

A Socio-Cognitive Study of Information Practices among Potential International Applicants: Implications for University Web-Mediated Communication and Branding

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Abstract

As universities across the globe respond to the pressures of neoliberal marketization and the internationalization of higher education, they have progressively redesigned and modernised their websites and digital infrastructure. Grounded in the socio-cognitive perspective of professional communication, this study explores how prospective international students seek, interpret, and utilise information communicated through the websites of elite Chinese universities. Using a mixed-methods approach that integrates questionnaire data with interview findings, the study reveals that prospective applicants effectively employ various online tools to identify information about their preferred institutions. Beyond simply accessing institutional websites, they actively engage with the available content, assess its usefulness, and critically appraise its credibility and relevance. Based on these findings, the study provides practical recommendations for enhancing information management, web-based communication, and institutional branding strategies in the higher education sector.

Keywords: Information Practices, Potential International Applicants, Universities, Web-Mediated Communication, Branding.

Introduction

In the contemporary higher education landscape, neoliberal marketization reflects a transition towards market-driven principles that reshape how universities operate (Evans et al., 2024). Rather than functioning solely as centres of learning, universities increasingly compete within global education markets by adopting business-oriented practices that prioritise efficiency, competitiveness, and responsiveness to stakeholder demands (Tusal et al., 2024). Consequently, higher education institutions place growing emphasis on branding, marketing, and revenue generation, frequently utilising web-mediated platforms to promote their programmes and attract prospective stakeholders, particularly international applicants (Hosein and Rao, 2023).

Internationalization has emerged as a central dimension of this market-oriented transformation in higher education (Frezghi and Tsegay, 2019). It refers to the integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the teaching, research, and service functions of higher education institutions (Harman, 2005, p. 120). Universities pursue internationalization through multiple initiatives, including the recruitment and mobility of international students (Volkova and Plakhotnik, 2023). Over recent decades, international student mobility has expanded substantially, becoming a defining characteristic of the global higher education

sector (Öz and Gök, 2021). Internationally mobile students are those who “cross a national border to study, or are enrolled in a distance learning program abroad” (Hartanto and Zunvindri, 2016, p. 21). This sustained growth reflects both the worldwide expansion of higher education enrolment and the increasing commercialization of the sector (Oeppen Hill, 2020). However, international students commonly encounter challenges associated with academic adjustment and cross-cultural adaptation in their host countries (Shafaei and Razak, 2016). As a result, prospective students seeking overseas education must navigate extensive and often complex information relating to academic requirements as well as everyday living (Hertzum and Hyldegård, 2019).

Since the early twenty-first century, China has actively expanded the international reach of its higher education system by increasing the recruitment of overseas students and introducing English-medium degree programmes (Ma and Zhao, 2018). In parallel, Chinese universities have strengthened efforts to establish a distinctive international identity and compete more effectively within the global education market. This strategic direction was formalised through the National Outline for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020) (MOE, 2010), followed by the Plan for Study in China (MOE, 2012), which outlined policies to promote international educational exchanges. The initiative sought to position China as Asia’s leading destination for international education by attracting 500,000 international students across higher, secondary, and elementary education by 2020 (MOE, 2012). By 2017, enrolment had already approached this target, reaching nearly 490,000 international students (MOE, 2018). Beyond increasing enrolment, the strategy also sought to improve educational quality, strengthen the global reputation of Chinese higher education, and enhance the country’s soft power. Accordingly, international education in China is intended to cultivate graduates who possess a strong understanding of China while fostering international cooperation, mutual understanding, and cross-border exchanges across multiple sectors (Hong and Hardy, 2024).

Although the Chinese government has made the internationalization and global competitiveness of its universities a national priority (Feng, 2019), mainland China continues to be perceived as a comparatively less preferred destination for overseas study. Existing research has predominantly examined international

students studying in developed countries (Bukhari et al., 2020; Hertzum and Hyldegård, 2019), while many earlier investigations have concentrated on students who had already commenced their studies abroad (Yoon and Chung, 2017). Regarding information-seeking behaviour, previous studies have largely emphasised the role of social media because these platforms provide convenient access to information and facilitate interaction with people and institutions (Bukhari et al., 2018). Research on web-mediated resources has mainly focused on search engines and electronic databases (Khoo, 2014; Schroeder, 2018), whereas university webpages, despite serving as primary channels for presenting institutional information (Zhang and O’Halloran, 2013), have received comparatively limited scholarly attention. Moreover, despite China’s sustained commitment to higher education internationalization, little research has explored how prospective international applicants utilise the official websites of Chinese universities during their information search. To address this gap, the present study investigates how potential international students engage with the web-mediated gateways of elite Chinese universities, while also examining their information experiences and critical evaluations of the content provided.

Literature Review

Information Practices

Information practices encompass “those activities a person may engage in when identifying their own need for information, searching for information and using or transferring that information” (Catalano, 2013, p. 243). This concept extends beyond information seeking to include the actions, perceptions, emotions, and social interactions associated with engaging with information, reflecting both cultural and social influences (Hughes, 2014). As noted by Savolainen (2007, p. 109), information practices function as an “umbrella concept” that integrates multiple theoretical perspectives, providing a broader foundation for investigating information-related phenomena and supporting diverse methodological approaches. Consequently, understanding information practices requires examining how individuals interact with information, what they perceive as meaningful information, how they experience these interactions, and the thoughts and emotions that shape their

engagement with information (Miller et al., 2019).

Research on information practices has evolved substantially over the past four decades, largely influenced by the pioneering contributions of Tom D. Wilson (e.g., Wilson, 1999), whose work established a comprehensive framework for understanding information behaviour. Wilson (2000, p. 50) defined information seeking behaviour as the “purposive seeking for information as a consequence of a need to satisfy some goal.” Building upon this definition, he integrated findings from disciplines including library science, communication, and psychology into a unified theoretical framework that has informed subsequent research on information-related behaviour. His work has provided the conceptual basis for later developments, including Kuhlthau’s (2004) model and investigations involving immigrants, educators, and users of technical information systems. Within the context of international education, previous studies have primarily examined the information needs and preferred information sources of international students, particularly those associated with adapting to everyday life in host countries (Yoon and Chung, 2017). Moreover, research informed by the concept of life-world information experience has increasingly explored how international students perceive, evaluate, and respond to information encountered throughout their diverse information-seeking activities (Schwandt, 2007).

Information Practices among International Students

Information serves as a vital resource that enables students to make informed decisions, reduce uncertainty, support personal development, and bridge knowledge gaps when pursuing specific goals (Opesade, 2020). For prospective international students, obtaining reliable information is particularly important because unfamiliar social and educational environments often create uncertainty and may result in various academic, social, and psychological challenges (Yoon and Chung, 2017). Recognising these distinctive needs, previous research has examined ways to support international students’ information practices by focusing on academic-related information, including research activities, language acquisition, career planning, and professional development (Park and Kim, 2011).

In recent years, international students have increasingly relied on networking services and social media to gather information about studying abroad

and to satisfy their everyday informational needs (Park, 2015; Sin and Kim, 2013). Their information requirements extend across a wide range of areas, including financial matters, institutional support services, entertainment, social engagement, and interpersonal relationships (Bukhari et al., 2020; Sin and Kim, 2013). Additionally, information relating to culture and identity has been identified as an important aspect of their information-seeking activities. Despite the growing body of research examining social media use among international students (Zhao et al., 2016), considerably less attention has been devoted to web-mediated information practices. In particular, the role of official university websites as sources of information for prospective international students remains insufficiently explored.

Scholars generally acknowledge that effective information practices are fundamental to meeting the academic and everyday needs of international students throughout their overseas educational journey. Successful adjustment to a new educational environment depends largely on the availability of accurate information and positive information experiences. Nevertheless, existing reviews indicate that most investigations have concentrated on the information practices of students after they have arrived and settled in their host countries. Moreover, previous studies have largely focused on international student populations in traditional destination countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, often within the broader context of immigration and ethnic communities (Lloyd et al., 2013; Yoon and Chung, 2017). Comparatively little research has examined the information practices of prospective international students during the pre-application stage, when they are still evaluating overseas universities and making study destination decisions.

University Webpages as Web-Mediated Gateways

Universities and other higher education institutions worldwide have continuously redesigned and modernised their websites since these platforms became widespread in the late 1990s (Zhang and O’Halloran, 2013, p. 468). As international student recruitment has evolved into a global phenomenon (Cassar and Caruana, 2023), universities have increasingly relied on digital communication channels to address the information needs of prospective applicants. Before the widespread adoption of

the Internet, information about overseas study opportunities was primarily disseminated through traditional means such as public events, printed brochures, and face-to-face interactions, all of which were constrained by social, geographical, and temporal factors (Jokila, 2019). The rapid development of web-mediated communication, particularly through institutional websites, has substantially expanded public access to information and transformed the way prospective students engage in information-seeking activities.

University websites frequently represent the first point of contact between institutions and external audiences, functioning as the university's "virtual face" and a principal gateway for prospective visitors. Within the contemporary context of higher education marketization and internationalization, these websites play a strategic role in communicating institutional identity, promoting educational missions, and attracting potential students (Fletcher, 2006). Accordingly, understanding the design and communicative functions of university webpages is essential for examining how higher education institutions position themselves within competitive global markets and engage with prospective students as key stakeholders.

Existing research suggests that university webpages constitute a highly complex communication medium that cannot be regarded simply as a conventional source of information (Askehave and Ellerup Nielsen, 2005). Bateman et al. (2017) argue that the diverse features embedded within webpages and the ways they fulfil multiple communicative purposes remain insufficiently understood. Their dynamic nature is reflected in characteristics such as hyper textuality, which enables non-linear navigation through hyperlinks, and multimodality, which integrates multiple forms of communication within a single platform. These distinctive attributes highlight the need for further investigation into the structure, functionality, and use of university webpages (Zhang et al., 2020). Higher education institutions increasingly depend on their websites to deliver online services and communicate with diverse user communities. Consequently, an important consideration is whether web-mediated communication effectively satisfies the expectations and information needs of prospective applicants. When institutional websites fail to provide clear, accessible, or relevant information, prospective students may experience

frustration and dissatisfaction, potentially leading to unfavourable perceptions of the institution and unsuccessful application decisions (Liu et al., 2023).

Methodology

Research Questions

This study intends to answer three research questions.

- RQ1. How do potential international applicants engage with the information provided by the webpages of elite Chinese universities?
- RQ2. How do potential international applicants experience the information provided by the webpages of elite Chinese universities?
- RQ3. How do potential international applicants evaluate the information provided by the webpages of elite Chinese universities?

Research Participants

A total of 50 international students enrolled at either a Malaysian university or a language training school participated in this study. Data collection was conducted by the second author following the approval of the institutional research ethics committee. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, targeting individuals who intended to pursue higher education abroad. Before participation, each individual received detailed information about the study and provided informed consent by signing a consent form. To protect confidentiality, all participants were anonymised, with questionnaire responses and interview transcripts identified only through coded labels (e.g., Participant/Interviewee 1). The collected data were used exclusively for the purposes of this research and were not shared with any third party. All questionnaires and interviews were conducted in English. Throughout the analysis stage, participants remained available to clarify responses, when necessary, thereby ensuring the accuracy of the transcriptions.

As presented in Table 1, the participants comprised Malaysian citizens as well as individuals from countries other than China. The sample included 28 male and 22 female participants. Regarding age distribution, five participants were younger than 18 years, whereas the remaining participants were between 18 and 30 years old. They were enrolled either at a Malaysian university or at a language

training institution serving non-Malaysian students seeking to improve their English proficiency before undertaking overseas study. Although the participants

represented diverse demographic backgrounds, all 50 expressed a clear intention to pursue higher education at Chinese universities.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Research Participants.

Nationality		Gender		Age	
Malaysian	Others Except Chinese	Male	Female	Under 18 Years Old	18-30 Years Old
13	37	28	22	5	25

Target Universities

This study targeted nine elite Chinese universities (the C9 League): *Fudan University* (FDU), *Harbin Institute of Technology* (HIT), *Nanjing University* (NJU), *Peking University* (PKU), *Shanghai Jiao Tong University* (SJTU), *Tsinghua University* (THU), *University of Science and Technology of China* (USTC), *Xi'an Jiaotong University* (XJTU) and *Zhejiang University* (ZJU). The selection of C9 League universities is justified by their position as China's leading higher education institutions, attracting exceptionally talented students and distinguished scholars while maintaining a strong commitment to achieving international academic excellence (Han, 2014). According to the three widely recognised global university ranking systems—QS World University

Rankings (QS), Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE), and Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)—all C9 League institutions were ranked among the top 20 universities in mainland China and within the world's top 300 universities during the 2023–2024 ranking cycle, as illustrated in Figure 1. The establishment of the C9 League has contributed significantly to strengthening China's higher education system by fostering high-quality education, cultivating outstanding innovative talent, and promoting academic collaboration and international exchange between Chinese universities and institutions abroad (Allen, 2017). Consequently, examining how these universities present themselves through their web-mediated platforms and support prospective international students is both timely and important.

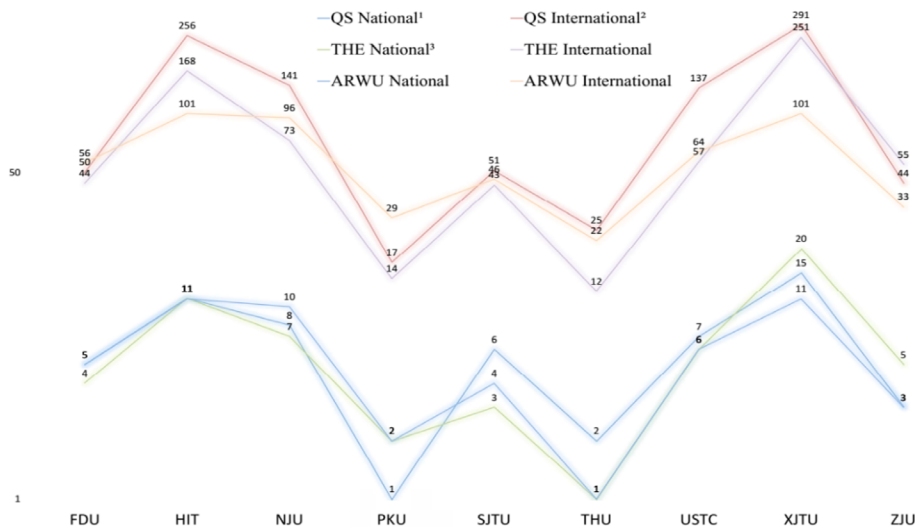


Figure 1: National and International Rankings of the C9 League Universities (2023-2024).

Note: The national ranking of the C9 League universities was only concerned with mainland Chinese universities; 1: mean ranking of QS national is 6.44>2760 colleges and universities 2022; 2: mean ranking of QS international is 112> 1500 institutions across 104 locations; 3: mean ranking of THE national is 6.56>2760 colleges and universities 2022; 4: mean ranking of THE international is 79.97> 1906 universities across 108 countries and regions; 5: mean ranking of ARWU national is 5.89>2760 colleges and universities 2022; mean ranking of ARWU international is 60.88>2500 universities across the world.

Research Approach

This study is grounded in Bhatia's (2004) socio-cognitive approach to critical discourse analysis, which provides a flexible conceptual framework for examining the construction and interpretation of professional communication. The approach facilitates an understanding of the cognitive and psychological dimensions that shape discourse communities and their communicative practices. Within communication studies, the critical analysis of discourse is essential for revealing how communicative integrity is negotiated, adapted, and employed to achieve particular purposes. Accomplishing this objective requires the integration of multiple analytical dimensions, including the socio-cognitive perspective. By emphasising individuals' interpretations, perceptions, and evaluations, this perspective offers valuable insights into how people receive and make sense of communication (Bhatia, 2016). Consequently, the socio-cognitive approach is particularly well suited to professional communication research, as it enables a comprehensive understanding of how specific forms of discourse are utilised, interpreted, accepted, and ultimately shaped by their intended user communities (Fakhrudin and Hassan, 2015).

Data Collection and Analysis

Cognitive Perceptions

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{favorability} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{F_i} V_{is}}{F_i} \\ \text{Salience} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{F_i} \frac{(N_s - R_{is})}{(N_s - 1)}}{F_i} \end{array} \right.$$

Research Instruments

This study employed two research instruments. The first was a questionnaire designed to examine how prospective international applicants perceived the "About Us" webpages of the nine C9 League universities. The questionnaire explored several aspects of participants' information practices, including their primary information sources, frequency of visiting university websites, perceptions of the importance and attractiveness of the "About Us" pages, the types of information they expected to find, preferences for website features and components, overall evaluations of the C9 university websites, and the challenges they encountered while navigating these online platforms. The second instrument comprised follow-up semi-structured interviews, which provided deeper insights into participants' information experiences. The interviews focused primarily on eliciting participants' critical evaluations of the C9 universities' websites, with particular attention given to their experiences, perceptions, and assessments of the "About Us" webpages.

where the favorability is about response i ; V_{is} is the valence rating provided by a student s to the response i ; F_i is the total frequency with which the response i was mentioned by all the students. Each student had assigned a favorability rating to specific response on the scale ranging from -2 to $+2$, respectively $+1$, 0 , $+2$.

where the salience index is about response i ; F_i is the frequency with which the response i was mentioned in total; N_s represents the total number of various responses mentioned by student s . R_{is} is the rank of the response i assigned by the student s . For example, if the response occupies the first position in the list of all responses, its rank is codified as 1; the rank of the second image in the list is codified as 2, and the like.

Figure 2: Calculation Formula for Favourability Rating and Salience Index.

Recognising that the "About Us" (hereafter AU) webpage commonly serves as the primary gateway to a university, this study asked all 50 participants to review the English versions of the AU webpages of the C9 League universities. After

exploring these webpages, participants completed a questionnaire based on their actual browsing experiences. Subsequently, 10 participants who expressed a willingness to provide more detailed feedback were invited to participate in follow-up

interviews. In addition to analysing the frequency of questionnaire responses, the study evaluated the favourability ratings and salience indices of selected responses when participants assessed specific topics (see Figure 2). Within cognitive research, favourability rating measures the degree to which individuals perceive a particular issue positively or negatively. Accordingly, participants assigned scores ranging from -2 to +2 to indicate their emotional responses to relevant questionnaire items. Likewise, the salience index represents the relative prominence or perceived importance of a particular topic or stimulus. The salience values reported in this study were calculated using the method proposed by Sutrop (2001).

Findings

Information Engagements of Potential International Applicants

As presented in Table 2, university websites were the most frequently used source of information, with 92% of participants relying on them during their search for overseas study opportunities. The second

most common source was seeking advice from familiar individuals, such as friends, teachers, and relatives, which was reported by 48% of participants. Overseas education agencies were consulted less frequently, with only 18% indicating that they used this source. Printed materials, including newspapers, magazines, and brochures, were the least preferred source of information, being used by only 10% of the participants. Table 2 also reports the mean favourability ratings assigned to each information source. All four categories achieved positive mean favourability scores, ranging from 0.78 to 1.41, indicating generally favourable perceptions of these information resources. University websites received the highest favourability rating (FAV = 1.41), highlighting their dominant role and strong positive perception among prospective international applicants. Advice obtained from familiar individuals ranked second (FAV = 1.33), followed by paper-based information sources (FAV = 1.00). In contrast, overseas education agencies received the lowest favourability score (FAV = 0.78), suggesting that participants viewed this source less positively and considered it comparatively less useful for obtaining information.

Table 2: Information Resources Regarding Elite Chinese Universities.

Information Retrieval Channels	F (%)	FR	FAV	FAVR
From universities' websites	46 (92%)	1	1.41	1
From familiar individuals	24 (48%)	2	1.33	2
From overseas educational consultants	9 (18%)	3	0.78	4
From paper-based media materials	5 (10%)	4	1.00	3

Note: F= Frequency; FR= Frequency Rank; FAV= Mean Valence of favourability (-2 to +2); FAVR= Favourability Rank.

These findings suggest that prospective international applicants prefer obtaining information about Chinese universities through web-mediated resources rather than printed materials. Although both official websites and printed publications are authorised institutional sources, university websites offer more comprehensive, current, and readily accessible information, making them the preferred medium for information seeking.

Interview findings further revealed that all participants (100%) regarded the convenience of web-based resources as their most valued attribute. Participants emphasised that university websites reduce the time required to locate relevant information while providing a more interactive and user-friendly browsing experience. In addition, the official status of institutional websites enhanced their perceived credibility, leading participants to trust that the

information presented reflected genuine institutional policies rather than promotional claims. Conversely, overseas education consultants were viewed with greater scepticism because their strong commercial orientation was perceived to influence the objectivity of the information they provided. Participants expressed greater confidence in recommendations from people within their personal networks, such as friends, teachers, or relatives, whom they considered more likely to offer impartial opinions about prospective universities. Nevertheless, the interviews also highlighted a shortage of reliable information sources about Chinese universities within participants' immediate social environments, leaving official university websites as their principal source of information.

As shown in Table 3, most respondents (68%) reported visiting university websites frequently to

obtain updated information, whereas the remaining participants (32%) accessed these websites only when specific information was required. These findings indicate that university websites play an

important role in prospective international applicants' information practices, serving as a primary resource for understanding Chinese universities and supporting their academic decision-making.

Table 3: Viewing Differences between Universities' Websites and AU Webpages.

	Frequent Viewing (%)	Sporadic Viewing (%)	No Viewing (%)
Universities' Websites	68	32	0
'About Us' Webpages	50	46	4

According to the questionnaire results, 96% of prospective international applicants reported consulting universities' AU webpages to obtain essential institutional information. Consistent with this finding, eight interviewees (80%) stated that the AU webpage provides comprehensive, detailed, and multidimensional information that enables them to develop a holistic understanding of a university. The remaining two interviewees (20%) noted that the AU webpage is typically the first section they access when visiting a university website. They observed that it is commonly positioned at the upper-left area of the navigation bar, a location that is generally regarded as the most visually prominent element of the webpage. From a multimodal communication perspective, this strategic placement enhances its visual salience, making it more likely to attract users' attention and positioning it as the primary

gateway to institutional information.

Table 4 summarises the categories of information most frequently sought by prospective international applicants. Information relating to a university's research and teaching capabilities emerged as the highest priority, with 80% of participants identifying it as essential. This preference reflects the fundamental objective of international students pursuing overseas education to enhance their academic development. Participants generally associated a favourable institutional image with demonstrated excellence in research and teaching. Within the context of academic communication, such information addresses the principal concerns of prospective students while simultaneously reinforcing a university's reputation, academic credibility, and institutional brand.

Table 4: Information Demands of Potential International Applicants.

Types of Information	F (%)	FR	SI	SIR
Capacity for Research and Reaching	40 (80%)	1	3.08	3
International Reputation/Ranking	37 (74%)	2	2.54	1
Pictures of University	32 (64%)	3	2.97	2
International Student Services	30 (60%)	4	3.77	4
Geographical Information	25 (50%)	5	3.96	5
Associated Services	25 (50%)	6	4.64	6
Internationalization	21 (42%)	7	5.62	7
Administration	5 (10%)	8	6.80	8

Note: F= Frequency; FR= Frequency Rank; SI = Mean Position of the Salience Index; SIR= Salience Index Rank.

A university's international reputation was identified as another highly valued source of information, with 74% of participants considering it essential. This finding reflects the close relationship between institutional reputation and global university rankings. International rankings play an influential role in shaping higher education policies and prospective students' decision-making because they provide a common framework for comparing universities worldwide (Allen, 2017). Consequently, a university's position in international ranking systems is widely

regarded as an indicator of its global competitiveness and academic standing.

Visual resources also play a significant role in shaping institutional communication through university websites. Nearly two-thirds of the participants (64%) expressed a preference for viewing photographs that would help them develop a visual understanding of the university's identity. Previous studies have demonstrated that images are powerful promotional tools within higher education communication, where they are strategically

employed to enhance institutional branding (Zhang and O'Halloran, 2013). Rather than merely depicting campuses or physical surroundings, these carefully selected images are designed to project an attractive institutional image, create favourable first impressions, and communicate substantial information about the university (Feng, 2019).

Information concerning services available to international students was considered important by 60% of the participants, who regarded such information as essential for evaluating the quality of the study experience in China. These services primarily include educational support, such as Chinese language courses, and student support provisions, including accommodation. In comparison, information relating to general facilities, such as hospitals, libraries, and fitness centres, attracted comparatively lower interest, with 50% of participants identifying it as necessary. Both academic services and student support facilities are widely recognised as important indicators of institutional quality and value (Osman, 2008).

Half of the participants (50%) also considered geographical information about the university to be important. This included details relating to the geographical setting, cultural environment, city size, tourism opportunities, and local climate. Such information assists prospective students in assessing whether they would be comfortable living in the surrounding environment. Universities situated in large metropolitan areas with rich historical, cultural, and economic characteristics are often perceived as having greater institutional autonomy and stronger access to resources, enabling them to respond more effectively to the growing demands of competitiveness, branding, and internationalization in higher education (Yang and Xie, 2015).

Information regarding internationalization was identified as important by 42% of participants. They recognised internationalization as a key characteristic of contemporary higher education, reflecting institutions' efforts to improve educational quality and strengthen their international reputation. As higher education continues to expand and diversify globally, universities increasingly promote initiatives such as international research collaborations, student exchange programmes, and internationally oriented curricula. These initiatives have become significant factors in attracting prospective international students (Frezghi and Tsegay, 2019).

Some Chinese universities also provide extensive administrative information, including organisational structures, leadership positions, administrative divisions, and the responsibilities of senior officials. This content reflects the integration of informative and bureaucratic discourse within institutional communication. Although such information may illustrate the organisational structure and multiple institutional identities of universities (Fay et al., 2021), it was the least valued category among participants, with only 10% expressing interest in it. This limited interest suggests that administrative hierarchies and leadership structures are not regarded as important considerations during the university selection process.

Overall, the comparison between frequency rankings and salience rankings revealed only minor differences across most information categories. Information ranked between fourth and eighth in terms of frequency generally occupied comparable positions in the salience rankings. However, among the three most frequently requested information types, international reputation and university ranking achieved the highest salience index ($SIR = 1$) despite being ranked second in frequency. This finding indicates that global reputation and ranking occupy a particularly prominent position in prospective international students' cognitive evaluations and are likely to exert substantial influence on their university selection decisions and overall perceptions of institutional quality. Conversely, the frequency and salience rankings of the remaining two leading information categories were reversed. This discrepancy arises from the calculation of the salience index, which considers the order in which participants listed their responses rather than the number of times each item was mentioned. Consequently, although information concerning research and teaching capacity was mentioned by many participants, it was often listed later in their responses, resulting in a comparatively lower salience ranking.

Information Experiences of Potential International Applicants

This section first examines prospective international applicants' perceptions of the compositional organisation of the AU webpages. The questionnaire results indicate that most participants (76%) began browsing from the top of the webpage. Interview findings identified four primary reasons for this behaviour: (1) reading from top to bottom

reflects their habitual reading pattern (70%); (2) this sequence provides a more coherent and accessible reading experience (60%); (3) information positioned at the top is more visually prominent (50%); and (4) the upper section is generally expected to contain the most important information (50%). In contrast, 20% of participants reported beginning with the middle section of the webpage. According to the interviews, this preference was attributed to two factors: (1) the central area typically contains infographics and the most prominent content (70%); and (2) readers' visual attention naturally gravitates towards the centre of the webpage (20%). Only 4% of participants preferred to start from the bottom of the webpage. One interviewee explained that the concluding section often summarises the most important institutional information. These findings support the proposition that the communicative value of webpage elements is closely associated with their compositional placement. As argued by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the meaning and function of elements within web discourse are largely determined by their position in the overall layout.

Overall, two-thirds of the participants (66%) considered the AU webpages of the C9 League universities to be appealing, although 18% believed that further improvements were still necessary. As multimodal communication artefacts, AU webpages combine written language, visual imagery, and compositional design into a unified communicative structure. Consequently, participants frequently identified multiple features that influenced their overall evaluation. Preferences for visual images (66%) and written content (60%) were relatively balanced, indicating that both modes contribute substantially to users' perceptions. In addition, 20% of participants highlighted webpage layout as an important factor influencing the attractiveness of the AU webpages.

Participants demonstrated almost equal preferences for animated and static images. Of the 50 respondents, 52% preferred animated images, whereas 48% favoured static visuals when browsing university webpages. Previous research has noted that Chinese university websites frequently incorporate dynamic visual elements and animated banners, reflecting broader trends in professional web design rather than practices unique to higher education. Animated content enhances perceptions of authenticity by presenting information in a vivid and engaging manner that resonates more strongly with viewers. Consistent with

this observation, 70% of the interviewees expressed a preference for animated images because they perceived them as more dynamic, visually attractive, and effective for storytelling than static photographs. They also believed that animated visuals communicate complex or evolving information more effectively, thereby increasing user engagement with institutional webpages.

When comparing visual and verbal content, 72% of participants expressed a preference for webpages containing a greater proportion of visual material than textual descriptions. They explained that images more effectively communicate institutional identity, capture attention, facilitate rapid information processing, and improve comprehension and memory retention. By contrast, 28% preferred written content, arguing that textual descriptions provide richer and more comprehensive information while also appearing more credible because they represent official institutional communication. These findings suggest that neither visual nor verbal communication alone is sufficient for an effective AU webpage. Instead, high-quality visual content should be integrated with accurate and informative written descriptions to strengthen the university's image and improve the overall communication experience.

After reviewing the AU webpages of the C9 League universities, most participants (64%) perceived them as a hybrid genre that combines informative and promotional communication. Interviewees consistently indicated that the primary purpose of the AU webpage is to introduce the university to prospective students while simultaneously presenting a favourable institutional image. Beyond providing factual information, these webpages seek to strengthen institutional identity and reinforce university branding. As organisations increasingly prioritise brand development as a strategic objective, universities have similarly adopted communication practices that resemble those of corporate organisations (Morrish and Sauntson, 2013). Consequently, the AU webpages of elite Chinese universities perform dual communicative functions by delivering essential institutional information while simultaneously promoting a prestigious and attractive image to prospective international applicants.

Information Evaluations of Potential International Applicants

This section reports the challenges prospective international applicants encountered while reading

the AU webpages of the C9 League universities. The interview findings indicate that the content presented on these webpages constituted the most significant source of difficulty. Specifically, 36% of the participants reported that some AU webpages contained incomplete information, with important institutional details either missing or insufficiently presented. This issue also recorded the highest salience index ($SI = 2.06$), ranking first among all identified challenges. The significance of this concern was illustrated by the comments of Interviewee 6, presented below:

This section should be the first port for us to view the university so that we expect to see very detailed information, especially those attractive and important information. I do not mean that this kind of overview must be very long; however, it should not be so brief as Peking University's General Information which is very simple. Although it still includes some achievements of this outstanding university, as one of my dream universities, it has more to show us, especially its great international competitiveness and research output.

Additionally, 34% of the questionnaire respondents reported that the introductory sections of some AU webpages contained an excessive amount of irrelevant information, making the content time-consuming to read and of limited practical value. The inclusion of unnecessary material may reduce readers' interest and patience, ultimately diminishing their engagement with the webpage. Interview findings further revealed that most participants believed administrative information should not appear on the university's primary gateway page. Although they recognised its institutional importance, they suggested that such content would be more appropriately located on dedicated subpages rather than within the AU section. Interviewees also observed that giving excessive prominence to administrative details, such as current university leaders and former presidents, could create an impression of bureaucratism in the website's presentation. As universities are fundamentally educational institutions whose primary missions are teaching and research, an overemphasis on administrative structures may divert attention from these core functions and weaken the institution's overall image. This perspective was reflected in the comments of Interviewee 3, presented below:

Why should so much administrative information be placed on this webpage? This webpage should contain the most basic and most useful information for applicants. However, administrative information here, I mean leaders and staff, at least for my application, is meaningless. Placing administrative officials in such prominent position makes me feel like (there is) a sense of power over education. Their information should be placed on a special webpage or weblink.

As globally recognised institutions, the elite Chinese universities generally demonstrate a high standard of English communication on their websites. Nevertheless, 30% of the prospective international applicants believed that the quality of English used on the webpages could be further improved. Participants noted that clearer, more natural, and linguistically accurate English would enhance readability and facilitate a better understanding of the information presented. This concern was reflected in the comments of Interviewee 5, who stated:

In general, the English is good, and there is no problem for me to get what I need. But I am very curious that whether the word 'spirit' used by some Chinese universities refers to the same meaning as 'culture'? I do not know whether this word can be used like that.

In this instance, participants' concern centred on the English translation of the term "spirit." The original Chinese expression, "jīng shén," refers to the beliefs, values, and guiding principles that characterise an individual or collective within Chinese culture. However, the English word "spirit" possesses multiple meanings depending on its context, which led to semantic ambiguity and confusion for the interviewee. This finding suggests that literal translation may not always convey the intended cultural meaning effectively, highlighting the importance of contextually appropriate translation in university web communication.

Navigation menus were also identified as an important factor influencing website usability, as they facilitate access to information and improve the overall browsing experience. Fifteen participants (30%) recommended improvements to the navigation system. During the interviews, respondents suggested that navigation bars should be larger,

more visually prominent, and consistently interactive to improve accessibility. They also emphasised that the organisation of navigation options requires greater attention. According to the participants, certain content was not appropriately categorised as independent menu items, while other webpages contained repetitive information across multiple sections. These observations are illustrated by the comments of Interviewee 8, presented below:

Some content should not be a specific option in the navigation bar, such as 'Library' 'Hangzhou', in the 'About Us' webpages. However, this information can be presented in other sections. On the other hand, the same information should not be repeated, for example, 'Contact' should not be listed as a specific option in the navigation menu as other sections also provide contact information.

The findings also indicate that compositional structure and webpage layout are important determinants of effective web design. Most prospective international applicants preferred a clearly organised main page that functions as the primary navigation hub for accessing institutional information. Participants further suggested that, to fulfil its role as an effective gateway, the webpage should employ sufficiently large font sizes to improve readability, while drop-down menus should remain concise and appropriately structured to facilitate efficient navigation. These design features were perceived as enhancing both usability and the overall user experience. This perspective is illustrated by the comments of Interviewee 4, presented below:

The main page serves the function of providing visitors with an overview of the entire site, allowing them to see what is included on the different sub-pages. This creates an organized presentation and a clearer reading path.

Although visual imagery was the final aspect considered by participants, it emerged as one of the most prominent factors, recording a high salience index and ranking (SI = 2.50; SIR = 2). Interviewees consistently emphasised that visual elements, including photographs, animations, and institutional logos, strongly shape prospective international applicants' perceptions of a university's atmosphere, facilities, and overall attractiveness. The visual presentation

of the AU webpage was considered influential in forming positive attitudes towards the institution and strengthening applicants' intention to apply. As reflected in the comments of Interviewee 9 below, participants believed that the images displayed on AU webpages should balance realism with an aspirational portrayal of the university. They also suggested that visual content should be presented in a sufficiently prominent size to increase its visibility, communicative impact, and attractiveness relative to that of other university websites.

The attractive pictures will enable me, as the prospective applicant, to visualize the university which I will get to experience and live in. I thus need to visualize more activities there. Besides, pictures with a large size and high modality usually give more accurate descriptions and representative characteristics of the universities.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research, demonstrating that contemporary media-literate students effectively utilise web-mediated communication to obtain information about prospective overseas universities. They are capable of navigating extensive online resources to identify information that supports their educational decision-making. The results also highlight the strategic importance of the "About Us" webpage, which functions not only as a source of institutional information but also as a platform for communicating institutional missions, establishing university identity, and attracting prospective international students. These functions are particularly significant within the increasingly competitive and globalised higher education environment.

The evidence further suggests that higher education institutions should strategically utilise their websites as instruments for institutional branding and international student recruitment. University webpages represent a critical source of information that substantially influences users' online experiences. Although these websites contain extensive information, prospective applicants possess diverse interests and information requirements. Consequently, even the well-developed webpages of elite Chinese universities, including their AU sections, may still present challenges that affect users' information-seeking experiences.

Difficulties encountered during website navigation or information retrieval may generate frustration and dissatisfaction, ultimately leading to negative perceptions of the institution. Effective web-mediated communication should therefore accommodate the varying needs of prospective users by providing accessible, relevant, and user-centred information. Developing successful university webpages requires a thorough understanding of target audiences and their information expectations. Accordingly, Chinese higher education institutions should prioritise the needs of prospective international students when designing web-mediated communication strategies to strengthen their global attractiveness.

As a prevalent form of hypermedia discourse in contemporary digital environments, university webpages, including AU sections, are characterised by hypermodality. This concept combines multimodality with hypertextuality to explain how meaning is constructed through the interaction of verbal, visual, and auditory resources within web-mediated communication (Zhang and O'Halloran, 2012). The findings indicate that contemporary users actively engage with this integration of language, visual imagery, and navigational features when exploring university websites. These results highlight the importance of incorporating multimodal principles and adopting a social semiotic perspective when developing university webpages to improve usability and enhance communication effectiveness.

The findings also underscore the importance of carefully selecting and presenting information that reflects the expectations and challenges of prospective international applicants. Universities should develop visually engaging, easily interpretable, and well-organised webpages that prominently communicate essential institutional information, including academic strengths and institutional credentials. Furthermore, higher education institutions should continually improve the usability, readability, and accessibility of their web-mediated communication to foster stronger relationships with prospective international students. Such improvements are likely to support institutional internationalization efforts while strengthening universities' competitiveness within the global higher education market.

Implications

This study provides important implications for information management and institutional

branding in higher education. The findings, together with the proposed principles for effective web-mediated communication, are particularly valuable for professionals responsible for brand management and internationalisation initiatives. Specifically, the study offers practical guidance for designing web-based informational and promotional content that more effectively engages prospective international applicants. It also advances understanding of prospective students' information practices by identifying their information needs, preferences, and challenges throughout the application process.

Although this research is situated within the context of Chinese higher education, its implications extend to universities in other regions pursuing greater internationalization and competitiveness in the global higher education market, particularly those in Africa.

Historically underrepresented within the international higher education landscape, African universities, like many Asian institutions, increasingly face the challenge of strengthening their global visibility and communicating distinctive institutional value (Maringe and Chiramba, 2020). The web-mediated information management strategies identified in this study provide a transferable framework that can assist these institutions in enhancing their international presence. By strategically utilising digital communication platforms to showcase their unique strengths, African universities can cultivate stronger institutional identities and more distinctive global brands (Oluwasola, 2020). Consequently, this study proposes a practical framework that positions digital infrastructure not merely as a communication channel but as a strategic branding asset for universities across the Global South, including Asia and Africa, seeking to strengthen their position within the global knowledge economy.

The questionnaire and interview findings informed the development of the proposed conceptual relationships and accompanying guidelines for effective web-mediated communication in higher education (see Figure 3). These recommendations are directed primarily towards the "About Us" webpage, given its central role in introducing institutions, strengthening university branding, promoting institutional identity, and supporting international student recruitment. More broadly, the findings highlight several key considerations that higher education institutions should incorporate when designing web-mediated communication strategies. In

addition, the critical case study by Xu and Sit (2025) is recommended as a complementary reference. Their research examines a leading Chinese university with a substantial international student population, namely Beijing Language and Culture University, and provides illustrative webpage screenshots that demonstrate

effective design practices. Integrating the socio-cognitive insights developed in the present study with the practical case analysis of Xu and Sit (2025) offers a more comprehensive and actionable foundation for improving university web communication.

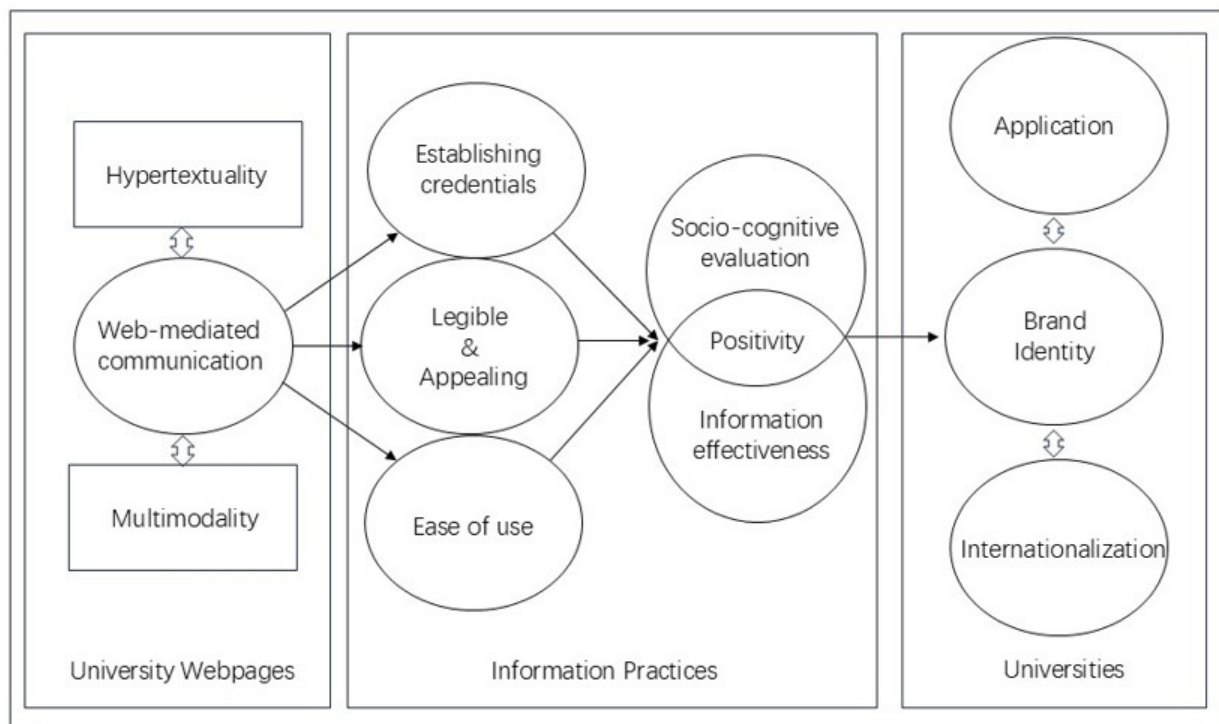


Figure 3: Role of Information Practices between University Webpages and Universities.

Establishing Credentials

Higher education institutions should prioritise background information that strengthens institutional credentials and reinforces university branding. This objective can be achieved by prominently presenting three key dimensions: (1) academic excellence, including research capacity, academic programmes, institutional achievements, facilities, distinguished faculty, and accomplished alumni; (2) international outlook, highlighting global partnerships, international programmes, and the university's international vision; and (3) compelling visual representation, using high-quality imagery to showcase the campus environment, facilities, and geographical advantages that enhance institutional attractiveness. Collectively, these elements constitute the university's "unique selling points", distinguishing the institution from its competitors and strengthening its competitive

position within the global higher education market.

Other forms of background information, including institutional history, social responsibility, and political priorities, also contribute to constructing an image of university excellence (Teo and Ren, 2019). However, the present findings indicate that prospective international applicants place comparatively less importance on such information, particularly within the context of the "About Us" webpage. Therefore, web-mediated communication should prioritise the most relevant, persuasive, and decision-oriented content that effectively captures prospective applicants' attention, encourages further exploration of the institution, and ultimately supports their application decisions.

Legible and Appealing

It is recommended that university web

communication adopt visually accessible and user-centred design principles. Webpages should employ full-colour displays, legible typography, and appropriately sized fonts to maximise readability. Equal attention should be given to the compositional balance between textual and visual elements. Written content should be sufficiently informative without becoming overly concise or excessively detailed, thereby ensuring clarity, credibility, and an enjoyable reading experience.

High-modality and visually salient images, particularly animated visuals where appropriate, should be incorporated to create webpages that are both informative and engaging. The accompanying visuals should be current, authentic, and accurately reflect the university without exaggeration. Rather than serving a purely decorative purpose, images should reinforce the intended messages and effectively complement the accompanying textual content. Preference should be given to visuals that contribute meaningfully to institutional branding by communicating distinctive characteristics and symbolic aspects of the university's identity. In addition, optional multimedia resources, including videos and animations, may be integrated to provide a richer and more interactive experience for users who prefer dynamic web content.

Ease of Use

This aspect relates to website usability, which refers to the extent to which a web system enables users to accomplish their objectives efficiently, effectively, and satisfactorily. Beyond visual appeal, usability encompasses key elements such as navigation, readability, personalisation, and intuitive interface design. The findings indicate that the main webpage should clearly communicate both its content and the available navigation pathways, enabling users to understand what information is provided and where additional resources can be accessed. Rather than presenting excessive information within long drop-down menus, webpages should organise content through well-structured hyperlinks and dedicated subpages that facilitate efficient information retrieval.

Both internal and external hyperlinks should remain functional and direct users seamlessly to relevant content. Navigation menus should be organised around broad thematic categories that present the university's key institutional strengths, particularly those associated with establishing academic credibility and institutional reputation. By contrast, secondary information, such

as administrative structures and leadership details that may convey an overly bureaucratic image, should be relocated to dedicated webpages rather than being prominently displayed within the main gateway. Furthermore, prospective international applicants emphasised the importance of using clear, accurate, and standard English throughout university websites. Although the C9 League universities represent the highest level of internationalization within Chinese higher education, English remains a foreign language in China. Consequently, careful attention to linguistic accuracy, natural expression, and intercultural comprehensibility is essential for ensuring effective communication with international audiences.

Limitations and Directions for Future Studies

The data analysed in this study were drawn from the nine C9 League universities, which are widely recognised as China's leading world-class higher education institutions. Although findings derived from this relatively limited sample should not be interpreted as universally generalisable, they offer meaningful insights into information practices, audience reception, web-mediated communication, and the internationalization of higher education. Future research should employ broader and more diverse datasets to deepen understanding of prospective international applicants' information practices and interactions with web-mediated communication. Such investigations may include other categories of universities within China as well as institutions in different countries that are actively pursuing greater internationalization and market-oriented higher education strategies.

Data Availability Statement

The appendixes including web links, questionnaire, and interview questions of the current study are available in the Dataverse repository: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/Z34NQH>

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