, I was not confident with them, but if a student on OSNs says this course is great this makes me very confident..." (A01)*

"...OSNs definitely influenced me, I received a lot of positive comments about this course and it made me very confident that I wanted to come and do my MBA here, so the answer is yes, OSNs helped me a lot…" (A09)

"...I would say between 70% to 80% OSNs helped me to finalize my options, and to be 100% confident in selecting this course. I could change my mind if somebody would tell me this course isn't very good…" (A10)

- **OSNs have a moderate influence on final course selection decisions [I2]**

OSNs had a moderate influence on A02's final course selection decision in comparison with other sources.

"...I believe OSNs have been 50% influential in selecting [Course A], because if somebody would give a bad feedback I would not consider selecting this course ..." (A02)

- **OSNs have a low level of influence on final course selection decisions [I3]**

A04 and A07 stated that OSNs had a low level of influence on their final course selection decisions. A04 and A07 stated that the information available on OSNs is biased in much the same way as official sources of information are, and they could not find enough information about *Course A* and students' experiences of the course on OSNs.

"...not very much. The information on OSNs is just same as official sources such as the official university website. I just felt it is going to be the same thing…I didn't really trust those comments…" (A04)

"...they didn't influence much because as I said earlier there were not much information available on the course or students' experiences…" (A07)

Table 32 The level of influence of online social networks on final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources – Course A

Interviewees	Strong level of influence	Moderate level of influence	Low level of influence
A01	✓		
A02		✓	
A04			✓
A07			✓
A09	✓		
A10	✓		

5.4.2 Course B

A sample of 10 international students studying on *Course B* was selected for the main study. The demographics of interviewees are presented in the table below.

Table 33 The demographics of interviewees – Course B

Interviewees	Age	Marital status	Gender	Country	The highest level of education before MBA	years of work experience	professional position	Industry
B01	28	Single	Male	India	MSc	6	Software engineer	IT
B02	29	Married	Male	Cameroon	Bachelor	6	Finance reporting officer	Finance
B03	26	Single	Male	Pakistan	Bachelor	4	Business consultant	Consulting
B04	33	Married	Male	Latvia	MSc	14	Self-employed	Real states/property
B05	28	Married	Female	China	MSc	6	Operations manager	Consulting
B06	30	Married	Male	Argentina	MSc	5	Sales manager	Retail
B07	30	Married	Female	Saudi Arabia	Bachelor	4	Librarian	Education
B08	25	Single	Male	India	Bachelor	6	Finance manager	Finance
B09	30	Married	Female	Germany	MSc	4	Project manager	Media
B10	31	Single	Male	Mexico	Bachelor	7	Finance Manager	Finance

In line with the aims of the analysis, this section is divided into three. The first subsection presents 'representamens' within codes that constitute the paradigmatic identity of *Course B*. The second subsection presents 'representamens' within codes that constitute the syntagmatic identity of *Course B* as observed through OSNs. Finally, the third subsection presents 'interpretants' within codes that constitute the perceived identity of *Course B*.

5.4.2.1 Paradigmatic identity of *Course B*

This section presents 'representamens' within codes that constitute the paradigmatic identity of *Course B*. The paradigmatic identity of *Course B* is the overall identity of this course communicated in the form of the representamen to international HE aspirants and applicants through a variety of resources from which international HE aspirants and applicants generate certain perceptions (or interpretants) about *Course B.*

Initial sources of information

Responses to the interview question 'how did you first find out about *[Course B]*?' include comments that suggest there are five representamens within code PAI.FSI. Participants first heard about *Course B* from friends who have previously taken *Course B* [R1], from

friends living in the UK [R2], from family members who have previously studied at *University B* [R3], from ranking websites [R4], or from education agencies [R5].

> *"...I first heard about [Course B] from a friend of mine who had studied [Course B]..." (B02)*

> *"...the first time I heard about this course was when I discussed this with my friend who has been living in the UK..." (B03)*

> *"...the choice of [Course B] was actually influenced by my husband who is studying here..." (B05)*

> *"...I looked at ranking sites and I searched the subjects for me and my husband...then we found [Course B]..." (B07)*

> *"...I heard about his course from an education agency back home in India..." (B08)*

Figure 44 Initial sources of information available during the course selection process – Course B
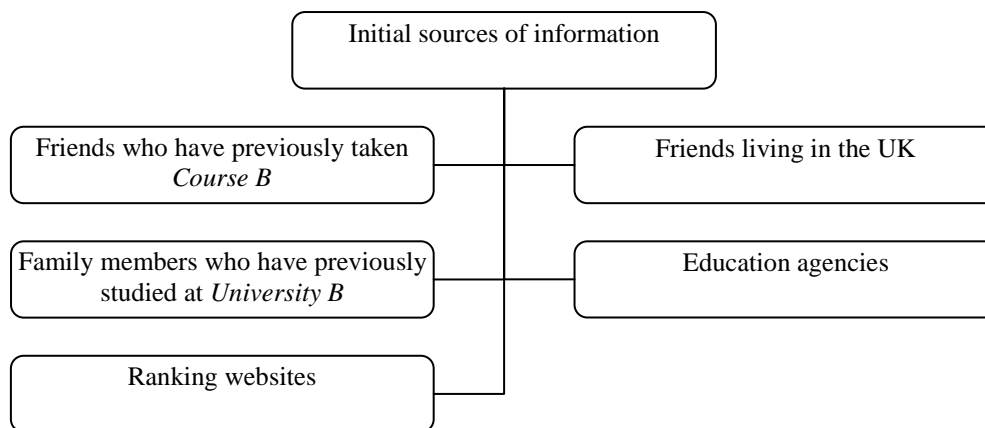
Offline sources of information

Responses to the interview question 'what offline sources of information did you use to obtain information about *[Course B]*?' include comments that suggest there are five representamens within code PAI.SIA.OFF. They are as follows: education agencies [R1], family members who have previously studied at *University B* [R2], telephone conversations with the admissions office [R3], friends living in the UK [R4] and friends who have previously taken *Course B* [R5]. The following comments capture some of these representamens.

> *"...the first time I heard about this course was when I discussed this with my friend who has been living in the UK..." (B03)*

"...I first heard about [Course B] from a friend of mine who had studied [Course B]…" (B02)

"...the MBA brochure of the university, after when I contacted the staff they sent me a brochure..." (B04)

"...I heard about his course from an education agency back home in India…" (B08)

Figure 45 Offline sources of information available during the course selection process – Course B
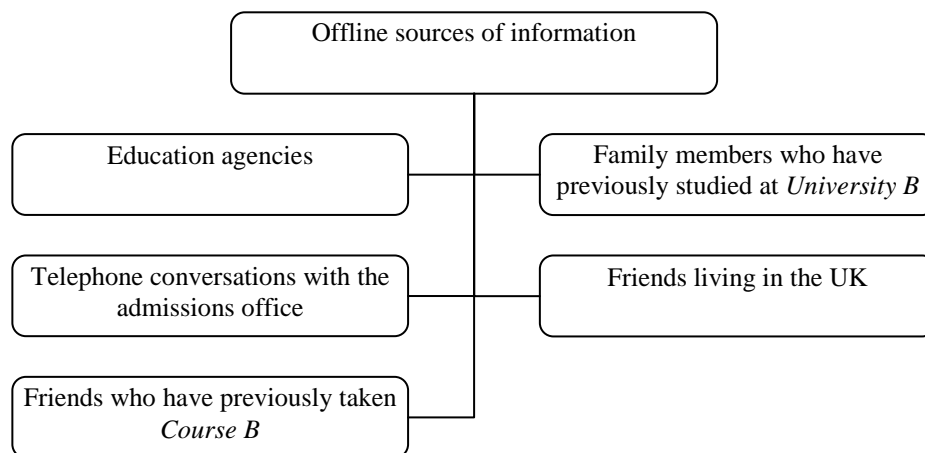
Online sources of information

Responses to the interview question 'what online sources of information did you use to obtain information about *[Course B]*?' include comments that suggest there are nine representamens within code PAI.SIA.ONL. They include the British Council website [R1], the British Consulate website [R2], information obtained via email exchanges with the admissions office [R3], accreditation bodies' websites [R4], e-journals [R5], OSNs [R6], ranking websites [R7], the UK Border Agency website [R8] and the official university website [R9]. The following comments capture some of these representamens.

"...I first looked at the ranking sites, I searched for the UK MBA rankings, I used Guardian ranking, it was Guardian University League table… I used sites such as Facebook and Orkut…and there is one famous Indian one which is called "Pagalguy"…" (B01)

"...I read about [Course B] on some e-journals and British Council in particular… I looked at the university website and various ranking websites such as Financial Times… I also looked at AMBA website to see if this course is accredited …" (B02)

"...online sources such as OSNs, I used a Chinese one which is called "Power Apple". It is the biggest and the most famous Chinese community in the UK...I also used Facebook, QQ and Renren"..." (B05)

"...I visited UK Border Agency website in Argentina, they have a list of all the universities and courses. Also I looked at British Council website..." (B06)

Figure 46 Online sources of information available during the course selection process – Course B
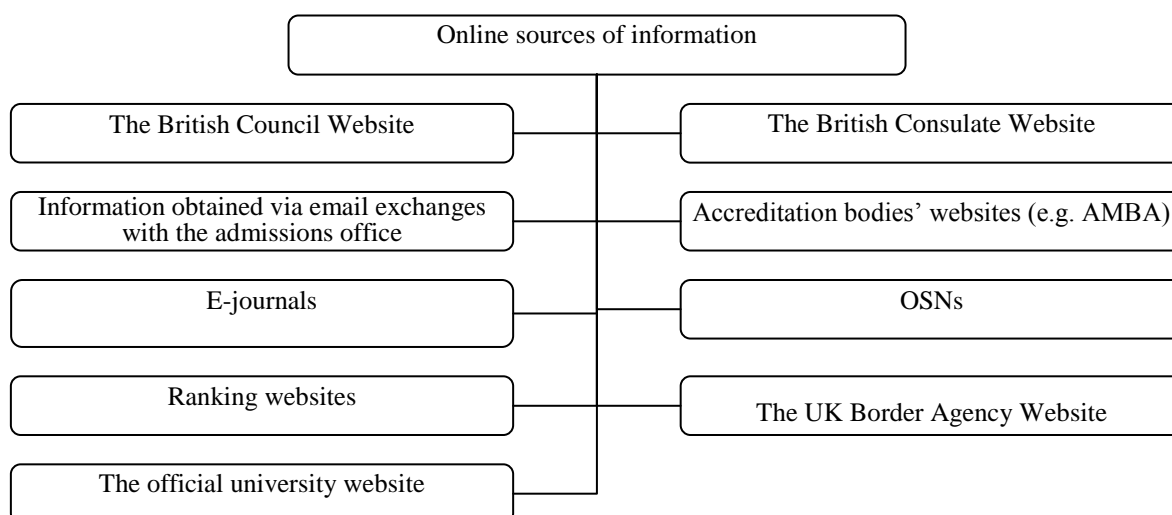
Core factors influencing the choice of *Course B*

Responses to the interview question 'why did you select *[Course B]* as your preferred course of study abroad?" include comments that suggest there are thirty-six representamens within code PAI.CF. These representamens will be discussed in turn.

- **Lower tuition fees than other average ranked MBA courses [R1]**

B01 and B10 indicated that the tuition fees for *Course B* were lower in comparison with other average ranked MBA courses. These participants stated that the low tuition fees for *Course B* were one of the main motivating factors in selecting this course.

"...one of the factors that motivated me to do my MBA here was the fee factor... the fee for [Course B] was lower in compare to other average ranked MBA courses..." (B01)

"...one of the important reasons was the tuition fees of this course which was lower than other courses, the tuition fees was very important for me..." (B10)

- **Lower tuition fees than other accredited MBA courses [R2]**

B08 noted that the tuition fees for *Course B* were lower than for other AMBA accredited courses in the UK.

> *"...the tuition fees for [Course B] was better in compare to other AMBA accredited courses in the UK and I had to go for a bigger loan if I wanted to consider studying other high ranked MBAs..." (B08)*

- **Future job and career prospects after graduation [R3]**

B02 and B09 stated that studying for an MBA course, such as *Course B,* would help them to progress to the managerial level and to achieve their career objectives.

> *"...I come from Cameroon and in my country there is a serious lack of managerial skills, and managers are really lacking in most private sectors, I thought an MBA would be an ideal thing for me to do in order to achieve my career goals..." (B02)*

> *"...I want to improve my career...I want to change the structure of the company I am working for...I have lots of responsibilities...I wanted to do an MBA to have more power to manage and change..." (B09)*

- **The prestige of the MBA course [R4]**

B05 and B08 believe the MBA is perceived as a prestigious postgraduate course, and this was one of the main factors in selecting *Course B.*

> *"...I already got MSc and I wanted to do a more prestigious course and that was the reason I wanted to study MBA. Generally, MBA is categorized as a better degree than MSc..." (B05)*

> *"...your practical experience is important, but besides that you need a prestigious course such as the MBA which can push you more up..." (B08)*

- **Whether the institution has a multicultural environment [R5]**

B02 indicated that *University B* is well-known for having a multicultural environment.

> *"...the multicultural environment of [University B] was important for me, [University B] is one of the well-known business schools for having a multicultural environment in the UK and this was really important for me and I saw it as an opportunity to meet different students from different countries and different environments..." (B02)*

- **High quality of teaching [R6]**

B05 had received a positive feedback on the quality of teaching at *University B.*

> *"...I think the teaching quality in here [University B] is high..." (B05)*

- **Campus infrastructure and new buildings [R7]**

B09 liked the campus infrastructure and new buildings.

> *"...I also really liked their new location, their new building...so I found their new building very interesting... (B09)*

- **Friendliness and courtesy of staff during the admission process [R8]**

B04 and B09 indicated that the friendliness and courtesy of staff during the admission process was an important factor in selecting *Course B.*

> *"... I also contacted the MBA administrator here and people have been really welcoming and polite…" (B04)*

> *"...the staff were very friendly when I contacted them and I found them friendlier than other universities…" (B09)*

- **The full-time MBA is shorter in duration than other study modes [R9]**

B01 and B10 noted that the full-time MBA is shorter than the part-time MBA and they would not be able to spend three years studying a part-time MBA.

> *"...I had the option to do part-time MBA but considering my age I am 28 years old, I could not invest 3 years of my life on part-time MBA..." (B01)*

> *"...because full-time MBA is only one-year and I believe the part-time is almost three years, so definitely the time was very important..." (B10)*

- **The full-time MBA enhances in-class participation and interaction with lecturers and other students [R10]**

B02 noted that full-time MBA, such as *Course A,* enhances in-class participation and enhances interaction with lecturers and other students.

> *"...full-time MBA gives me some direct participation in class and gives me the opportunities to discuss with people from various background and also gives me direct relationship with lectures which to me is the added advantage in compare to other MBA modes…" (B02)*

- **The full-time MBA is culturally diverse [R11]**

B02 believes that there is a greater diversity of students from different backgrounds studying the full-time MBA than in other MBA study modes.

> *"...I think there are more diverse students from different backgrounds studying full-time MBA in compare to other MBA modes…" (B02)*

- **The full-time MBA allows students to focus intensively, and without interruption, on their academic development [R12]**

B04 and B08 indicated that they are able to concentrate more on studying when they study full-time.

> *"... I just wanted to focus on the MBA, and I think when I do it full-time I can concentrate more on my studies…" (B04)*

> *".... I think when you do your Master degree such as the MBA you need to allocate a good amount of time so I think it is necessary to select full-time MBA..." (B08)*

- **The full-time MBA is more highly valued by employers** [R13]

B04 stated that full-time MBA is more highly valued by employers in comparison with other study modes.

> "...I also think full-time MBA degree has better value and image especially for employers..." (B04)

- **The UK Border Agency only allow international students to apply for full-time courses** [R14]

B07 stated that the UK Border Agency only allow non-EU students to study full-time courses.

> "...because the UK only allows me to study full-time course and not PT..." (B07)

- **Shorter duration in comparison with other full-time MBA courses** [R15]

B01 and B05 selected *Course B* because the duration of the course was shorter than other full-time MBA courses.

> "...for me 1 year course is more preferred and I can't spend more than 1 year without working..." (B05)

> "...my basic concern was that I need to do an MBA in a short duration and learn from it and apply it as soon as possible when my mind is still fresh..." (B01)

- **High quality of education in the UK** [R16]

B01 and B10 decided to study their MBA in the UK because of the UK's high quality of education.

> "...the influencing factor to select UK among other countries was the high quality of education in the UK..." (B01)

> "...the quality of education in the UK is very high, in Mexico they focus a lot on where you study...basically quality of education in the UK has been really important in selecting my MBA here..." (B10)

- **UK qualifications are recognized all over the world** [R17]

B10 and B02 noted that UK qualifications are recognized all over the world.

> "...in the country that I come from, the UK certificate is much more valid in compare to other certificates, for example Spain..." (B10)

> "...in the Cameroon the UK degree is really valuable and it has been always a cultural thing and in Cameroon we always believe in the UK degrees..." (B02)

- **It is easier to find a job in the UK after graduation** [R18]

B01 indicated that it is easier to find a job in the UK after graduation.

> *"...in terms of future job opportunities, I thought I would have more chances to find jobs if I do my full-time MBA here in the UK..." (B01)*

- **UK qualifications are highly valued by employers [R19]**

B02 believes UK qualifications are highly valued by employers and there is a perception that UK graduates are better than graduates from other countries.

> *"...employers believe that graduates or degrees from UK are better than others because UK is the best place you can study..." (B02)*

- **The visa application process is easier for the UK than other popular study destinations [R20]**

B03 indicated that the visa application process for the UK is easier in comparison with other popular study destinations.

> *"...UK was the easiest one for me to obtain the student visa...for overseas students the most important thing is how easy they give you the student visa and invite you to do an MBA in their country..." (B03)*

- **Preference for British culture [R21]**

B04 and B06 decided to study their MBA in the UK because they were interested in British culture.

> *"...also the local British culture is important for me...I like the British culture..." (B04)*

> *"... It has more to do with the history of the country...I like the way how British people think and I think it is better than USA...what really distinguished UK from other countries I think is the culture and history..." (B06)*

- **Studying in the UK helps students to improve their English language skills [R22]**

B04 and B10 stated that they decided to do their MBA in the UK because they wanted to improve their English language skills.

> *"...I used to live in other countries and I already know how to speak German and Spanish very well, I wanted to come to England to do my MBA to improve my English language knowledge..." (B04)*

> *"...first of all I wanted to improve my English language, so basically this was the most important reason to study in an English speaking country..." (B10)*

- **Studying in the UK provides the opportunity for students to visit other European countries [R23]**

B04 believes studying in the UK provides students with the opportunity to visit other European countries.

"...also I have the possibility of visiting other countries close to Britain..."
(B04)

- **Ability to work whilst studying** [R24]

B01 and B08 noted that they are allowed to work in the UK whilst studying and the chances of finding a part-time job are higher in the UK than in other popular study destinations.

> *"...because for me as an international student the most important thing is getting a job and working experience..." (B01)*

> *"...and you have also more chances to get part time job here..." (B08)*

- **The city is culturally diverse** [R25]

B01 indicated that the city in which *Course B* is offered is friendly and has a lot of cultural activities on offer.

> *"...also this city is a cultural friendly city, this was very important for me..." (B01)*

- **The city is an education hub** [R26]

B02 selected *Course B* because the city in which *Course B* is offered is an education hub.

> *"...I have always considered this city to be hub when it comes to the education in the UK, and also a good place for study..." (B02)*

- **The city is large** [R27]

B04 noted that the city in which *Course B* is offered is the five largest cities in the UK and it is well recognized internationally.

> *"...this city is among top 5 biggest cities in the UK..." (B04)*

- **The city does not have a high cost of living in comparison with other large cities** [R28]

B04 and B06 indicated that, unlike other large British cities, the cost of living in the city in which *Course B* is offered is relatively inexpensive.

> *"...this city is less expensive than other big cities in the UK..." (B04)*

> *"...I then started to think about the cities and I eliminate some of them and finally I had two cities including this city. I chose this city because the living cost here is cheaper in compare to others..." (B06)*

- **The city is internationally recognised** [R29]

B04 and B09 noted that the city in which *Course B* is offered is internationally recognised.

> *"...this city is famous...here we have several famous sports teams and this city is well known internationally..." (B04)*

155

"...when I present my MBA certificate to a German company they would know where this city is...so the name of this city was also very important in selecting this course..." (B09)

- **Nightlife and leisure activities in the city [R30]**

B10 noted that there are more leisure activities in the city in which *Course B* is offered in comparison with other large British cities.

"...I like the nightlife here in this city, this city is full of students, I went to other cities as well, I was comparing different cities, and definitely this one is much better to have fun and so many activities you can do here..." (B10)

- **Accreditation by AMBA [R31]**

B04 and B08 selected *Course B* because it is accredited by AMBA and therefore its quality is assured.

"... [Course B] is accredited by AMBA and this was really important for me..." (B04)

"...I had several offer letters from UK universities but only AMBA accreditation was very important for me... AMBA accreditation was still the main reason to select [Course B]..." (B08)

- **Lower entry requirements than high ranked MBA courses [R32]**

B09 selected *Course B* because the entry requirements for this course (in terms of work experience, academic background) were lower than those of high ranked MBA courses.

"...I saw that the MBA admission requirements for high ranked MBA courses are very difficult, I didn't have enough time to do preparation... I was only working in Germany and I didn't have time to study for the GMAT ...I also thought even If I have my GMAT it would be still difficult to fulfil their requirements for work experience and academic background..." (B09)

- **The availability of scholarships and bursaries [R33]**

B09 selected *Course B* because she was offered scholarship.

"..I seriously considered this course because this university gave me scholarship..." (B09)

- **The course structure and curriculum [R34]**

B02 found the structure and curriculum of *Course B* better than high ranked MBA courses in terms of the modules covered.

"...I was looking for a general MBA, the high ranked MBA courses were specialized in one specific thing such as only finance or only marketing and this makes the manager to only be specialized in one specific thing, but here

the MBA was a general MBA which covers many things such as sales, marketing, HRM…" (B02)

- **To enhance knowledge about business and management in general [R35]**

B01 wanted to study for an MBA predominantly in order to boost his knowledge and understanding about business and management in general.

> *"…because I was doing software engineering I had a few modules on management such as project management and I found that I needed more knowledge about management science because I was only from technical background …" (B01)*

- **Course perceived as easy to complete to earn the MBA degree [R36]**

B05 and B07 selected *Course B* because they believed it would be easy for them to complete the course and earn the MBA degree.

> *"…I just wanted to get the degree … for me the degree is important and here is much easier to get the degree than other well-known business schools…" (B05)*

> *"…I didn't want to go for a high ranked MBA because it would be more difficult to study…I don't want to study an MBA course which is very difficult…" (B07)*

Core factors influencing the choice of *Course B* are shown in the figure below.

Figure 3 Core factors influencing selection of a course abroad – Course B

Core factors influencing the choice of *Course B*	
Lower tuition fees than other average ranked MBA courses	Lower tuition fees than other accredited MBA courses
Future job and career prospects after graduation	The prestige of the MBA course
Whether the institution has a multicultural environment	High quality of teaching
Campus infrastructure and new buildings	Friendliness and courtesy of staff during the admission process
The full-time MBA is shorter in duration than other study modes	The full-time MBA enhances in-class participation and interaction with lecturers and other students
The full-time MBA is culturally diverse	The full-time MBA allows students to focus intensively, and without interruption on their academic development
The full-time MBA is more highly valued by employers	The UK Border Agency only allow international students to apply for full-time courses
Shorter duration in comparison with other full-time MBA courses	High quality of education in the UK
UK qualifications are recognized all over the world	It is easier to find a job in the UK after graduation
UK qualifications are highly valued by employers	The visa application process is easier for the UK than other popular study destinations
Preference for British culture	Studying in the UK helps students to improve their English language skills
Studying in the UK provides students with the opportunity to visit other European countries	Ability to work whilst studying
The city is culturally diverse	The city is an education hub
The city is large	The city does not have a high cost of living in comparison with other large cities
The city is internationally recognised	Nightlife and leisure activities in the city
Accreditation by AMBA	Lower entry requirements than high ranked MBA courses
The availability of scholarships and bursaries	The course structure and curriculum
To enhance knowledge about business and management in general	Course perceived as easy to complete to earn the MBA degree

158

5.4.2.2 Syntagmatic identity of *Course B* as observed through online social networks

This section presents 'representamens' within codes that constitute the syntagmatic identity of *Course B as* observed through OSNs. This identity of *Course B* is communicated in the form of the representamen to international HE aspirants and applicants through OSNs, from which international HE aspirants and applicants generate certain perceptions (or interpretants) about *Course B*.

Participants did not use OSNs

Five out of ten research participants did not use OSNs during the course selection process: B02 from Cameroon, B04 from Latvia, B06 from Argentina, B07 from Saudi Arabia and B10 from Mexico. Their reasons for not using OSNs and subsequent changes in their perceptions about OSNs are discussed below.

Reasons for not using OSNs and subsequent changes in perceptions about OSNs

Responses to the interview question 'why didn't you use OSNs during the course selection process?' include comments that suggest there are seven representamens within code SYI.PDU.RNU. These representamens will be discussed in turn.

- **OSNs can be a distraction and time-consuming [R1]**

B10 stated that OSNs are very time consuming and he prefers face-to-face communication instead.

> *"...I think OSNs are very time consuming and instead of wasting your time on OSNs you should spend more time in talking to people face to face..." (B10)*

- **No further information was required [R2]**

B04 did not use OSNs because he was satisfied with the information he had already obtained from official sources.

> *"...I was happy with the information I got from official sources and it was enough for me to make my decision. I already had the information such as course structure, fees, staff, etc..." (B04)*

- **OSNs are not perceived as a valid source of information [R3]**

B02 and B07 believe OSNs are not a valid source of information. B02 and B07 used official sources such as the official university website because they knew where exactly the

information was coming from.

> *"...I am familiar with OSNs but I didn't use them because I don't use them when it comes to decision-making...I want to use a source that I know where exactly the information is coming from...so for me the information provided on OSNs such as Twitter or Facebook aren't valid enough because anybody can post on these sites..." (B02)*

> *"...I know OSNs, but I don't use them...because I think if I use official sources such as the official university website, I will get the right information but if I go to sites such as Facebook or Twitter I might get wrong information from students..." (B07)*

- **Did not know how to use OSNs [R4]**

B06 did not know how to use OSNs, and therefore did not use them during the course selection process.

> *"...I didn't totally understand the function of OSNs and how I should use them...but now I have better understanding of them ..." (B06)*

- **Participants' cultural traits discouraged them from using OSNs [R5]**

B06 indicated that in his country, Argentina, it is more common to call or email a person, and OSNs are not a common method of communication.

> *"...In Argentina when we want to contact a friend we just call or send an email, I really didn't use OSNs..." (B06)*

- **Privacy concerns [R6]**

B06 and B10 were concerned about the privacy issues surrounding OSNs, particularly as they did not want to expose their personal life, such as their photos, online.

> *"...I don't use OSNs because I don't like people to enter in my private life, I never post my photos on Facebook. I am concerned about privacy issues of these sites..." (B06)*

> *"...I think it isn't good to put lots of information on these sites in public..." (B10)*

- **Lack of time to use OSNs due to late application [R7]**

B10 indicated that he applied late so he had no time to research the course using OSNs.

> *"...I would definitely check it on OSNs, but I didn't do it because I didn't have time...I was very late to apply for admission..." (B10)*

Figure 48 Reasons for not using online social networks – Course B
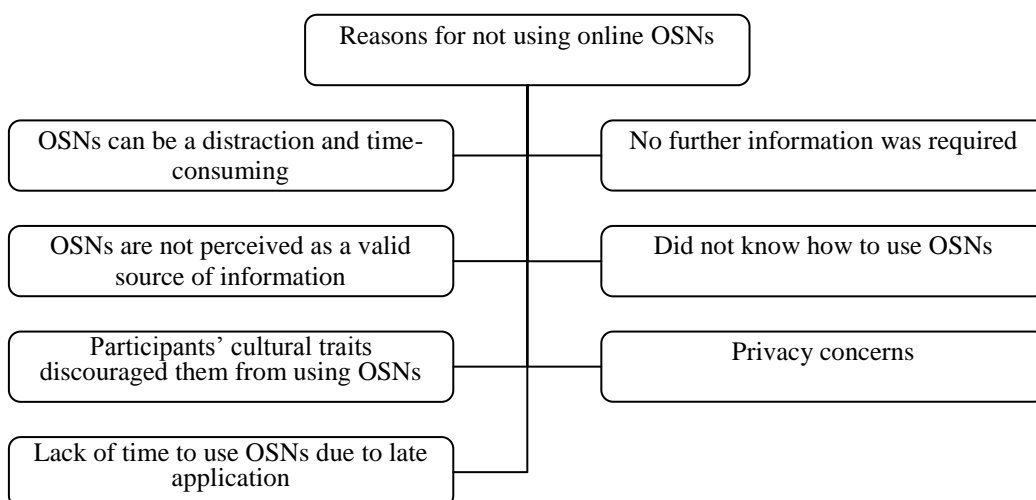
Responses to the interview question 'do you still have the same approach towards OSNs?' include comments that suggest there are two representamens within code SYI.PDU.SCP. These representamens will be discussed in turn.

- **Changed perceptions of OSNs** [R1]

Four out of five research participants who did not use OSNs indicated that their perceptions about using OSNs had since changed such that they would now consider using them. B04 and B07 noted that OSNs could be useful for collecting supplementary information, although their main focus would still be on official sources. B04 believes unlike OSNs, the information available from official sources of information is more reliable and provided responsibly. B04 stated that on some occasions personal views expressed on OSNs could negatively influence the course selection decisions of HE aspirants and applicants.

> *"...I can find quite supplementary and interesting information on OSNs...I would still concentrate more on official websites, because the information on official website is written responsibly...on OSNs students give their own personal comments about a module or whole course, for example an unhappy student can have a negative influence on those who are interested in selecting the course..." (B04)*

> *"...OSNs could give you more insights and more knowledge about people experiences with the course, for example I could ask past or current students about their experiences with the examinations and assignments, and how easy they were to pass..." (B07)*

- **Perceptions did not change [R2]**

There was one participant whose perceptions about using OSNs did not change. B02 stated that he still prefers to use official sources of information and will not make decisions based on information available on OSNs.

> *"...my perceptions aren't changed...I personally don't trust OSNs ...but there are many people who use them to contact past and current students, and to obtain information...I believe OSNs are important to meet the public, but then it isn't valid and good enough to make decisions on the basis of information collected from OSNs ..." (B02)*

Table 34 Subsequent changes in perceptions about online social networks – Course B

Interviewees	B02	B04	B06	B07	B10
Changed perceptions of OSNs		✓	✓	✓	✓
Perceptions did not change	✓				

Participants used OSNs

Five out of ten research participants used OSNs during the course selection process: B01 and B08 from India, B03 from Pakistan, B05 from China and B09 from Germany.

Stages at which OSNs are used during the course selection process

Responses to the interview question 'at what stages in your course selection process did you use OSNs?' include comments that suggest there are three representamens within code SYI.PUS.S. These representamens will be discussed in turn.

- **The pre-search behaviour stage [R1]**

The pre-search behaviour stage begins when an individual hears about a course of study for the first time. B01 and B05 first heard about *Course B* on OSNs through searching for keywords on OSNs including 'MBA in the UK', and contacting their friends who had studied in the UK.

> *"...at very early stages... some of my friends were studying here in the UK and I contacted them on OSNs ..." (B01)*

> *"...I searched in Facebook and Chinese OSNs which is called Power Apple for MBA courses in the UK and I found this course..." (B05)*

- **The search behaviour stage [R2]**

The search behaviour stage is characterized by extensive and active acquisition of information about the course of study. All participants who used OSNs stated that OSNs allowed them to acquire information on *Course B*. The following comments by B01 and B03 capture this representamen.

> *"...I basically searched for my preferred courses on Facebook and Orkut ....once I had a list of my preferred MBA courses, I sent private messages to students asking questions about how much is the fees and job opportunities..." (B01)*

> *"...I used it [OSNs] before I officially applied for admission. I tried to search through LinkedIn, Facebook and to get in touch with past and current students ..." (B03)*

- **The choice decision stage [R3]**

At the choice decision stage, an individual makes his/her final course selection decision and selects one course of study. B01 and B08 claimed that OSNs helped them in their final course selection decisions.

> *"...I would say, OSNs really assisted me to select [Course B], because I met people who have already done their MBA here..." (B01)*

> *"...I used them [OSNs] to help me in selecting between two options, [Course B] and the other MBA offered at the other university close to here..." (B08)*

Table 35 Stages at which online social networks are used during the course selection process – Course B

Interviewees	B01	B03	B05	B08	B09
The pre-search behaviour stage	✓		✓		
The search behaviour stage	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
The choice decision stage	✓			✓	

OSNs most commonly used during the course selection process

Responses to the interview question 'can you please name all the OSNs that you used to obtain information about *[Course B]*?' include comments that suggest Facebook [R1], Orkut [R2], Pagalguy [R3], LinkedIn [R4], Power Apple [R5], and QQ [R6] are popular OSNs to use during the course selection process. 'Pagalguy' is an Indian OSN which is mainly managed by Indian students who provide feedback on various courses and institutions. 'Power Apple' and 'QQ' are popular Chinese OSNs and managed by Chinese students.

163

"...I used OSNs such as Facebook and Orkut...and there is a famous Indian site Pagalguy......" (B01)

"...I tried to search it [Course B] through LinkedIn and Facebook to get in touch with students..." (B03)

"...I used many different online sources for example I visited Pagalguy in India..." (B09)

"...I used a Chinese OSNs community which is called Power Apple... back home in China I think QQ is the most important one, QQ is like a Facebook in China..." (B05)

Figure 49 Online social networks most commonly used during the course selection process – Course B
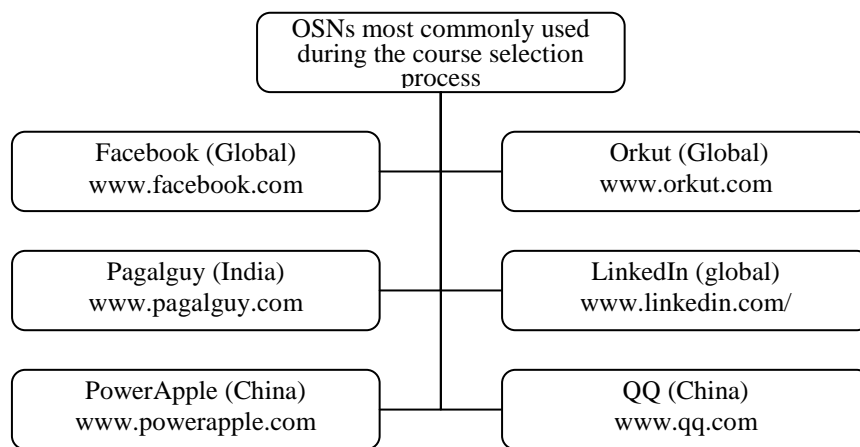
Information-gathering methods using OSNs

Reponses to the interview question 'how did you gather information using OSNs?' include comments that suggest there are five representamens within code SYI.PUS.IGM. Participants obtained information via a variety of means, including reading comments from other users [R1], contacting users directly via private messages [R2], viewing online profiles [R3], responses received to questions posted publicly by participants [R4] and viewing photos [R5].

"...I read different posts and I also contacted some members individually...once I had a list of my preferred MBAs, then I sent private messages to past and current MBA students..." (B01)

"...I used to post my questions on walls in public, for example, I'm coming to do my MBA if anybody can give me some feedback..." (B03)

"...I only looked at existing comments from students...I also looked at the profiles of students..." (B08)

"...I found some general information on the graduation and some photos posted by past students..." (B09)

Figure 50 Information-gathering methods using online social networks – Course B
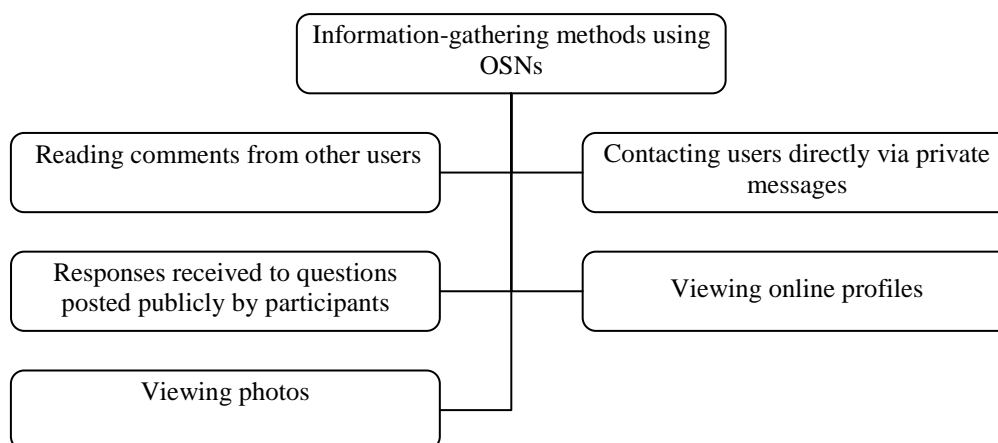
Information available on OSNs

Responses to the interview question 'what information was available on OSNs?' include comments that suggest there are thirteen representamens within code SYI.PUS.IAO. By viewing online profiles, B08 was able to make contact with past and current students and get contact details, such as email addresses so he could communicate with them privately [R1].

"...I could find information such as email addresses of students, so I could contact these students...it was very important to contact these people before coming here..." (B08)

By reading comments from other users, B01 and B05 obtained information about past and current students' levels of satisfaction with *Course B* [R2], the reputation of the institution [R3], future job and career opportunities [R4], the lecturers' academic and professional backgrounds [R5], the quality of teaching [R6], information on assessment [R7], the level of student support and care [R8], lecturers' personalities and attitudes towards students [R9] and information on exams and assignments [R10].

"...I found more general information such as one student had a very good experience here, he had fun here...so the comments on OSNs were mainly about students' personal experiences...I used those comments for some basic purposes such as fees, location, reputation, jobs...I also read a comment that lecturers here are very friendly and friendlier than other universities..." (B01)

"...I found information on teaching quality and assessment and how easy it is to pass the exams and assignments...I wanted to find these information more

and that is why I searched more about these information…I also found
information on student service and attitude of lecturers, and if they are helpful
or nice, there are lots of comments about these things on OSNs …" (B05)

Through viewing photos uploaded on OSNs, B09 obtained information about the graduation ceremony and what it involves [R11].

"…I found some general information on the graduation and how it is carried
out via looking at some photos posted by students…" (B09)

By contacting users directly via private messages, B01 acquired information about the location of the institution within the city [R12]. B01 noted that students' feedback on location was positive, for example, B01 was told that *University B* is located very close to the city centre.

"…I found information on location of [University B]… they said location is
good, and it is very close to city centre… people said it is a good place and it
is very friendly…" (B01)

From responses received to questions posted publicly by participants, B01 acquired information on the tuition fees for *Course B* [R13].

"…I also posted a question on wall…I asked about tuition fees…" (B01)

Figure 4 Information available on online social networks - Course B

Information available on OSNs

By viewing online profiles

To make contact with past and current students and get contact details, such as email addresses

By reading comments from other users

Past and current students' levels of satisfaction with *Course B*

The reputation of the institution

Future job and career opportunities

The lecturers' academic and professional background

The quality of teaching

Information on assessment

Lecturers' personalities and attitudes towards students

The level of student support and care

Exams and assignments

Through viewing photos and watching videos

Information about the graduation ceremony and what it involves

By contacting users directly via private messages

The location of the institution within the city

From responses received to questions posted publicly by participants

Information on the tuition fees

167

The information needed most from OSNs during the course selection process

Responses to the interview question 'what is the information that is needed most during the course selection process that you search for on OSNs?' include comments that suggest there are nine representamens within code SYI.PUS.INM. They include information about the city [R1], photos and videos of students, particularly from their day-to-day course related activities and student life in general [R2], information on the lecturers' academic and professional backgrounds [R3], information about university accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city [R4], information about food [R5], information on the graduation completion rate [R6], information about the climate and weather [R7], information on study trips [R8] and information about the course structure and curriculum [R9].

> *"...I wanted to get some information on this city...I think there is a huge need to provide information about the city in terms of living, accommodation, foods, weather and many other things...I also wish I could find more information on course structure...in their website they have some video clips of lectures, and I think that would be really good if they could also have similar videos on OSNs ..." (B03)*

> *"...I wanted to know what proportion of students each year can graduate successfully, and get the degree...I also wanted to find information on course structure, and more information on lecturers and their backgrounds..."(B05)*

> *"...nobody talked about international trips we have, such as going to Prague for 7 days which is the capital and largest city of the Czech Republic...nobody mentioned this on OSNs ..." (B08)*

Figure 52 Information needed most from online social networks during the course selection process – Course B
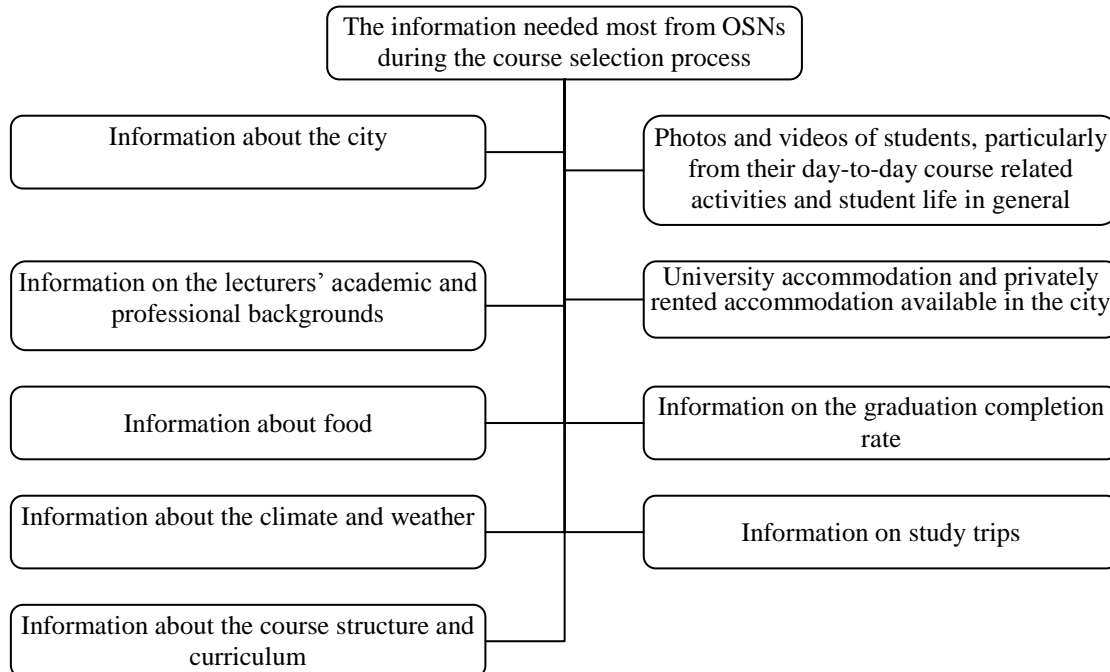
Benefits of using OSNs in course selection

Responses to the interview question 'what are the benefits of using OSNs in comparison with other sources?' include comments that suggest there are nine representamens within code SYI.PUS.BOC. B01 and B08 indicated that it was very easy for them to access and use OSNs [R1].

> *"..it was very easy to use them, couple of years ago I was not really familiar with OSNs ..." (B01)*

> *"...they were very easy to access and use..." (B08)*

B01 and B05 stated that OSNs strengthened their confidence in selecting *Course B* [R2], and they were a less biased and more credible source of information than official sources [R3], and that OSNs facilitate connections between and information sharing with past and current students [R4].

> *"...I really can't trust the information from official sources but I can trust the information provided by students...some students told me don't select specific courses because they didn't have good experiences... talking to other people on OSNs had a huge impact on my MBA selection decision and selecting this course, I was more confident..." (B01)*

> *"...comments left on OSNs are more subjective and personal, they are fact...so I was able to explore in details the fact and reality of this course by*

looking at these subjective comments… also you can contact many other people and get the latest information available from students…" (B05)

B09 claimed that OSNs helped her to find out about past and current students' academic and professional backgrounds [R5] and to obtain feedback from students from different countries [R6].

> *"...you can gain an insight into past and current students' academic and professional backgrounds…you can contact people from many different countries and obtain the latest information…" (B09)*

B08 and B09 claimed that, unlike official sources, OSNs helped them to find out about past and current students' personal views and experiences of the MBA course [R7].

> *"...I think there is a huge difference between comments that you get from students on OSNs and what you read on official website…comments are more personal on OSNs ..." (B08)*

> *"...Facebook or other OSNs were interesting because the information provided was more on the personal level…you get more student focus view on OSNs…" (B09)*

B01 and B05 claimed that OSNs allowed them to send direct messages to past and current students [R8] and to gather detailed information about *Course B* [R9]

> *"...on OSNs you can search more detailed information…wider subjective information…" (B05)*

> *"...some students said don't select specific MBA courses because they didn't have good experiences…as a result OSNs helped me to ask the questions I wanted to know and they had huge impact on my MBA selection decision…" (B01)*

Figure 53 Benefits of using online social networks in course selection – Course B

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                    ┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
                    │  Benefits of using OSNs in course selection │
                    └─────────────────────────────────────────┘

┌──────────────────────────────┐         ┌──────────────────────────────────┐
│  It is easy to access and use  │         │  They strengthen an individual's    │
│  OSNs                          │         │  confidence in selecting the course │
└──────────────────────────────┘         └──────────────────────────────────┘

┌──────────────────────────────┐         ┌──────────────────────────────────┐
│  They are less biased and a more │       │  They facilitate connections between │
│  credible source of information  │       │  and information sharing with past   │
│  than official sources           │       │  and current students                │
└──────────────────────────────┘         └──────────────────────────────────┘

┌──────────────────────────────┐         ┌──────────────────────────────────┐
│  They help to find out about past │      │  The help to obtain feedback from    │
│  and current students' academic   │      │  students from different countries    │
│  and professional backgrounds     │      │                                      │
└──────────────────────────────┘         └──────────────────────────────────┘

┌──────────────────────────────┐         ┌──────────────────────────────────┐
│  They help to find out about past │      │  They help to send direct messages   │
│  and current students' personal   │      │  to past and current students        │
│  views and experiences of the     │      │                                      │
│  MBA course                       │      │                                      │
└──────────────────────────────┘         └──────────────────────────────────┘

┌──────────────────────────────┐
│  They help individuals to gather  │
│  detailed information about        │
│  Course B                          │
└──────────────────────────────┘
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Downsides of using OSNs in course selection

Responses to the interview question 'what are the downsides of using OSNs in comparison with other sources?' include comments that suggest there are four representamens within code SYI.PUS.DOC. B01 and B03 found it difficult to distinguish between posts made on OSNs by members of staff and those made by students [R1]. B01 and B03 claimed that they could not completely rely on all of the information available on OSNs and they perceived the information on OSNs as potentially unreliable [R2].

> *"...regarding disadvantages I would say inaccuracy, I could not rely on all the information…" (B01)*

> *"...I think the information you get from journals or the official university website is what it claims it should be. Because on OSNs everyone can post something, if I had a bad experience with [Course B] I post something which isn't really representing the reality of the course... anybody can post a comment online and it is difficult to verify these comments, I really could not identify the source or the person who was responsible for some comments, it could be a marketer or a member of staff trying to sell the course…" (B03)*

B05 and B01 indicated that students' personal views could sometimes result in negative preconceptions about the MBA course and negatively influence the course selection decisions of HE aspirants and applicants [R3].

"...disadvantages I think preconception, comments are more subjective and depends on personal views of people, and people may have different views about something..." (B05)

"... because sometimes you find people who say alright I have done a course in a university, I only know one university and I only suggest you that...but you have to compare different universities or MBA courses...you can't purely rely on people's personal opinions..." (B01)

B01 noted that OSNs should not be used as the only source of information during the course selection process [R4].

"...personal opinion does matter, OSNs are important but they should not be the sole source of information...they should not be used as the only source of information, they should be used besides the official sources..." (B01)

Figure 54 Downsides of using online social networks in course selection – Course B
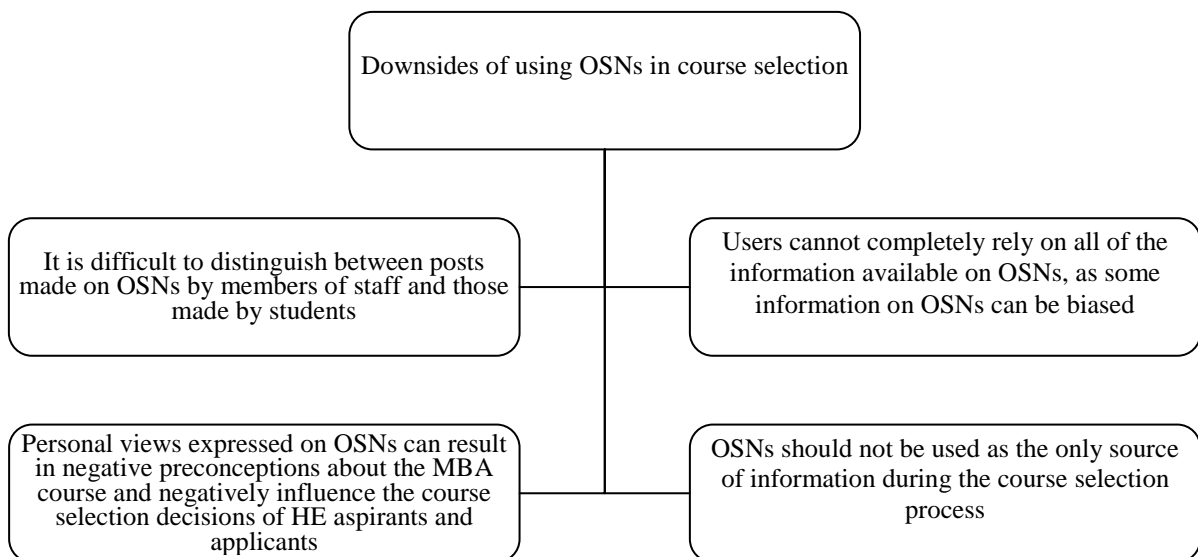
5.4.2.3 Perceived identity of *Course B*

This section presents 'interpretants' within codes that constitute the perceived identity of *Course B*. The perceived identity of *Course B* is determined by the paradigmatic identity of *Course B* and the syntagmatic identity of *Course B*, and influences the final course selection decisions of international HE aspirants and applicants.

The level of influence of OSNs on final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources

172

Responses to the interview question 'how influential were OSNs on your final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources?' include comments that suggest there are four 'interpretants' within code PEI.LIF. These representamens will be discussed in turn.

- **OSNs have a strong influence on final course selection decisions [I1]**

B01 stated that OSNs had a strong influence on his final course selection decision. B01 believes OSNs were influential in his decision to select *Course B* because he was able to contact past and current students on OSNs and get their feedback on *Course B*.

> *"...I would say they have been really influential in selecting [Course B], because I met people who have already done their MBA here and they gave me feedback on this course..." (B01)*

- **OSNs have a moderate influence on final course selection decisions [I2]**

OSNs had a moderate influence on B05' and B08' final course selection decisions. B05 stated that if somebody had said that the exams and assignments were difficult she would not have selected *Course B*. B08 also stated that he had not been aware that the course included international trips until he used OSNs.

> *"...If I want to rate how influential they [OSNs] have been in selecting [Course B] I would say 50% in my case, because if somebody would say the exams and assignments are really hard I would not come here to study..." (B05)*

> *"...I would say 50%. I didn't know everything about this course until I spoke to a student on Facebook, that person told me about the international travelling....when I contacted somebody on OSNs and she told me about these international trips, then I become interested in selecting this course...this was the information that I didn't get from my agent and official sources..." (B08)*

- **OSNs have a low level of influence on final course selection decisions [I3]**

B03 noted that OSNs had a low level of influence on his final course selection decision. He stated that OSNs could have been more influential if *University B* had invested in a presence on popular OSNs.

> *"..they could be really influential but they didn't influence my decisions so much, it can be in the future if university invest more in them...until now OSNs have not been utilized effectively by [University B]..." (B03)*

- **OSNs have no influence on final course selection decisions [I4]**

B09 stated that OSNs had no influence on her final course selection decision.

> *"...they had no influence on my decisions, no influence at all!..." (B09)*

Table 36 The level of influence of online social networks on final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources – Course B

Interviewees	Strong level of influence	Moderate level of influence	Low level of influence	No influence
B01	✓			
B03			✓	
B05		✓		
B08		✓		
B09				✓

5.4.3 Course C

A sample of 10 international students studying on *Course C* was selected for the main study. The demographics of interviewees are presented in the following table.

Table 37 The demographics of interviewees – Course C

Interviewees	Age	Marital status	Gender	Country	The highest level of education before MBA	years of work experience	professional position	Industry
C01	26	Single	Male	India	Bachelor	5	IT consultant	IT
C02	28	Single	Male	India	BSc	9	2nd officer (merchant navy)	Arm forces
C03	35	Single	Male	India	MSc	9	IT consultant	IT
C04	28	Single	Male	Japan	Bachelor	4	Accountant	Hospitality/Travel/Tourism
C05	37	Single	Male	Bahamas	Bachelor	9	Finance manager	Hospitality/Travel/Tourism
C06	29	Single	Male	Chile	Master	3	Finance Manager	Finance
C07	28	Single	Female	Thailand	Bachelor	4	Supply chain support manager	Consumer goods
C08	31	Single	Male	Mali	Master	7	Sales Manager	Oil and Gas
C09	30	Married	Male	Egypt	Bachelor	6	Customer service advisor	Telecommunications
C10	29	Single	Male	France	Master	5	International product manager	Media

In line with the aims of the analysis, this section is divided into three. The first subsection presents 'representamens' within codes that constitute the paradigmatic identity of *Course C*. The second subsection presents 'representamens' within codes that constitute the syntagmatic identity of *Course C* as observed through OSNs. Finally, the third subsection presents 'interpretants' within codes that constitute the perceived identity of *Course C*.

5.4.3.1 Paradigmatic identity of *Course C*

This section presents 'representamens' within codes that constitute the paradigmatic identity of *Course C*. The paradigmatic identity of *Course C* is the overall identity of this course communicated in the form of the representamen to international HE aspirants and applicants through a variety of resources from which international HE aspirants and applicants generate certain perceptions (or interpretants) about *Course C*.

Initial sources of information

Responses to the interview question 'how did you first find out about *[Course C]*?' include comments that suggest there are eight representamens within code PAI.FSI. C03, C06 and

C07 first heard about *Course C* at education fairs [R1], from education agencies [R2], or from friends who have previously taken *Course C* [R3].

> *"...I attended a few MBA fairs back home organized by various agencies and [University C] was one of participants..." (C03)*

> *"...the first time I heard about [Course C] was in an MBA fair conducted in HYAT hotel in Santiago...I attended this fair to find out about different MBAs..." (C06)*

> *"...from my friend, he studied here before for the MBA..." (C07)*

C01 and C04 first heard about *Course C* from newspaper advertisements [R4], and from friends in their home country who were also interested in studying abroad [R5].

> *"...my friend's wife was applying for some colleges abroad...I always used to help them in searching for different business schools abroad. ...I got to know [Course C] accidentally when I was helping this friend..." (C01)*

> *"...actually I think it [University C] was advertised in a newspaper back home, I saw an advertisement that [University C] is coming to Japan..." (C04)*

Others first heard about *Course C* through ranking websites such as the Financial Times [R6] and from friends who have previously studied *at University C* [R7].

> *"...I was reviewing ranking websites for MBA courses in the UK, I don't remember exactly what sources but maybe Financial Times..." (C05)*

> *"...the first thing that you do when you want to do an MBA is looking at ranking sources...I used Financial Times as the first source of information..." (C08)*

> *"...It was about four years ago when one of my friends was applying for this university...so it was from a friend of mine..." (C02)*

C09 indicated that if he had not used OSNs he would not have known about *Course C*. C09 stated that he made a friend via an OSN who was studying in the city in which *Course C* is offered, and this friend had recommended *Course C*.

> *"...it [OSNs] was essential, because what happen is that I knew someone who was studying in this city so I was introduced to him through Facebook...so if it wasn't for this connection through Facebook I would never know about [Course C]. As I said earlier I was using Facebook to connect with this person before even I applied for MBA..." (C09)*

Figure 55 Initial sources of information available during the course selection process – Course C
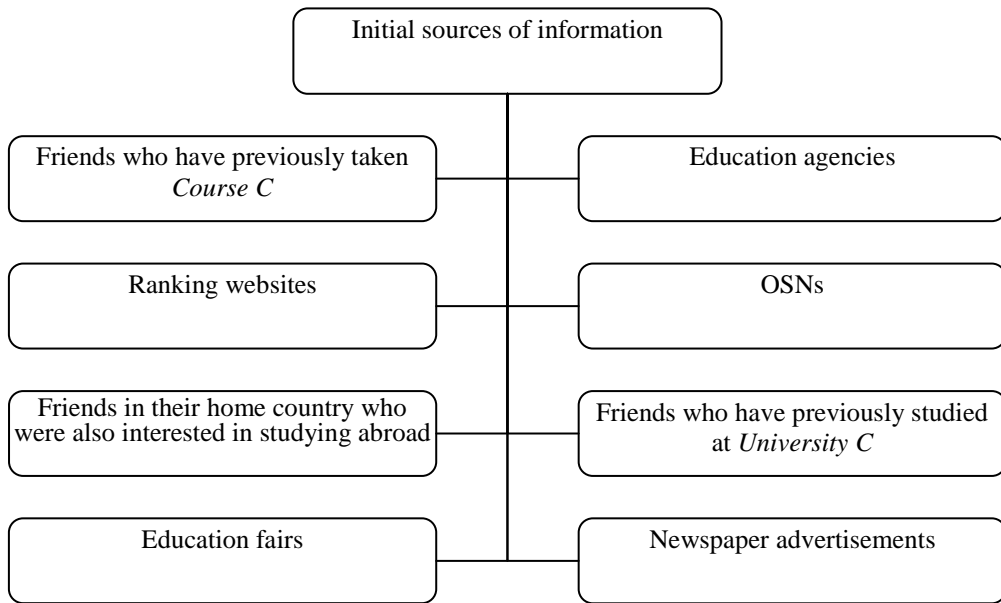
Initial sources of information

Friends who have previously taken *Course C*	Education agencies
Ranking websites	OSNs
Friends in their home country who were also interested in studying abroad	Friends who have previously studied at *University C*
Education fairs	Newspaper advertisements

Offline sources of information

Responses to the interview question 'what offline sources of information did you use to obtain information about *[Course C]*?' include comments that suggest there are six representamens within code PAI.SIA.OFF. They include friends who have previously studied at *University C* [R1], education agencies [R2], newspaper advertisements [R3], education fairs [R4], friends in their home country who were also interested in studying abroad [R5], and friends who have previously taken *Course C* [R6]. The following comments capture some of these representamens.

> *"...I participated in some MBA fairs back home...there was also one education consultancy in Delhi called Chopras...Chopras provided lots of information on this course..." (C02)*

> *"...my friend had studied [Course C] before...he recommended this course... I also attended some education fairs and I talked to admission team in person..." (C07)*

Figure 56 Offline sources of information available during the course selection process – Course C
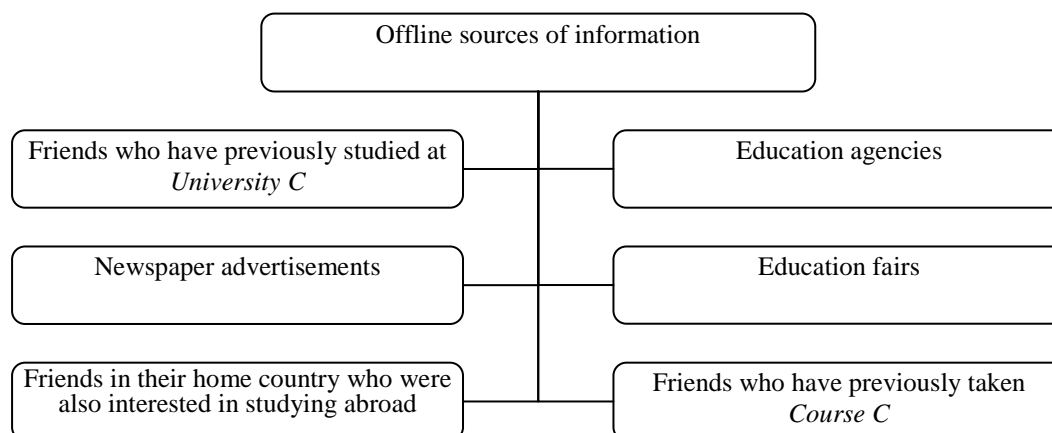
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                    ┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
                    │   Offline sources of information     │
                    └─────────────────────────────────────┘
                                      │
        ┌─────────────────────────────┴─────────────────────────────┐
┌───────────────────────────────┐           ┌───────────────────────────────┐
│ Friends who have previously    │           │      Education agencies        │
│ studied at *University C*      │           │                                │
└───────────────────────────────┘           └───────────────────────────────┘

┌───────────────────────────────┐           ┌───────────────────────────────┐
│  Newspaper advertisements      │           │       Education fairs          │
└───────────────────────────────┘           └───────────────────────────────┘

┌───────────────────────────────┐           ┌───────────────────────────────┐
│ Friends in their home country  │           │ Friends who have previously    │
│ who were also interested in    │           │ taken *Course C*               │
│ studying abroad                │           │                                │
└───────────────────────────────┘           └───────────────────────────────┘
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Online sources of information

Responses to the interview question 'what online sources of information did you use to obtain information about *[Course C]*?' include comments that suggest there are nine representamens within code PAI.SIA.ONL. They include OSNs [R1], electronic course brochures [R2], accreditation bodies' websites [R3], e-journals [R4], the British Council website [R5], the official university website [R6], ranking websites [R7], the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) website [R8] and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) Website [R9].

> *"...I looked at full-time and Forbes... well I used the UK British Foreign and commonwealth office (FCO) Website...I also checked UCAS and British council website..." (C05)*

> *"...ranking sites such as Financial Times...then online magazines such as QS TOP MBA...official website of [University C]... then you have OSNs such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn , YouTube...I discovered lots of information on [Course C] on OSNs... I also got information from accreditation bodies such as AMBA..."(C02)*

> *"...I used the official GMAT Website... I first started looking at the ranking websites such as Financial Times and Forbes...I also used LinkedIn, Facebook and Pagalguy to find students who were studying in here and to see if they have left any comments..."(C01)*

> *"...I downloaded the MBA brochure online...I used a lot of French websites and English websites about MBA courses or executive education and some e-journals as well..." (C10)*

Figure 57 Online sources of information available during the course selection process – Course C

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                    ┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
                    │   Online sources of information      │
                    └─────────────────────────────────────┘
┌──────────────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│            OSNs              │        │  Electronic course brochures │
└──────────────────────────────┘        └──────────────────────────────┘
┌──────────────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│ Accreditation bodies' website │        │   E-journals (e.g. QS TopMBA) │
│        (e.g. AMBA)           │        └──────────────────────────────┘
└──────────────────────────────┘
┌──────────────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│  The British Council website  │        │ The official university website│
└──────────────────────────────┘        └──────────────────────────────┘
┌──────────────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│ Ranking websites (e.g. the    │        │ The Universities and Colleges │
│ Financial Times and Forbes)   │        │  Admissions Service (UCAS)    │
└──────────────────────────────┘        │          website              │
┌──────────────────────────────┐        └──────────────────────────────┘
│ The British Foreign &         │
│ Commonwealth Office (FCO)      │
│          website              │
└──────────────────────────────┘
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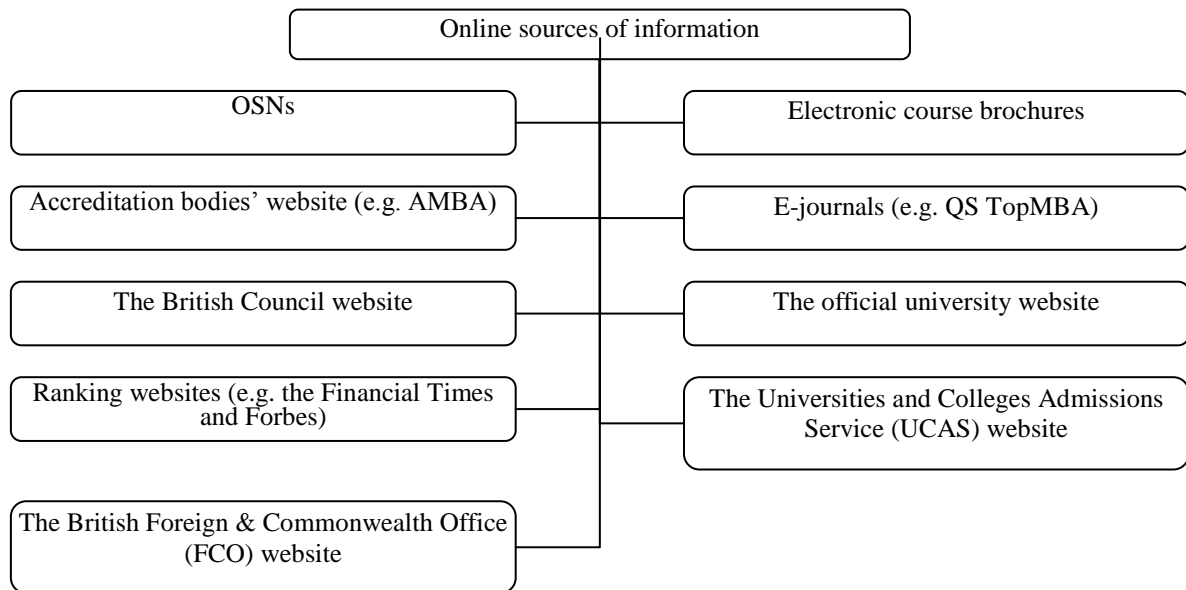
Core factors influencing the choice of *Course C*

Responses to the interview question 'why did you select *[Course C]* as your preferred course of study abroad?" include comments that suggest there are thirty-six representamens within code PAI.CF. These representamens will be discussed in turn.

- **Future job and career prospects after graduation [R1]**

C01 and C02 stated that studying for an MBA, such as *Course C,* helps them to develop their career towards more senior managerial positions.

> *"...I have engineering background and I have five years work experience in the IT industry...my job role was changing from technical jobs to managerial positions, moving from coordinating and development to team management and project management, so I thought it was the time to go for an MBA to enhance my skills, because I wanted to take these managerial opportunities..." (C01)*

> *"...I have been serving in Navy for a few years and there was no progression in my career...then I thought probably an MBA would be a good opportunity to leverage and make a transition to something interesting..." (C02)*

- **The prestige of the MBA course [R2]**

C07 decided to study for an MBA because of the prestige of the MBA course. C07 believes the MBA as a prestigious professional degree helps gradates to achieve their

career objectives.

> *"...Because of the course itself, it is kind of management thing and it covers many areas...the main reason was only because the prestige of an MBA allows graduates to achieve their career objectives..." (C07)*

- **Class sizes are not too large [R3]**

C01 selected *Course C* because class sizes are not too large.

> *"...they have also very good class size, not too big that you can't network with people, and not very small that you are very restricted..." (C01)*

- **The reputation of the institution [R4]**

C08 selected *Course C* because *University C* has a good reputation.

> *"...I chose this course because of the brand and the reputation of [University C]... brand is important..." (C08)*

- **Teaching methods [R5]**

C04 stated that *University C* has a very strong focus on group activities.

> *"...[University C] has a very strong focus on group activities and from day one they put you in groups or teams..." (C04)*

- **The full-time MBA helps students to fully focus on their education [R6]**

C01 and C09 stated that it would be difficult to work and study at the same time and therefore studying full-time for an MBA helps them to fully focus on their education.

> *"...I wanted to allocate more time for studying...it would be really difficult to work and study at the same time..." (C01)*

> *"...it is just terrible to go to work and study at the same time, you never get the full benefits of either studying or working..." (C09)*

- **The full-time MBA gives students more networking opportunities [R7]**

C01 indicated that a full-time MBA gives him more opportunities to network with other students.

> *"...I always thought you are able to make a better network in a classroom environment when you spend more time with your colleagues...a full-time MBA usually attracts the best candidates from different parts of the world ..." (C01)*

- **The full-time MBA gives students easier access to academic staff and resources [R8]**

C05 stated that the full-time MBA gives students easier access to staff and resources.

> *"...I definitely wanted to do it full-time...when you are studying full-time you have more access to academic staff and resources..."(C05)*

- **The full-time MBA is more highly valued by employers [R9]**

C08 believes the full-time MBA is more highly valued by employers in comparison with other study modes.

> *"...for employers a full-time MBA is different than part-time MBA, people have different perceptions about a full-time MBA than other modes of study..."* (C08)

- **Duration more than a year [R10]**

Course C was preferred by C03 and C08 because it is more than one year. C03 and C08 noted that the longer duration of *Course C* helps them to allocate more time for studying and to improve their English language knowledge.

> *"...I wanted to do reasonably longer MBA and most of the MBA courses in Europe are between 10 to 12 months... there are some top ranked MBA courses in the UK with short duration...even though there were better than [Course C] but I didn't select them because their duration was shorter..."* (C03)

> *"...I thought if I do an MBA which is more than one-year I can stay here more, and I can improve my English...one-year MBA would be very difficult for me because my English was not that much good at that time..."* (C08)

- **Familiarity with the working culture in the UK [R11]**

C01 had previously worked for British companies and he was already familiar with working culture in Britain.

> *"...I am from India, for the last two and half years I was working in the USA and I interacted with people from the UK and I got used to the working culture of the UK...I already knew how people and companies work in this country..."* (C01)

- **The structure of the UK MBA [R12]**

C01 stated that the structure of the UK MBA is better than that of MBA courses offered in other popular study destinations such as the USA.

> *"...the structure of MBA courses in the UK appeals more to me than MBA courses in USA..."* (C01)

- **The quality and the reputation of the UK education system [R13]**

C03 and C06 stated that the UK education system is held in high esteem and its quality is internationally recognised.

> *"...I felt that the recognition of the UK MBA is higher in compare to other countries ..."* (C03)

> *"...I chose UK because the quality of education in the UK is very high...most people know a few very well-known institutions in the UK so I suppose the*

perception is that the UK education is very good and it has a very good quality..." (C06)

- **UK MBA students have greater work experience than MBA students in other countries [R14]**

C03 stated that UK MBA students have greater work experience than MBA students in other popular study destinations.

> *"...the students who go to MBA in India, they don't have as much as experience, generally it is between one to two years...because I was experienced, I had to rule out the option of doing it in India, then my options boiled down to the UK..." (C03)*

- **Preference for British culture [R15]**

C05, C07 and C10 were more interested in British life style than that of other popular study destination. Participants from commonwealth countries in particular had a strong cultural affinity with the UK.

> *"...well I think the UK for the fact that the country I come from is a commonwealth country so we have some cultural linkages with the UK..." (C05)*

> *"...I like the culture in the UK more than USA..." (C07)*

> *"...British culture is really different from the French culture, basically if you are really good at doing something you can be promoted in the UK very fast, here in the UK you can meet somebody who is top manager and he is only in his early 30th..." (C10)*

- **UK is a culturally and ethnically diverse society [R16]**

C06 decided to study for an MBA in the UK because the UK is a culturally and ethnically diverse society.

> *"...I thought that the UK is closer to Asia and Middle East, and I will have more opportunity to meet different people and more diverse type of people..." (C06)*

- **Distance between the home country and the UK [R17]**

C09 and C10 decided to study in the UK because UK is closer to their home countries.

> *"...I considered USA first, but it was too far from my country...that is why I wanted to study somewhere in Europe..." (C09)*

> *"...UK isn't very far from Paris, just 3 hours train, and 1 hour flight..." (C10)*

- **The city is large [R18]**

C05 stated that the city in which *Course C* is offered is large and he wanted to study in and

experience living in a large city.

> *"... I wanted to do an MBA in a big city...this city to me was very attractive because it is a large city..." (C05)*

- **The city does not have a high cost of living in comparison with other large cities [R19]**

C10 noted that the city in which *Course C* is offered has a reasonable cost of living in comparison with other large cities in the UK.

> *"...the cost of living here in this city is cheaper and it is very important because I am not working full time and I have to pay for my fees and other expenses..." (C10)*

- **The city is not too crowded [R20]**

C05 stated that the city in which *Course C* is offered is not too crowded.

> *"...other big cities in the UK are very crowded, this city was a better city for me..." (C05)*

- **The city is a hub for business and finance [R21]**

C06 noted that the city in which *Course C* is offered is a hub for business and finance.

> *"...this city is a strong hub of business and finance and I thought this city is a good place to do my MBA..." (C06)*

- **The city is lively and vibrant [R22]**

C07 stated that the city in which *Course C* is offered is lively and vibrant.

> *"...and also the social life is better in this city and the city is very lively..." (C07)*

- ***Course C* is accredited by AMBA, AACSB and EQUIS [R23]**

C03 selected *Course C* because it is accredited by AMBA, AACSB and EQUIS

> *"...accreditation of the course was very important for me, this course is accredited by AMBA, AACSB and EQUIS..." (C03)*

- **High level of work experience of past and current students [R24]**

C03 and C04 selected *Course C* because the work experience of past and current students was greater in comparison with those on MBA courses offered in other popular study destinations such as the USA.

> *"...average work experience is 1 to 2 years in business schools in India...because I was very experienced, I had to eliminate the option of doing my MBA in India and choose this course..." (C03)*

"...MBA students at this school have an average work experience which is far greater than MBA courses in USA..." (C04)

- **Higher ages of past and current students** [R25]

C04 selected *Course C* because the average age of past and current students was higher in comparison with those on MBA courses offered in other popular study destinations such as the USA.

> *"...I thought that people who are attending this course are much more experienced in life than people who attend courses in the USA..." (C04)*

- **The diversity of past and current students** [R26]

C01, C06 and C09 stated that *Course C* attracts diverse students from different countries. for example, according to C09, students from the previous MBA class came from 40 different countries.

> *"...looking at the history of [course C,] they always seem to attract diverse students from different parts of the world, the last year MBA students were from 39 nationalities..." (C01)*
>
> *"...there are diverse types of students studying this course, you have people from many different countries and I found this very important to expand my networks..." (C06)*
>
> *"...the other really great thing about [Course C] is the diversity of the students, this is one of those few courses that students come from more than 40 different countries in the world and this is amazing..." (C09)*

- **High ranking and reputation of *Course C*** [R27]

C01 and C09 selected *Course C* because it is highly ranked and it has a good reputation worldwide.

> *"...[Course C] is very well placed in the ranking and it has a very good history of return in investment... this course is ranked among top MBA courses in the UK and in the world..." (C01)*
>
> *"...in Financial Times ranking website, there were 5 UK MBA courses listed among top 10 MBA courses in the world... [Course C] was one of them ..." (C09)*

- **The course structure and curriculum** [R28]

C02 and C05 liked the structure of *Course C* as it is based on learning by practice, and it gives students the opportunity to work on different projects whilst studying.

"...I like the structure of [Course C], lots of focus on different projects, and I saw this as an opportunity to put our academic learning into practice..." (C02)

"...I was very attracted to the unique structure of [Course C], I didn't find any other course that had a mixture of consultancy projects..." (C05)

- **Friends and relatives studying at the institution** [R29]

C09 selected *Course C* because his friends and relatives were studying at *University C.*

"...particularly I was looking for Course C because I have relatives here in this University, my uncle is here..." (C09)

- **Studying for an MBA helps students to enhance their knowledge and skills in management and leadership** [R30]

C09 and C10 decided to study *Course C* in order to enhance their knowledge and skills in subjects such as management and leadership.

"...I have already studied economics in school and I took some courses in business, but I didn't have that global understanding of what business is, and I never studied management in-depth..." (C09)

"...I really didn't have business background, I didn't study back home in France, I studied in the university which was very different, I studied philosophy and I never studied leadership and management..." (C10)

- **Studying for an MBA helps students to improve their English language skills** [R31]

C08 and C10 selected *Course C* in order to improve their English language skills.

"...my first language is French and I said that if I have to do an MBA it should be in an English country..." (C08)

"...and I wanted to improve my English, I used to work for international companies and English was the business language. I was not very confident with my English and that is why I essentially targeted English business schools..." (C10)

- **Studying in the UK provides the opportunity for students to visit other European countries** [R32]

As *Course C* is offered in Europe, C01 perceived studying *Course C* as an opportunity to visit other European countries.

"...I like to travel, so I wanted to travel around and to live in Europe and to see different countries. Being in UK allows me to visit different countries in Europe in a very short period of time..." (C01)

- **Studying for an MBA helps students to build a global network** [R33]

C01 noted that studying for an MBA, such as *Course C,* helps him to build and expand his global network, particularly in Europe.

"... I didn't want to do an MBA in India because I already have a good network there and I wanted to build a global network, for that reason I decided to study here…" (C01)

- **Work placement opportunity** [R34]

C03 selected *Course C* because it offers a work placement opportunity.

"...then the placement was important…in picking this course my primary consideration was the reputation and the placement prospects..." (C03)

- **The possibility of working in the UK after graduation** [R35]

C08 and C10 stated that studying in the UK gives them the opportunity to stay and work after graduation.

"...I have an option to stay here after my MBA..." (C08)

"...the second point was that I didn't want to study in France because I am French and I wanted to look for the jobs in the UK and it is easier to have a job here…" (C10)

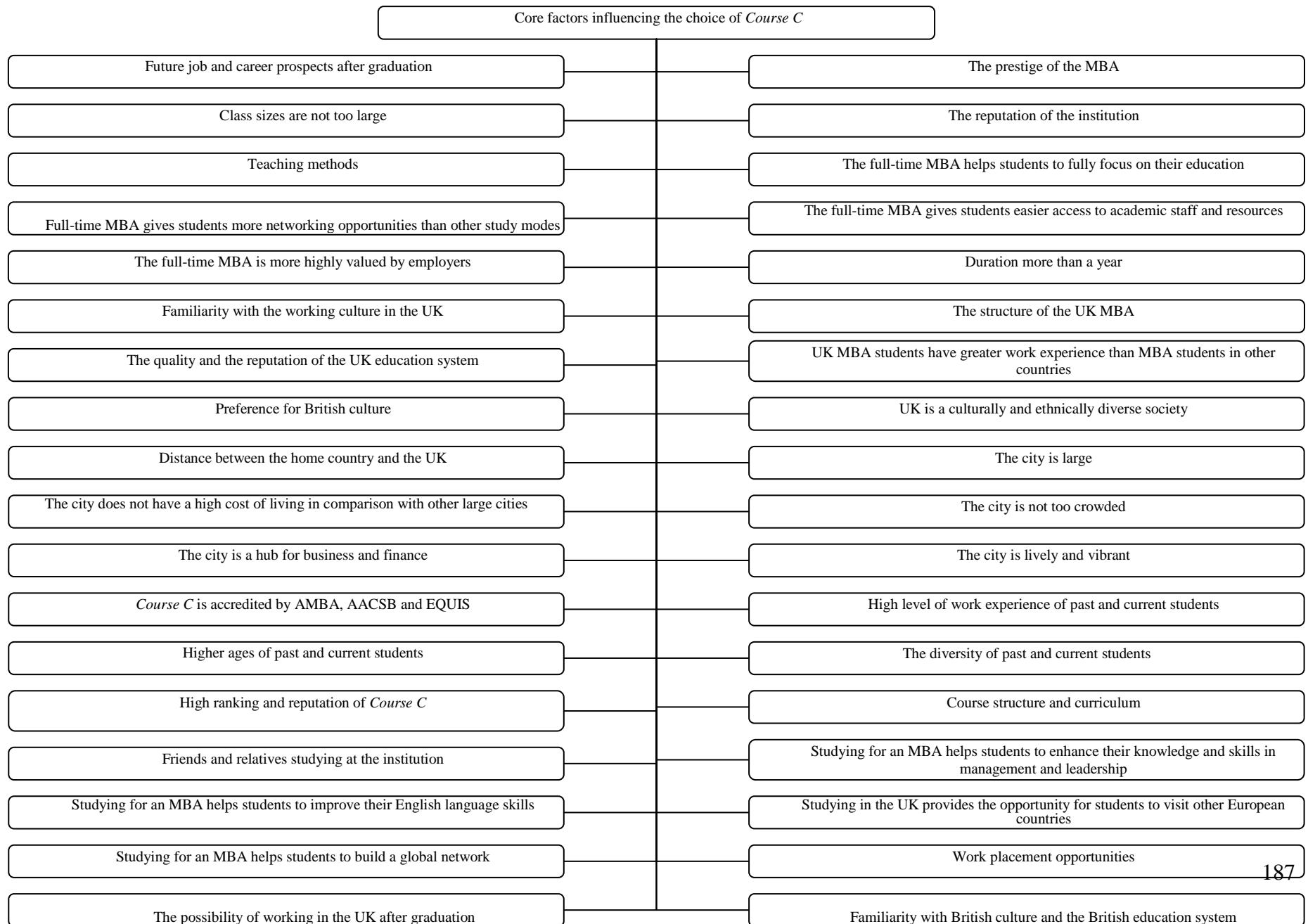- **Familiarity with British culture and the British education system** [R36]

C09 selected *Course C* because he was familiar with British culture and the British education system.

"...When I did my high school I went to a British school in Egypt so I was familiar with British culture and the education system…" (C09)

Core factors influencing the choice of *Course C* are displayed in the following figure.

Figure 5 Core factors influencing selection of a course abroad – Course C

Core factors influencing the choice of *Course C*

Left column:
- Future job and career prospects after graduation
- Class sizes are not too large
- Teaching methods
- Full-time MBA gives students more networking opportunities than other study modes
- The full-time MBA is more highly valued by employers
- Familiarity with the working culture in the UK
- The quality and the reputation of the UK education system
- Preference for British culture
- Distance between the home country and the UK
- The city does not have a high cost of living in comparison with other large cities
- The city is a hub for business and finance
- *Course C* is accredited by AMBA, AACSB and EQUIS
- Higher ages of past and current students
- High ranking and reputation of *Course C*
- Friends and relatives studying at the institution
- Studying for an MBA helps students to improve their English language skills
- Studying for an MBA helps students to build a global network
- The possibility of working in the UK after graduation

Right column:
- The prestige of the MBA
- The reputation of the institution
- The full-time MBA helps students to fully focus on their education
- The full-time MBA gives students easier access to academic staff and resources
- Duration more than a year
- The structure of the UK MBA
- UK MBA students have greater work experience than MBA students in other countries
- UK is a culturally and ethnically diverse society
- The city is large
- The city is not too crowded
- The city is lively and vibrant
- High level of work experience of past and current students
- The diversity of past and current students
- Course structure and curriculum
- Studying for an MBA helps students to enhance their knowledge and skills in management and leadership
- Studying in the UK provides the opportunity for students to visit other European countries
- Work placement opportunities
- Familiarity with British culture and the British education system

5.4.3.2 Syntagmatic identity of *Course C* as observed through online social networks

This section presents 'representamens' within codes that constitute the syntagmatic identity of *Course C as* observed through OSNs. This identity of *Course C* is communicated in the form of the representamen to international HE aspirants and applicants through OSNs, from which international HE aspirants and applicants generate certain perceptions (or interpretants) about *Course C*.

Participants did not use OSNs

Three out of ten research participants did not use OSNs during the course selection process: C04 from Japan, C06 from Chile and C10 from France. Their reasons for not using OSNs and subsequent changes in their perceptions about OSNs are discussed below.

Reasons for not using OSNs and subsequent changes in perceptions about OSNs

Responses to the interview question 'why didn't you use OSNs during the course selection process?' include comments that suggest there are five representamens within code SYI.PDU.RNU. These representamens will be discussed in turn.

- **No further information was required [R1]**

C06 did not require further information on *Course C,* and therefore did not use OSNs during the course selection process.

> *"...I didn't need more information, I didn't really look for more information on [Course C]…" (C06)*

- **Did not know how to use OSNs [R2]**

C06 and C10 did not know how to use OSNs, otherwise they would have used them to acquire information on *Course C*.

> *"...I suppose the main reason is that I was not really a heavy user of OSNs. But right now I am much more comfortable and more experienced user, and I know how to research on them…" (C06)*

> *"...I didn't much know about OSNs and I was not aware that I can find information on them about [Course C], if I knew about OSNs and their potential, and if I had time I would definitely join OSNs to ask questions about [Course C]…" (C10)*

- **Lack of time to use OSNs due to late application [R3]**

C10 indicated that he applied late so he had no time to research the course using OSNs.

> *"...no I didn't, because before I come here I didn't have much time to go on Facebook. As I said I changed from MSs to MBA and I really didn't have much time to get research on OSNs..." (C10)*

- **Official sources provide greater insight** [R4]

C04 believes official sources, such as the official university website, give greater insight in comparison with OSNs.

> *"...for me official sources such as the website gave me more insight about how the course was actually structured..." (C04)*

- **OSNs are not a valuable source of information** [R5]

C04 did not consider OSNs a valuable source of information.

> *"...I didn't use them because I really didn't consider them as a valuable source of information...I didn't think that OSNs would be a very valuable source of information...I just was not sure what values they can add, I didn't see them to be necessary for me..." (C04)*

Figure 59 Reasons for not using online social networks – Course C
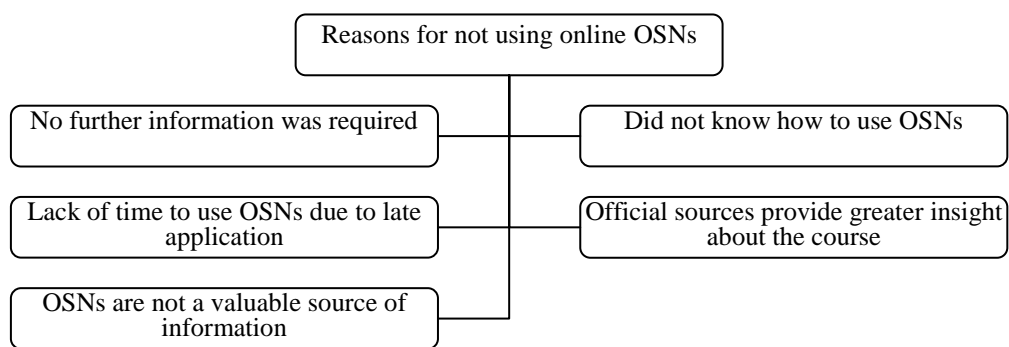
Responses to the interview question 'do you still have the same approach towards OSNs?' include comments that suggest there are two representamens within code SYI.PDU.SCP. The representamens will be discussed in turn.

- **Changed perceptions of OSNs** [R1]

Two out of three participants who did not use OSNs indicated that their perceptions about using OSNs had since changed such that they would now consider using them. C06 believes that OSNs provide more accurate and honest information than official sources of information, but this still depends who you communicate with on OSNs. C06 stated that it is easier to find past and current students on OSNs, and to obtain background information on them.

"...I now use OSNs to get information on any important topics that I am researching about, I think OSNs provide more accurate results when you look for specific topics than using only official sources. So if you find right community or right kind of people on OSNs such as Twitter then they would lead you to the kind of information that you want to find... you have the opportunity to contact previous students or current students on OSNs...it is easier to obtain the background information and profile of past students..." (C06)

C10's perceptions about OSNs had also changed since he had attended IT lectures as part of *Course C.* Prior starting *Course C,* C10 did not know that OSNs were a source of information.

"...I will definitely use OSNs to help me in MBA selection decisions. As I said I didn't know if there are any information on [Course C] on OSNs, if I knew it I would definitely use them to obtain more information...before coming here I didn't really trust OSNs, but when we had IT lectures in our first term I really saw the potential of these sites and how useful they can be for sharing information, especially getting research about something..." (C10)

- **Perceptions did not change** [R2]

C04's perceptions about using OSNs remained the same. C04 stated that it is still difficult for him to trust information from OSNs. C04 believes that the contacts provided by *University C* were adequate and he did not need to find further information on *Course C.*

"...I think OSNs aren't really reliable, for example if you ask about the quality of teaching, some people would say good and some would say no...I had two options, I could obtain information on past students' experiences on Facebook, or I could do it through those people who were introduced by [University C] during the admission process...the contacts provided by [University C] were good enough and I didn't really feel lacking information and going on OSNs to find out more about this course..." (C04)

Table 38 Subsequent changes in perceptions about online social networks –
Course C

Interviewees	C04	C06	C10
Changed perceptions of OSNs		✓	✓
Perceptions did not change	✓		

Participants used OSNs

Seven out of ten research participants used OSNs during the course selection process: C01, C02 and C03 from India, C05 from Bahamas, C07 from Thailand, C08 from Mali and C09 from Egypt.

Stages at which OSNs are used during the course selection process

Responses to the interview question 'at what stages in your course selection process did you use OSNs?' include comments that suggest there are four representamens within code SYI.PUS.S. These representamens will be discussed in turn.

- **The pre-search behaviour stage [R1]**

C09 heard of *Course C* for the first time through OSNs. C09 stated that one of his Facebook friends used to study at *University C* and C09 heard about *Course C* for the first time through this friend.

> *"...OSNs such as Facebook were essential...because I knew someone who was studying at [University C] so I was introduced to him through Facebook...if it wasn't for this connection through Facebook I would never know about [Course C]..." (C09)*

- **The search behaviour stage [R2]**

All participants who used OSNs during the course selection process stated that OSNs allowed them to acquire information on *Course C*. The following comments by C03 and C05 capture this representamen.

> *"...when I decided to study an MBA course, I used OSNs as a tool to search for different MBA courses in the UK and obtain information on past students' experiences...' (C03)*

> *"...prior selecting [Course C] I used OSNs to obtain information on MBA courses in the UK..." (C05)*

- **The application decision stage [R3]**

At the application decision stage, individuals focus down onto a few course options that they are interested in and to which they are more likely to be admitted. C03 and C07 claimed that they used OSNs to focus down onto a few course options that they were interested in and to which they were more likely to be admitted.

> *"...before I applied for the MBA here, I used OSNs to shortlist my options... my initial list was made from full-time and after that I needed to do more research on them..." (C03)*

> *"...I used OSNs when I wanted to shortlist my preferred courses..." (C07)*

- **The choice decision stage [R4]**

C01, C02, C03, C05 and C08 claimed that OSNs helped them in their final course selection decisions.

> *"...they [OSNs] had a significant influence on finalizing which MBA course to select..." (C01)*

"...I used Pagalguy before I applied for admission...Pagalguy assisted me to select my preferred MBA course..." (C03)

"...I had several options and I was considering different high ranked MBAs...I used mainly YouTube to watch videos about the city, business school and the MBA, if I wouldn't watch those videos I would be a little bit hesitant or uncomfortable about making my final decision..." (C05)

"...when I had several options, OSNs helped me to select the best option..." (C08)

Table 39 Stages at which online social networks are used during the course selection process – Course C

Interviewees	C01	C02	C03	C05	C07	C08	C09
The pre-search behaviour stage							✓
The search behaviour stage	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
The application decision stage	✓		✓		✓		
The choice decision stage	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	

OSNs most commonly used during the course selection process

Responses to the interview question 'can you please name all the OSNs that you used to obtain information about *[Course C]*?' include comments that suggest there are seven representamens within code SYI.PUS.MCU. They are as follows: Beatthegmat [R1], Pagalguy [R2], LinkedIn [R3], Facebook [R4], Twitter [R5] and YouTube [R6]. Beatthegmat.com is one of the world's largest OSNs for MBA applicants, serving over 2 million people each year.

"...I went to different OSNs, one was Beatthegmat, which was the MBA network, and there is also a very popular Indian OSNs which is Pagalguy...I also used LinkedIn and Facebook to find students who were studying here and to see if people have left any comments..." (C01)

"...I checked official websites very often and then you have those OSNs fan pages on Facebook , Twitter, LinkedIn , YouTube... later on I discovered that there are lots of information on [Course C] on Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube and Twitter..." (C02)

"... I looked at YouTube to get a sense of how this city looks like...for me it was very important to get a sense of environment, so I looked at some videos on YouTube to see if people posted things about this city..." (C05)

"...I tried to do research by asking five alumni fom Thailand through Facebook and YouTube..." (C07)

"...I would say at that time I only used LinkedIn... I didn't use other OSNs such as Facebook, or Twitter..." (C08)

University C also owns a popular blogging site [R7]. Participants stated that this blogging

site is for individuals who are offered a place. C02 noted that this blogging site has the characteristics of an OSN in that it allows individuals to log on, create a profile, connect with others, see what information others have posted, and contribute information.

> *"...we were asked to join the MBA blogging site which is owned by [University C], it is more like a closed OSNs. On this blogging site you have all the classes listed...It is like an internal OSNs, you can post comments or contact people...also staff are there and you can get information on them as well..." (C02)*

> *"...then there is school's own portal which I got some information from, it is the MBA blogging site owned by [University C], so this portal is for students who have been offered a place, I used this portal after when I was offered a place here, I was still an applicant, I was not officially a registered student..." (C03)*

> *"...I used the MBA blogging site owned by the business school, before I come here I went on it and just read the comments of the people..." (C08)*

Figure 60 Online social networks most commonly used during the course selection process – Course C
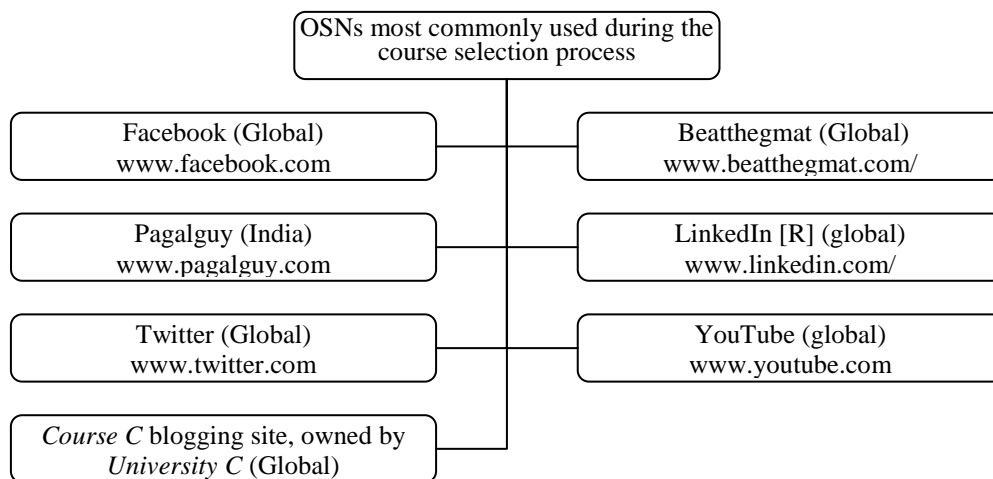
Information-gathering methods using OSNs

Reponses to the interview question 'how did you gather information using OSNs?' include comments that suggest there are six representamens within code SYI.PUS.IGM. Participants obtained information via a variety of means, including viewing online profiles [R1], reading comments from other users [R2], viewing photos [R3], contacting users directly via private messages [R4], responses received to questions posted publicly by participants [R5], and watching videos [R6].

"...I went on OSNs to see the profiles of people who studied in this school...I also read existing comments...I contacted a few past students directly on OSNs, and then I got insights before actually applying for this course..." (C01)

*"...I contacted some students on OSNs, and I also posted my questions on the wall..." (C02)*

"...I contacted previous students on Pagalguy, you can also post a question yourself and expect somebody answer that question...If you just go to Pagalguy there is a search option, so if you just type in [Course C], you see all the search results..." (C03)

"...I read the existing comments on the videos on YouTube...comments were from past and current students as well as staff... you can contact people directly on YouTube...you can post your questions on a video..." (C05)

"...I went to the MBA blogging site owned by [University C]...my approach to collect data was just to read those posts and comments..." (C08)

"...I saw many photos and the photos from this city and all the events that past students had participated..." (C09)

Figure 61 Information-gathering methods using online social networks – Course C
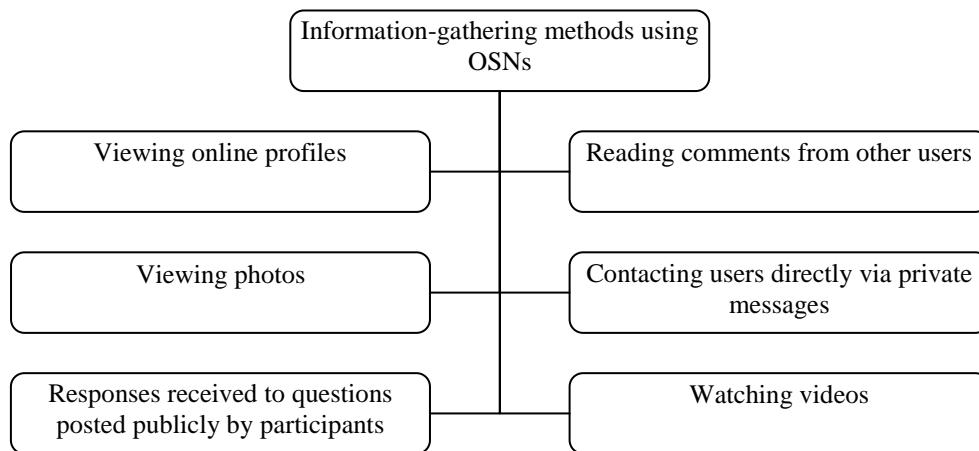
Information available on OSNs

Responses to the interview question 'what information was available on OSNs?' include comments that suggest there are forty-two representamens within code SYI.PUS.IAO. By viewing online profiles, C01 found information on the age range of past and current students [R1].

"...before actually applying for this school, I looked at what was the aging profile of the students..." (C01)

By reading comments from other users, participants found information on: student-friendliness of the city [R2], social life in the city [R3], sports facilities in the city [R4], the course structure and curriculum [R5], class sizes [R6], course ranking [R7], average salary after graduation [R8], students' work experience [R9], university accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city [R10], student-friendliness of the university [R11], social and leisure activities in the city [R12], student life on and off campus [R13], and events and exhibitions [R14].

> *"...I found many information through reading the comments on OSNs such as how student friendly the city is, class size, student experience, average work experience, average salary... apart from the usual things such as ranking I wanted to find out what sports facilities are available here in the city... I was mainly looking for the availability of student accommodation and how student friendly the university is...what else is going on in the city and what is the social life here...I wanted to find out what was the culture over here and what things you could do in the city..." (C01)*

> *"...I found information on the social life in this city and the school life..." (C08)*

> *"...the students were talking about the project content and about the course in general...one thing that really got my attention on the blogging site was that MBA students attended an event related to media...and it was amazing to read their blogs on how they organized the event and who came and the calibre of the speakers who came and the experience of students that really got my attention..." (C09)*

Through viewing photos uploaded on OSNs, C05 and C09 obtained information about the city [R15], the diversity of past and current students [R16], social and leisure activities in the city [R17] and national and international trips during the course [R18].

> *"...I looked at many photos online, I could get some information on this city...also by looking at photos I could see lots of information such as the diversity of people attending the course and what they were doing...I saw lots of students' photos and the photos from this city and all the events they participated in the city...for example they went to a trip from school to Brathay...when you come to an MBA you not only coming for the lectures, you want to also visit companies and you want to go to different trips and to improve your experience and skills..." (C09)*

> *"...I found some nice images of this city on OSNs ..." (C05)*

By contacting users directly via private messages, participants obtained information about the course structure and curriculum [R19], tuition fees [R20], teaching and learning style at *University C* [R21], academic staff [R22], facilities and resources [R23], admission process (e.g. interview) [R24], past and current students' experiences of the course [R25], past and current

students' experiences of the institution [R26], and work placement opportunities [R27].

> *"...I contacted some people directly online and I sent them private messages, I got information such as fees, what is the education style, how is the faculty and how was the facilities..." (C01)*

> *"...I managed to speak to some students on the internal OSNs we have for [Course C]...also staff are there and you can also get information on the staff..." (C02)*

> *"...I asked some students what are the course strengths in terms of specialization in finance, consultancy....there is lots of information on Pagalguy, I contacted some students to see what have been their interview experience...I contacted some past students to see how did they found the MBA...what was their opinions about the school..." (C03)*

From responses received to questions posted publicly by participants, C02 and C03 found information about the course structure and curriculum [R28], the city [R29], tuition fees [R30], the quality of teaching [R31], university accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city [R32], information about the climate and weather of the city [R33] and social and leisure activities in the city [R34].

> *"...the MBA blogging site owned by [University C] is like an internal OSNs, I posted my questions on the wall, asking questions about the course structure, the city, quality of teaching, accommodation..." (C02)*

> *"...I posted some questions on the wall about the accommodation, quality of teaching, how is it like living in this city, course structure, about the fees, this city weather...about how active the city is, night life and all those things..." (C03)*

By watching videos uploaded on OSNs, C05 and C07 found information about the city [R35], the institution [R36], the course structure and curriculum [R37], social and leisure activities in the city [R38], information about the climate and weather of the city [R39], exams and assignments [R40], learning outcomes from the course [R41] and university accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city [R42].

> *"....I used mainly YouTube to watch videos about the city...I used YouTube to fill in gaps of my knowledge about what this place was like and the course structure and curriculum...if I wouldn't watch those videos I would be a little bit hesitant or uncomfortable about making my final decision...so they showed a very good picture of the university people enjoying themselves, and some of the social life and student life I think they were pretty much selling the city as the place to do an MBA and to come and study here...most of the videos I looked at were official videos and some others were not official and they were posted by students and they were more around looking at the city and what the weather was like..." (C05)*

> *"....watching the videos assisted me to get information on the social life here in this city and if the city is lively...I found information on the course structure*

and curriculum…basically they discussed about the course works… I also found some information the possible accommodation opportunities…" (C07)

Figure 6 Information available on online social networks – Course C
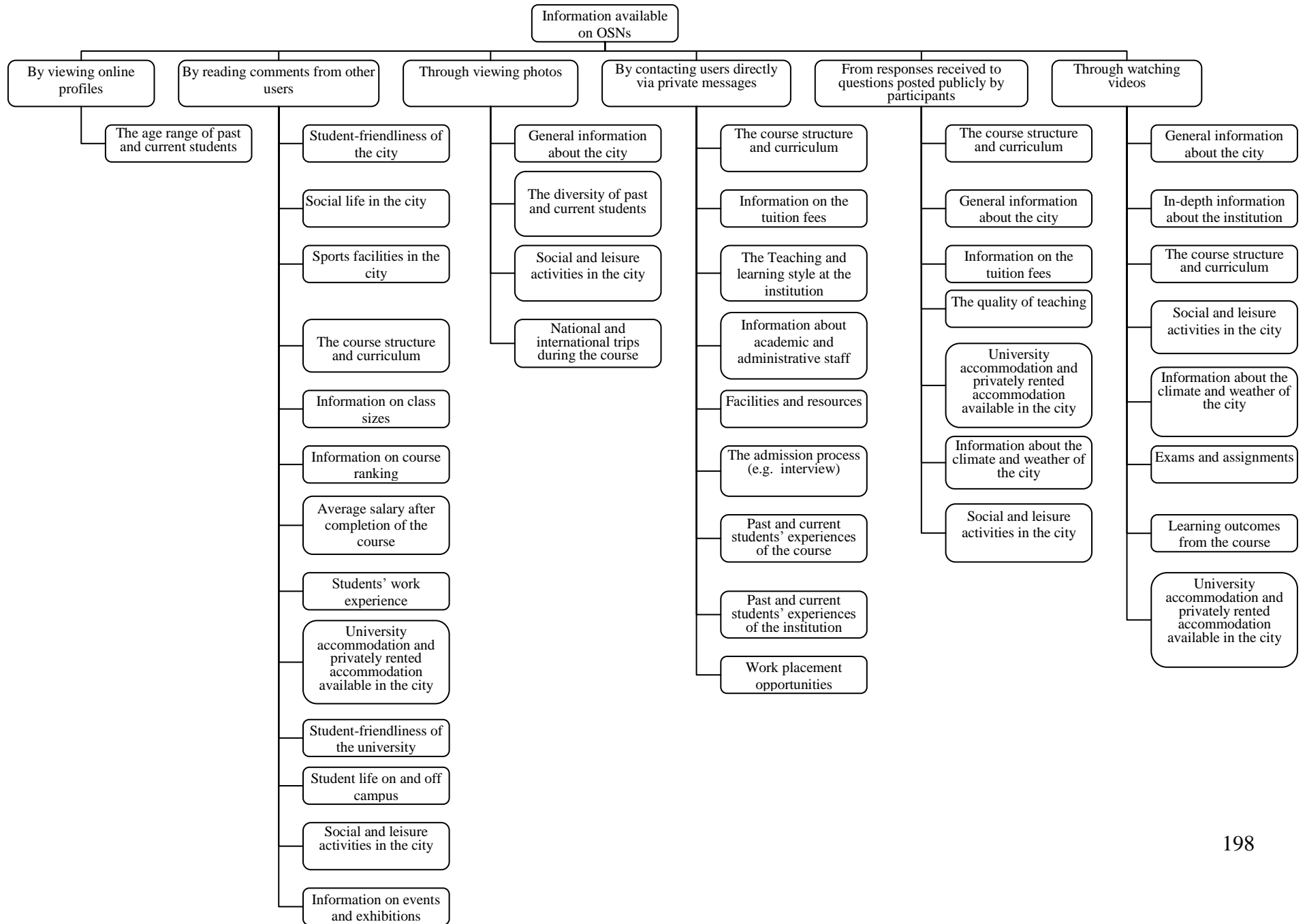
198

The information needed most from OSNs during the course selection process

Responses to the interview question 'what is the information that is needed most during the course selection process that you search for on OSNs?' include comments that suggest there are seven representamens within code SYI.PUS.INM. They include information on student visas [R1], the latest news from UKBA [R2] and information about university accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city [R3].

> *"...they did have a small problem in the Visa application process and it wasn't really clear, although their admission group has set up their own blogging site and students can join to ask their immigration queries but the regulations keep changing fast and the information there wasn't the most up to date information. That would be good if the university could provide some information on the Visa application process on...the school was helpful in giving us information on student accommodation but I think they could have assisted us more in finding accommodation, before the course starts some students were facing difficulties in finding accommodation..." (C01)*

C02 and C03 wanted to watch promotional videos featuring academic staff and the course director talking about *Course C* [R4], and find detailed information about the course structure and curriculum [R5].

> *"...I think basically more about some interviews with people, like the dean of the business school, MBA director, those are few things would be nice to have on OSNs such as Facebook or the MBA blogging site owned by the University..." (C02)*

> *"...for example, the course structure in details, what was in each term or semester..." (C03)*

C03 and C07 wanted to find details of work placements [R6] and information on past and current students' experiences of the course [R7].

> *"...information on placements such as how many work placements we have, this information was not available on Pagalguy..." (C03)*

> *"...maybe the students' experiences...it was difficult to find students' experiences with the course...I just wanted to find more student experience to make a comparison but I could not find..." (C07)*

Figure 63 Information needed most from online social networks during the course selection process – Course C
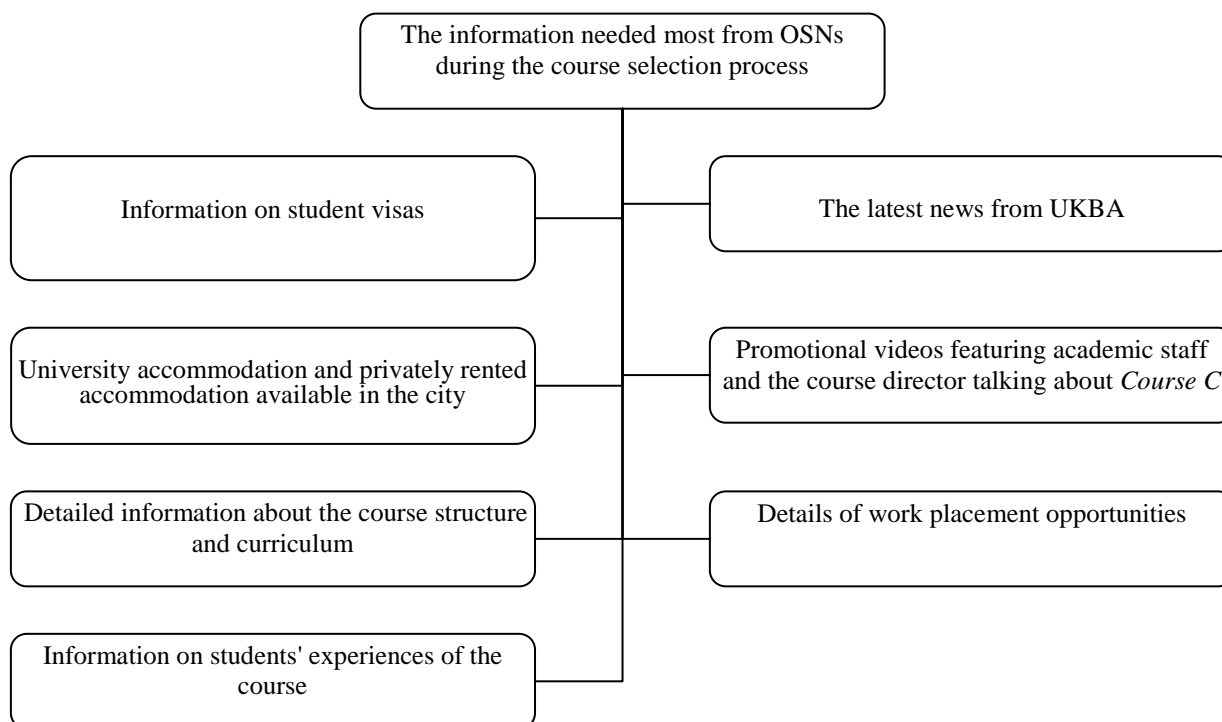
Benefits of using OSNs in course selection

Responses to the interview question 'what are the benefits of using OSNs in comparison with other sources?' include comments that suggest there are thirteen representamens within code SYI.PUS.BOC. C02 and C07 stated that OSNs are less biased and a more credible source of information than official sources [R1] and that OSNs are more interactive than official sources of information [R2].

> "...the main difference is the information I got on YouTube is the mixture of bad and good information, but on official website is only good and positive information on the course, so I think the information from OSNs such as YouTube is more valid..." (C07)

> "...I think the HE aspirants and applicants have more opportunity to be more interactive when they use OSNs..." (C02)

C01 and C07 claimed that OSNs allowed them to send direct messages to past and current students [R3], and to gather in-depth information about the institution, students, and academic and administrative staff [R4].

> "...OSNs were really helpful in finding out detailed information on what students do in their time outside the school and how they interact amongst themselves..." (C01)

> *"...I think OSNs such as YouTube and Facebook have advantages because I can find people and alumni, and I can contact people personally to ask question..." (C07)*

The findings reveal that it was easy for participants to access and use OSNs from their home countries [R5].

> *"...it was very easy to use OSNs back home...it was very easy to find information on [Course C] on OSNs..." (C01)*

C02 and C09 claimed that OSNs allowed them to obtain feedback from students from different countries [R6], receive faster replies to their queries [R7], acquire information from customers' perspective [R8], and gather information on a real time basis [R9].

> *"...I think the likelihood for me to get a response from somebody on OSNs such as Facebook or the MBA blogging site owned by [University C] is very high, because most people or brands respond very quickly, it is for the world to see...people can track whatever you are doing on OSNs such as Facebook or the MBA blogging site owned by [University C] on a real time basis..." (C02)*

> *"...I think you get more of candid view in OSNs because most of the official websites or the ranking sites have the same information that is taken from official website itself, so you get to see the same information on the school in all official sources...but on OSNs you can get information from the customer sides, you can contact past and current students...OSNs gave me definitely more confidence in my decision-making process and in selecting [Course C]...it was amazing, so all these random people from different countries replied to me although I wasn't friends with them...I just found them on OSNs, the advantage then is OSNs made the connection easier, OSNs helped me in finding and connecting with very "random" people..." (C09)*

C02 and C03 stated that OSNs allowed them to double-check the information provided in official sources [R10]. C03 noted that unlike official sources which only focus on facts and figures about the course, OSNs provide richer and more in-depth information about the course [R11].

> *"...you can also double check what school says by checking with other students, for example you can check how well school has been doing in past and what are the experiences of past students..." (C02)*

> *"...official sources such as Financial Times are very objective so they give you all the quantitative information on different schools such as what is average age, GMAT scores etc. where I found most of the value in OSNs is getting kind of the qualitative information, so that is something..." (C03)*

C03 claimed that the information acquired from OSNs was less biased and more independent information than official sources [R12], and OSNs provided a platform to compare and contrast the information from the various sources [R13].

"...you get very independent information on OSNs, because people who you speak to on OSNs they don't have any motivation to give you wrong information, but if you speak to school officials you can't get honest feedback as they work for the school...some people give you good feedback and some bad feedback, you then have the chance to compare what is good and what is bad..." (C03)

Figure 64 Benefits of using online social networks in course selection – Course C
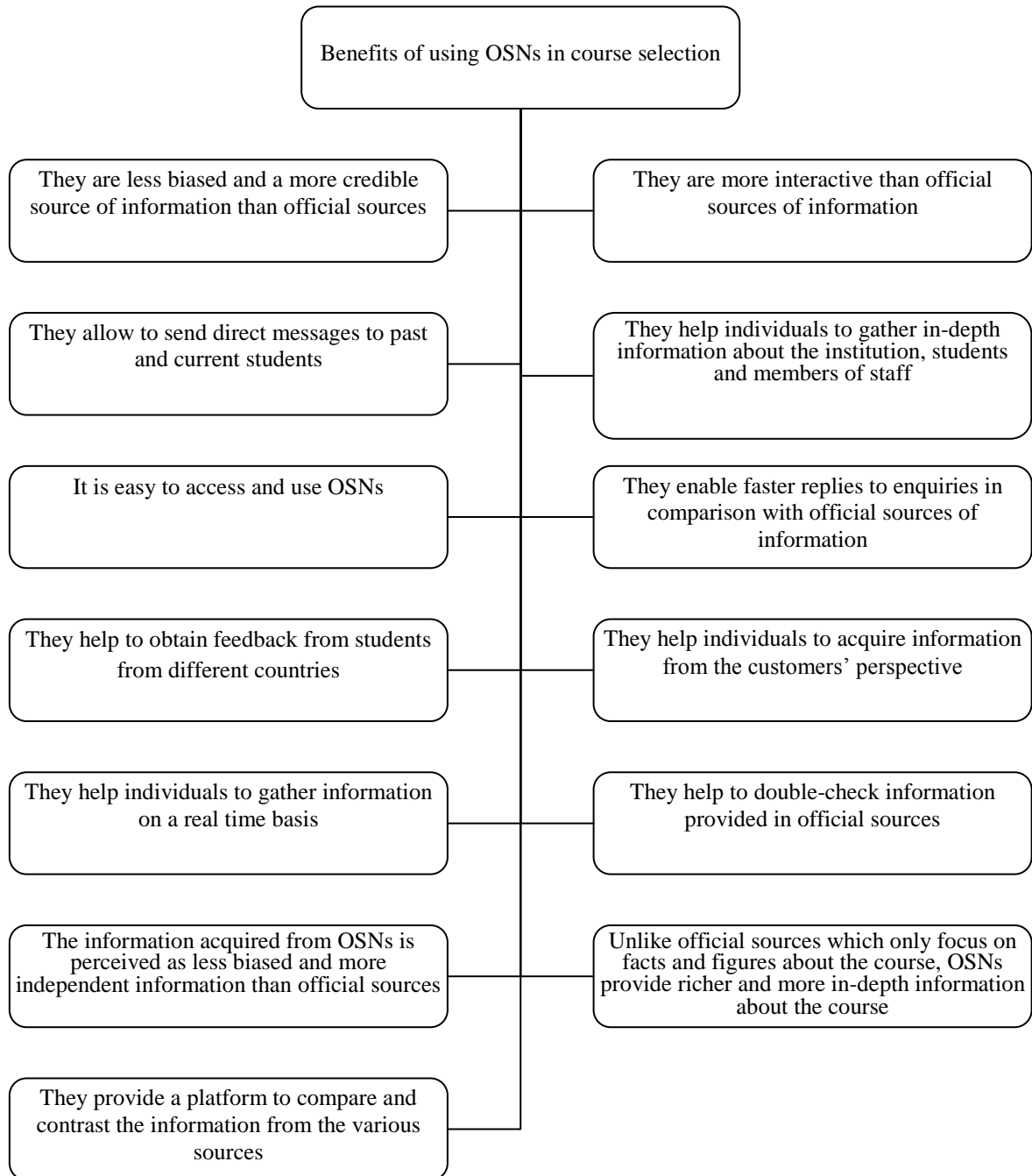
Downsides of using OSNs in course selection

Responses to the interview question 'what are the downsides of using OSNs in comparison with other sources?' include comments that suggest there seven representamens within code SYI.PUS.DOC. C05 and C07 could not completely rely on all of the information available on OSNs and they perceived the information on OSNs as potentially unreliable [R1]. C05 and C07 stated that it was difficult for them to distinguish between advertising messages and more neutral information [R2].

> *"...one of the disadvantages perhaps is because it is unedited there is no way to understand whether the information is correct or if people want to destroy the reputation of the school, there is really no way in OSNs environment to tell whether people are telling you the truth..." (C05)*

> *"...but then again most of the videos uploaded onto OSNs are just adverts for the university..." (C07)*

Participants stated that the information on ONSs tends to be biased [R3] and that a single unhappy student can negatively influence the course selection decisions of HE aspirants and applicants [R4]. A number of participants also indicated that unlike official sources, it is difficult to verify the accuracy of information on OSNs [R5].

> *"...One of the disadvantages is that the information on OSNs tends to be biased...and if one student has a bad experience due to some reason so he/she can post this bad experience all across the Web and this information may not be even true but this can influence HE aspirants and applicants all across the Web..."(C01)]*

> *"...maybe a negative comment from an unsatisfied student can have negative impact on HE aspirants and applicants' selection decision and destroy the image of the university and the course..." (C08)*

> *"...the possible disadvantages, I think OSNs you get a view of only certain persons and what they talk about is based on their own experiences...could be one negative thing that made them give negative feedback and this may influence HE aspirants and applicants wrongly..." (C09)*

Participants believed that the freedom to share information on OSNs has the potential to damage the reputation of the course and the institution [R6], and they argue that OSNs should not be used as a primary source of information [R7].

> *"...first of all I think one damaging aspect of Facebook is that it is free for everyone to post comments and share opinions. Although institutions may have the option to delete bad comments but even if a bad comments stay for 2 hours it can still destroy the image of the university and the MBA..." (C02)*

> *"...you should be more careful if you are looking for some specific information, if you use for example Pagalguy as a primary source to select school you miss some other schools, because you don't have the overall*

picture of everything…some schools aren't even discussed on OSNs…once you have an overall idea about the MBA then I think for secondary research you can utilise OSNs such as Pagalguy…" (C03)

"…OSNs might not provide a complete picture of the course they may provide sort of one side of the views…" (C05)

"…maybe one student really like the course and give an untrue positive feedback on the course and this can misdirect HE aspirants and applicants…" (C08)

Figure 65 Downsides of using online social networks in course selection – Course C
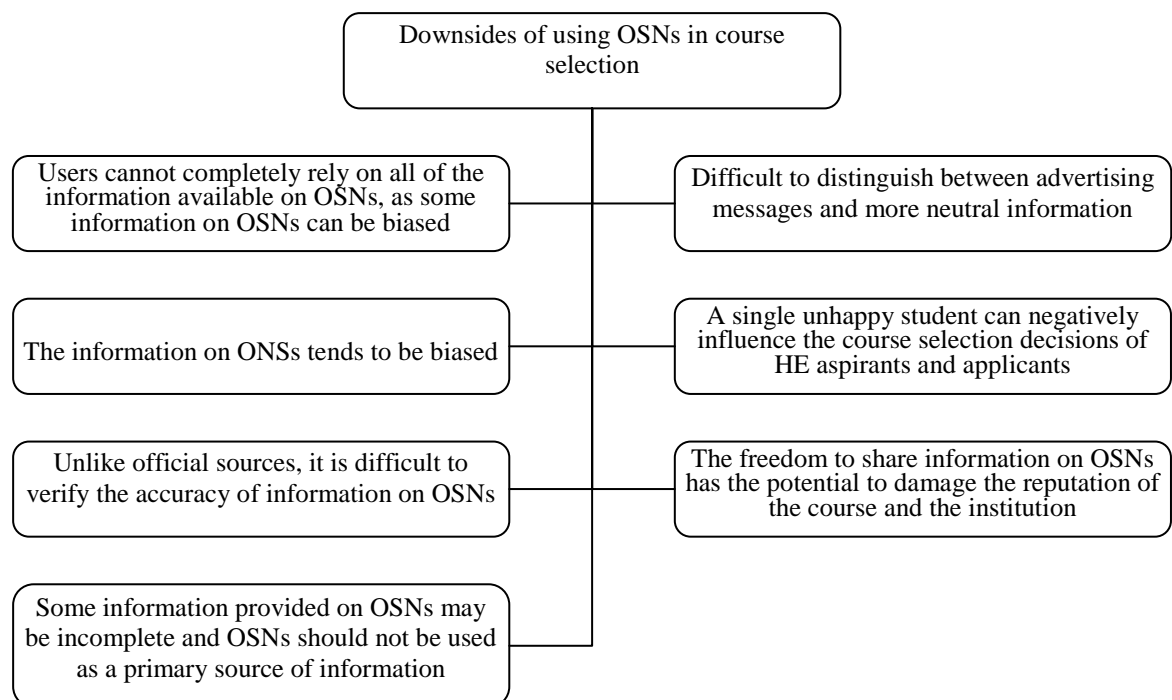
5.4.3.3 Perceived identity of *Course C*

This section presents 'interpretants' within codes that constitute the perceived identity of *Course C*. The perceived identity of *Course C* is determined by the paradigmatic identity of *Course C* and the syntagmatic identity of *Course C*, and influences the final course selection decisions of international HE aspirants and applicants.

The level of influence of OSNs on final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources

Responses to the interview question 'how influential were OSNs on your final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources?' include comments that suggest

there are four 'interpretants' within code PEI.LIF. These representamens will be discussed in turn.

- **OSNs have a strong influence on final course selection decisions** [I1]

C01 and C09 stated that OSNs had a strong influence on their final course selection decisions. C01 stated that OSNs had a significant influence on determining his preferred course of study. C01 noted that prior starting the course, OSNs helped him to acquire a good understanding of what to expect in terms of the institution and other students attending the course. C09 stated that in the absence of OSNs, he would not have known about *Course C*. C09 indicated that he made a friend via an OSN who used to study in the city in which *Course C* is offered, and this friend had recommended *Course C*.

> *"...they did have a significant influence on finalizing which school to go to, because I was able to get to know a lot of students...I already knew what the class was going to look like before actually committing to join the school...I met some of them outside or on OSNs and interacted with each of them...so OSNs was very significant..." (C01)*

> *"...I am very honest, it [OSNs] was essential, because what happen is that I knew someone who was studying in this city so I was introduced to him through Facebook...so if it wasn't for this connection through Facebook I would never know about [Course C]. As I said earlier I was using Facebook to connect with this person before even I applied for MBA..." (C09)*

- **OSNs have a moderate influence on final course selection decisions** [I2]

C03, C05 and C08 stated that OSNs had a moderate influence on their final course selection decisions. C03 stated that prior to use OSNs, he had a reasonable idea about *Course C* and its reputation from official sources such as ranking websites, however, he still wanted to verify the information he got from official sources using OSNs. C03 claimed that OSNs helped him to shortlist his MBA options and select *Course C* as his preferred course of study.

> *"...I would say, I had a fair idea about the reputation of [Course C] from going to all these official and ranking sites such as Financial Times, Businessweek, Forbes, so they can't all tell you lies! I had a general idea I just wanted somebody to confirm what these official sites are telling me, I wanted to actually speak to somebody who had studied MBA previously here... I would say maybe I was sure about 50% that I want to study my MBA in one of the seven institutions that I had selected. Now where I think OSNs would have made a very important difference on my final decision-making is when I was I basically stuck because all these schools are rated so closely, so I think the opinions expressed in OSNs may have made me think about some of these schools, which one is the best..." (C03)*

C05 claimed that OSNs helped him to gain more confidence in selecting *Course C*. C05 was sure about studying for an MBA in the UK but did not know much about other students attending UK MBA courses, and he also did not know much about UK cities. OSNs such as YouTube allowed C05 to watch videos about the city in which *Course C* is offered and to get to know about MBA students attending the course.

> *"...I gained more confidence from OSNs such as YouTube, so If I would rate it from on scale 1 to 5 , with 1 being the most influential, I would probably say 2.5...if I was not able to see or get the better sense for the city and for the environment and for the people who actually go to school here I would be a little bit hesitant or uncomfortable about making my final decision, I mean I had made up my mind already that I wanted to do an MBA, I had made up my mind that I wanted to do it in the UK, but I didn't know anything about this city as a city in compare to any other places in the UK, so I used YouTube to fill in the gaps of my knowledge about what this place was like..." (C05)*

C08 stated that OSNs are very different from official sources such as university and ranking websites. Prior to using OSNs, C08 had already made up his mind about his preferred courses, and he used OSNs only as a means to shortlist his options.

> *"...I would say OSNs are very different, when you use OSNs you have already made up your mind about your preferred MBA courses and you just want to select the best on...in my view official sources such as Financial Times and Businessweeks are only marketing tools and your future employers care about these official sources..." (C08)*

- **OSNs have a low level of influence on final course selection decisions [I3]**

OSNs had a low level of influence on C07's final course selection decision. C07 found the videos uploaded onto OSNs such as YouTube boring, and as a result her decision-making was mainly based on information she had acquired from official sources.

> *"...from the scale of 1 to 5, 1 very good and 5 very bad, I think it will be 4 out of 5, I would go for 4 because to be honest it isn't interesting the videos they made, it is so boring, so my decision-making was mainly based on data collected from official sources. So my main decision was 80% to 90% based on the official data I collected..." (C07)*

- **OSNs have no influence on final course selection decisions [I4]**

OSNs had no influence on C02's final course selection decision. C02 stated that he had used OSNs more for fun than for gaining information. C02 believes that he would never base a life changing decision, such as choosing an MBA, on the information provided on OSNs such as Facebook.

> *"...as I said I only used Facebook or the MBA blogging site owned by [University C] couple of times, I think not very influential, for me OSNs have*

been more for fun not for getting a serious information…so I would not base a life changing decision on the information I collected from OSNs such as Facebook. I rather to follow official website and exchange some emails with people…in my opinion each person has a very unique query and a very unique response so I would not use OSNs to make any life changing decisions…" (C02)

Table 40 The level of influence of online social networks on final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources – Course C

Interviewees	Strong level of influence	Moderate level of influence	Low level of influence	No influence
C01	✓			
C02				✓
C03		✓		
C05		✓		
C07			✓	
C08		✓		
C09	✓			

5.5 Summary

This chapter presented the analysis of the findings. It began with a detailed discussion of the approach to analysis adopted in this research followed by presentation of the analysis of the data from the pilot study and the main study. The next chapter will present and discuss the findings that emerged from the data analysis and how these relate to the literature.

Chapter 6
Findings and Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with answering the research question for this study. It presents and discusses the findings that emerged from the data analysis and how these relate to the literature (Figure 66). Findings that support the literature are identified, as are differences, enabling the current work to contribute new insights. This chapter provides both researchers and practitioners with insights into how the choice of course of study abroad interrelates with participation in OSNs. The findings suggest several courses of action for education marketers and policy makers who wish to invest in their student recruitment strategies.

Figure 66 Conceptual framework: Chapter 6
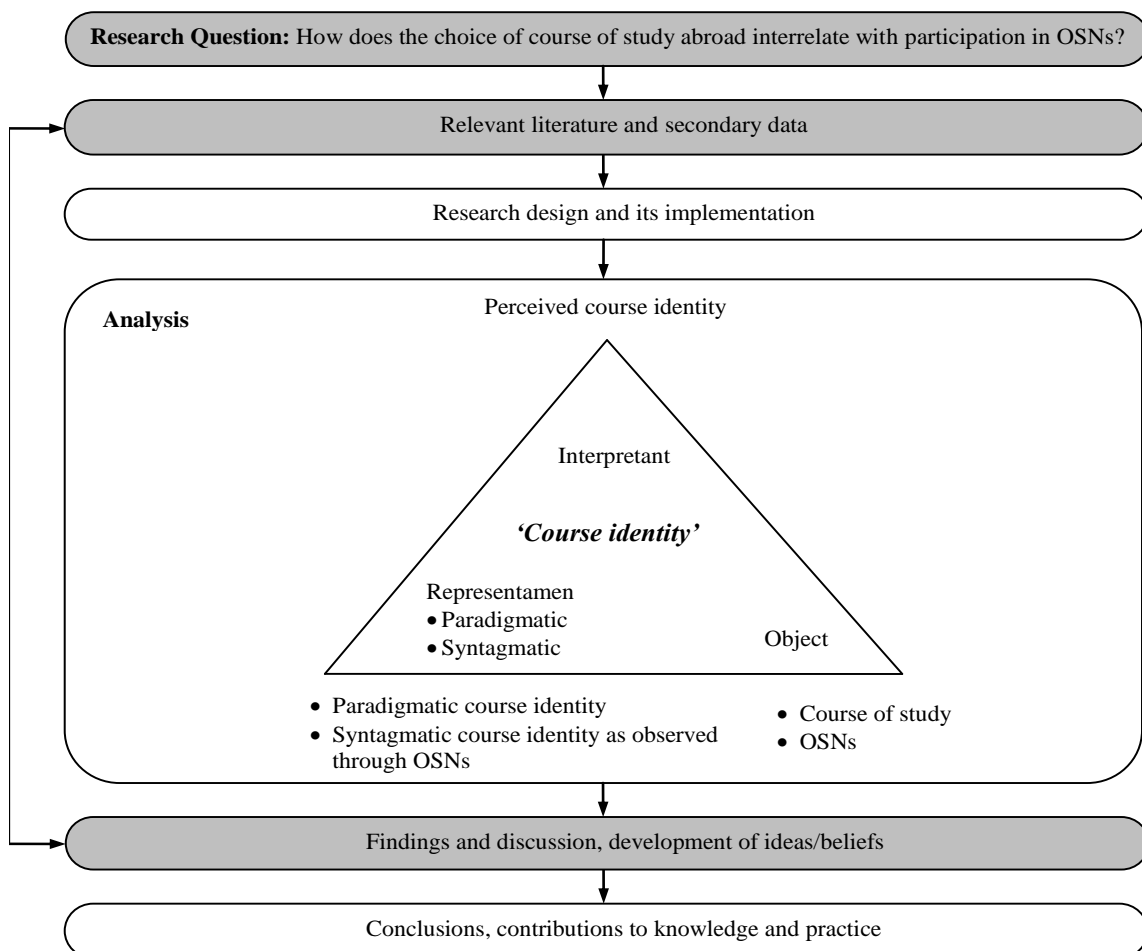
The primary aim of this study has been to explain how the choice of course of study abroad interrelates with participation in OSNs, and the secondary aim has been to provide an application of semiotics to research in choice and decision making in HE and IS research. In order to answer the research question in section 1.3 and achieve the research aims in section 1.5, three research objectives were formulated. The objectives derived from a review of relevant literature and semiosis of course identity in Chapter 2. The primary data for this work were collected through semi-structured interviews with 33 international students studying on three distinct MBA courses in the UK. Each of the three research objectives applies independently to each of the three participating courses of study, however, the intention of this research is to provide a set of findings and conclusions that could equally apply to any HE course in the UK, and potentially beyond.

This chapter is structured according to the research objectives. Section 6.2 discusses the paradigmatic course identity. Section 6.3 is concerned with the syntagmatic course identity as observed through OSNs. Section 6.4 and final section will discuss the levels of influence of paradigmatic course identity and syntagmatic course identity on the perceived course identity.

6.2 Paradigmatic course identity

The first objective of this study was to define the paradigmatic course identity. This enabled identification of the sources of information that international HE aspirants and applicants use during the course selection process, and to discover whether OSNs are among these sources. This objective also helped to reveal the core factors influencing selection of a course abroad. Results from this objective contributed to the discussion of findings, particularly discussions surrounding the significance of online and offline sources on course selection decisions and the level of influence of OSNs on final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources.

This section is broadly divided into three, the first part discusses the sources of information available to international HE aspirants and applicants during course selection, the second discusses the sources of information that international HE aspirants and applicants initially use during the course selection process, and the third is concerned with the core factors influencing selection of a course abroad.

6.2.1 Sources of information available during the course selection process

This study has shown that international HE aspirants and applicants use a number of online and offline sources during the course selection process, and that OSNs are among the online sources used. Offline sources of information include family members and friends who have previously studied at the same institution, family members and friends who have previously taken the same course, education fairs, education agencies, newspaper advertisements, leaflets received in the post, telephone conversations with the admissions office, telephone conversations with a course administrator or course director, family members and friends living in the UK, and friends in their home country who are also interested in studying abroad.

Online sources of information include OSNs, electronic course brochures, information obtained via email exchanges with the admissions office, information obtained via email exchanges with a course administrator or course director, ranking websites (e.g. the Financial Times and Forbes), the official university website, accreditation bodies' websites (e.g. AMBA for management courses), e-journals (e.g. Guardian and Newsweek), the British Council website, the British Consulate website, the UK Border Agency website, the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) website, and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) website.

6.2.2 Initial sources of information available during the course selection process

This study has shown that the majority of international HE aspirants and applicants find out about a course of study for the first time through their family members and friends who have previously studied at the same institution, family members and friends who have previously taken the same course, education agencies, newspaper advertisements, friends living in the host country, ranking websites, and education fairs. These findings are similar to those reported by Maringe (2006), Whitehead *et al.* (2006) and Soutar and Turner (2002), who argue that the family members and friends have significant impact on individuals' HE decisions. According to Chapman (1986), 'knowledgeable others' are consulted with great frequency and in depth during the early stages of the course selection

process. Chapman (1986) argues that 'knowledgeable others' can include family members and relatives, friends, alumni, and acquaintances attending particular universities.

This study found that OSNs are not usually among the initial sources of information consulted by international HE aspirants and applicants during the course selection process. In this research there was only one participant who indicated that he had first heard about a course of study through his friends on OSNs.

6.2.3 Core factors influencing selection of a course abroad

This study found several core factors that influence selection of a course abroad. The factors discovered fall into 14 categories including future job and career prospects after graduation, entry requirements, financial considerations of taking the course, the host country, the city, ranking and accreditation, past and current students, the course structure and curriculum, the institution, academic and administrative staff, personal development, the mode of study, perceived difficulty of completing the course, and course prestige (Table 41).

Table 41 Core factors influencing selection of a course abroad

Future job and career prospects after graduation		
Entry requirements	Work experience	
	Academic background	
	IELTS/TOEFL scores	
Financial considerations of taking the course	The cost of accommodation	
	Tuition fees	
	The availability of scholarships and bursaries	
The host country	The reputation and popularity of the host country's education system	
	Whether there is the opportunity to stay and work at the host country after graduation	
	Regulations on student visas	Whether international students and their dependents are allowed to work
		The visa application process
		Documents required for the student visa
	Existing social links in the host country	Friends living in the host country
		Family members living in the host country
	Geographical proximity	Distance between the home country and the host country
	The culture and society of the host country	Familiarity with the culture and customs
		Familiarity with the work culture
		Cultural and ethnic diversity

		Interest in learning more about the culture of host country
	Travel opportunity	Opportunities to visit other countries close to the host country
The city	The city's transport system	
	Cultural and ethnic diversity	
	Whether or not the city is a business and education hub	
	The geographical size of the city	
	The cost of living	
	International recognition of the city	
	Social and leisure activities	
	Population	
	How vibrant and lively the city is	
	Privately rented accommodation options	
Ranking and accreditation	Ranking of the course in league tables	
	Accreditation of the course	
Past and current students	The average work experience	
	The average age	
	The diversity of past and current students	
The course structure and curriculum	The modules covered	
	The degree of focus on practice	
	The availability of international exchange programmes	
The institution	The institution's help and support with job hunting	
	Whether the institution has a multicultural environment	
	The quality of teaching	
	Teaching methods	
	University accommodation	
	Campus infrastructure	
	The reputation of the institution	
	Class sizes	
	Existing social links at the institution	Friends studying at the institution
		Family members studying at the institution
Academic and administrative staff	Level of support provided by academic and administrative staff	
	Friendliness and courtesy of academic and administrative staff during the admission process	
Personal development	To improve the language skills	
	To enhance knowledge and understanding of the modules taught	
Mode of study	Learning outcomes from the course	
	The duration of the course	
	Degree of in-class participation and interaction with academic staff and other students	
	Degree of students' focus on studying	
	Regulations on student visas	
Perceived difficulty of completing the course	How easy or hard it is to complete the course and earn the degree	
The prestige of the course		

The research to date has tended to focus on the factors influencing the choice of institution (e.g. Price *et al.*, 2003; Soutar and Turner, 2002; Whitehead *et al.*, 2006) and host country (e.g. Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Shanka *et al.*, 2005). One of the few studies that investigates the choice of course of study as a phenomenon distinct from the choice of institution, is that of Maringe (2006). However, unlike the current research, Maringe's (2006) study focuses on the choice of course of study within one's own country. The factors identified by Maringe (2006) include interest in a given subject, course prestige, performance in a given subject, career opportunities, staff profiles, perception that the course is easy to complete, friends doing the same course, advice from teachers, advice from parents, and advice from careers services. There are a few similarities between the factors discovered in the current research and the factors discovered by Maringe (2006) including course prestige, career opportunities, staff profiles, perception that the course is easy to complete, and friends doing the same course. The core factors discovered in the current research will be discussed in turn.

Future job and career considerations after graduation

This study found that future job and career considerations are an important factor influencing selection of a course abroad. Several research participants noted that they had been in the same position within their industry for several years, and they had gone as far as they could with their technical expertise and did not know how to develop further so they could be promoted. The findings of the current research support Maringe's (2006, p. 472) argument that "career considerations have the greatest impact on students' choice of course of study". Thus, "students choose subjects they intend doing at the university primarily on consideration of future job opportunities and on the basis of their assessed ability in those subjects" (Maringe, 2006, p. 473).

Entry requirements

International HE aspirants and applicants select courses based on their entry requirements in terms of work experience, academic background and IELTS/TOEFL scores. Several participants in this study selected *Courses A* and *B* because the entry requirements for these courses were lower than high ranked MBA courses. In earlier research, entry requirements were identified as a factor influencing the choice of institution (e.g. Briggs, 2006) and also host country (e.g. Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002).

Financial considerations of taking the course

Financial considerations relate to the cost of accommodation, tuition fees and the availability of scholarships and bursaries. Financial considerations have a major influence on selection of a course abroad as most international HE aspirants and applicants and their parents are concerned about the financial implications of studying abroad. In earlier research, the importance of financial considerations as a selection factor was supported by studies focusing on the choice of host country (e.g. Shanka *et al.*, 2005).

The host country

According to Cubillo *et al.* (2006), the decision to acquire a product or a service can be positively influenced by the country offering that product or service. Cubillo *et al.* (2006, p. 109) argue that "due to the prestige image of certain countries in higher education, students tend to believe that higher education offered in these countries is high quality". Therefore, one of the factors considered by international HE aspirants and applicants is the status conferred by studying in these countries (Bourke, 2000; Cubillo *et al.*, 2006). This study found that the host country and city in which the course is offered are major factors influencing selection of a course abroad. It is also influenced by the reputation and popularity of the host country's education system, whether there is the opportunity to stay and work at the host country after graduation, regulations on student visas, existing social links in the host country, for example friends and family members studying there, geographical proximity to the home country, opportunities to visit other countries close to the host country, the culture and society of the host country, familiarity with the culture and customs, familiarity with the work culture, cultural and ethnic diversity, and interest in learning more about the culture of the host country.

The city in which the course is offered

The city in which the course is offered is the other major factor influencing selection of a course abroad. This study found that selection of a course abroad is influenced by the city's transport system, its cultural and ethnic diversity, whether or not the city is a business and education hub, the geographical size of the city, the cost of living, international recognition of the city, social and leisure activities, population, and how vibrant and lively the city is. According to Cubillo *et al.* (2006), the city represents the environment in which the service will be produced and consumed. Cubillo *et al.* (2006) argue that since education is a

complex service jointly produced by multiple different roles and groups, the physical environment is made up of the institution's facilities and the city as a whole. In this way, students' perceptions about the destination city as well as the host country can influence the decision process (Cubillo *et al.*, 2006).

Ranking and accreditation

Another determinant of selection of a course abroad is the ranking of the course in league tables (e.g. the Financial Times) and by accreditation bodies (e.g. AMBA, ABS, AASCB and EQUIS for management courses).

Past and current students

The profiles of past and current students of the course is another factor influencing selection of a course abroad. This study found that selection of a course abroad is influenced by the average age, average working experience, and the diversity of past and current students.

The course structure and curriculum

According to Eggins (1992), course structure has an effect upon the student's experience and therefore impacts on the opportunity for them to develop a range of personal skills and qualities. This study found that selection of a course abroad is influenced by the modules covered, the degree of focus on practice, and the availability of international exchange programmes.

The institution

This study found that selection of a course abroad is influenced by the institution's help and support with job hunting, whether the institution has a multicultural environment, the quality of teaching, teaching methods used at the institution, campus infrastructure, the reputation of the institution, class sizes, and existing social links at the institution, such as friends and family members studying there. In earlier research, the institution was identified as an important factor influencing HE choices (e.g. Bourke, 2000; Gutman and Miaoulis, 2003).

Academic and administrative staff

This study found that the level of support provided by academic and administrative staff and their friendliness and courtesy during the admission process has a direct impact on selection of a course abroad. According to Samuel and Burney (2003), academic staff are in a privileged position to influence classroom atmosphere and to create environments where students learn effectively.

Personal development

Students are not only buying degrees, they are buying the benefits that degree can confer (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003). The current research found that international HE aspirants and applicants also choose to study abroad in order to improve their language skills and their knowledge and understanding of the modules taught. Several participants in this study stated that they wanted to study for an MBA predominantly in order to boost their knowledge and understanding about business and management in general.

Mode of study

The mode of study plays an important role in deciding on which course to study abroad. International HE aspirants and applicants associate the mode of study with learning outcomes from the course, the duration of the course, degree of in-class participation and interaction with academic staff and other students, future job and career prospects, degree of students' focus on studying, and regulations on student visas. Several participants in this study preferred to study a full-time course because the learning outcomes from the full-time course are better than with other study modes, the duration of the full-time course is shorter, it enhances in-class participation and interaction with academic staff and other students, and there is a perception that graduates will be more likely to find a job with a full-time degree. In terms of regulations on student visas, participants indicated that international students have no options but to study full-time and are not permitted to study through other study modes.

Perceived difficulty of completing the course

The findings of this study do not support Maringe's (2006) argument that few courses are selected because they are perceived to be easy. The current research found that some international HE aspirants and applicants select courses that are easier to complete. Several

participants in this research stated that they selected *Courses A* and *B* only because they perceived it was easier for them to complete these courses and earn an MBA.

Course prestige

The study found that the prestige of the course is an important factor influencing selection of a course abroad. Several participants in this study perceived the MBA course to be prestigious and highly valued by employers. In earlier research, it was found that having an MBA is perceived as a passport to senior managerial roles and seen as a means to fast track careers (Baruch and Peiperl, 2000; Kang and Sharma, 2012).

6.3 Syntagmatic course identity as observed through online social networks

The second objective of this study was to define the syntagmatic course identity as observed through OSNs. This objective contributed to an understanding of the popularity of using OSNs as part of the course selection process, the stages at which OSNs are used during the course selection process, OSNs most commonly used during the course selection process, information-gathering methods employed when using OSNs, what information is available on OSNs, information needed most from OSNs during the course selection process, and the benefits and downsides of using OSNs for individuals' course selection decisions. These will each be discussed in turn.

6.3.1 Popularity of using online social networks during the course selection process

The findings of this study suggest that international HE aspirants and applicants show an increased interest in the use of OSNs during the course selection process. Results from the primary data collected from 33 international MBA students reveal that users of OSNs outnumbered non-users. In total, 20 research participants used OSNs and 13 did not. This finding is in agreement with Stagno's (2010) finding that shows majority of HE aspirants and applicants use OSNs and they have at least one OSN profile.

Despite the growing interest in using OSNs, there are still a number of factors that discourage international HE aspirants and applicants from using OSNs, including privacy
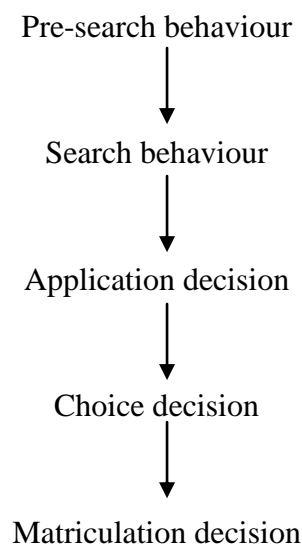
concerns, cultural and personality traits which make them averse to using OSNs, they do not perceive a need for further information, OSNs are not perceived as a valid source of information, they do not know how to use OSNs, they do not have enough time to use OSNs for research due to late admission, and they have already been put in contact with past or current students on the course by the university. In terms of the privacy concerns and cultural and personality traits, this study found that some international HE aspirants and applicants perceive OSNs as a threat to their future job and career prospects because OSNs can expose their personal life to future employers and head-hunters, through personal photos for example. Trust and online privacy are significant areas of concern for critics of OSNs. Several studies revealed that users on OSNs disclose a considerable amount of information, and tend not to be very aware of their privacy options or who can view their profile (e.g. Acquisti and Gross, 2006; Dwyer *et al.*, 2007). This study found that some international HE aspirants and applicants do not use OSNs because they prefer not to contact or to be contacted by people who they have never met. A number of participants in the current research suggested that this is partly related to their cultural backgrounds and their personality traits. Some international HE aspirants and applicants do not use OSNs because they have already acquired all of the information they need from other sources, such as education agencies or official university websites. This study found that some international HE aspirants and applicants prefer to use official sources rather than OSNs because individuals can post and edit messages anonymously on OSNs, and it is therefore difficult to identify senders and their intentions.

It was later discovered that the perceptions of ten out of thirteen research participants who did not use OSNs during the course selection process had changed after studying in the UK. A number of participants indicated that they had learnt more about OSNs while attending IT classes as part of their course, and they now recognize the potential of OSNs as a valuable source of information. Some participants stated that if they had previously appreciated the potential value of OSNs they would have contacted students and obtained information about the course structure and curriculum, assignments, academic and administrative staff, fees, the diversity of past and current students, and job opportunities through OSNs.

6.3.2 Stages at which online social networks are used during the course selection process

The literature in Chapter 3 contributed to a greater understanding of the stages individuals go through when making decisions about HE. Different models have been developed by scholars over recent decades to capture HE aspirants and applicants' complex decision-making processes (e.g. Chapman, 1986; Hanson and Litten, 1982; Jackson, 1982; Kotler and Fox, 1985). Chapman's (1986) model is the best-known theoretical model, and was discussed in section 3.3.1, and is shown below in Figure 67. Chapman's (1986) model is used in the current research to discuss the different stages at which international HE aspirants and applicants use OSNs during the course selection process.

Figure 67 Decision-making process for higher education (Chapman, 1986)

Pre-search behaviour

↓

Search behaviour

↓

Application decision

↓

Choice decision

↓

Matriculation decision

This study found that international HE aspirants and applicants use OSNs at the pre-search behaviour stage, search behaviour stage, application decision stage and choice decision stage. At the pre-search behaviour stage, three research participants (15%) noted that their initial motivations to study came from their friends on OSNs who had already studied abroad. At the search behaviour stage, all twenty research participants (100%) who were users of OSNs claimed that OSNs allowed them to search for and acquire information about different courses. At the application decision stage, three participants (15%) claimed that they used OSNs to focus down onto a few course options that they were interested in and to which they were more likely to be admitted. At the choice decision stage, seven

participants (35%) claimed that OSNs helped them to make their final course selection decisions and select one course of study. The following figure displays a stage by stage comparison of the use of OSNs during the course selection process based on the primary data collected for this work (Figure 68).

Figure 68 Stage by stage comparison of the use of online social networks during the course selection process
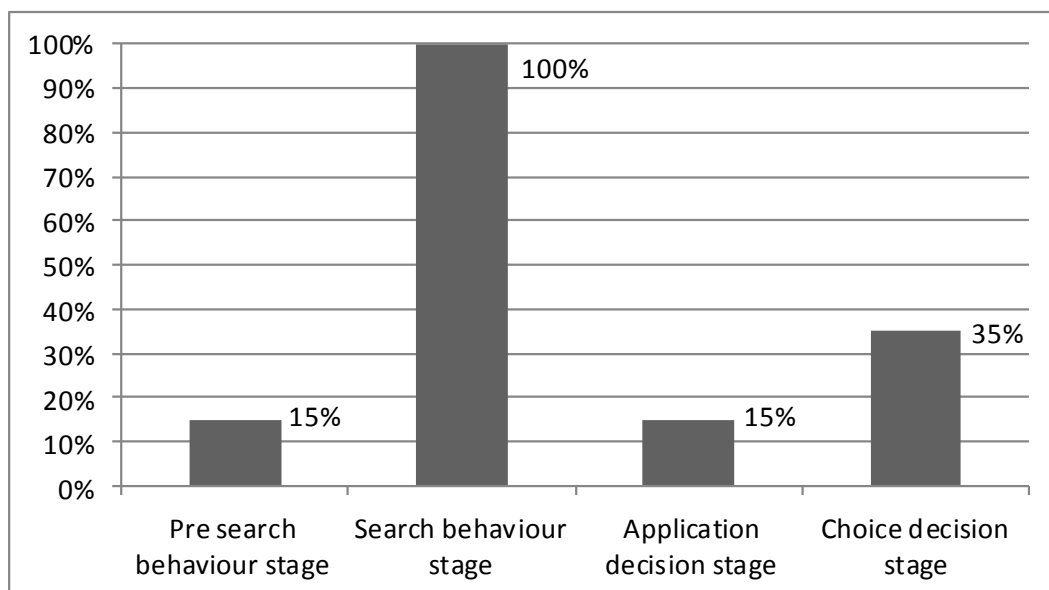
6.3.3 Online social networks most commonly used during the course selection process

This study found a number of OSNs used by international HE aspirants and applicants during the course selection process. They include Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter, Pagalguy, Orkut, PowerApple, and QQ. Pagalguy is an Indian OSN which is mainly managed by Indian students for sharing their experiences of studying abroad. Orkut is a popular OSN in Brazil. PowerApple and QQ are popular OSNs amongst Chinese students. However, the findings of the current research support Stagno's (2010) argument that the most widely used OSNs among HE aspirants and applicants are Facebook and YouTube.

The secondary data presented in Chapter 3 contributed to a greater understanding of OSNs and the discussion of findings in this section. Data from Ignite Social Media revealed that Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube have global reach. Based on a simple design,

broad demographic appeal and a focus on connecting individuals, Facebook has become the largest OSNs globally (Nielsen Report, 2009). Facebook has the greatest reach in the UK out of all other countries (Nielsen Report, 2009) and it is becoming the premier destination for marketers (eMarketer Report, 2010; 2012).

6.3.4 Information-gathering methods using online social networks

This study found that international HE aspirants and applicants can acquire information on OSNs via a variety of means including viewing online profiles, reading comments from other users, viewing photos, watching videos, contacting users directly via private message, and reading responses to questions they have posted publicly. The kind of information international HE aspirants and applicants can acquire via OSNs varies, depending upon the method of information-gathering used. The following section discusses the information available on OSNs using each method.

6.3.5 Information available on online social networks

The findings of the current research suggest that international HE aspirants and applicants frequently rely on the open information resources available on OSNs. OSNs have demonstrated their potential to leverage a vast amount of user-generated content. In earlier research, Krumm *et al.* (2008) find that user-generated content comes from those who voluntarily contribute data. According to Krumm *et al.* (2008), for content suppliers, the process can be rewarding because it allows them to receive recognition for their contributions. For an individual, besides the potential to inform or entertain, the content provides access to data from other individuals. According to Fisher *et al.* (2011), user-generated content is among the largest and fastest growing aspects of OSNs, in part because it is relatively inexpensive to acquire and users do not require significant technical skill to produce content (Fonio *et al.*, 2007; Krumm *et al.*, 2008). Clever *et al.* (2007) argue that contrary to usual expectations about incentives for providing and creating content, users on OSNs are not motivated by remuneration but by a range of interests such as being creative and wanting to entertain others, self-expression, sharing experience and documenting their lives, being part of OSNs to make new friends and staying in touch with old ones, and moreover the lower costs and increased availability of platforms for the creation of user-generated content (i.e. for creating, editing and hosting content) are bringing down the entry barriers (Clever *et al.*, 2007).

In section 6.3.4, it was highlighted that international HE aspirants and applicants can acquire information on OSNs via different methods, and this section discusses the information available on OSNs using each method of information-gathering.

Viewing online profiles

By viewing online profiles, international HE aspirants and applicants can acquire information on the professional backgrounds, contact details, ages and nationalities of past and current students and other HE aspirants and applicants interested in the course.

Reading comments

By reading comments from other users it is possible to acquire information on the student-friendliness of the city, cost of living, social life in the city, university accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city, sports facilities, the city's transport system, student life on and off campus, the diversity of past and current students, class sizes, new buildings and campus construction projects, the reputation of the institution, exams and assignments, the quality of teaching, the level of student support and care at the institution, future job and career prospects, average salary after graduation, the lecturers' academic and professional backgrounds, personalities and attitudes of academic and administrative staff towards students, tuition fees, the course structure and curriculum, past and current students' levels of satisfaction with the course, and information on events and exhibitions.

Viewing photos

Through viewing photos uploaded on OSNs, international HE aspirants and applicants can acquire information about the diversity of past and current students, the graduation ceremony and what it involves, social and leisure activities in the city, and national and international trips organized by the school.

Watching videos

By watching videos uploaded on OSNs it is possible to find information on social and leisure activities in the city, information about the climate and weather of the city, the course structure and curriculum, learning outcomes from the course, exams and

assignments, and university accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city.

Contacting users directly via private messages

By contacting users directly via private messages it is possible to find out about past and current students' personal experiences of the course and of the institution, university accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city, the location of the institution within the city, the teaching and learning style at the institution, facilities and resources, and the admission process (e.g. interview).

Responses received to questions posted publicly

From responses received to questions posted publicly by international HE aspirants and applicants it is possible to acquire information about the course structure and curriculum, university accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city, tuition fees, the quality of teaching, information about the climate and weather of the city, and social and leisure activities in the city. Table 42 presents the information available on OSNs through the different information-gathering methods.

Table 42 Information available on online social networks through the different information-gathering methods

Information-gathering methods using OSNs	Information available on online social networks	
Viewing online profiles	Past and current students	Professional backgrounds
		Contact details
		Ages
		Nationalities
	Other international HE aspirants and applicants interested in the course	Professional backgrounds
		Contact details
		Ages
		Nationalities
Reading comments from other users	The city	Student-friendliness of the city
		The cost of living
		Social life in the city
		Privately rented accommodation options
		Sports facilities
		The city's transport system
		Student life on and off campus

	The institution	University accommodation
		The diversity of past and current students
		Class sizes
		New buildings and campus construction projects
		The reputation of the institution
		Teaching quality
		The level of student support and care at the institution
		Events and exhibitions
	Future job and career prospects	Average salary after graduation
	Academic and administrative staff	Academic and professional backgrounds of staff
		Personalities and attitudes of staff towards students
	Financial considerations of taking the course	Tuition fees
	Past and current students	Levels of satisfaction with the course
	The course structure and curriculum	Learning outcomes from the course
		Exams and assignments
Viewing photos	Past and current students	The diversity of past and current students
	The institution	The graduation ceremony and what it involves
		National and international trips organized by the institution
	The city	Social and leisure activities
Watching videos	The city	Weather information
		Social and leisure activities
	The course structure and curriculum	Learning outcomes from the course
		Exams and assignments
	The institution	University accommodation
Contacting users directly via private messages	Past and current students	Past and current students' personal experiences of the course
		Past and current students' personal experiences with the institution
		Admission process (e.g. interview)
	The institution	University accommodation
		The location of the institution within the city
		The teaching and learning style
		Facilities and resources
	Academic and administrative staff	Academic and professional backgrounds of staff
Reading responses to questions international HE aspirants and applicants have posted publicly	The institution	University accommodation
	The city	Weather information
		Social and leisure activities available
		Privately rented accommodation options
		Teaching quality
	Financial considerations of taking the course	Tuition fees
	The course structure and curriculum	Learning outcomes from the course
		Exams and assignments

6.3.6 Information needed most from online social networks during the course selection process

This study found that the information that is needed most during the course selection process that international HE aspirants and applicants search for on OSNs includes information about student visas and the application process, future job and career prospects after graduation, the institution's help and support with job hunting, university accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city, detailed information about the course structure and curriculum, promotional videos featuring academic staff and the course director talking about the course, past and current students' experiences of the course, details of work placements, photos and videos of students, particularly from their day-to-day course related activities and student life in general, information about food, the climate and weather of the city, information on study trips, and information about lecturers, particularly their academic and professional backgrounds.

The findings of this study suggest that many international HE aspirants and applicants are unclear about the student visa process and the main challenge is to stay updated with the latest changes relating to student visas and the application process. By sharing such information on OSNs, institutions can support international HE aspirants and applicants during the visa application process. Sharing such information also encourages other students to share their ideas and experiences on OSNs.

6.3.7 Benefits of using online social networks in course selection

Promoting courses via OSNs is an excellent way for higher education institutions to broaden their exposure to international HE aspirants and applicants at a much lower cost than traditional student recruitment practices such as participating in education fairs or working with education agencies. Establishing a presence on most commonly used OSNs including Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter, Pagalguy, Orkut, PowerApple, and QQ, can help higher education institutions to target more international HE aspirants and applicants and make their brands of their institutions more visible. The findings presented in this section and section 6.3.8 are aimed at an audience of both researchers and practitioners including education marketers, student recruitment specialists, course directors and policy makers who are seeking a conceptual understanding of the benefits

and downsides of using OSNs during the course selection process from the perspectives of consumers of higher education services. This study found that using OSNs brings a number of benefits to international HE aspirants and applicants, these will each be discussed in turn.

- **OSNs strengthen students' confidence in selecting the course.**

  OSNs help international HE aspirants and applicants to contact past and current students from their home countries and speaking to these people significantly help them to gain more confidence in selecting their preferred course of study. Some international HE aspirants and applicants are not sure about choosing their preferred course until they manage to obtain more information via OSNs and meet other people who are also interested in the same course. The findings of this study suggest that even though international HE aspirants and applicants can obtain a significant amount of information from official sources, they are not fully confident in selecting their preferred course on the basis of this information alone and they use OSNs to enhance their confidence. The findings indicate that some international HE aspirants and applicants do not know much about other people interested in selecting the course, and they also do not know much about the cities. OSNs allow international HE aspirants and applicants to watch videos about the city in which their preferred course is offered and to get to know about students attending the course.

- **The information acquired from OSNs is perceived as less biased and more independent information than official sources.**

  The findings indicate that some international HE aspirants and applicants do not trust the information provided through official sources such as education agencies and the university official website and they want to acquire less biased feedback from past and current students who have already experienced studying the course. A number of research participants claimed that when their education agents suggested studying a particular course they started to develop a feeling of distrust and of a lack of autonomy as they had little or no information about that course. The findings indicate that the information available on OSNs is more credible to international HE aspirants and applicants than the information available through

official sources since the information on OSNs is largely shared by the consumers of higher education services and those who have provisory experienced studying the course.

- **OSNs facilitate gathering of in-depth information about the institution, past and current students and academic and administrative staff.**

  OSNs help international HE aspirants and applicants to gather in-depth information about the institution, students and members of staff. The findings suggest that, by reading comments from other users and watching videos uploaded on OSNs, it is possible to acquire in-depth information about the institution in terms of sports facilities available in the institution, the location of the institution within the city, student accommodation, class sizes, new buildings and campus construction projects, the reputation of the institution, the quality of teaching, and the level of student support and care at the institution. Several participants claimed that through viewing online profiles and photos uploaded on OSNs they acquired information on the professional backgrounds, contact details, ages and diversity of past and current students. OSNs provide a platform for international HE aspirants and applicants to interact with academic and support staff in an informal and friendly manner. Besides obtaining information on the lecturers' academic and professional background, international HE aspirants and applicants have an opportunity to evaluate the friendliness and supportiveness of academic and administrative staff during the course selection process which in turn has a significant impact on their final course selection decisions.

- **OSNs facilitate gathering of in-depth information about other HE aspirants and applicants interested in the course**

  The rise of OSNs has enabled consumers of higher education services to take a more active role during the course selection process and reach, and be reached by, almost everyone and anytime. Besides facilitating interaction with past and current students who have experienced studying the course, OSNs allow international HE aspirants and applicants to interact with other HE aspirants and applicants interested in the same course as them. Several participants claimed that, by viewing online profiles, they acquired information on the nationality, professional background and ages of other HE aspirants and applicants interested in the same

course as them. This is perceived as an advantage by international HE aspirants and applicants as it provides an opportunity for them to assess the quality and popularity of the course based on academic and professional backgrounds of other HE aspirants and applicants. The findings indicate that as HE aspirants and applicants interact with each other, either consciously or subconsciously, their course selection decisions are likely to be influenced by the displayed emotions of one another.

- **OSNs are easy to access and use.**

The majority of OSNs are user-friendly and easy to work with, and international HE aspirants and applicants usually do not need any additional skills in order to use them. The findings suggest that among the most commonly used OSNs during the course selection process, Facebook is perceived as the most user-friendly and Twitter the least. It generally takes less experienced international HE aspirants and applicants longer to get to know the Twitter rules. A number of participants claimed that upon joining the Twitter, they did not know who to follow and how it works really. Some participants stated that Twitter might be more user-friendly but there is definitely that barrier to entry for basic users, which has more to do with the concept than interface or the functionalities. Facebook was the most commonly used OSNs by participants in the current research during the course selection process. Facebook was launched by Mark Zuckerberg, along with his college roommates, in February 2005. Facebook was initially only intended for Harvard students, but eventually expanded to include students at other Boston colleges, Ivy League universities, and Stanford. Facebook is used by international HE aspirants and applicants for a variety of purposes. The findings suggest that the majority of international HE aspirants and applicants use Facebook at the search behaviour stage to search for and acquire information about different courses. International HE aspirants and applicants can acquire information on Facebook via a variety of means including viewing online profiles of past and current students or other HE aspirants and applicants interested in the course, reading comments from other users, viewing photos and videos uploaded on Facebook particularly from past and current students' day-to-day course related activities and student life in general, contacting users directly via private message, and reading responses to questions they have posted publicly.

- **OSNs enable individuals to contact others from their own country or other countries, and provide a platform to compare and contrast different viewpoints.**

  OSNs help international HE aspirants and applicants to contact past and current students from their own countries. The findings suggest that speaking to these people significantly help international HE aspirants and applicants to gain more confidence in selecting their preferred course of study. Studying abroad involves a significant investment of time and money, and it is therefore to be expected that international HE aspirants and applicants want to compare and contrast courses and different viewpoints in order to reduce the uncertainly associated with their decision-making, and to select a course which best suits their needs.

- **OSNs enable faster replies to enquiries in comparison with official sources of information.**

  The findings suggest that OSNs enable faster replies to enquiries in comparison with other contact channels available to international HE aspirants and applicants during the course selection process. International HE aspirants and applicants can simply post their course related enquiries on the wall and other users can directly reply with a comment or send a private message. Data from eDigitalResearch, an online market research company, reveals that OSNs is the quickest and most reliable form of customer contact, with around 80 percent of consumers hearing back from a brand they recently contacted within 12 hours through OSNs platforms (eDigitalResearch, 2013). A separate study by social media analytics company Simply Measured reveals that companies tend to provide faster responses on social media platforms. On Twitter, for example, a consumer query is handled within an average of 5.1 hours. Additionally, 10% of companies take less than one hour to respond via social media (SimplyMeasured, 2013).

- **They allow international HE aspirants and applicants to send direct messages to past and current students and other HE aspirants and applicants interested in the course.**

  Several participants claimed that OSNs allowed them to send direct messages to past and current students and other HE aspirants and applicants interested in the course. Most social media have some sort of messaging system in place since their

inception; however, in order to block spams, some OSNs such as Twitter, restrict their users to only sending direct messages to their friends. The findings suggest that Facebook and LinkedIn are the most popular OSNs among international HE aspirants and applicants in terms of sending direct messages to users during the course selection process. Some participants claimed that LinkedIn is particularly well suited for sending direct messages (or 'InMail', a direct messaging system built into the LinkedIn network). Since LinkedIn is a professionally oriented platform and it is more likely that users will positively respond to direct messages. International HE aspirants and applicants can especially benefit from direct messages through LinkedIn because LinkedIn guarantees an answer to any InMail sent. If the users do not receive a response, they get their messaging credit back. In spite of the popularity of Facebook among international HE aspirants and applicants, Facebook is perceived as a more personal network and users are sometimes put off when international HE aspirants and applicants contact them via the network.

- **They help individuals to gather information on a real time basis.**

  International HE aspirants and applicants demand fast, transparent, and easy to understand information. The findings suggest that during the course selection process international HE aspirants and applicants increasingly use OSNs to obtain information on a real-time basis. Various OSNs provide an opportunity for support and information on a real-time basis. Features such as 'News Feed', 'Status', 'Trending Topics' allow international HE aspirants and applicants to receive information about what users are doing, watching or thinking, and provide opportunities for them to comment and interact based on what is shared.

- **They help individuals to acquire information from the customers' perspective.**

  The findings suggest that an advantage of using OSNs during the course selection process is to gain valuable advice from past and current students who have already experienced studying the course. Several participants claimed that they did not trust information provided through official sources, such as educational agencies and university official websites, and they wanted to acquire less biased feedback from past and current students. Through their suggestions, positive and negative reactions about courses, past and current students on one hand show their interest

about courses and on the other hand present their need which has to be fulfilled. This is not only free advertising that can benefit higher education institutions in terms of their student recruitment activities, but international HE aspirants' and applicants' interests in selecting courses are more likely to increase.

- **OSNs are more interactive than official sources of information. Unlike official sources that only focus on facts and figures about the course, OSNs give individuals the means to interact with each other**

The findings show that OSNs are more interactive than official sources of information. OSNs allow course related information to become viral and International HE aspirants and applicants reading the posts of others are able to engage with them by contributing their views on the topic while sharing it with others. Interactivity has long been considered a key element of new media (Boczkowski, 2002; Chung, 2007; de Sola Pool, 1983; Deuze & Dimoudi, 2002; Jenkins, 2006; McMillan, 2002b). Lievrouw and Livingstone argue that new media "give users the means to generate, seek, and share content selectively, and to interact with other individuals and groups, on a scale that was impractical with traditional mass media" (2002, p. 9). Moreover, researchers have indicated that the expanded possibilities for audience participation are related to increased involvement in the public sphere (Bucy & Gregson, 2001; Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Robinson, 2006;Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005).

- **OSNs help to confirm information provided by official sources.**

The findings suggest that OSNs help international HE aspirants and applicants to evaluate the accuracy of information provided through official sources such as education agencies and university official websites. Several participants stated that they did not trust information provided though official sources and wanted to acquire less biased feedback from past and current students who had already experienced studying the course. A number of participants also claimed that their preferred course of study was not listed in ranking websites, and without OSNs they could not get access to much information about their preferred course of study.

- **OSNs are perceived as less marketing-driven than official sources of information.**

OSNs are usually perceived by international HE aspirants and applicants as a medium that is less marketing driven than official sources of information such as the university official website. Some participants claimed that OSNs allowed them to communicate with 'real' people and hear the 'real' stories of those who had experienced studying the course. A number of participants stated that for them it was difficult to distinguish between neutral information and advertising messages provided through official sources, and they had to use OSNs to help them to confirm information provided through official sources.

The findings in this section support previous research on why individuals use OSNs. Wigand *et al.* (2008) argue that behaviour on the Internet, as in the rest of our lives, is motivated by our desire to fulfil our basic human needs and OSNs have allowed us to satisfy these needs. The findings of the current research indicate that OSNs can satisfy international HE aspirants and applicants' needs in several ways, including the need for autonomy (Kuznetsov, 2006), the need for relatedness or the need to belong (Gangadharbatla, 2010), exhibitionism needs (Fisher *et al.*, 2011), voyeurism needs (Fisher *et al.*, 2011), the need to acquire information (Wigand *et al.*, 2008), and the need for feedback about competence (Wigand *et al.*, 2008).

In terms of the need for autonomy, Kuznetsov (2006) argues that the freedom to make decisions independently attracts many individuals to the arena of OSNs. The current research found that unlike official sources, the independence and the anonymity of OSNs boost individuals' levels of assurance when selecting the course of study. In terms of the need for relatedness or the need to belong, OSNs allow international HE aspirants and applicants not only to find out information about courses, but also to connect through others by linking to their profiles, joining and creating groups, and to send public and private messages to past and current students or other HE aspirants and applicants interested in the course. For decades social and personality psychologists have argued that people have an intrinsic motivation to affiliate and bond with each other (e.g. Maslow, 1968; McClelland, 1987; Murray, 1938). OSNs offer a space in which people can address the need to belong by using services provided that enable conversations and information-gathering, along with the possibility of gaining social approval, expressing opinions, and influencing others (Gangadharbatla, 2010). Therefore, international HE aspirants and

applicants' attitudes and behaviour with regard to OSNs may stem from their need to belong.

In a study conducted by Fisher *et al.* (2011), it has been demonstrated that the architecture and the culture of OSNs promote digital emotional exhibitionism and associated voyeurism, with individuals projecting their (sometimes imagined) identities in the dynamic and free floating digital world and offering opportunities for others to look in and observe them. This study found that OSNs allow past and current students or HE aspirants and applicants to satisfy their exhibitionism and voyeurism needs. In terms of exhibitionism needs, for example, they can upload photos, post comments, and update statuses in the hope that others will view and interact with their displays. In terms of voyeurism needs, they exhibit voyeuristic behaviour when they access user-generated content and engage in social exchanges about it. According to Calvert (2004), motivations for exhibitionism on OSNs include self-validation, the desire to manage one's self-identity, the development of new relationships, and the desire to exert social control.

In terms of the need to acquire information, the need to acquire goods and the need for feedback about competence, Wigand *et al.* (2008) argue that an individual may decide to purchase an item because they believe it will make them fit in with others (in order to better relate to others) or may seek information on the Internet about average scores on a test in order to compare themselves with others (i.e. the need for feedback about competence).

6.3.8 Downsides of using online social networks in course selection

Responses to the interview question 'what are the downsides of using OSNs in comparison with other sources?' included a set of contradictory findings to those reported in section 6.3.7. These contradictory viewpoints help practitioners such as marketing and student recruitment specialists to acknowledge different perspectives on the role of OSNs during course selection process, which in turn help them in designing, implementing and evaluating marketing campaigns on OSNs. The findings suggest that using OSNs brings a number of downsides to international HE aspirants and applicants, these will each be discussed in turn.

- **Difficulty of distinguishing between advertising messages and information that is more neutral.**

  The findings suggest that, in some instances, it is difficult for international HE aspirants and applicants to distinguish between advertising messages and more neutral information available on OSNs. In some occasions, international HE aspirants and applicants become doubtful about the course when they see members of staff post positive comments or upload photos and videos. The findings indicate that the photos, videos and posts uploaded by students are more reliable than those uploaded by members of staff. While many international HE aspirants and applicants click onto advertising messages posted by members of staff that they find interesting or useful, some international HE aspirants and applicants avoid these adverting messages because of their perceived lack of trustworthiness. When international HE aspirants and applicants perceive that there is excessive advertising they will find it difficult to differentiate between advertisements that they are interested in and those that they are not, which may result in disregarding all messages on OSNs. These findings are supported by Johnson and Kaye (1998) who suggest that advertising has less credibility when it is viewed in a medium that is not perceived as being trustworthy. Advertising avoidance due to scepticism is supported by Obermiller, Spangenberg and MacLachlan (2005) who argue that consumers are not motivated to process information when they are sceptical about the message.

- **Users cannot completely rely on all of the information available on OSNs, as some information on OSNs can be biased.**

  The findings suggest that some international HE aspirants and applicants cannot completely rely on all the information available on OSNs and they perceive the information on OSNs potentially unreliable. Some bias remarks are very clear such as adverting messages posted by members of staff about the student friendliness of the institution offering the course or its reputation for quality and expertise of its staff. Several participants claimed that most information shared by members of staff on OSNs is biased and evaluating information for level of bias is an important part of being educated on what international HE aspirants and applicants are reading. Every higher education institution wants to increase student enrolment; as

a result, they often try to attract international students. Such students are attractive because they are required to pay high tuition and are viewed as serious, dedicated students. Some participants claimed that, in order to avoid bias, they contacted several users on OSNs and they used official sources of information such as the University official websites and ranking websites.

- **Personal views expressed on OSNs could negatively influence the course selection decisions of HE aspirants and applicants.**

  The findings suggest that on some occasions personal views expressed on OSNs can negatively influence the course selection decisions of international HE aspirants and applicants. For example, a single unhappy student can negatively influence the course selection decisions of others. The use of OSNs for brand management and student recruitment activities is not without its risks for higher education institutions, and they should accept risks such as handing over a part of their brand's management and reputation to past and current students. If anyone from these groups feels they have been unfairly treated, they can use OSNs to air their grievances in public, which, in turn, can negatively influence the course selection decisions of international HE aspirants and applicants.

- **Unlike official sources, it is difficult to verify the accuracy of information on OSNs.**

  The growing popularity of OSNs has made findings course related information easier and faster for international HE aspirants and applicants. Much of the information on OSNs is valuable; however, OSNs also allow rapid and widespread distribution of false and misleading information. A number of participants stated that international HE aspirants and applicants should carefully consider the source of information they find on OSNs and check that information with the information available through other sources such as university official websites, ranking websites and education agencies. Using multiple sources of information can help international HE aspirants and applicants to decide whether the course related information they find on OSNs is likely to be reliable.

- **In relation to the uncontrollable nature of the spread of information via OSNs, OSNs have the potential to damage the reputation of the course and the institution.**

The development of OSNs as a global, free and open resource is a constant challenge. The dynamic and decentralized nature of OSNs offers new opportunities for communication and free expression as well as new threats. The use of OSNs like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and LinkedIn present multiple challenges to both students and higher education institutions. Even if the institution's course offerings and other matters affecting course selection decisions are excellent, individuals may still post inappropriate comments on OSNs and severely damage the reputation of the course and the institution in general. On some occasions, personal views expressed on OSNs are biased and they can negatively influence the course selection decisions of international HE aspirants and applicants. For example, a single unhappy student can negatively influence the course selection decisions of others. Setting up an OSN account is easy, but managing it is a time consuming investment many higher education institutions hesitate to make. Successful OSNs campaigns count on interaction between the institution and its students. This means higher education institutions have to set aside time each day to post engaging information, ideas and respond to comments their followers leave.

- **Some information provided on OSNs may be incomplete.**

  A number of participants claimed that some information provided on OSNs are basic and do not quite represent a full picture of the course. In particular, international HE aspirants and applicants should be aware that some information may contain errors or may have become out-of-date. A number of participants stated that some information they obtained through OSNs comprised general statements based on past and current students' personal experiences with the course and, in some instances, they had to contact the admission office to confirm some unclear points.

- **It is difficult to distinguish between posts made on OSNs by members of staff and those made by students.**

  The findings suggest that some international HE aspirants and applicants find it difficult to distinguish between posts made on OSNs by members of staff and those made by students, and international HE aspirants and applicants cannot completely rely on all of the information shared by members of staff on OSNs as some information can be biased. The findings indicate that the information provided by

members of staff is perceived as advertising to promote the course and to attract HE aspirants and applicants. Some participants claimed that they did not contact academic and administrative staff via OSNs as they believed information provided by them is only ever positive.

- **Some users are apprehensive about sharing information via OSNs.**

  The findings suggest that some users are apprehensive about sharing information with HE aspirants and applicants via OSNs. Some participants claimed that this could be driven by fear to share information with strangers due to privacy reasons and the fear of sharing course related information and other matters directly affecting course selection decisions of HE aspirants and applicants.

The findings of this study indicate that the freedom to share information on OSNs can, on some occasions, harm the course identity. Research has shown that individuals have many different motivations for spreading messages about organizations, including extreme satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Anderson, 1998; Bowman and Narayandas, 2001; Dichter, 1966; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002; Richins, 1983), commitment to the organization (Dick and Basu, 1994), length of the relationship with the organization (Wangenheim and Bayón, 2004), and novelty of the product or service (Dahl and Moreau, 2007).

A review of the literature in Chapter 3 revealed that co-creating value with customers and exploiting the potential of OSNs for viral spread of messages within an organisational marketing strategy can be risky (e.g. Payne *et al.*, 2011; Wesch, 2008). Organizations have previously relied on models of marketing that focus on creating a tangible product and/or service, and if an organization fails to provide a positive experience for stakeholders there may be negative consequences, such as negative publicity among stakeholders (Wesch, 2008). Consequently, co-creating value with stakeholders (i.e. past and current students or HE aspirants and applicants interested in the course) requires institutions to become more directly involved with them.

6.4 Perceived course identity

The third objective of this study was to compare and contrast the levels of influence of paradigmatic course identity and syntagmatic course identity on the perceived course identity. This objective enabled comparison of the level of influence of OSNs on final

course selection decisions with other sources of information available during the course selection process.

6.4.1 The level of influence of online social networks on final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources

In the current research, seven out of twenty research participants who had used OSNs during the course selection process indicated that OSNs had a strong influence on their final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources. Some research participants had a good idea of what to expect in terms of other students attending the course and about the institution because of the information they had acquired through OSNs. Even though it is possible to acquire a considerable amount of information from sources such as education fairs, official university websites, ranking websites and education agencies, a number of research participants were not fully confident about finalizing their course selection decisions on the basis of this information alone and used OSNs to enhance their confidence. It was also discovered that not all of the research participants trusted the information provided through official sources of information and wanted to acquire information directly from students who had experienced the course.

Seven out of twenty research participants who had used OSNs during the course selection process indicated that OSNs had a moderate influence on their final course selection decisions. Prior using OSNs some research participants had a reasonable idea of which were their preferred courses because they had already obtained some information from sources such as ranking websites, friends and family, university websites, education agencies and education fairs, and wanted to be more certain that they have made the right decision and to verify the information they already had with that available on OSNs. For example, prior to using OSNs, participants had already decided to study *Course B* but they did not know much about the other students taking *Course B*, or the city in which *Course B* was offered. OSNs such as Facebook and YouTube allowed them to watch videos about the city in which *Course B* was offered and to get to know the other students on the course.

Four participants out of twenty who had used OSNs during the course selection process noted that OSNs had a low level of influence on their final course selection decisions, which were mainly based on information they had already collected from official sources

such as university and ranking websites. Some research participants stated that the information available on OSNs could be as biased as information from official sources.

Finally, two participants out of twenty who had used OSNs during the course selection process stated that OSNs had no influence on their final course selection decisions. They stated that they would never make a life changing decision, such as the choice of a course abroad, based on the information provided on OSNs. A number of participants believe that each person has a unique query and a unique response, therefore other people's personal experiences of the course cannot meet their information needs. Because this kind of information is a significant driver for use of OSNs they believe that it is not advisable to use OSNs to make life changing decisions. Figure 69 presents levels of influence of OSNs on research participants' final course selection decisions.

Figure 69 Levels of influence of online social networks on research participants' final course selection decisions.
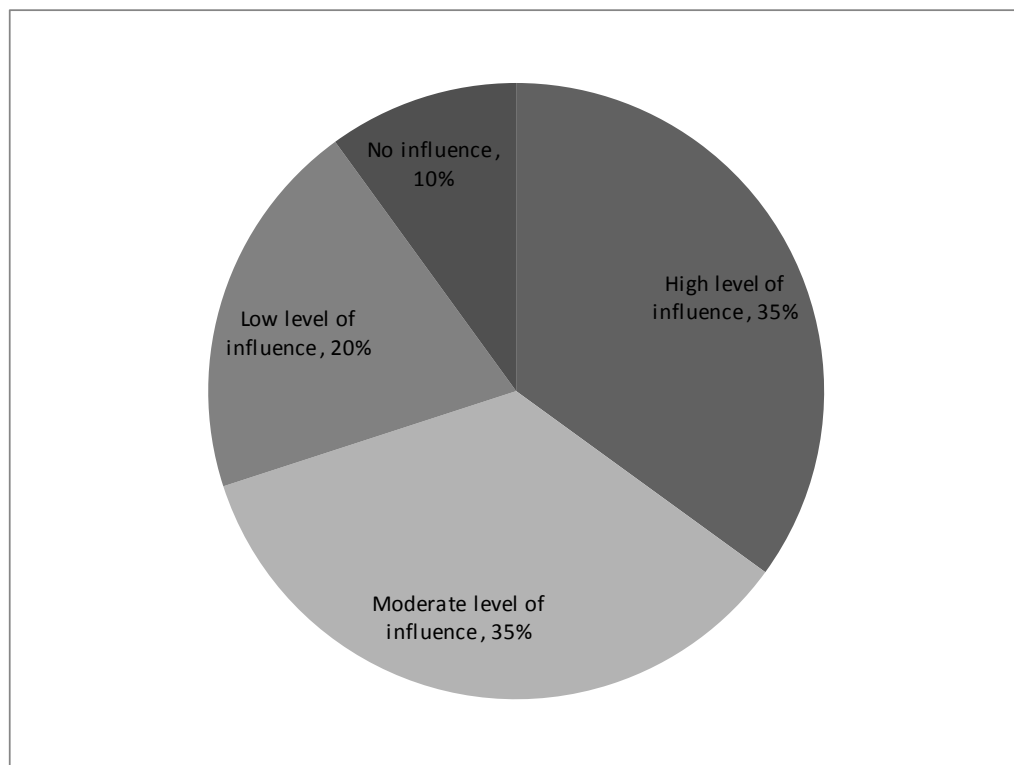
A comparison of information available on OSNs (Table 42) and core factors influencing selection of a course abroad (Table 41) revealed that almost all of the information that the participants obtained through OSNs fits within seven categories of factor that influence

239

selection of a course abroad. They include future job and career prospects after graduation, financial considerations of taking the course, past and current students, the course structure and curriculum, the institution, the city, and academic and administrative staff. There are several possible explanations for why the information available on OSNs is less relevant to other categories of factor which include entry requirements, the host country, ranking and accreditation, course prestige, personal development, and the mode of study. In Chapter 3, it was highlighted that the decision to enter HE may be regarded as a multi-stage process involving a series of decisions finally resulting in enrolment in a HE course. Existing studies confirm that the effect of the host country's image, personal motivations and course prestige are significant motivating factors at the pre-search behaviour stage (Cubillo *et al.*, 2006; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Shanka *et al.*, 2005) that begins with recognizing the possible need for and desirability of acquiring a HE (Chapman, 1986). The current research has shown that OSNs are largely used at the search behaviour and choice decision stages (Figure 68). The findings indicate that at the search behaviour and choice decision stages, international HE aspirants and applicants use OSNs to acquire information on future job and career prospects after graduation, financial considerations of taking the course, past and current students, the course structure and curriculum, the institution, the city, and academic and administrative staff. A review of the literature in Chapter 3 revealed that factors such as the quality of the institution, financial issues, campus life, and the city in which the course is offered are key factors at the search behavior stage (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000; Choy *et al.*, 1998; Hossler *et al.*, 1999). Factors related to the choice phase are both economic and sociological in nature (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000; Choy *et al.*, 1998; Hossler *et al.*, 1999). Economic factors are implicated in the process whereby an individual estimates the costs and benefits of attending a course, whereas the sociological factors relate to individuals' socioeconomic characteristics and academic preparation, both of which may predispose an individual to enroll at a specific type of institution (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000). A possible explanation for why the information available on OSNs is less relevant to finding out about entry requirements, ranking and accreditation, and the mode of study is that international HE aspirants and applicants can easily obtain these kinds of information from official sources such as ranking websites and official university websites, and as such there is no need to use OSNs to acquire or verify such information.

The findings of this study suggest that OSNs could be a highly influential source of information during the course selection process if universities invest in a presence on

popular OSNs and provide more information about courses, however until now OSNs have not been utilised effectively by all institutions. These findings are similar to those reported by Constantinides and Stagno (2011) and Stagno (2010). Stagno (2010) perceives this as a failure in universities' marketing strategies. Having a presence on OSNs is not a marketing strategy in itself; instead institutions should develop a clear marketing strategy for OSNs, making decisions on the basis of well-defined goals (Stagno, 2011). Constantinides and Stagno (2011) argue that one possible explanation for the low importance of OSNs as a source of influence in comparison with other sources could be the lack of relevant content. This is due to the poor engagement with such tools as public relations and direct marketing tools by universities. Creating and implementing effective OSN marketing campaigns and staying connected with users are major challenges for HE institutions (Constantinides and Stagno, 2011). This requires the allocation of resources, and an organizational structure and consistent policy that ensure the content is kept up to date and that make use of customer input.

6.4.2 A comparative view on the significance of online and offline sources on course selection decisions

The findings suggest that online sources have significantly influenced the information search behaviour of international HE aspirants and applicants during the course selection process. Many international HE aspirants and applicants regularly consult online sources for information on courses such as information on past and current students, the city, the institution, future job and career prospects, academic and administrative staff, financial considerations of taking the course, the course structure and curriculum, amongst others. Online sources such as OSNs have several distinctive features that directly influence course selection decisions of international HE aspirants and applicants. Online sources can improve the course selection process by enabling international HE aspirants and applicants to sort and group information (e.g. sort courses by tuition fees and the city, categorise courses by rankings), and by enabling them to access peer opinions and recommendations. Therefore, it is likely that, for the same international HE aspirant and applicant, online and offline decisions take place under different sets of information. The findings suggest that, potentially, there is more course related information available online. With more available information, international HE aspirants and applicants are likely to devote more cognitive effort to their course selection processes because they can see the potential for realizing the

additional benefits (e.g. more informed or improved course choices) through additional effort. Additional information, combined possibly with greater effort, will improve the quality of course selection decisions, which in turn, is likely to result in an experience that delivers higher satisfaction when the choices made online than offline.

Online sources such OSNs could also offer alter expectations of international HE aspirants and applicants about the course, if they have more information about the course beforehand (including visual information), they know what type of service they will get and are less likely to be surprised or angry at the service received, than when they make a course choice offline. For example, the findings show that through viewing photos uploaded on OSNs, international HE aspirants and applicants can acquire information about the diversity of past and current students, the graduation ceremony and what it involves, social and leisure activities in the city, and national and international trips organized by the school. By watching videos uploaded on OSNs it is possible to find information on social and leisure activities in the city, information about the climate and weather of the city, the course structure and curriculum, learning outcomes from the course, exams and assignments, and university accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city.

The online environment could also decrease satisfaction because of the perceived lack of information trustworthiness. The growing popularity of online sources has made findings course related information easier and faster for international HE aspirants and applicants. Much of the information on online sources is valuable; however, some online sources such as OSNs also allow rapid and widespread distribution of false and misleading information. The findings suggest that some international HE aspirants and applicants cannot completely rely on all the information available online and they perceive the online information potentially unreliable. Some bias remarks are very clear such as adverting messages posted by members of staff on OSNs. The findings suggest that on some occasions personal views expressed on online sources can negatively influence the course selection decisions of international HE aspirants and applicants. For example, a single unhappy student can negatively influence the course selection decisions of others.

With the ongoing emphasis on maximizing student recruitment campaigns by using online tools, higher education marketers and student recruitment specialists should still remember that some international HE aspirants and applicants prefer to use offline sources of information. This study has shown that international HE aspirants and applicants use numerous offline and online sources during the course selection process (Table 43) and OSNs is only one of them. Higher education institutions must carefully blend both online and offline interactions to effectively communicate with international HE aspirants and applicants.

Table 43 online and offline sources of information available during the course selection process

Online sources of information	Offline sources of information
• Online social networks	• Education fairs
• Electronic course brochures	• Education agencies
• Information obtained via email exchanges with the admissions office	• Family members and friends who have previously studied at the same institution
• Information obtained via email exchanges with a course administrator or course director	• Family members and friends who have previously taken the same course
• Ranking websites (e.g. the Financial Times and Forbes)	• Friends in their home country who are also interested in studying abroad
• The official university website	• Leaflets received in the post
• The UK Border Agency website	• Telephone conversations with the admissions office
• E-journals (e.g. Guardian and Newsweek)	• Newspaper advertisements
• The British Council website	• Family members and friends living in the UK
• The British Consulate website	• Telephone conversations with a course administrator or course director
• Accreditation bodies' websites (e.g. AMBA for management courses)	
• The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) website	
• The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) website	

Online communication is definitely becoming more integrated with our daily activities, but it has not replaced international HE aspirants' and applicants' needs for face-to-face interaction. The challenge then for higher education institutions is to find the appropriate

balance between online and offline channels. Chances are international HE aspirants and applicants will use multiple offline and online channels and switch in and out of those channels several times through their course selection processes. For example, international HE aspirants and applicants might see newspaper advertisements that reference OSNs channel for those with a specific interest or need. They then spend time using OSNs to contact past and current students who have already experienced studying the course and build connections with other international HE aspirants and applicants interested in the course. From there, international HE aspirants and applicants may take course related information and recommendations and finalise their course preferences.

6.5 Summary

This chapter has presented and discussed the findings that emerged from the data analysis and how the findings relate to the literature. This has allowed the current work to contribute new insights. The chapter has provided researchers, and particularly practitioners, with insights into how the choice of course of study abroad interrelates with participation in OSNs. This chapter was structured according to the research objectives. The first section discussed the paradigmatic course identity. The second section was concerned with the syntagmatic course identity as observed through OSNs. The third and final section discussed the levels of influence of paradigmatic course identity and syntagmatic course identity on the perceived course identity. The next chapter will present the conclusions of the study.

Chapter 7

Conclusions

7.1 Introduction

This thesis examined how the choice of course of study abroad interrelates with participation in OSNs. This study was justified by the need to examine the choice of course of study as a phenomenon distinct from the choices of institution and host country (Maringe, 2006), and the need to understand the role of OSNs in the process of decision-making about HE from the perspectives of the consumers of HE services (Nyangau and Bado, 2012). The previous chapter was concerned with answering the research question for this study, and presented and discussed the findings that emerged from the data analysis and how these related to the literature. The findings add to our understanding of how the choice of course of study abroad interrelates with participation in OSNs, which will serve as a basis for future studies. The findings suggest several courses of action for education marketers and policy makers who wish to invest in their student recruitment strategies.

This chapter presents the conclusions of the study, as highlighted in Figure 70. The structure of this chapter is as follows: the research aims and objectives are revisited in section 7.2. This is followed by a full semiotic examination of choice of course of study and participation in OSNs in section 7.3 and the main overall findings from the research in section 7.4. This study contributes to knowledge and practice in a number of ways, and these are discussed in section 7.5. Section 7.6 is concerned with the principles used to guide the conduct and evaluation of this research. The research method is then appraised is section 7.7. The final section of the chapter reflects on the limitations of this work. Bearing in mind these limitations, suggestions are made for future work.

Figure 70 Conceptual framework: Chapter 7
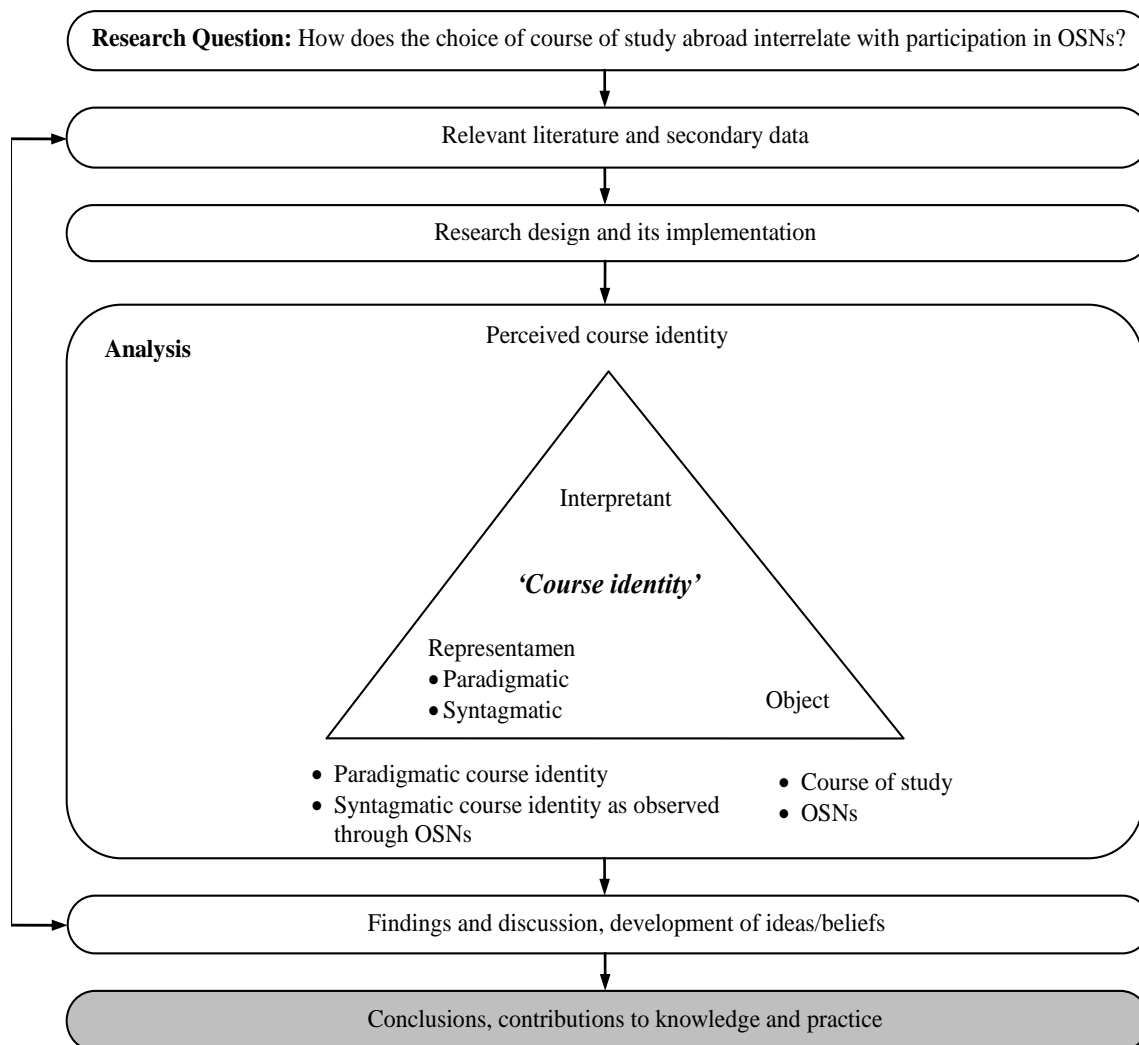
7.2 Revisiting research aims and objectives

The primary aim of this study was to explain how the choice of course of study abroad interrelates with participation in OSNs, and the secondary aim was to provide an application of semiotics to research in choice and decision making in HE and IS research. Based on semiotic concepts, this research introduced the concept of 'course identity' as a semiotic sign system, and utilised the semiotic model of course identity as a theoretical framework to study and analyse the interrelationship between selection of a course abroad and participation in OSNs, and also to guide the fieldwork and subsequent analysis. The objectives were to: (1) define the paradigmatic course identity, (2) define the syntagmatic

course identity as observed through OSNs, and (3) compare and contrast the levels of influence of paradigmatic course identity and syntagmatic course identity on the perceived course identity.

7.3 Semiotics applied to the choice of course of study and participation in online social networks

Semiotics has always been implicit within informatic domains including computing science and IS (Clarke, 2007). The realisation of the semiotic nature of IS has been apparent in the earliest work in semiotics applied to the informatic domains, for example see Langefors (1973). Langefors (1973) proposed the research project that developed into the Information Systems work & Analysis of Change (ISAC) methodology which had as its definition of elementary information the triadic sign developed by Peirce. Since the mid-1990s there has been a broad application of semiotic concepts within IS (Clarke, 2007). These include, for example, Human Computer Interaction (e.g. Buarque, 1997; Merkle, 2002), text analysis and computational text semiotics (e.g. Rieger, 1981), hypersystems and hypermedia (e.g. Andersen, 1997; Clarke, 2001b), agent-based systems and associated methodologies (e.g. Chong and Liu, 2001) and system evolution (e.g. Clarke, 1996).

Semiotics has been considered by a number of IS academics to be necessary advance in IS theory (e.g. Clarke, 2007; Land, 1985; Rzevski, 1985; Tully, 1985). Along with psychology and sociology, semiotics is considered to be a foundation discipline for IS by the International Federation for Information Processing (IFIP) (Falkenberg *et al.*, 1998). The IFIP FRISCO report justifies the IS area scientifically by placing it in a more general context, comprising semiotics, system science, organisation science, as well as computer science. Thereby, the concepts of the IS area become "rooted" or "anchored", that is, related to concepts of these other areas (Falkenberg *et al.*, 1998). "Semiotics examines the processes of production and consumption of meanings in organisations, institutions and society, and their underlying mechanisms" (Clarke, 2007, p. 75) by means of what Pap (1991, p. 47) refers to as a "…systematic analysis of patterns of interpretive behaviour". Although often acknowledged, "meaning is central to any definition of an Information System" (Clarke, 2007, p. 75). While the concept of meaning and meaning making is difficult to define, semiotic theory can assist by emphasising the distinctions between

'information', 'meaning' and 'sense' (Nöth, 1995). Eco (1976) provides a broad definition of semiotics as the study of all cultural processes as processes of communication. According to Clarke (2007), cultural processes are interpreted to include organisational contexts and processes thereby providing a link between systems and organisations.

There is considerable debate about what constitute the core criteria that define semiotics, and this appears to discourage many IS scholars and practitioners from applying semiotic approaches, even though some acknowledge its potential relevance (Clarke, 1992). The fundamental nature of semiotics, its multiple theoretical traditions and its diverse applications may account for the slow infusion of semiotics into the IS discipline (Clarke, 1992). However, "the transdisciplinary nature of semiotics makes it eminently suitable for the study of IS precisely because it [semiotics] is concerned with examining the ways meanings are made" (Clarke, 1992, p. 67). The current research contributes to the field of IS by illustrating how semiotics can be utilised to analyse the make-up and the interrelationships which constitute a given phenomenon. Based on Saussurean and Peircean sign theories, this study introduced the concept of 'course identity' as a semiotic sign system. The semiotic model of course identity developed in Chapter 2 was used as a theoretical framework to analyse the interrelationships between selection of a course abroad and participation in OSNs, and also to guide the fieldwork and data analysis. The theoretical framework presented in Figure 7 strengthened the current research in a number ways as follows (the details of which are given in section 2.7): to contextualise the study within the current body of knowledge, to formulate the research objectives, the choice of research paradigm and research methods, to guide the fieldwork, and to structure and analyse the interview data.

The concept of course identity, as a whole, was perceived as a semiotic sign system. Guided by the research question, the semiosis of course identity led to two representamens and one interpretant. Based on Chandler's (2007, p. 84) argument that "the value of a sign is determined by both its paradigmatic and its syntagmatic relations", and that "syntagms and paradigms provide a structural context within which sign makes sense", it was argued that the value of the signifying element of the course identity is determined by both its paradigmatic and its syntagmatic relations. The 'paradigmatic course identity' is the overall identity of the course communicated in the form of the 'representamen' to

international HE aspirants and applicants through a variety of resources from which international HE aspirants and applicants generate certain perceptions, or 'interpretants', about the course. Guided by the research question and research objectives, the first aim of the analysis was to discover the representamens within codes that constitute the paradigmatic course identity. In total, nine representamens were identified within code PAI.FSI, twelve within code PAI.SIA, thirteen within code PAI.SIA.ONL and fourteen within code PAI.CF. Table 44 presents the representamens within codes that constitute the paradigmatic course identity.

Table 2 The 'representamens' within codes that constitute the paradigmatic course identity

Paradigmatic course identity						
Categories	**Codes**	**Representamens**	**Categories**	**Codes**	**Representamens**	
Initial sources of information	PAI.FSI	• Family members who have previously studied at the same institution[R1] • Friends who have previously studied at the same institution[R2] • Family members and friends who have previously taken the same course[R3] • Friends who have previously taken the same course[R4] • Education agencies[R5] • Newspaper advertisements[R6] • Friends living in the host country[R7] • Ranking websites[R8] • Education fairs[R9]	Online sources of information	PAI.SIA.ONL	• Online Social Networks[R1] • Electronic course brochures[R2] • Information obtained via email exchanges with the admissions office[R3] • Information obtained via email exchanges with a course administrator or course director[R4] • Ranking websites (e.g. the Financial Times and Forbes) [R5] • The official university website[R6] • Accreditation bodies' websites (e.g. AMBA for management courses) [R7] • E-journals (e.g. Guardian and Newsweek) [R8] • The British Council website[R9] • The British Consulate website[R10] • The UK Border Agency website[R11] • The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) website[R12] • The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) website[R13]	
Offline sources of information	PAI.SIA	• Family members who have previously studied at the same institution[R1] • Friends who have previously studied at the same institution[R2] • Family members who have previously taken the same course[R3] • Friends who have previously taken the same course[R4] • Education fairs[R5] • Education agencies[R6] • Newspaper advertisements[R7] • Leaflets received in the post[R8] • Telephone conversations with the admissions office[R9] • Telephone conversations with a course administrator or course director[R10] • Family members and friends living in the UK[R11] • Friends in their home country who are also interested in studying abroad[R12]	Core factors influencing selection of a course abroad	PAI.CF	• Future job and career prospects after graduation[R1] • Entry requirements[R2] • Financial considerations of taking the course[R3] • The host country[R4] • The city[R5] • Ranking and accreditation[R6] • Past and current students[R7] • The course structure and curriculum[R8] • The institution[R9] • Academic and administrative staff[R10] • Personal development[R11] • The mode of study[R12] • Perceived difficulty of completing the course[R13] Course prestige[R14]	

The value of the course identity, as a semiotic sign system, is determined by both its paradigmatic and its syntagmatic relations. Saussure's concepts of paradigm and syntagm enabled a distinction to be made between representamens within OSNs and representamens within other sources of information available during the course selection process. Chandler (2007) proposes that a syntagm is an orderly combination of interacting representamens within the same paradigm and that a paradigm is a set of associated representamens which are all members of some deifying category. Semiotic syntagms differ depending on the context in which they are initiated. Syntagmatic relations in the context of the current research refer to the orderly combination of interacting representamens within OSNs only (i.e. the same paradigm). The 'syntagmatic course identity' is the identity of the course communicated in the form of the 'representamen' to international HE aspirants and applicants only through OSNs, from which international HE aspirants and applicants generate certain perceptions, or 'interpretants', about the course. The second aim of the analysis was to discover the 'representamens' within codes that constitute the syntagmatic course identity. In total, seven representamens were identified within code SYI.PDU.RNU, two within code SYI.PDU.SCP, four within code SYI.PUS.S, eight within code SYI.PUS.MCU, six within code SYI.PUS.IGM, forty within code SYI.PUS.IAO, thirteen within code SYI.PUS.INM, thirteen within code SYI.PUS.BOC, and eight within code SYI.PUS.DOC. Table 45 presents the representamens within codes that constitute the syntagmatic course identity

Table 3 The 'representamens' within codes that constitute the syntagmatic course identity

Syntagmatic course identity						
Categories	Codes	Representamens	Categories	Codes	Representamens	
Reasons for not using OSNs	SYI.PDU.RNU	• Privacy concerns[R1] • Cultural and personality traits which make international HE aspirants and applicants averse to using OSNs[R2] • International HE aspirants and applicants do not perceive a need for further information[R3] • OSNs are not perceived as a valid source of information[R4] • International HE aspirants and applicants do not know how to use OSNs[R5] • International HE aspirants and applicants do not have enough time to use OSNs for research due to late admission[R6] • International HE aspirants and applicants have already been put in contact with past or current students on the course by the university[R7]	Information-gathering methods using OSNs	SYI.PUS.IGM	• Viewing online profiles[R1] • Reading comments from other users[R2] • Viewing photos[R3] • Watching videos[R4] • Contacting users directly via private message[R5] • Reading responses to questions they have posted publicly[R6]	
Subsequent changes in perceptions about OSNs	SYI.PDU.SCP	• Changed perceptions of OSNs [R1] • Perceptions did not change [R2]	Information available on OSNs	SYI.PUS.IAO	• Academic and professional backgrounds of staff[R1] • Admission process (e.g. interview) [R2] • Ages of other international HE aspirants and applicants interested in the course[R3] • Ages of past and current students[R4] • Average salary after graduation[R5] • Class sizes[R6] • Contact details of other international HE aspirants and applicants interested in the course[R7] • Contact details of past and current students[R8] • Events and exhibitions[R9] • Exams and assignments[R10] • Facilities and resources[R11] • Learning outcomes from the course[R12] • National and international trips organized by the institution[R13] • Nationalities of other international HE aspirants and applicants interested in the course[R14] • Nationalities of past and current students[R15] • New buildings and campus construction projects[R16] • Past and current students' levels of satisfaction with the course[R17] • Past and current students' personal experiences of the course[R18] • Past and current students' personal experiences with the institution[R19] • Personalities and attitudes of staff towards students[R20] • Privately rented accommodation options[R21] • Professional backgrounds of other international HE aspirants and applicants interested in the course[R22] • List continued on next page	
Stages at which OSNs are used during the course selection process	SYI.PUS.S	• Pre-search behaviour stage[R1] • Search behaviour stage[R2] • Application decision stage[R3] • Choice decision stage[R4]				
OSNs most commonly used during the course selection process	SYI.PUS.MCU	• Facebook[R1] • LinkedIn[R2] • YouTube[R3] • Twitter[R4] • Pagalguy[R5] • Orkut[R6] • PowerApple[R7] • QQ[R8]				

Syntagmatic course identity					
Categories	Codes	Representamens	Categories	Codes	Representamens
Information available on OSNs	SYI.PUS.IAO	• Professional backgrounds of past and current students[R23] • Social and leisure activities available in the city[R24] • Social life in the city[R25] • Sports facilities available in the city[R26] • Student life on and off campus[R27] • Student-friendliness of the city[R28] • Teaching quality[R29] • The city's transport system[R30] • The cost of living[R31] • The diversity of past and current students[R32] • The graduation ceremony and what it involves[R33] • The level of student support and care at the institution[R34] • The location of the institution within the city[R35] • The reputation of the institution[R36] • The teaching and learning style[R37] • Tuition fees[R38] • University accommodation[R39] • Weather information[R40]	Information needed most from OSNs during the course selection process	SYI.PUS.INM	• Photos and videos of students, particularly from their day-to-day course related activities and student life in general[R9] • Information about food[R10] • The climate and weather of the city[R11] • Information on study trips[R12] • Information about lecturers, particularly their academic and professional backgrounds[R13]
Information needed most from OSNs during the course selection process	SYI.PUS.INM	• Information about student visas and the application process[R1] • Future job and career prospects after graduation[R2] • The institution's help and support with job hunting[R3] • University accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city[R4] • Detailed information about the course structure and curriculum[R5] • Promotional videos featuring academic staff and the course director talking about the course[R6] • Past and current students' experiences of the course[R7] • Details of work placements[R8]	Benefits of using OSNs for individuals' course selection decisions	SYI.PUS.BOC	• OSNs strengthen students' confidence in selecting the course[R1] • The information acquired from OSNs is perceived as less biased and more independent information than official sources[R2] • OSNs facilitate gathering of in-depth information about the institution, past and current students and academic and administrative staff[R3] • OSNs facilitate gathering of in-depth information about other HE aspirants and applicants interested in the course[R4] • OSNs are easy to access and use[R5] • OSNs enable individuals to contact others from their own country or other countries, and provide a platform to compare and contrast different viewpoints[R6] • They enable faster replies to enquiries in comparison with official sources of information[R7] • They allow international HE aspirants and applicants to send direct messages to past and current students and other HE aspirants and applicants interested in the course[R8] • They help individuals to gather information on a real time basis[R9] • They help individuals to acquire information from the customers' perspective[R10] • OSNs are more interactive than official sources of information. Unlike official sources that only focus on facts and figures about the course, OSNs give individuals the means to interact with each other[R11] • OSNs help to confirm information provided by official sources[R12] • OSNs are perceived as less marketing-driven than official sources of information[R13]

		Syntagmatic course identity
Categories	Codes	Representamens
Downsides of using OSNs for individuals' course selection decisions	SYI.PUS.DOC	• Difficulty of distinguishing between advertising messages and information that is more neutral[R1] • Users cannot completely rely on all of the information available on OSNs, as some information on OSNs can be biased [R2] • Personal views expressed on OSNs could negatively influence the course selection decisions of HE aspirants and applicants[R3] • Unlike official sources, it is difficult to verify the accuracy of information on OSNs[R4] • In relation to the uncontrollable nature of the spread of information via OSNs, OSNs have the potential to damage the reputation of the course and the institution[R5] • Some information provided on OSNs may be incomplete[R6] • It is difficult to distinguish between posts made on OSNs by members of staff and those made by students[R7] • Some users are apprehensive about sharing information via OSNs[R8]

The 'interpretant' is the course identity perceived by international HE aspirants and applicants. It is this identity of the course that influences final course selection decisions of international HE aspirants and applicants. I referred to this identity as 'perceived course identity'. Just as with the representamen/object relation, Peirce believes the representamen/interpretant relation to be one in which the representamen determines the interpretant (Atkin, 2010). Therefore, the perceived course identity is determined by the paradigmatic course identity and the syntagmatic course identity (i.e. the two signifying elements of course identity). The 'interpretant' is the meaning that an international HE aspirants and applicants actually ascribes the course of study (the object) as a consequence of associating it with the 'paradigmatic course identity' and the 'syntagmatic course identity' (the signifying elements of the course identity). For example, a course of study (the object) might be presented as a highly ranked course on the Financial Times or OSNs, which leads to perception of the course as being prestigious, which in turn has a significant impact on international HE aspirants' and applicants' final course selection decisions. According to North (2012), a sign can influence perception of an object because it activates the person's broader knowledge of the world, which in turns becomes associated with the object.

The third aim of the analysis was to discover the 'interpretants' within codes that constitute the perceived course identity. Responses to the interview question 'how influential were OSNs on your final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources?' included comments that suggest there are four 'interpretants' within code PEI.LIF. The following table presents the 'interpretants' that constitute the perceived course identity.

Table 46 The 'interpretants' within codes that constitute the perceived course identity

Perceived course identity		
Categories	Codes	Interpretants (or 'I' as abbreviation of the interpretant)
The level of influence of OSNs on final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources of information.	PEI.LIF	• OSNs have strong influence on final course selection decisions[R1] • OSNs have a moderate influence on final course selection decisions[R2] • OSNs have a low level of influence on final course selection decisions[R3] • OSNs have no influence on final course selection decisions[R4]

7.4 The main overall findings from the research

The findings that emerged as a result were presented and discussed in relation to the literature in Chapter 6. In this section, however, I wish to draw out the main overall findings from the research. This section is structured according to the research objectives.

7.4.1 Paradigmatic course identity

This objective enabled identification of the sources of information that international HE aspirants and applicants use during the course selection process, and to discover whether OSNs are among these sources. This objective also helped to reveal the core factors influencing selection of a course abroad. Results from this objective contributed to the discussion of findings, particularly discussions surrounding the significance of online and offline sources on course selection decisions and the level of influence of OSNs on final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources.

This study has shown that international HE aspirants and applicants use a number of online and offline sources during the course selection process, and that OSNs are among the online sources used. The majority of international HE aspirants and applicants find out about a course of study for the first time through friends and family members who have previously studied the course or studied at the institution, education agencies, newspaper advertisements, friends and family members living in the host country, ranking websites, and education fairs. This study found that OSNs are not usually among the initial sources of information used during the course selection process.

There are several core factors that influence selection of a course abroad. The core factors identified in this research fall into 14 broad categories including future job and career prospects after graduation, entry requirements, financial considerations of taking the course, the host country, the city, ranking and accreditation, past and current students, the course structure and curriculum, the institution, academic and administrative staff, personal development, the mode of study, perceived difficulty of completing the course, and course prestige. The research to date has tended to focus on the factors influencing the choice of institution (e.g. Price *et al.*, 2003; Soutar and Turner, 2002; Whitehead *et al.*, 2006) and host country (e.g. Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Shanka *et al.*, 2005). One of the few studies

that investigates the choice of course of study as a phenomenon distinct from the choice of institution, is that of Maringe (2006). However, unlike the current research, Maringe's (2006) study focuses on the choice of course of study within one's own country. There are a few similarities between the factors discovered in the current research and the factors discovered by Maringe (2006) including course prestige, career opportunities, staff profiles, perception that the course is easy to complete, and friends on the same course.

7.4.2 Syntagmatic course identity as observed through online social networks

This objective contributed to an understanding of the popularity of using OSNs as part of the course selection process, the stages at which OSNs are used during the course selection process, OSNs most commonly used during the course selection process, information-gathering methods employed when using OSNs, what information is available on OSNs, information needed most from OSNs during the course selection process, and the benefits and downsides of using OSNs for individuals' course selection decisions.

This study found that international HE aspirants and applicants show an increased interest in the use of OSNs during the course selection process. Despite the growing interest in using OSNs, there are still a number of factors that discourage international HE aspirants and applicants from using OSNs, including privacy concerns, cultural and personality traits which make them averse to using OSNs, they do not perceive a need for further information, OSNs are not perceived as a valid source of information, they do not know how to use OSNs, they do not have enough time to use OSNs for research due to late admission, and they have already been put in contact with past or current students on the course by the university.

Chapman's (1986) model was used in the current research to discuss the different stages at which international HE aspirants and applicants use OSNs during the course selection process. This study found that the majority of international HE aspirants and applicants use OSNs at the 'search behaviour stage' to help them to search for and acquire information about different courses. This is followed by the 'pre-search behaviour stage', 'application stage' and 'choice decision stage'.

There are several popular OSNs used by international HE aspirants and applicants during the course selection process, including Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter, Pagalguy, Orkut, PowerApple, and QQ. This study found that international HE aspirants and applicants can acquire information on OSNs via a range of means, including viewing online profiles, reading comments from other users, viewing photos, watching videos, contacting users directly via private message, and reading responses to questions they have posted publicly. The kind of information international HE aspirants and applicants can acquire via OSNs varies, depending upon the method of information-gathering used. The kind of information available via each method of information-gathering was discussed in detail in section 6.3.5.

This study found that the information that is needed most during the course selection process that international HE aspirants and applicants search for on OSNs includes information about student visas and the application process, future job and career prospects after graduation, the institution's help and support with job hunting, university accommodation and privately rented accommodation available in the city, detailed information about the course structure and curriculum, promotional videos featuring academic staff and the course director talking about the course, past and current students' experiences of the course, detailed information on work placements, photos and videos of students, particularly from their day-to-day course related activities and student life in general, information about food, the climate and weather of the city, information on study trips, and information about lecturers, particularly their academic and professional backgrounds.

A comparison of information available on OSNs and core factors influencing selection of a course abroad revealed that almost all of the information that the research participants obtained through OSNs fits within seven categories of factor that influence selection of a course abroad. They include future job and career prospects after graduation, financial considerations of taking the course, past and current students, the course structure and curriculum, the institution, the city, and academic and administrative staff. There are several possible explanations for why the information available on OSNs is less relevant to other categories of factor which include entry requirements, the host country, ranking and accreditation, course prestige, personal development, and the mode of study. This study

found that OSNs are largely used at the search behaviour and choice decision stages. Existing studies confirm that the effect of the host country's image, personal motivations and course prestige are significant motivating factors at the pre-search behaviour stage (Cubillo *et al.*, 2006; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Shanka *et al.*, 2005) that begins with recognition of possible need for and desirability of acquiring a HE (Chapman, 1986). A possible explanation for why the information available on OSNs is less relevant to finding out about entry requirements, ranking and accreditation, and mode of study is that international HE aspirants and applicants can easily obtain these kinds of information from official sources such as ranking websites and official university websites, and as such there is no need to use OSNs to acquire or verify such information.

This study found that using OSNs can provide a number of benefits for international HE aspirants and applicants, including building students' confidence in selecting the course; they are less biased and a more credible source of information than official sources; they facilitate gathering of in-depth information about the institution, students and members of staff; they facilitate acquisition of information on the academic and professional backgrounds of past and current students and other HE aspirants and applicants interested in the course; they facilitate acquisition of information on the nationality and the age range of past and current students and other HE aspirants and applicants interested in the course; they are easy to access and use; they enable individuals to contact others from their own country or other countries; they provide a platform to compare and contrast different viewpoints; they enable faster replies to enquiries in comparison with official sources of information; they allow individuals to send direct messages to past and current students and other HE aspirants and applicants interested in the course; they help them to gather information on a real time basis; they help individuals to acquire information from the customers' perspective; they are more interactive than official sources of information, unlike official sources which only focus on facts and figures about the course, OSNs provide richer and more in-depth information; they help to confirm information provided through official sources; and finally, they are perceived as less marketing-driven than official sources of information.

On the other hand, this study found that using OSNs has several downsides for international HE aspirants and applicants including, the difficulty of distinguishing

between advertising messages and more neutral information; some information available on OSNs being unreliable and tending to be biased; the potential negative influence of personal views expressed on OSNs on course selection decisions; the difficulty of verifying the accuracy of information; the freedom to share information on OSNs, which can damage the reputation of the course and institution; the incompleteness of some information available on OSNs; the difficulty of distinguishing between posts by members of staff and those made by students; and finally, the apprehensiveness of some students about sharing information on OSNs.

7.4.3 Perceived course identity

This objective supported comparison of the level of influence of OSNs on final course selection decisions with other sources of information available during the course selection process.

In this research the majority of participants who had used OSNs during the course selection process indicated that OSNs had moderate to strong level of influence on their final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources. Even though it is possible to acquire a considerable amount of information from sources such as education fairs, official university websites, ranking websites and education agencies, nevertheless a number of research participants were not fully confident about finalizing their course selection decisions on the basis of this information alone and used OSNs to enhance their confidence. It was also discovered that not all of the research participants trusted the information provided through official sources and wanted to acquire information directly from students who had experienced the course.

In contrast, a few research participants indicated that OSNs had little to no influence on their final course selection decisions, and that their final course selection decisions were primarily based on information they had collected from official sources such as university and ranking websites. Some research participants also stated that the information available on OSNs could be biased in the same way as information from official sources.

The findings of this research suggest that OSNs could be a highly influential source of information if universities invest in a presence on popular OSNs and provide more

information about courses. These findings are similar to those reported by Constantinides and Stagno (2011) and Stagno (2010). Constantinides and Stagno (2011) argue that one possible explanation for the low importance of OSNs as a source of influence could be the lack of relevant content, which Stagno (2010) perceives as a failure in universities' marketing strategy.

7.5 Contributions to knowledge and practice

This study contributes to knowledge and practice in a number of ways. For each contribution, the structure will address the four dimensions of contribution: new insight, audience, literature and use, as proposed by Walsham (2006):

> *"...construct our piece to aim at a particular type of audience or audiences. In addition, we can ask to what literature we are aiming to contribute. Thirdly, what does the piece of written work claim to offer that is new to the audience and the literature? Finally, how should others use the work?"*

<div align="right">(Walsham, 2006, p. 326)</div>

- This study contributes to the field of IS in two areas. First, despite a great deal of research on when and why IS are used (e.g. Burton-Jones and Grange, 2012; Venkatesh *et al.*, 2003), very little research has examined the role of modern IS, such as OSNs, in choice and decision making in higher education. The intersection of OSNs and choice and decision making in higher education represents a promising space for future IS research. This contribution is aimed towards researchers and practitioners in the area of IS, and it contributes to the literature relating to use of OSNs in the context of choice and decision-making in HE. The key issues identified in this work can guide the development of OSN campaigns for courses in terms of selecting popular OSNs, identifying the target audience and determining the type of information to share via OSNs. Second, calls have been made for the use of semiotics to better understand IS (e.g. Clarke, 1992, 2001a). This study illustrates how semiotics can be utilised to analyse the make-up and the interrelationships which constitute a given phenomenon. Semiotics can be used in the analysis of the development, use and application of IS in organizational, institutional and social contexts and their influence in these contexts. This contribution is particularly aimed towards IS researchers and it contributes to the literature relating to theories in IS.

- This study contributes to the field of choice and decision making in HE in three areas. First, research in choice and decision making in HE has focused largely on the choice of institution (e.g. Price et al., 2003; Soutar and Turner, 2002; Whitehead et al., 2006) and host country (e.g. Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Shanka et al., 2005), and less attention has been paid to the choice of course of study as a separate phenomenon. This study focuses on the choice of course of study as a phenomenon distinct from the choices of institution and host country. This contribution is aimed at an audience of both researchers and practitioners, such as education marketers and policy makers, who are seeking a conceptual understanding of course selection as a phenomenon distinct from the choices of institution and host country. This also contributes to the literature relating to choice and decision-making in HE and, in a broader context, the marketing of HE. The key issues identified in this work can guide the branding, strategic marketing and competitive positioning of courses. Second, research in HE to date has tended to focus on the application of semiotics in the area of teaching and learning (e.g. Bayne, 2008; Cunningham, 1984; Groisman et al., 1991; Gwyn-Paquette, 2001; Lemke, 1984, 1989; Presmeg, 1998; Ryan., 2011), and less attention has been paid to use of semiotics in the area of choice and decision-making. This study illustrates how semiotics can be utilised to analyse the make-up and the interrelationships which constitute a given phenomenon. This contribution is particularly aimed towards researchers and it contributes to the literature relating to theories in choice and decision-making research in HE. For example, semiotics can be used to analyse the popularity of educational services among consumers of HE services. This can help institutions in designing, branding and positioning their educational services. Third, the introduction of the concept of '*course identity*' is a direct contribution to knowledge, while also providing a theoretical framework which enables practitioners and scholars to acknowledge the externally oriented aspects of the course in the same way that teaching and learning represent the internal practices and theorisation of the course. The concept of '*course identity*' was used as a theoretical framework in this research to study and analyse the interrelationship between selection of a course abroad and participation in OSNs, and it guided the design of the method and the subsequent analysis of the interview data, amongst

others. This contribution is aimed at an audience of both researchers and practitioners, such as education marketers and policy makers, and it also contributes to the literature relating to theories of choice and decision-making in HE. The use of the concept of 'course identity' strengthened the current research in a number ways as follows, the details of which are given in section 2.7:

- o To contextualize the study within the current body of knowledge

- o To formulate the research objectives

- o The choice of research paradigm and research methods

- o To guide the fieldwork

- o To structure and analyse the interview transcripts

- This study also contributes to the field of semiotics. This study utilised Peircean semiotics in conjunction with Saussurean semiotics to analyse the phenomenon under study. Utilising Peircean Semiotics in conjunction with Saussurean semiotics in studying semiotic sign systems is a direct contribution to knowledge. In his dyadic model of the sign, Saussure emphasizes that meaning arises from the differences between signifiers (or 'representamen' in the Peircean tradition); these differences are of two kinds: syntagmatic and paradigmatic. A syntagm is an orderly combination of interacting signifiers within the same paradigm, which forms a meaningful whole, and syntagmatic relations are the various ways in which constituent units within the same paradigm may be structurally related to each other (Chandler, 2007). A paradigm is a set of associated signifiers which are all members of some defining category, but in which each signifier is significantly different (Chandler, 2007). In the current research, it is argued that the value of Peirce's representamen is determined by both its paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations. Syntagms and paradigms provide a structural context within which Peirce's representamen makes sense. This contribution is aimed at an audience of researchers in the field of social semiotics, particularly researchers interested in studying Peircean and Saussurean semiotic traditions. This also contributes to the literature relating to studies in semiotic

theory and methodology. The triadic model of the sign developed in Chapter 2 can be used to analyse semiotic sign systems in a wide range of disciplines.

7.6 Evaluation of the use of the interpretive paradigm

In order to assess the quality of interpretive research, there are a number of different methods that can be adopted (Klein and Myers 1999; Miles and Huberman 1994). The evaluative principles for interpretive field studies proposed by Klein and Myers (1999) are widely accepted in the fields of IS (Walsham 2006) and educational research (Fisher, 2006; Santonen, 2009), and are therefore used in this work. The principles, presented in Table 47, were also used to guide the progress of the study as I wanted to be aware of the evaluation criteria whilst conducting the study.

Table 47 Principles for interpretive field research (Klein and Myers 199)

The fundamental principle of the hermeneutic circle
The principle of contextualization
The principle of interaction between the researchers and the subjects
The principle of abstraction and generalization
The principle of dialogical reasoning
The principle of multiple interpretations
The principle of suspicion

In addition to the evaluation principles for interpretive research stated above, a number of other steps were taken during the research process. The content of this work was the subject of a process of continues evaluation, as evidenced through a number of conference presentations and publications (see dissemination activities, Appendix 1)

7.6.1 The fundamental principle of the hermeneutic circle

This principle states that all human understanding is achieved by iterating between considering the interdependent meanings of parts and the whole that they form (Klein and Myers, 1999). This principle of human understanding is fundamental to all the other evaluation principles for interpretive research (Klein and Myers, 1999). The 'whole' in the current research refers to "explaining how the choice of course of study abroad interrelates with participation in OSNs". Consequently, it is possible to develop a better understanding

of this phenomenon through its parts and their interrelationships. Therefore, to understand this phenomenon more thoroughly, its constituents and their interrelationships were drawn out of the literature and the semiotic model of course identity developed in Chapter 2. The fieldwork further focussed upon gathering data about the elements of the semiotic model of course identity. It is, however, important to note that it is difficult to understand the totality of 'the whole' in both theory and practice. The problem therefore, was determining when there was 'a whole' that was useful and when data collection and theory development could therefore stop. Data collection was stopped when it became clear that nothing of great significance was being added to as a result of additional data, that is, when theoretical saturation had been reached (Eisenhardt, 1989; Strauss and Corbin, 1994).

7.6.2 Contextualization

This principle requires critical reflection on the social and historical background of the research setting, so that the intended audience can understand how the situation under investigation emerged (Klein and Myers, 1999). By enabling the reader to situate the study, contextualization offers the opportunity for improved understanding of the phenomenon and how it emerged. The interrelationship between choice of course of study abroad and participation in OSNs, as the central concern of this study, can be seen as a phenomenon which needs to be understood contextually. From this point of view, the entire study is perceived as concerned jointly with the process and its context. In order to improve the accuracy of the reporting of the context, various sources of data were used to avoid misunderstandings, whether this was through cross-checking of interviews or documentation. I identified documentation of relevance to the study by some manual process. These documents contributed to a greater understanding of OSNs and the three cases selected for the study.

7.6.3 Interaction between the researchers and the subjects

This principle requires critical reflection on how the research materials (or "data") were socially constructed through the interaction between the researchers and participants (Klein and Myers, 1999). This principle required me to explicitly consider my role and those of the participating international students in the development of the research. The case study method used in the current research clearly implies that there should be interaction between the researcher and research participants in developing the outcomes. The

interaction between the researcher and the subjects (international students) was discussed as part of research design and implementation in Chapter 4. This focused on the data types and sources. In terms of the field study the aim was for data collection, reporting and analysis to be as faithful as possible to the various viewpoints of participating international students. This was achieved by cross checking interpretations with participants with the aim of developing shared meanings for the data in question. The findings of this study therefore comprise my own interpretations and those of the international students who were involved in the study. However, as different people interpret data in different ways, this leads to multiple realities (Kaplan and Duchon, 1988). This study aimed to communicate and emphasis these diverse realities in order to explain how the choice of course of study abroad interrelates with participation in OSNs.

7.6.4 Abstraction and generalization

This principle involves relating the idiographic details revealed by data interpretation through application of the "fundamental hermeneutic principle" and the "principle of contextualization" to general theoretical concepts that describe the nature of human understanding and social action (Klein and Myers, 1999). Abstraction and generalization are not prerequisites for interpretive studies, however, the current research nevertheless offers opportunities to relate ideas to multiple situations, although it is important to point out that these are not characterised as universal laws as associated with positivist studies (Denzin, 2001). Instead, the current research offers generalizations that relate to the development of concepts and theory which may be intersubjectively understood to be useful (Walsham, 1995b). These generalizations relate to the further development of our understanding of selection of a course abroad, as a phenomenon distinct from the choices of institution and host country, and also our understanding of the role of OSNs in the course selection decisions of international HE aspirants and applicants. These generalizations also relate to the application of semiotics and the concept of course identity in choice and decision-making research in HE and IS research. The contribution in this respect was outlined in Section 7.5.
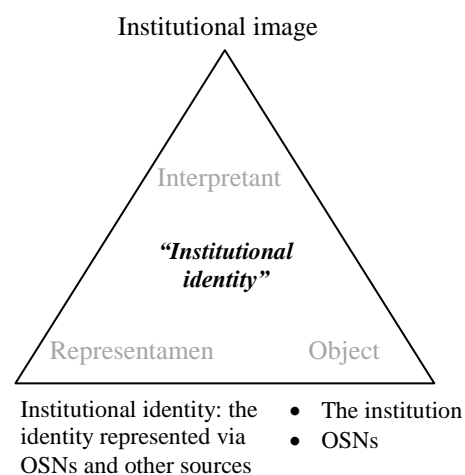
7.6.5 The Principle of Dialogical Reasoning

This principle requires sensitivity to possible contradictions between the theoretical preconceptions guiding the research design and actual findings ("the story which the data

tell") with subsequent cycles of revision (Klein and Myers, 1999). First, it is suggested that the researcher should make the philosophical assumptions of the research as transparent as possible and relate the strengths and weaknesses of these assumptions to the work at hand. In Chapter 4, the philosophical (interpretivist) underpinnings of this study are clearly articulated and critiqued. Moreover, the challenges of the interpretivist approach are referred to in this evaluation section, for example in relation to the idea that it is the researcher who has the final say about what aspects of the data are interpreted and written down, and how. This principle also suggests that the research findings may not support the researcher's initial theoretical preconceptions and that the researcher must be aware of the need to revise these as necessary. There are four key points at which theoretical preconceptions were altered as a result of the study:

1. This study initially intended to explain how the choice of HE institution abroad interrelates with participation in OSNs. Christensen and Askegaard's (2001) semiotic framework was used to study this phenomenon through analysing the parts and interrelationships which comprise it. In 2001, Christensen and Askegaard published a paper in which they adopted Peirce's triadic model of object, representamen and interpretant, to demonstrate the advantages of theoretical consistency and to stimulate self-reflection among scholars who use the notions of "corporate identity" and "corporate image" (see Christensen and Askegaard' (2001) semiotic framework, Appendix 8). The semiotic model that was initially developed for the current research consisted of two objects, one representamen, and one interpretant (Figure 71). The "institutional identity" was defined as both the sign (i.e. as a whole) and the representamen (i.e. the signifying element).

Figure 71 Semiotic model of institutional identity - Iteration 1

Institutional image

Interpretant

"Institutional identity"

Representamen   Object

Institutional identity: the   • The institution
identity represented via   • OSNs
OSNs and other sources

This was the source of the first contradiction between the loose theoretical propositions about the choice of institution abroad and the shift towards choice of course of study abroad. It was during the literature review process that my position shifted. A review of the literature reveals that research to date has tended to focus on the choice of institution and host country, and less attention has been paid to the choice of course of study as a distinct phenomenon. Therefore, the interrelationship between the choice of course of study abroad and participation in OSNs represented a potentially more relevant and theoretically rewarding area of investigation than the interrelationship between the choice of institution abroad and participation in OSNs.

2. This shift in position led to a review of various theories of choice and decision-making in HE. Based on Peirce's triadic model of sign, the concept of course identity was introduced as a semiotic sign system. The semiotic model of course identity initially consisted of two objects, one representamen, and one interpretant as shown in Figure 72.

Figure 72 The preliminary semiotic model of course identity - Iteration 2
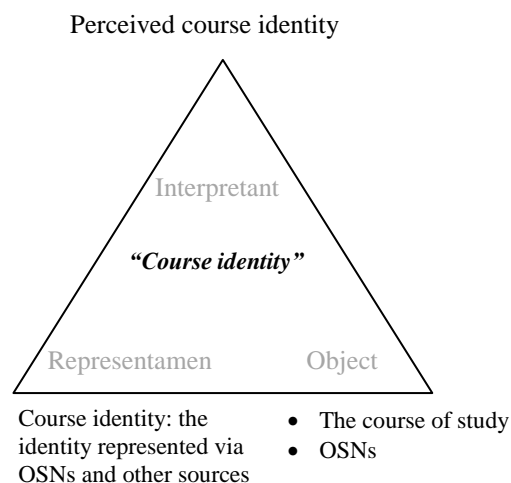
The course identity was initially defined as both the sign and the representamen. The course identity as the representamen was defined as the identity of the course

represented to international HE aspirants and applicants via OSNs and other sources of information available to them during the course selection process.

3. The semiotic model of course identity was revised further before the fieldwork commenced. There was a need to compare and contrast the identity of the course represented via OSNs with the identity represented via other sources of information available during the course selection process. This resulted in further theoretical revision. Based on the Saussurean concepts of paradigm and syntagm, the representamen in Peirce's triadic model was divided into paradigmatic representamen and syntagmatic representamen. As a result, course identity, as the representamen, was divided into paradigmatic course identity and syntagmatic course identity as observed through OSNs. The ideal semiotic model of course identity was therefore developed in light of this in Section 2.6, and is shown in Figure 73.

Figure 73 The ideal semiotic model of course identity - Iteration 3

Perceived course identity

Interpretant

'Course identity'

Representamen
- Paradigmatic
- Syntagmatic

Object

- Paradigmatic course identity
- Syntagmatic course identity as observed through OSNs
- Course of study
- OSNs
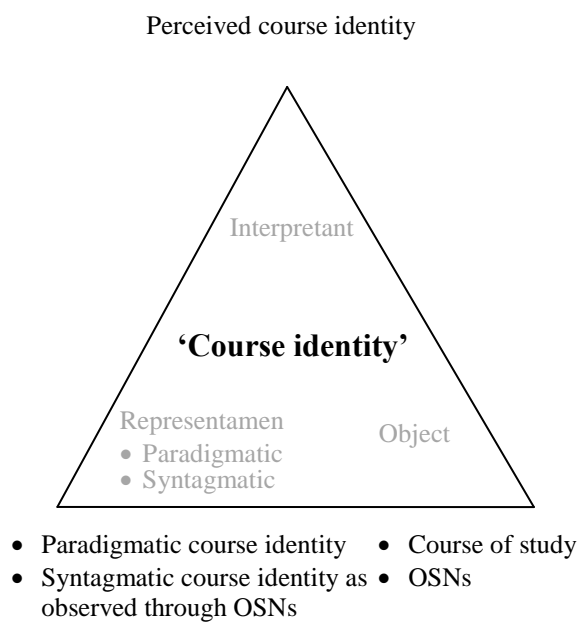
4. Finally, as the study progressed and theoretical preconceptions were further refined, a final conceptual framework was produced (see section 2.8).

7.6.6 The principle of multiple interpretations

This principle requires sensitivity to potential differences in interpretations among participants, which are typically expressed in multiple narratives of the same sequence of events under study (Klein and Myers, 1999). This principle requires the researcher to examine the influences of social context upon actions. This entails seeking out multiple viewpoints and the reasons why individuals hold particular viewpoints. The whole basis of this thesis is the idea that there are multiple realities that may influence the interrelationship between choice of course of study abroad and OSNs, making this one of the most important principles for this research. Consequently, a broad range of viewpoints have been highlighted in the literature review, and more particularly in the fieldwork. The three cases selected for this study (i.e. *Course A, Course B*, and *Course* C) illustrate differing viewpoints across the 33 international students who participated. Where differences in perspective have arisen, the aim has been to find out about, and tell the story of why this may have been, or was perceived to have been the case.

7.6.7 The principle of suspicion

This principle requires sensitivity to possible "biases" and systematic "distortions" in the narratives collected from participants (Klein and Myers, 1999), and I was aware of potential bias while collecting empirical data. I was aware of the potential that participants might respond in the way that they expected I wanted them to respond. Sensitivity to such bias was maintained throughout all aspects of the research, including the selection of cases, the acknowledgment of differing participant viewpoints, the use of multiple data collection sources and the multiple stages of data analysis. Potential sources of bias were also minimised by ensuring that research participants were independent and by informing the participants that their responses would remain confidential. In the following section the research method will be appraised.

7.7 Appropriate methodological choice

There is consensus that methodological choices should be commensurate with the research aims and objectives (Silverman, 2011). Therefore, an interpretive case study method was undertaken in order to better explain how the choice of course of study abroad interrelates with participation in OSNs. A survey, for example, would not have been able to provide rich insights into the research participants' complex course selection decisions and their

experiences with OSNs. Prior to deciding on an interpretive case study method other research methods were considered and found to be ill fitting for reasons discussed in section 4.3. In this section, I wish to draw out the main points.

The other research methods considered as possible alternatives were ethnography and action research. Ethnography, unlike experiments and surveys, is generally used in the interpretive paradigm, and to some extent in the critical paradigm (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Ethnographies usually require the researcher to spend a long period of time in the field and they emphasize detailed, observational evidence (Myers, 1997; Yin, 1994). The longer duration required by the ethnographic method was not my primary concern to use this method as for most people the best time to do ethnographic research is during one's doctoral studies (Myers, 2008). The predominant method of data collection in ethnography is participant observation, where an ethnographer aims to become a part of the group being studied and records observations without conducting any analysis (Myers, 2008). The ethnographic method did not fit with the current research since in-depth interviews were chosen as the primary means of data collection because they would enable me to explore participants' complex course selection decisions and to collect detailed information on their experiences with OSNs.

Action research was an attractive method at first. Lewin (1946) emphasizes change and the investigation of change as key contributions of action research (Hendry, 1996). Action research has been criticized for its lack of methodological rigor (Cohen and Manion, 1980) and its lack of distinction from consulting (Avison, 1993). Several authors argue that action research should use the case-study method in order to enhance the acceptability of action research as a research method (e.g. Blichfeldt and Andersen, 2006; Cunningham, 1993). Action research did not fit the current research, since it lacks emphasis on the researcher's ability to control processes and outcomes as well as the freedom to select problems.

As with case studies, it is difficult to generalise results from action research and ethnography. However, case researchers do not experience this difficulty to the same extent, because case researchers have opportunities to select the contexts that facilitate analytical generalization i.e. generation of abstractions based on empirical material

(Blichfeldt and Andersen, 2006). A further difference between case study, action research and ethnographic methods relates to the researcher's stance on how and to whom they disseminate their results. Action researchers and ethnographic researchers have an obligation to feed data back to the participant community with which they collaborated to identify and solve a practical problem (Blichfeldt and Andersen, 2006). In privileging a particular target audience, action researchers and ethnographic researchers may neglect the other relevant audiences (Blichfeldt and Andersen, 2006). Although case study researchers may disseminate their findings to those who participated in the study, findings are primarily targeted at the academic community (Blichfeldt and Andersen, 2006). Action research and ethnography are fundamentally about telling a story as it happens. Blichfeldt and Andersen (2006) argues that apart from storytelling, case study researchers also try to enrich and expand our understanding of phenomena beyond the level at which individual stories are constructed.

7.8   Limitations and future research opportunities

The previous section was concerned with the principles used to guide the conduct and evaluation of the study. It is believed that this was an acceptable interpretive case study that conforms to the expectations derived from the evaluative principles for interpretive research. I will now focus on the limitations of the current study and potential future research opportunities that emerge from the research.

7.8.1   Limitations

This thesis subscribes to interpretive beliefs and the principles of case study research, therefore, it will not be able to withstand positivist scrutiny. Each data collection technique used in the current study has associated limitations. The use of interviews and documentation, and the focus on three specific MBA courses offered in the United Kingdom again limit the findings. This work, like other interpretive arguments, is based on my perceptions as a researcher and is therefore, according to my epistemological viewpoint, subjective, which could imply a severe limitation to the work. However, the author does not accept that this need be the case. If the findings that grow out of a detailed analysis of three UK MBA courses can equally be applied to any HE course in the UK, and potentially beyond, then subjective work need not be considered limited in its applicability.

7.8.2 Suggestions for future work

This thesis provides a number of insights in relation to the interrelationship between selection of a course abroad and participation in OSNs. Furthermore, it provides a number of insights with regard to the application of semiotics in choice and decision-making research in HE and IS research. However, a number of issues remain that could benefit from further academic study which was outside the scope of this research. It is impossible to draw out all aspects worthy of further investigation, instead those considered particularly interesting, relevant and significant are listed below:

- The data collection process in this study used an exploratory approach that aimed to collect detailed information on the research participants' complex course selection decisions and on their experiences with OSNs. A potential follow up study would be to devise a positivist student survey that would be able to analyse the weightings of core factors that influence selection of a course abroad or of the information that is needed most during the course selection process that international HE aspirants and applicants search for on OSNs.

- This study sought to focus on the interrelationship between the selection of a course abroad and participation in OSNs. The findings of this research provide direction for researchers interested in studying how course selection within one's own country interrelates with participation in OSNs.

- The data for the current research were collected from three MBA courses offered in the United Kingdom. Thus, future research could include other courses at different levels, offered in other popular study destinations.

- More research is needed on the application of semiotics in choice and decision-making research in HE and IS research. Future research could include the sign theories of linguists such as Vološinov, Bühler, Jakobson, Langer, Levi-Strauss, Bateson, Morris and Barthes.

- Greater understanding is needed with respect to the concept of course identity as a semiotic sign system. The semiosis of course identity can lead to different elements of the sign (i.e. object, representamen and interpretant) depending on the context. The

flexibility of course identity as a semiotic sign system makes it a powerful logical concept that can be utilised by researchers in different contexts.

- Issues related to using Peircean semiotics in conjunction with Saussurean semiotics in studying semiotic sign systems are a further area for exploration. This study argued that the value of Peirce's representamen is determined by both its paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations, and Saussure's concepts of paradigm and syntagm provide a structural context within which Peirce's representamen makes sense. Future research could explore this possibility in greater detail.

7.9   Final conclusions

The primary aim of this study has been to explain how the choice of course of study abroad interrelates with participation in OSNs, and the secondary aim has been to provide an application of semiotics to research in choice and decision making in HE and IS research. In order to answer the research question and meet the aims of the research, three research objectives were formulated. The objectives derived from a review of relevant literature and semiotic concepts. The semiotic model of course identity was used as a theoretical framework to study and analyse the interrelationship between selection of a course abroad and participation in OSNs, and also to guide the fieldwork and subsequent analysis.

The first objective of this study was to define the paradigmatic course identity. This objective enabled identification of the sources of information that international HE aspirants and applicants use during the course selection process, and to discover whether OSNs are among these sources. This objective also helped to reveal the core factors influencing selection of a course abroad. Results from this objective contributed to the discussion of findings, particularly discussions surrounding the significance of online and offline sources on course selection decisions and the level of influence of OSNs on final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources. The second objective was to define the syntagmatic course identity as observed through OSNs. This objective contributed to an understanding of the popularity of using OSNs as part of the course selection process, the stages at which OSNs are used during the course selection process, OSNs most commonly used during the course selection process, information-gathering

methods employed when using OSNs, what information is available on OSNs, information needed most from OSNs during the course selection process, and the benefits and downsides of using OSNs for individuals' course selection decisions. The third objective of this study was to compare and contrast the levels of influence of paradigmatic course identity and syntagmatic course identity on the perceived course identity. This objective enabled comparison of the level of influence of OSNs on final course selection decisions with other sources of information available during the course selection process.

The findings of this study add to our understanding of how the choice of course of study abroad interrelates with participation in OSNs and serve as a basis for future studies. The findings suggest several courses of action for education marketers and policy makers who wish to invest in their student recruitment strategies. The findings suggest that OSNs could be an influential source of information for international HE aspirants and applicants selecting a course abroad if universities invest in a presence on popular OSNs and provide more information about their courses. Having a presence on OSNs is not a marketing strategy in itself; instead, institutions need to develop a clear marketing strategy for OSNs based on clearly defined goals. This requires the allocation of resources, and an organizational structure and consistent policy that ensure the content is kept up to date and that make use of customer input.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Dissemination activities

According to Hearn and White (2009) "the knowledge gained by research is often trapped at the point of origin, caught in the language of research, or simply isolated from those who apply that knowledge - the practitioners in the field. Likewise, tacit knowledge from the field rarely reaches the researchers or those making decisions". In order to relate the research findings to practical applications and policy-making, throughout the research process I considered various dissemination activities:

Journal Articles

Raeisi, A. and Fletcher, G. (2013). "The interrelationship between choice of course of study abroad and participation in online social networks". Manuscript submitted for journal publication (copy on file with author).

Raeisi, A. (2013). "Factors influencing course selection decisions of international higher education aspirants and applicants: the case of UK full-time MBA". Manuscript submitted for journal publication (copy on file with author).

Papers in Published Conference Proceedings

Raeisi, A. (2010). The use of online social networks for marketing higher education. Proceedings of the tenth Salford Postgraduate Annual Research Conference. 10 (1). P. 312-329

Presentations

Raeisi, A. (2010). Marketing strategies in online social networks for higher education institutions (webcast presentation). The Centre for Information Management, University of Bath.

Raeisi, A. (2011). Introducing the concept of 'course identity' as a semiotic sign system. 4th Annual Information Studies Postgraduate Symposium. Manchester Metropolitan University.

Raeisi, A. (2011). The use of online social networks for marketing higher education. Salford Postgraduate Annual Research Conference. University of Salford.

Posters

Raeisi, A. (2010). The use of online social networks for marketing higher education. ISOS. University of Salford.

Workshops

Raeisi, A. (2011). Online social networks for enterprise. Researcher Enterprise Development Salford. University of Salford.

Raeisi, A. (2011). Online social networks supporting enterprise activities. The enterprise café. Researcher Enterprise Development Salford. University of Salford.

Projects

Researcher Enterprise Development Salford. The Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council – EPSRC. Investigators: C Costa, D Roberts, A Raeisi, J Condie, E Jackson, C Mydlarz.

Appendix 2 Ethical approval memorandum for the current research

Academic Audit and Governance Committee

**Research Ethics Panel
(REP)**

To	Arash Raeisi
cc:	Dr G Fletcher, Jean Mulhall
From	Jayne Hunter, Contracts Administrator
Date	23rd June 2011

MEMORANDUM

Subject:	Approval of the Amendment to your Project by REP
Project Title:	The interrelationship between choice of course of study abroad and participation in online social networks
REP Reference:	REP10/110

Following your responses to the Panel's queries, based on the information you provided, I can confirm that they have no objections on ethical grounds to the amendment to your project on condition that anonymity of the Universities and any individuals is maintained. In addition, no direct quotations of individual's comments should be included where this might enable the individual to be identified.

If there are any changes to the project and/or its methodology, please inform the Panel as soon as possible.

Regards,

PP Dwoodna

Jayne Hunter
Contracts Administrator

For enquiries please contact
Jayne Hunter
Contracts Administrator
Contracts Office
Enterprise Division
Faraday House
Telephone: 0161 295 3530 Facsimile: 0161 295 5494
E-mail: j.hunter@salford.ac.uk

Appendix 3 Information sheet for the study

Arash Raeisi
ISOS Research Centre
Room 517, Maxwell Building,
University of Salford,
Salford M5 4WT
t: +44 (0) 7753266331
Email address | a.raeisi@edu.salford.ac.uk

Information Sheet

Dear student,

My name is Arash. I am studying at the doctoral level at the University of Salford, Greater Manchester, in the fields of information systems and educational research. I am in the middle of my research, for which I need to collect data regarding how the choice of course of study abroad interrelates with participation in online social networks. There are many types of creative new media. The term 'online social networks' is used as an umbrella term to cover those categories of new media (e.g. social networking sites, blogs, sharing for videos, sharing for photos) which allow individuals to log on, create a profile, connect with others, see what information others have posted and contribute information.

If you decide to volunteer, you will be asked to participate in one interview. Interviews will last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour and will be timed to suit your availability. The interview will seek information on your course selection process and your experiences with online social networks. With your permission, I will tape record the interviews. The interviews will be recorded and then transcribed. You may choose to replay the recording and read the transcripts for clarification and correction. Please be assured that all your comments will remain completely confidential and will be based only in aggregate with all other responses. Your name will be anonymised and a code will be associated with your responses. This code will be used for your interview transcript and in any publications. Your details and associated code will be kept securely and separately from interview data. It is necessary to keep your details on record associated with your code in order to enable you to withdraw consent at any time, and to enable further communication with you.

You have the right to agree, participate in the study, and still withdraw from the research at any time without giving any reason. Please feel free to discuss any concerns or questions with me either over email or face-to-face, both prior to the interview and at any time afterwards. Any communication will remain anonymous, including discussion of concerns and questions. These will remain private and not be treated as research data.

If you have questions or concerns about this study, please contact me on any of my contact details on top right hand corner of this page.

Yours faithfully

Arash Raeisi

Appendix 4 Research participant consent form

Arash Raeisi
ISOS Research Centre
Room 517, Maxwell Building,
University of Salford,
Salford M5 4WT
t: +44 (0) 7753266331
Email address | a.raeisi@edu.salford.ac.uk

Research participant consent form

By completing this form and leaving your signature, you are indicating that you have read the information sheet, and have made a decision to participate in the study.

Thank you.

Title of project:

The interrelationship between choice of course of study abroad and participation in online social networks.

Name of Researcher: Arash Raeisi   Name of Supervisor: Dr Gordon Fletcher

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and what my contribution will be.	YES/NO
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions (face to face, via telephone and e-mail)	YES/NO
I agree to the interview being tape recorded	YES/NO
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the research at any time without giving any reason	YES/NO
I agree to take part in the above study	YES/NO

Name of participant:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix 5 Revocation of consent

Arash Raeisi
ISOS Research Centre
Room 517, Maxwell Building,
University of Salford,
Salford M5 4WT
t: +44 (0) 7753266331
Email address | a.raeisi@edu.salford.ac.uk

Revocation of consent

You have the right to withdraw your consent at any time. If you decide to withdraw your consent please forward the consent withdrawal to Arash Raeisi, Room 517, Maxwell Building, University of Salford, Salford M5 4WT. Alternatively, you can fill in this form and return scanned copy via email to <a.raeisi@edu.salford.ac.uk>.

Title of project:

The interrelationship between choice of course of study abroad and participation in online social networks

Name of Researcher: Arash Raeisi   Name of Supervisor: Dr Gordon Fletcher

I hereby wish to withdraw my consent to participate in the research outlined above.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix 6 Interview guide

Date of Interview	
Time of Interview	
Place of interview	
Interview ID	

Name of Participant	
Course/University	
Email address	
Contact number	
Gender	
Country	
City	
Income	
The highest level of education	
Age	
Marital status	
How many years of work experience do you have?	
What is your current or previous professional position?	

Which industry? (Please tick boxes which apply)							
Finance		Media		R and D/ science		Energy/ Environmental/ Utilities	
Engineering		Health/ Medical		Consumer goods		Agricultural/ Fishing/Forestry	
Information technology		Non-profit		Hospitality/ Travel/Tourism		Logistics/ Transportations	
Consulting		Telecommunications		Pharmaceuticals		HR/ Recruiting/ Training	
Public sector		Legal		Retail		Real states/ Property	
Entertainments/ Leisure		Defence/ Security/Rescue		Other			

Outline draft of interview questions

Paradigmatic course identity

    A. How did you first find out about this course?

    B. What offline sources of information did you use to obtain information about this course?

    C. What online sources of information did you use to obtain information about this course?

    D. Why did you select this course as your preferred course of study abroad?

Syntagmatic course identity as observed through OSNs

Participants did not use OSNs

    E. Why didn't you use OSNs during your course selection process?

    F. Do you still have the same approach towards OSNs?

Participants used OSNs

    G. At what stages in your course selection process did you use OSNs?

    H. Can you please name all the OSNs that you used to obtain information about this course?

    I. How did you gather information using OSNs?

    J. What information was available on OSNs?

    K. What is the information that is needed most during the course selection process that you search for on OSNs?

    L. What are the benefits of using OSNs in comparison with other sources?

    M. What are the downsides of using OSNs comparison with other sources?

Perceived course identity

    N. How influential were OSNs on your final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources?

Appendix 7 A sample of interview transcript

Date of Interview	8 July 2011
Time of Interview	Afternoon, 12:37
Place of interview	*University A*, Business School, Room 208
Interview ID	PS2

Name of Participant	
Course/University	*Course A/University A*
Email address	---
Contact number	---
Gender	Female
Country	Brazil
City	Sao Paulo
Income	---
The highest level of education	MSc
Age	30
Marital status	Single
How many years of work experience do you have?	10
What is your current or previous professional position?	Sales Manager

Which industry? (Please tick boxes which apply)							
Finance		Media		R and D/ science		Energy/ Environmental/Utilities	
Engineering		Health/ Medical		Consumer goods		Agricultural/ Fishing/Forestry	
Information technology		Non-profit		Hospitality/ Travel/Tourism		Logistics/ Transportations	
Consulting		Telecommunications		Pharmaceuticals	■	HR/ Recruiting/Training	
Public sector		Legal		Retail		Real states/ Property	
Entertainments/ Leisure		Defence/ Security/Rescue		Other			

How did you first here about *Course A*?

One of my friends graduated from this university, he told me for the first time about this course because this friend used to live here. She also told me about other courses in other cities, but those are sort of distance away, so I looked at all these course and that is how I decided to select this course.

What offline sources of information did you use to obtain information about *Course A*?

It was this friend and I called the admissions office. I called the admission office directly and I spoke to one of the school advisors on the phone. I do not remember the name of the person, but I spoke to somebody on the phone asking questions. My conversation took an hour and half on the phone and I was told about what to except and what the course involves and what I'm expected and what are the objectives and what they expect me to achieve at the end of it. I did the same for other universities. So mainly was my friend and admissions office.

What online sources of information did you use to obtain information about *Course A*?

Ok, first of all, the Internet was really useful for me to get information, so I went online, I used Google search engine to search for the key term *[Course A]*, I found university website and I also went to official website to look for the information about this course. I used a number of online sources of information to get information on *[Course A]* and to have a good understanding of *[Course A]* and what I should expect. There were also other sources, when I searched in Google I also came up with several pages in Facebook and online ranking websites such as the Financial Times. Facebook came into play for me in 2010, just before I started doing MBA, OSNs such as Facebook only alighted me more, you know, it gave me more…I wouldn't say I used it like quite a lot but I did, I looked at using them in terms of trying to influence me, because what they do, they provide information, you get criticisms of what people think about it. It was mainly Facebook, by the way, I also met someone on the LinkedIn who said he was graduated from here, and he had MSc. So these people told me that this course is good.

Why did you select *Course A* as your preferred course of study abroad?

First of all, I decided to select *[Course A]* because the tuition fees was reasonable and it was also cheaper than other accredited MBA courses in the UK. As an international student, I know in order for me to manage to get a good job is to be well educated; MBA helps me to develop my career towards managerial positions. It helps me to enhance my knowledge in managing people. That is why I needed to take an MBA in order to develop my career and knowledge. Moreover, back home where I come from, an MBA from UK is very prestigious and employers take it very serious and valuable. The UK HE is very famous in my home country and it is very easy to find a job back home when you have your certificate from the UK. I could also do the MBA in Brazil, but what stopped me from doing an MBA in Brazil was the quality of education back home, it is not as good or as famous as the UK. I selected this course because it is only 1-year course. I am only here in the UK for 1 year and I have to go back home, my employer back home only sponsored a one-year MBA because I can return to work quicker . I had options to study in other countries such as the USA and Canada but the duration of the full-time MBA is only one-year in the UK which is shorter than those countries , it is very difficult to find one-year MBA in the USA and Canada. I always wanted to improve my English language, so this was also a good opportunity for me…I wanted to live in an English speaking country in order to improve my English language knowledge. The other reason was that, because I think, the selection of MBA applicants in the UK is much more serious than other countries. Back home where I come from, MBA students do not usually have three years managerial work experience, but UK MBA students have at least three years managerial work experience. The average age of UK MBA students is also higher than MBA students in other countries such as the USA. This was a positive point for me. I also really like this city, [the city in which *Course A* is offered] is really nice and this city is small and the cost of accommodation and transportation is cheaper in comparison with large and famous British cities. My friend also graduated from here, he gave me good feedback on this university, this friend told me that this university has several advantages such as good student social life, average class-sizes, great cultural and ethnic diversity and good student accommodation.

You said you used OSNs during your course selection process, at what stages in your course selection process did you use OSNs?

I made a lot of research about which kind of course I would select. It is difficult to remember now, ha-ha, but I think it was after when I decided to do my MBA, I used OSNs to search for different MBA courses and to find information on them. I had different options, I did not know really which course was better, they were all very similar, and OSNs helped me to shortlist my MBA options. As I told you earlier, one of my friends graduated from this university, he told me for the first time about this course.

Can you please name all the OSNs that you used to obtain information about *Course A*?

Well when I decide to look for *[Course A]* on OSNs, I looked for few OSNs . Orkut is very famous in that part of the world in that time and of course Facebook is also very famous now , so I had lots of friends on Orkut, so I started looking for different groups on Orkut or any other students living in and around [the city in which *Course A* is offered] , so Orkut was my first source and then I went on Facebook, honestly, Facebook was not that famous , that popular, when I was in Brazil that time, so as soon as I went on to these OSNs the first thing I done was looking for any group. So that is exactly how I started looking for different groups available on OSNs. I met some people on the LinkedIn and Facebook who did their MBA in this university. I tried to find some information on this course on the Orkut because Facebook was still new for me in Brazil. However, I could find more information on Facebook than the Orkut, ha-ha, I found several Facebook pages and groups for this course.

How did you gather information using OSNs?

I mainly looked at students' online profiles and I read some comments.

What information was available on OSNs?

Actually, Orkut did not give so much insight for me; it gave me a kind of general appearance about the course. Facebook and LinkedIn were helpful, I could get lots of information on the people who wanted to attend this course, I looked at their profiles on the LinkedIn and Facebook, and I just wanted to know what countries they are coming from and how old they are. I saw many people contacting the group admins, I think I saw

another person from Brazil, I saw other people from India. When I saw that there are all the people contacting group admins, for international applicants who are outside, we are just a little bit worried if you are going to have enough students, do you understand? So if you see a lot of people contacting the administrator of the group or the page, it seems that there are lot of people interested in the course and I could see if we are going to have enough students. As soon as I decided to select this course as one of my options, I went online to check the profiles of the people who studied here to get more information, it was very important for me to see what kind of students study here. I looked at what was the aging profile of the students, their working experience. I also found so many photos uploaded by students. These photos gave me so many information about members of staff and how friendly they are with people, I do not remember if it was Facebook or LinkedIn, these photos gave me so much information, I also could gain an overall, understanding about the city and the campus infrastructure. I also contacted one of the HE aspirants and applicants, to see how was his feedback on the academic quality of the course and if he could share with me. So I contacted this person and I asked him if he got any feedback, I don't remember where he was from, I think he was Indian, yes he was Indian, and I remember that he didn't have good feedback on the academic quality of this course, he seemed to be not happy with the course, anyway, I thought the course is still reasonable, I knew it isn't a top MBA but it is still ok, ha-ha. I had better insights when I talked to students, when I asked them more details about the course, because I was very worried if the course was good and if it has a good academic quality. Let me also tell you this, I was very worried about the course structure, and I wanted to know if it was very theoretic, or if it was practical. Therefore, I contacted students to ask these questions, I was feeling more confident when I spoke to some of the students.

In your view, what is the information that is needed most during the course selection process that international HE aspirants and applicants search for on OSNs?

I was wishing to find more information on the student visa. I had several problems with the visa application, the immigration rules were changing fast and I was very confused, it was very hard to fill the application form, it was complicated for me. I think that would be good if *[University A]* could provide some information on the student visa on OSNs and how students can apply for the visa; other students can also share their experiences about visa process. I was also facing many problems to find accommodation in [the city in which

Course A is offered], university didn't help me so much. To be honest the University was helpful in giving us information only about student accommodation but they could have assisted us more in finding private accommodation. Finding accommodation wasn't only my problem, before the course starts some students found it difficult to find accommodation, that would be great if *[University A]* could have more information on the student accommodation on OSNs, this could really help students to speak to each other and help each other in finding accommodation. Some mature students really do not like to live in the student accommodation, if the university had linked up with a few agencies or people like that that would be much easier for us to find a place.

What are the benefits of using OSNs in comparison with other sources?

When I looked at the Facebook I remember there was not only one page, there were other pages, it seemed to be for the students from previous years, then I saw some of the pages didn't have so much things there, it was not so busy. There was nobody writing, it was a little bit, how can I say, old! You know…I was not sure about this course, and then I saw one page that the owner was one of the previous students, there was many members, many members there. I just realized oh! Maybe this MBA is good there are many people there, I can try to contact some of these people, asking information about this course, I became very happy, and then I remember that it was very busy, many people posted comments and this course is good and this place is good. I then told to myself I can try to contact some of these people, asking information about the course, because one thing is for you to get information from university, another thing is to get information from students, the clients, they can give better feedback because people who work in the university they want to sell the course to you. And then I remember that I tried to contact someone from my country, because when you contact somebody from your country you feel more comfortable, and then I remember that I was looking the name of the people in the group, there were many different names, with the name you can see if the person is from your country or no, and I remember I contacted a person with a very South American name, her name was Nair Carminhato , Nair Carminhato is a very popular South American name. I just wanted to contact somebody that is neutral, and somebody that is from my country, because when you contact somebody you want somebody to be honest with you , you really want to have a real feedback , you want to know the truth.

Other advantages because through Facebook you interact with people, what kind of interaction I am going to have with the Financial Times or other official sources. I can only read a table statistics on the Financial Times. Ok, let me put it this way, Facebook allowed me to contact other people, if I am in touch with other people ex-students I can interact more. Also, I can personalize more through Facebook, let me put it this way, I can get more insights, I can get the information that I want, I can make specific questions for people, if I look at the table in Financial Times I can get some insights, but maybe, this table isn't going to answer all my questions. For example, I want to know if this course going to teach specifically leadership, maybe I cannot have this answer in Financial Times because it is very, how I can say, it is very superficial. They just give some data that is not beneficial for you, some numbers some figures, but through Facebook I can explore more, I can personalize my questions.

What are the downsides of using OSNs in comparison with other sources?
The disadvantage is that, you have to be careful who you are talking to, for example if you are talking with, let's suppose, the person who is the administrator on the LinkedIn or Facebook…I think if it is a member of staff, you have to be a little bit carful because they only pose things that are beneficial for the course to attract new students, it is like advertising, so this is something you have to be very careful. You have to be careful to analyse information on OSNs , of course everything that you find on the Internet you have to look with two eyes. You have to see who is the person who is administrator. For me it was difficult to distinguish between neutral messages and advertising messages, you have to see who is the person putting the photos, promoting the course, if a member of staff put a lot of advertising you just become a little bit suspicious, this person is selling a lot the course! There is something behind, do you understand? You have to be careful to analyse the information on OSNs; of course, everything that you find on the Internet you have to look carefully. Also sometimes, the information on the Internet is not reliable. I would recommend my friends to use different kind of sources, including OSNs, Financial Times, and education fairs. I would say yes use OSNs, but just be very careful to analyse what people say.

How influential were OSNs on your final course selection decisions in comparison with other sources?

A lot! Because the first thing…the information I got from Website I did not get so much information and insights. I am talking about the official university website. OSNs influenced my final decision a lot. To be honest, I did not get so much information and insight from university website and it was only advertising about the course. Because they are going to say that, the course is good. The information that come from the university is always biased because they want to sell the course, they always say that the course is the best, I just wanted to see the other side, I wanted to talk to the people who really experienced the course, what they think about the course. Therefore, when you contact ex-students you can have a real feedback, the feedback is closer to the reality, so I would say Facebook really influenced my decision because I could contact ex-student. For me, OSNs such as Facebook was only a gate to connect me to other students. Because in Facebook you also have to look with two eyes whatever you see in the Internet you have to see with two eyes. Nevertheless, Facebook is the gate to connect you with other people. In addition, Facebook was very important because this course is not in the ranking table, so I could not get so much information. Therefore, it was necessary to contact other people to get more insights. That is why Facebook was very important. However, I would again recommend my friends to use different sources and not only OSNs.

Appendix 8 Christensen and Askegaard' (2001) semiotic framework based on Peirce's theory of sign

In 2001, Christensen and Askegaard published a paper in which they adopted Peirce's triadic model (i.e. object, representamen and interpretant) to demonstrate the advantages of theoretical consistency and to stimulate self-reflection among scholars who use the notions of corporate identity and corporate image. Christensen and Askegaard (2001) argue that the "object" is the organization as it really is and the "representamen" is the corporate identity, it is the organization's formal profile and other representations of the organization including rumours and unplanned publicly. The "interpretant" is the corporate image, it is the general impression and estimation of the organization among its various audiences, or, as the Christensen and Askegaard (2001) put it, it is the organizational reputation.

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