

**The Impact of Brand Attitude on Chinese Students' Private
University Choice in the Context of Social Media**

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Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed

Date July 2023

STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s). Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed

Date July 2023

STATEMENT 2

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for deposit in the University's digital repository.

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Dedication

I am grateful to my family, my husband Dr AipingLuo, my parents and my children for their patience, support, and understanding for the countless hours I have spent studying and writing. I would also like to thank my colleagues and friends for encouraging me to continue my journey.

Abstract

Research problem: Chinese private universities need help with the problems of homogeneous development and low social recognition, which leads to the long-term disadvantage of private universities in the competition for high-quality students. To address these problems, the current study investigated the main influencing factors of brand attitudes in Chinese private universities. At the same time, the study discussed how to actively use social media tools to enhance the brand marketing capability of private universities.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how brand attitudes affect Chinese students' decision-making in choice of private universities by exploring the main factors that influence the formation of students' brand attitudes when they enrol in private universities, and in particular by exploring the role of social media in the formation of brand attitudes. This in turn provides Chinese private universities with practical policy recommendations to enhance their precision marketing, improve the quality of enrolment, and promote the recognition and influence of their brands.

Design/methodology/approach: This study mainly uses the research methods of case study and qualitative analysis. 25 individuals from 12 different private universities were selected to conduct interviews. Within the 25 individuals, there are 12 university managers and 13 first year students. The thematic analysis method was used to discover the main factors influencing brand attitudes and the importance of social media for communicating these factors.

Findings: Candidates' primary considerations for choosing a private university are 'hardware' conditions such as location, living conditions, and campus environment; and 'software' conditions such as majors, employment rate, and university history. Social media is the most important and influential platform to disseminate these factors.

Limitations: This study uses mainly qualitative research, which can only obtain the direction of the influence of a particular factor, but not the size of the influence effect, which makes it difficult to quantitatively rank the degree of leverage of each type of factor more accurately.

Originality/value: This study is the first to develop a conceptual model of brand attitudes applicable to the private higher education market in China. It finds that the new habits of the younger generation of consumers, who have been deeply influenced by social media, also play a role in their decision-making process in choosing a university. This study is of great practical significance for quality improvement of China's higher education, as well as having implications for the development of higher education in other countries.

Keywords:

Private university, Private higher education, Brand attitude, Social media.

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List of Abbreviations

NCEE	National College Entrance Examination
PRC	The People's Republic of China
CNNIC	China Internet Network Information Centre
CSR	Corporate social responsibility

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background

1.1.1 Private Higher Education Is an Important Part of China's Higher Education

Since 1978, higher education in China has grown at a phenomenal pace as the Chinese government adopted a policy of reform and opening-up. At the same time, the domestic education market has opened up to the international community and the domestic private sector (Zhou, 2016). Specific measures include increasing international exchanges, sending more international students to Western countries, and absorbing more international students to study in the country (Li, 2020). In addition, the government has encouraged more bilateral cooperation, which has accelerated the integration of Chinese education into the international market (Lu, 2020). The Chinese government continues to expand enrolment and explore various modes of provision to make higher education more accessible and improve the standard of higher education (Xu and Mei, 2019). At the same time, the government is also experimenting with authorising private capital to establish private universities. The first private university was established in Beijing in 1982 (Zhou, 2014). Over the past four decades, the private sector of higher education has achieved rapid expansion. As of 2021, there were 771 private universities with state-recognised qualifications and 7.91 million students enrolled nationwide. Private universities account for more than one-fifth of the country's undergraduate enrolment; and for 28.15% of the total number of higher education institutions in China (Ministry of Education of PRC, 2021). Private higher education institutions have become an important part of China's higher education.

In general, the process of privatising higher education has raised the overall level of education in Chinese society, and significantly increased the tertiary education coverage rate, which reached 12.5% in 2000 (Yu, 2020). The gross rate of enrolment in higher education in China reached 15% in 2002, indicating higher education has begun to shift from elite schools to mass education. In 2019, the gross rate of enrolment in higher education in China reached 51.6%, exceeding 50% for the first time, indicating that

China has entered the popularization stage of higher education (Ministry of Education of PRC, 2022). The sizeable private universities have contributed to this leap.

1.1.2 Increasing Competition Among Private Universities

Nevertheless, China's private universities face tremendous competitive pressures as they grow rapidly, from three main sources. This pressure comes from government policy regulation on the one hand and competition among private universities in terms of student numbers and faculty on the other. It comes mainly from the following three areas:

The first is government has implemented a mechanism for selecting the superior and eliminating the worst. Although private universities in China are not government-run, there are multiple government policies that intervene in private universities (Zhou, 2014).

In recent years, the Chinese Ministry of Education has required all private universities to pass the undergraduate teaching assessment, organised by the Ministry of Education at a set point in time (Xu and Ren, 2022). Private universities must meet national standards in order to continue operating, and if they fail to pass the assessment the first time, they are required to make corrections and limit their enrolment plans for the year. If they fail to meet the assessment standards the second time, they are required to stop enrolling. This means that private universities are required to invest heavily in quality, faculty, and resources in a short period of time in order to meet the requirements of the policy. Private universities are, therefore, under immense pressure to qualify for continued operation.

The second primary challenge is competition for quality students. A common problem for private universities in China is that they always follow public universities in setting up disciplines and specialisations, although they are different in development conditions. While pursuing scale, private universities are also expanding the number of specialisations. In recent years, in order to attract more students and increase their own popularity, many private universities have sought to pay more attention to social needs to set up majors, form distinctive majors, and continuously increase the investment and curriculum construction of distinctive majors to form a differentiated competitive advantage (Jin and Xu, 2019). Some private universities adopt specialised major settings, such as increasing resource investment in art majors; while others strengthen in-depth cooperation with well-known enterprises, inviting engineers from enterprises to attend

classes and providing students with opportunities for internship and employment. Some private universities hope that building branded programmes can attract quality students to enrol and achieve a better employment rate. Graduates who perform well in the marketplace will help private universities develop a better reputation and brand influence in the community, thus enhancing the university's attractiveness to more students. From homogeneous development to specialised development, this has made the competition between private universities more intense.

The third challenge is posed by competition for faculty resources. Studies show that faculty resources are an important constraint on the development of private universities (Zhou and Zhong, 2018). Private universities operate on a market basis, they can hire experienced executives, well-known professors and scholars in the higher education industry in a new, highly competitive way. In particular, the Ministry of Education's undergraduate assessment has set higher requirements for both the number and structure of faculty members. Therefore, competition among private universities is also manifested in the grab for human resources.

1.1.3 Private Universities in China Face Multiple Constraints and Challenges

Private universities in China have encountered some bottlenecks in the process of development. First, private universities are disadvantaged relative to public universities by state policy. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, substantial government financial investment, preferential policies, and research resources have been directed toward public universities (Sun, 2022). Top public universities have always been able to attract more talented students because of their superior brand equity and low tuition fees. In contrast, private universities lack financial support and subsidies from the government, with student fees being the main source of funding and the institutions having less access to finance. The higher tuition fees will make some quality students shy away from private universities and choose public post-secondary institutions instead of private undergraduate institutions.

Secondly, private universities are restricted in their enrolment plans. Although private universities have market-oriented characteristics, their enrolment targets are not determined autonomously based on their operating ability. The government's education

authorities determine the number of students enrolled in private and public universities in each province, rather than being determined by the market (Li, 2020). The fixed nature of enrolment numbers, which cannot be increased significantly through full market competition, severely limits the interest and strength of private capital investment in private universities and hinders the pace of their development.

Thirdly, the majors in private universities develop slower than that of their public counterparts. Private universities have a relatively short history of development, and all types of majors need to be built from scratch, which takes significant time and financial resources. By 2021, only five private universities in China had the right to award postgraduate degrees (Li, 2021). This shortcoming has severely restricted the competitiveness of private higher education in terms of human resources and the progress of scientific research, keeping private higher education in a subordinate position for a long time.

Fourthly, the homogenisation of private universities is serious. While pursuing the number of students and economic benefits, private universities need long-term planning and characteristic development in professional construction. The positioning in cultivating talents needs to be more precise. They tend to imitate the teaching and research mode of public universities, and private universities' curriculum, teaching methods, and enrolment strategies are similar (Chen, 2017). This results in a situation in which private universities have little distinction in schooling and lack of brand recognition in the enrolment market, which produces fierce competition for attracting outstanding candidates (Wang, 2022).

Fifthly, there are misconceptions and prejudices in the public's perception of private universities. Although private universities have made remarkable progress in the past four decades and have produced many outstanding talents, private higher education is still at an early stage of development, most Chinese families pay more attention to public universities at home and private universities abroad, and some people have persistent misconceptions about private higher education institutions in terms of perception (Liu and Zhu, 2020). For example, they believe that the organisers of private universities are simply chasing profits, thus sacrificing the quality of educational provision. In addition, some employers are prejudiced against graduates from private universities, preferring to

recruit graduates from well-known public universities.

To sum up, among the bottlenecks and challenges faced by private universities, the first three stem from government-policy level and historical factors, which are difficult to solve and change in a short period. In contrast, the latter two reasons can be effectively improved through the efforts of private universities themselves, forming the focus of this study.

1.1.4 Social Media Has Become the Main Channel for Teenagers to Obtain Information

According to CNNIC (2023), as of December 2022, social media users had exceeded 900 million in China, and the rate of internet usage among minors had reached 96.8%. The 2021 National Research Report on Internet Usage by Minors was released; 57.4% of minors use social media for less than half an hour on weekdays, and 22% of minors use social media for more than half an hour (CNNIC, 2022). According to the statistics, the proportion of high school students who regularly watch short videos on social media has reached 65.1%; nearly half of the minors obtain information on major social events through platforms such as Douyin, WeChat, and short videos on B station. The content on social media will have a subtle influence on minors' thoughts and concepts (CNNIC, 2022). The function of social media as a search engine is becoming more pronounced. Compared with traditional search engines, social media apps host a large amount of user-generated content, enabling two-way interaction between information publishers and receivers. Specifically, users from various professional backgrounds can produce specialised content, giving social media a unique advantage in searching for specialised knowledge in certain fields (Liang, Chen and Ren, 2023). This change profoundly affects high school students preparing to apply to college. They are high-frequency social media users and heavily dependent on it, accustomed to searching for information about colleges and sharing their opinions once they are in college. This creates new perspectives and attitudes about the quality and reputation of the university, influencing their enrolment decisions (Munisamy, Mohd Jaafar and Nagaraj, 2014).

On the other hand, from the perspective of university administrators, rapidly evolving social media technologies have compelled them to modify their communication strategies to attract and retain more students. They have transitioned their marketing activities from

traditional media, including print and radio, to new and innovative media such as internet-based websites and mobile-based social media (Salem, 2020). However, private universities' ability to research and apply social media still requires improvement, especially in using social media to enhance the recognition and influence of school brands. Thus, studying how social media affects candidates' brand attitudes is vital for university administrators to adapt their brand strategies in the context of the media revolution in recent years.

1.2 Definition of the Research Problems

Two core questions are addressed in this study. First, the discussion focuses on the determinants that influence students' attitudes towards private university branding in the context of the unique attributes of private universities in China. Private universities in China differ significantly from both public universities in China and private universities abroad. On the one hand, Chinese private universities are not funded by the government (Sun, 2022); on the other hand, the process of running a Chinese private university is controlled by various government policies and is not full autonomous (Zhou, 2014). These two characteristics make the process of forming brand attitudes toward Chinese private universities unique, a phenomenon that has not been adequately and thoroughly investigated in the existing literature. To adapt the existing model of university brand attitudes, this thesis conducts an interview study to deeply explore the main factors influencing brand attitudes toward private universities in China. Further, a general conceptual model of private university brand attitudes is refined.

Secondly, it considers the opportunities and challenges private university brand marketing faces in the context of the widespread use of social media, and how to better apply social media for brand marketing. China has the highest number of social media users in the world, and the brand messages of private universities are therefore likely to be deeply influenced by social media. In particular, the current generation of young people entering university are heavily influenced by social media (CNNIC,2022). Therefore, the second major issue that needs to be addressed in this study is the impact of social media on the formation of brand attitudes in private universities. This focus will make it possible to consider how to optimise branding strategies based on the current social media trends and the preferences and habits of the student body in using social

media, in order to improve the effectiveness of marketing for private universities.

1.3 Theoretical Foundations of Research

The theoretical basis of this study comprises three main aspects: the brand attitude theory-HOE model; the process theory of consumer purchase decisions; and demographic theory. With regard to the first, the brand attitude theory-HOE model, private universities in China are a product of marketisation and can use the more established consumer models available to understand students' university choice behaviour. The researcher therefore applied the HOE model from brand attitude theory, which reveals that consumers' psychology gradually changes as they receive brand information (CFI Team, 2022). The impact of brands on consumers is hierarchical, with different psychological changes existing at different levels, which can be broadly divided into three main stages: cognitive, affective, and behavioural. The HOE model theory is also applicable to the psychological changes and behavioural patterns of students who are preparing to enrol in private universities during this process. Students also go through the process of building up their perceptions of private universities, forming affective dispositions (attitudes) and finally their behaviour in choosing a university.

Secondly, concerning the process theory of consumer purchase decisions, applying for an examination can be seen as a consumer decision-making process for purchasing university services. Stankevich (2017) five-stage model of the consumer purchase process, taking account relevant internal psychological processes (Belch G. and Belch M.,2008), which includes needs identification, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase behaviour, and after-sales behaviour, particularly the stage of attitude formation, was judged to apply to the object of inquiry of this study. This also provides the theoretical basis and research ideas for the study of the formation of candidates' brand attitudes in this research. Brand attitudes becomes an important point of psychological change, directly influencing later decisions.

Thirdly, demographic theory is a marketing theory that aims to help brand marketers attract and retain more consumers. The approach is to study how information about the characteristics of target consumers, such as age, group, psychology, and behaviour, influence their decision to purchase a brand (Loken, 2006) and to make targeted

adjustments to marketing strategies. This study applies this theory to study the demographic characteristics of the group of students who are about to enrol in university. Analysing and summarising the psychological and behavioural characteristics of this group makes it possible to understand and explore how the characteristics they display influence the formation of brand attitudes during the process of enrolling in a private university. At the same time, these group characteristics can also help in the analysis and identification of the main influencing factors for enrolling in private universities. In particular, the researcher focused on the impact of the widespread use of social media on the psychology and behaviour of this generation of young people, as well as on the decision to apply to private universities.

1.4 Research Scope

This study explores the branding of a private university from the perspective of an administrator of an organisation. The researcher of this study is an administrator who has been working in a private university in China for nearly ten years and established a secondary college in 2014 with more than 1,800 students enrolled. Therefore, the researcher of this study has the foundation of deep practical experience to study this issue. Through existing theoretical studies and case studies, the researcher focuses on exploring and discovering the main factors that influence the formation of brand attitudes when candidates apply to private universities. The researcher selected cases from two sources: 12 directors of admission offices and vice presidents in charge of admissions from private universities. They come from 12 different private universities in Wuhan. They have been involved in private university admissions for a long time and have come into contact with many students applying for the exams. At the same time, they have a direct perception and rich experience of the problems Chinese private universities face in the admissions process. The other part of the case consists of 13 first-year students. These students have just undergone the college entrance examination and the university selection process and have finally enrolled in a private university. They have the most direct perception of the brand attitude of private universities. The researcher chose three different types of private universities in Wuhan, China, as the source of the students' schools. This is because Wuhan is one of China's cities with the highest concentration of private universities. In the student sample, we selected five students from the liberal

arts-based school, five from the science and engineering-based school, and three from the arts-based school. The total number of student respondents was 13 from 13 provinces across the country, representing 41% of China's provincial administrative units.

Following the establishment of the first private university in Beijing in 1982, the first private university in Wuhan, Hubei University of Economics and Management, was established in August 1984, which was also one of the first private universities in China. There are 31 private universities in Wuhan with 350,000 students (Wang, 2020). Wuhan's private universities have a long development history and a high overall level, and most have more than 10,000 students, which is typical and representative.

1.5 Research Aim and Research Objectives

This research aims to deepen the understanding of how brand attitudes influence Chinese students' decision-making during their private university selection process. By examining the key determinants shaping students' brand attitudes at the point of enrolment – and particularly focusing on the role of social media in this context – the study seeks to furnish Chinese private universities with actionable policy recommendations. These insights can guide institutions towards more precise marketing strategies, elevate the calibre of enrolments, and augment the recognition and clout of their brands.

The objectives of this study are outlined below:

Objective 1: Construct a comprehensive conceptual framework that analyze the determinant factors of brand attitude for private universities in China. And incorporate the role of social media in the framework.

Objective 2: By employing thematic analysis to evaluate the interview data and integrating the salient findings into the conceptual framework, a brand attitude model tailored for the Chinese private higher education sector will be devised.

Objective 3: Based on the theoretical and case studies, the thesis tries to provide practical suggestions for private universities to enhance their enrollment quality.

1.6 Research Questions

The researcher sought to discover the main factors that influence the formation of students' attitudes towards branding, while investigating the role that social media platforms play in the dissemination of these factors. To this end, the following research

questions were formulated:

- Research Question 1: What are the main factors that influence the formation of students' brand attitudes in the process of applying to private universities?
- Research Question 2: What role do social media platforms play in influencing students' choice of private universities in the dissemination of information about universities?
- Research Question 3: What strategies for private university branding and recruitment should private university administrators implement to maximise the effectiveness of social media marketing?

1.7 Research Methodology

This study employed a combination of case study and qualitative analysis. The primary research used interviews with administrators and first-year students at private universities in China. The research sample was selected from administrators of 12 private universities and 13 first-year students from three private universities in Wuhan. In this study, the researcher implemented a face-to-face interview method in a semi-structured framework and audio-recorded all interview sessions.

The researcher used thematic analysis as the primary method of data analysis. The researcher organises the content of the respondents' responses according to different questions, finding and understanding keywords, ideas, patterns, relationships, and theoretical structures in the range. In the final stage, all divisions are integrated, especially for common themes and perspectives, to form a theoretical finding, while differentiation is illustrated and discussed. The thematic analysis helps produce qualitative analyses to inform policy development (Braun and Clarke 2006).

1.8 Research Significance

Firstly, the theoretical significance of this study lies in establishing a conceptual model of brand attitudes applicable to the Chinese private higher education market. Private universities in China need to be in a stronger position in terms of enrolment, and there is an urgent need to improve this situation through brand recognition and influence. This paper attempts to construct a general conceptual framework from the market attributes of private universities in China by first applying the HOE model, the process theory of

consumer purchase decisions, and the demographic theory. Then, through interviews and analyses with two groups of private university administrators and students, the main factors influencing the formation of students' brand attitudes and the critical role of social media were identified. The researcher revised the conceptual framework and finally established a conceptual model applicable to brand attitudes of private universities in China, and at the same time, it has specific complementary contributions to the existing research literature on university brand attitudes.

Secondly, this study helps private universities to develop a better brand image and social reputation, thus improving their disadvantaged position in the development process. Today, private universities have become an important part of national higher education and play a crucial role in improving the expertise and competitiveness of China's population (Zhou, 2020). By providing individual education at different levels, private universities compensate for the lack of government resources and play an important role in promoting national economic development (Liu and Zhu, 2020). However, there are persistent misconceptions and prejudices about private universities in Chinese society, which severely hinder access to quality students and limit the employment options of private university graduates. Therefore, through the findings of this study, the researcher hopes to provide private university administrators with more effective strategies to strengthen their branding, which could change some of the existing inaccurate perceptions of private universities and provide specific policy recommendations for improving the social reputation of private universities in China.

Thirdly, this study provides ideas and suggestions for private university administrators to use social media more effectively for brand communication. The goal of private university administrators is to attract and retain domestic candidates to choose private universities for higher education. In the past, when traditional media dominated the education market, universities relied on a highly monolithic approach to promotion in the form of print and broadcast media (Oral and Erkilic, 2022). With the development of information technology, internet-based websites and social media applications have become dominant. These new social media have not only broadened the channels through which people seek information but have also changed the way people make decisions about their behaviour. In contrast to the previous situation in which information

was provided in a unidirectional manner from an unquestionably authoritative media, communication today takes place in two directions, with audiences able to participate in the communication process (Qingzhu and Liu, 2020). They can exchange ideas and ask questions with other users through social media platforms. With this change, university administrators must take a flexible view of the communication habits of the younger generation. This is important to change the way university administrators work today, as they use social media fully and efficiently in their marketing campaigns to help build the university's brand.

1.9 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into seven sections as Figure 1-1. The first chapter introduces the background of the study, defines the research problem, and presents the objectives of the study. Chapter 2 present a review of the literature on brand attitude theory, the history and specificity of the development of private higher education, and the influence of social media on Chinese students' choice of university. This framework aims to enhance the theoretical depth of this study. Chapter 4 presents the research methodology of the study. The main focus is on the philosophical foundation of the study, and the methods used to collect and analyse the data. Chapter 5 presents a descriptive analysis and summary of the data from the administrators and student interviews. Chapter 6 provides an in-depth causal analysis of the findings from the data analysis in Chapter 5. The researcher identified that the main factors influencing students' attitudes towards branding could be grouped into hard factors and soft factors, and analysis demonstrated that social media platforms played a crucial role in helping to communicate both types of factors to potential students. Chapter 7 details the conclusions and recommendations of the study. In this chapter, the researcher summarises the main findings and contributions of this study and provides recommendations for private university administrators in terms of branding and recruitment strategies.

Chapter 1 Introduction	
Research Background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Serious homogenisation among private universities, resulting in low brand recognition. ● There are misunderstandings and prejudices in the public's perception of private universities, resulting in weak brand influence. ● Private universities are an essential part of China's higher education. ● Social media has become the main channel for young people to search for information.
Research Aim	<p>To gain a deeper understanding of how brand attitudes affect Chinese students' decision-making in choosing private universities by exploring the main factors that influence the formation of students' brand attitudes when they enroll in private universities, and in particular by exploring the role of social media in the formation of brand attitudes, which in turn provides Chinese private universities with practical policy recommendations to do a better job of precision marketing, improve the quality of enrollment, and enhance the recognition and influence of their brands.</p>
Research Objectives	<p>Objective 1</p> <p>To discuss the main influencing factors of brand attitudes of Chinese private universities and the role of social media in spreading these influencing factors, and finally constructing a general conceptual framework that includes the above elements.</p> <p>Objective 2</p> <p>To conduct a case interview study from the perspectives of two different groups of private university managers and students to explore the main factors influencing the formation of students' brand attitudes towards private universities and the role played by social media in the formation of brand attitudes. By using thematic analysis and integrating the key findings into the conceptual framework, a conceptual model of brand attitudes applicable to the Chinese private higher education market is developed.</p> <p>Objective 3</p> <p>Based on the theoretical and case study findings, summarise the shortcomings of Chinese private universities in brand marketing, especially in social media, and the main directions that can be taken to improve enrolment results. In particular, based on the problems in the case study, the researcher will propose strategies and approaches to serve the private universities' goals of improving enrolment quality and enhancing brand influence.</p>

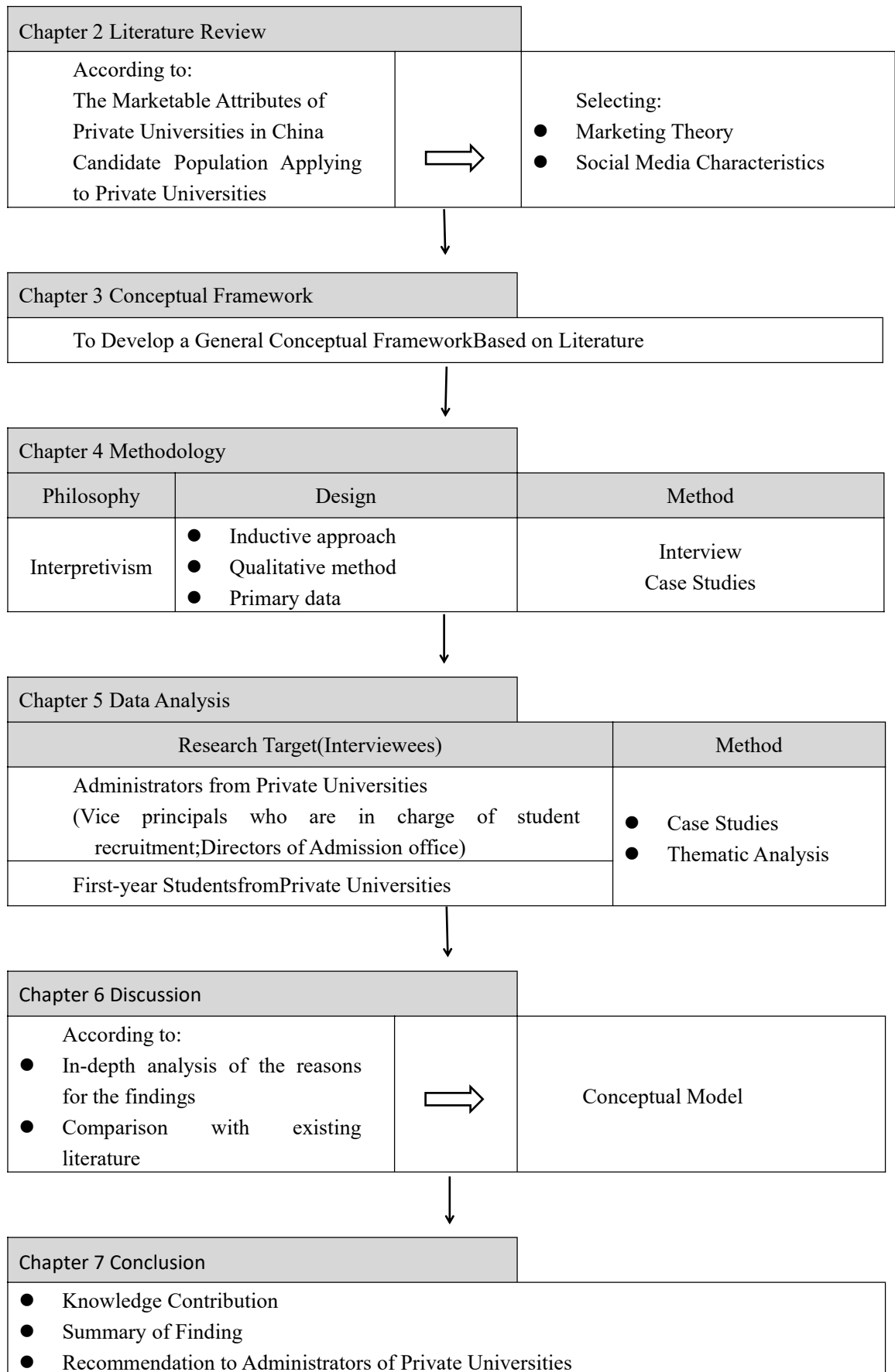


Figure 1-1: Research route map (developed by the researcher).

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The chapter begins with a review of the literature on the concept of brand attitudes, including the classical models, as well as theories of consumer purchase decisions, demographic theories, and important attributes of social media. Next, the chapter provides an overview of the history of private higher education in China, the current state of branding, and the specific characteristics of its marketability. The chapter then summarises the existing literature on the main factors that influence Chinese students' attitudinal decisions towards branding. Finally, the researcher compares the differences between Chinese and Western students' perceptions of university branding.

2.2 Brand Attitude

2.2.1 Definition of Brand Attitude and Related Concepts

Traditionally, brand attitudes have been understood as the quality and reputation of the tangible products in people's lives (such as food, clothing, housing, and other tangible goods) as well as the services they purchase (Bozbay, Karami and Arghashi, 2018). Consumers' attitudes towards brands play an important role in the process of choosing a product or service from a particular institution (Bozbay, Karami and Arghashi, 2018). The choice of a university is no exception to this, with brand playing a crucial role in students' decisions of where to study. Students and their parents tend to choose a university toward the brand of which they have a positive attitude. While there may be no uniform criteria for assessing a university so that students and their parents can make a completely objective decision about their attitude towards the university's brand, their personal experiences, personal interests, and career plans are likely to influence their choice of university (Carnevale, Loureiro and Kabadayi, 2018).

Brand attitudes influence the perception of a brand in the target market substantially. Brand perception involves both rational and emotional elements of consumers, who care deeply about the quality and reputation of the brands they intend to buy (Moon and Byun,

2016). In this way, brand awareness is concerned with the emotional valence of the sentiment a brand evokes in the marketplace. Whether a product or a service, brand awareness is related to consumers' attitudes and emotional preferences. In any case, both brand attitudes and brand perceptions influence Chinese students' choice of university. In the next paragraphs, the scholars first define the concept of brand attitude, then explain the factors that are likely to influence consumers' attitudes towards brands, before finally introducing several models of brand attitude that explain the ways in which brand attitude influences consumers' choice of brands.

Before discussing the various factors that influence consumers' attitudes towards brands, it is necessary to understand the concept of brand attitudes. Different scholars have defined brand attitudes in different ways, giving the concept a variety of connotations and extensions. Attitude is a broad concept that refers to an enduring overall evaluation of an object or issue (Solomon, 2009). Thus, brand attitude can simply be defined as the overall evaluation of a brand by consumers (Martensen et al., 2007). In more specific terms, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) define brand attitude as the consistent response of consumers to an object in a favourable or unfavourable manner. Rossiter (2014) defines brand attitude as the buyer's evaluation of a brand, in the sense of the brand's expected ability to achieve the currently relevant purchase motivation. These two definitions imply that people hold positive or negative attitudes towards brands, depending on their circumstances.

Based on previous research, this study defines brand attitudes as a person's personal evaluation, feelings, and behavioural tendencies towards a brand, whether favourable or unfavourable. It is known from existing research that brand attitudes can be formed and modified, and that there can be both positive and negative brand attitudes towards a brand (Ghorban, 2012). Therefore, in the process of enrolling in a private university, students' brand attitudes include their evaluations, feelings, and behavioural tendencies towards a university, and their attitudes can be either positive or negative. The following section explores the main influences that affect the formation of students' brand attitudes.

2.2.2 Factors Influencing Brand Attitudes

There are many factors that influence consumers' attitudes towards brands. In general,

these factors can be divided into two categories, namely external factors and internal factors. External factors are all factors from external sources that influence consumers' choice of brands. One crucial factor is the sources of information available to consumers in different contexts (Sicilia and Ruiz, 2010). This is a concept that is closely linked to the conditions of human communication in different historical periods. In older times, when communication and production were more limited, brand recognition was achieved through a word-of-mouth effect among consumers. However, with advances in communication technology, brand recognition has become very fast and effective, leading to consumers being easily influenced by the forms of media they use in their lives (Ramesh Kumar and Advani, 2005). At the same time, brand attitudes and brand perceptions are constantly changing, making it more challenging for brand marketers.

The internal factor of brand attitude refers to the internal perception of a brand by consumers due to individualism or personal emotions. For example, when female consumers buy lipstick, they tend to choose different colours according to their personal preferences: some prefer deep red, others prefer mauve. As these factors are themselves highly complex, scholars have defined and described the intrinsic factors differently. For example, Moon and Byun (2016) have identified and distinguished four factors, including consumer loyalty, affective and purchase intentions, and customer satisfaction. These factors influence consumers' purchase decisions for brands in an intrinsic way.

2.2.2.1 Brand Loyalty

According to Jacoby (1971), brand loyalty refers to consumers' favourable attitudes and behavioural responses to a particular brand. Consumers maintain a preference for a particular brand and tend to continue to purchase that brand (Engel and Blackwell, 1982). Aaker (1991) argues that brand loyalty reflects purchase patterns and willingness to switch brands: whether consumers will switch from one brand to another, especially when there is a change in price or product characteristics. Aydin and Özer (2005) argue that factors that influence brand loyalty include corporate image, perceived service quality, brand trust, and switching costs. Brand trust positively influences brand loyalty. Ramesh Kumar and Advani (2005) identified brand attributes, consumers' price awareness and brand trust as three important factors that influence brand loyalty.

Research has shown that there is a strong relationship between brand attitude and brand

loyalty. Rajumesh (2014) suggests that brand attitudes mediate the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty. At the same time, the study provides some managerial insights, such as suggesting that companies create positive brand experiences for consumers and use brand experiences as a weapon to influence consumer preferences for specific brands (Rajumesh, 2014). One of the key findings of Kruger et al. (2013) is that “there is a significant positive relationship between brand romance, brand attitude and mobile phone brand loyalty.” This finding supports the findings of Rajumesh (2014) explained above.

Thus, the previous research indicates that if a person is loyal to a brand, he/she tends to have a positive brand attitude towards that brand, which in turn motivates him/her to purchase that brand’s products or services. The market attributes of a private university allow it to be seen as a commercial entity and therefore, consumer loyalty and brand attitudes towards the university influence the consumer’s (student’s) choice of university. Brand trust is not only a factor that affects brand loyalty but is also directly related to brand attitude. Munuera-Alemán, Delgado-Ballester and Yague-Guillén (2003) define brand trust as a customer’s confidence in the reliability of a brand. High brand trust is therefore associated with reduced perceived risk of buying the brand and higher motivation to buy the brand repeatedly. From Navaneethakrishnan and Sathish’s (2020) detailed explanation of brand trust, the following information can be derived: (1) brand trust is an important factor considered in various forms of relationship marketing; (2) it is the willingness of the average consumer to rely on a brand’s ability to perform its stated function; (3) it is formed over a long period of time by the consumer’s brand interactions, both directly and indirectly; and (4) it depends on the consumer’s expectations and how the brand fulfils this expectation.

A higher level of consumer satisfaction with a brand’s services or products leads to trust in the brand. With brand trust, consumers are willing to trust that a brand will deliver on the promised features and performance. If they are satisfied, trust grows gradually. Conversely, if they are dissatisfied, trust is often broken, either gradually or immediately. Building trust in a brand is a long and difficult process, while destroying it can be easy and happen very suddenly. It is therefore crucial that the quality of the product or service remains consistent with the promise. Research by Carnevale, Loureiro and Kabadayi

(2018) shows that brand trust protects brands from uncertainty, negative information, and consumer scepticism. This shows that brand trust is another important factor that influences and contributes to brand attitude.

2.2.2.2 Brand Emotions

One way of categorising brand emotions is by their endurance and their resistance to change. Brand loyalty, as a factor influencing brand attitudes, is enduring and does not easily change in a short period of time. There are other factors, such as brand emotion, that help build brand attitudes. Usually, brand emotions do not last and do not block change. But they can be translated into trust, which is enduring and resistant to change.

The concept of brand love was introduced by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006). Brand love refers to the positive emotions and feelings that consumers have towards a brand, which includes a positive evaluation of a brand, enthusiasm for the brand, positive emotions towards the brand, and a declaration of love for the brand. This construct demonstrates a strong link between brand love and brand attitudes. Bozbay, Karami and Arghashi (2018) found a relationship between brand love and identity, showing that customers who love a brand and have a strong and unique emotional connection to it tend to maintain a positive attitude towards the brand. When customers maintain a high level of affection for the brand, they are reluctant to switch to other brands. Navaneethakrishnan and Sathish's (2020) study showed a strong positive relationship between brand attitude and brand love.

Research by Walla, Brenner and Koller (2011) has shown that if consumers see a brand name they like, they tend to be activated to a higher degree of pleasure, to show more positive emotions, and to exhibit lower skin conductance and heart rate. These findings suggest that there is also a positive correlation between emotions towards a brand and brand attitudes; if an individual has positive emotions towards a brand, then they not only have positive brand attitudes towards the brand but are also more likely to consume that brand's products or services. Emotional factors are thus a factor that cannot be ignored in influencing brand attitudes, which in turn influence an individual's choice of services and products offered by a brand.

2.2.2.3 Purchase intention.

Purchase intention refers to consumers' preference to buy certain products or services

(Younus, Rasheed and Zia, 2015). Purchase intention refers to consumers' tendency to buy a particular product. Consumers' purchase intention is closely related to their buying behaviour, perceptions and attitudes. Purchase intention is a key factor that can be used to predict the buying process (Ghosh, 1990). There are many internal and external factors that influence consumers' purchase intention, such as consumers' knowledge of the brand, consumers' perceptions of product attributes and service quality, and celebrity endorsements (Younus, Rasheed and Zia, 2015). Arslan and Altuna (2010) argue that brand image has a significant impact on consumers' purchase intention. Chi, Yeh and Yang (2009) argue that product quality is a key factor influencing purchase intentions. They found that for the same price, consumers are more likely to buy the product if the quality of the product is better.

Purchase intention is another important factor that influences and contributes to attitudes towards brands. Many studies have shown that these two factors are closely related to each other and that they influence each other in many ways. Here, reference is made to two existing studies that explain how purchase intentions influence brand attitudes. He and Qu's (2018) research shows that brand attitudes play a key mediating role in social media advertising in activating consumers' purchase intentions and promoting marketing. If positive consumer attitudes towards the brand are not established, purchase intentions will not be activated.

The results of Shekhar and Jaidev's (2017) study suggest that brand attitudes influence consumers' purchase intention, being "a strong predictor of purchase intention" (Shekhar and Jaidev, 2017, p.449). From these two studies, it can be found that a strong purchase intention implies maintaining a very positive attitude towards a brand. Weak purchase intention means that consumers are not so positive about a brand. Therefore, purchase intention plays a crucial role in developing brand attitudes and should be taken into account when discussing consumers' attitudes towards brands.

2.2.2.4 Consumer Satisfaction

Another important factor related to brand attitude is customer satisfaction. Quantitative research by Rivera, Bigne and Curras-Perez (2016) suggests that brand attitude mediates the relationship between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and consumer satisfaction. The theoretical model of the relationship is shown in Figure 2-1

below(Rivera, Bigne and Curras-Perez, 2016).

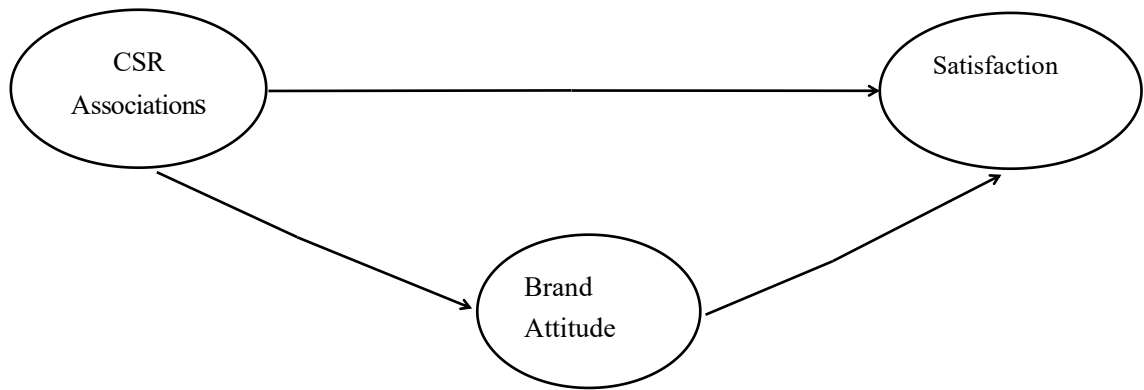


Figure 2-1: The relationship between CSR, brand attitude and consumer satisfaction (Rivera, Bigne and Curras-Perez, 2016).

Baron and Kenny’s (1986) study showed that brand attitude does have a mediating effect on the impact of CSR on consumer satisfaction. Moon and Byun’s study also showed that consumer satisfaction has a significant effect on brand attitude (Moon and Byun, 2016). The first reason for this is that, if consumers are satisfied with a service/product, they tend to develop a positive attitude toward the brand and to choose the brand again in the future. Secondly, positive attitudes are usually generated on the premise that consumers are already satisfied with the services and products offered by the brand; and thirdly, making consumers satisfied can intuitively be taken to be key to building positive brand attitudes. Thus, consumer satisfaction constitutes another key factor in the construction of attitudes towards a brand.

2.2.3 Brand Attitude Models

2.2.3.1 The Rossiter–Percy Model of Brand Attitudes

The above discussion has shown us that brand attitude is a complex concept that can be studied from different perspectives and in different dimensions. In this section, several important models of brand attitudes are discussed, and used as the theoretical framework for this study, beginning with that of Percy and Rossiter (1992) (see Table 2- 1 below). Percy and Rossiter (1992) begin by explaining the four main characteristics of brand attitudes:

- Brand attitudes depend on current and relevant motivations and may change as consumer motivations change.

- Brand attitudes include both cognitive and emotional components, guiding behaviour and emotions, and motivating and inspiring behaviour.
- The cognitive component may consist of a specific set of interests and beliefs. These are not attitudes in themselves, but rather the reasons for the creation of brand attitudes.
- Brand attitude is a relative construct. In almost all product categories, people are looking for brands that are more likely to satisfy potential motivations than alternative brands. If a behavioural motivation exists, buyers will choose the brand that best matches their motivation (Percy and Rossiter, 1992).

Developing from these insights, Percy and Rossiter (1992) proposed a model of brand attitude strategy based on the type of motivation and type of decision based on their understanding of brand attitudes.

Table 2-1: The Rossiter–Percy brand attitude model (Bozbay, Karami and Arghashi, 2018).

Type of Decision	Informational (Negative Drive Reduction)	Transformational (Positive drive enhancement)
Low Involvement (Trial experience sufficient)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • aspirin • light beer • detergents • routine industrial products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • soda • regular beer • snacks and dessert • cosmetics
High Involvement (Search and conviction required prior to purchase)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • housing • professional calculators • cars (print) • new industrial products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • vacations • fashion clothing • cars (television) • corporate image

According to Percy and Rossiter (1992), brand attitudes contain both cognitive and affective components, in the form of consumer involvement and consumer motivation. Involvement is the cognitive aspect of brand attitude and can be divided into high- and low-involvement. Low-involvement refers to sufficient trial experience, while high-involvement refers to the need to search for information and be convinced before making a purchase decision (Percy and Rossiter, 1992). The level of involvement is related to the level of risk perceived by the consumer. Motivation, as the affective component of brand attitudes, is divided into two types. The first type is information desire. Consumers are driven by a need for information to satisfy a negative behavioural

motive. Negative behavioural motivations include problem elimination or resolution, problem avoidance, incomplete satisfaction, mixed methods avoidance, and normal consumption (Percy and Rossiter, 1992). The second type is conversion desire, whereby consumers are driven by a desire to convert in order to satisfy positive behavioural motives. Positive behavioural motivations include sensory gratification, intellectual stimulation and social approval (Percy and Rossiter, 1992). Based on these categories of brand attitudes, Percy and Rossiter (1992) proposed four different brand attitude strategies: low-involvement/informational, low-involvement/transformational, high-involvement/informational, and high-involvement/transformational.

The Rossiter–Percy Brand Attitude Model can provide a conceptual framework for understanding the cognitive and affective components of brand attitudes. It can help guide the development of effective communication strategies based on consumer engagement levels and motivations. This study focuses on exploring how brand attitudes influence Chinese students’ choice of private universities and provides suggestions for private universities’ approaches to their branding. The Rossiter–Percy model helps to understand Chinese students’ brand attitudes as consumers in the Chinese higher education market and to develop effective communication and branding strategies for private universities. According to the Rossiter–Percy model, choosing a university as a brand involves the choice of educational services offered by the university, which represents a high-involvement/transition situation. This is because, when choosing universities and educational services, students tend to search extensively for information before making a decision. They seek to satisfy positive behavioural motives such as sensory gratification, intellectual stimulation, and social recognition. Therefore, private universities should adopt a high-involvement/transformation brand attitude strategy.

It is nevertheless worth noting that the Rossiter–Percy model is still deficient in some respects. It only focuses on how to develop communication strategies based on the two components of consumers’ brand attitudes, i.e., perception and emotion. However, this model is inadequate in answering what are the factors affecting the consumers’ involvement and motivation. It is important to know these factors so as to provide recommendations for marketing strategy (Zhao et al., 2019). In this study, the researcher tries to find out what are the main factors that affect the students’ brand attitude of

private universities and provide suggestions for universities managers. Therefore, the researcher didn't choose this model as the base of conceptual model.

2.2.3.2 The He and Qu Model of Brand Attitudes

He and Qu (2018) studied the impact of advertising appeals on purchase intentions in a social media environment and developed a model to explain the various factors that influence brand attitudes. Their approach involved combining Hovland's (1959) standard attitude change model with Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) theory of rational behaviour and planning. The model (illustrated in Figure 2-2 below) explains how advertising appeals influence purchase intentions by shaping consumers' attitudes towards brands. In this model, advertising appeals are considered external stimuli. Advertising claims can influence consumers' attitudes towards the advertised brand, and brand attitudes can directly influence purchase intentions. Furthermore, the model divides advertising appeals into emotional and rational appeals. Advertisements with rational claims encourage consumers to purchase products based on information such as quality, price, and performance, while advertisements with emotional claims encourage consumers to purchase products based on emotions and perceptions (He and Qu, 2018).

The model also divides brand attitudes into brand emotion and brand trust and suggests that these two constructs play a mediating role in the influence of advertising appeals on purchase intentions. This model can be used to understand how advertising appeals affect consumers' purchase intentions through brand attitudes. This is because the aim of this study is to investigate the role of brand attitudes in Chinese students' choice of private universities. The model is thought to help explain the relationship between brand attitudes and purchase intentions and how external stimuli such as advertising can be used to change Chinese students' attitudes towards private universities.

However, the model has some drawbacks concerning the information on brand attitude. There are more and more new channels other than advertisement for consumers to receive information related with goods or services which may affect brand attitude (Ferencová, et al., 15). Especially, more and more consumers rely on social media to receive information which can satisfy their more personal needs. Lots of companies only promote their products by social media (Gryshchenko and Niesheva, 2013). There are interaction between sellers and buyers with the help of social media, which make it

completely different with traditional advertisement in the formation of brand attitude.

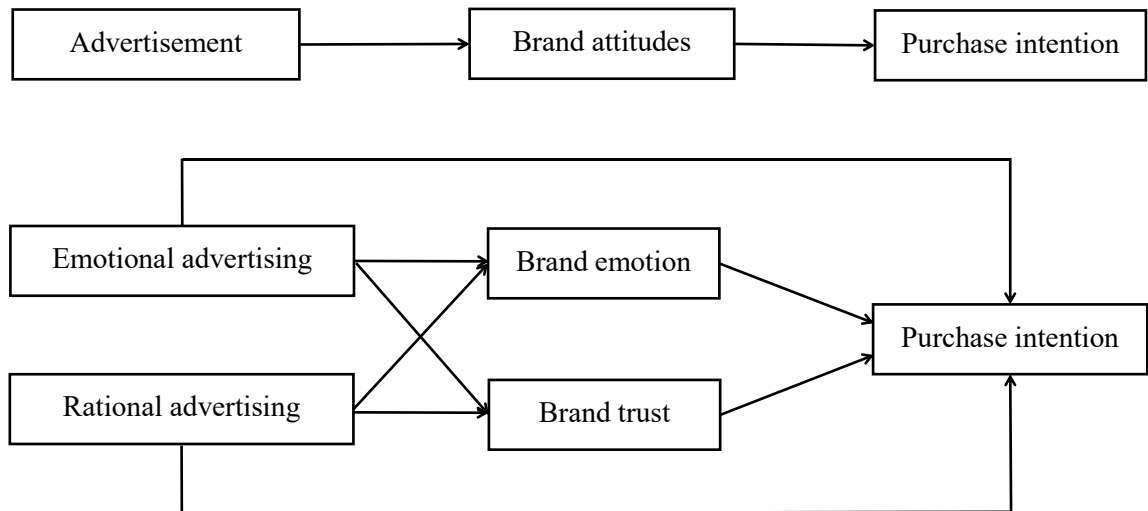


Figure 2-2: A theoretical model for brand attitude and related factors (He and Qu, 2018).

Referring to existing research and models (He and Qu, 2018; Rivera, Bigne and Curras-Perez, 2016) and taking into account the above discussion and the purpose of this study, a new model of brand attitudes is proposed by the researcher, as illustrated in Figure 2-3 below. The model incorporates the findings of a few existing studies and identifies a number of essential components, elements, and factors that are important for brand attitudes. The top line in the diagram indicates that regardless of the form of communication, the consumer receives external information that influences purchasing intentions by changing and shaping brand attitudes. The lines below show the measures that are typically used to build brand attitudes in the consumer's awareness, such as the provision of satisfactory services and consumer emotions and purchase intentions. In the initial stages, loyalty, emotion, and willingness are often fragile. There may be purchases based on fragile loyalty, emotion, or intent. After the purchase, if the consumer is satisfied with the service or product, there may be further purchases. If this virtuous cycle continues, a positive brand attitude will develop and grow. Conversely, if the consumer is dissatisfied with the service or product, a negative brand attitude will develop and secondary purchase behaviour towards the brand's service or product will often not occur.

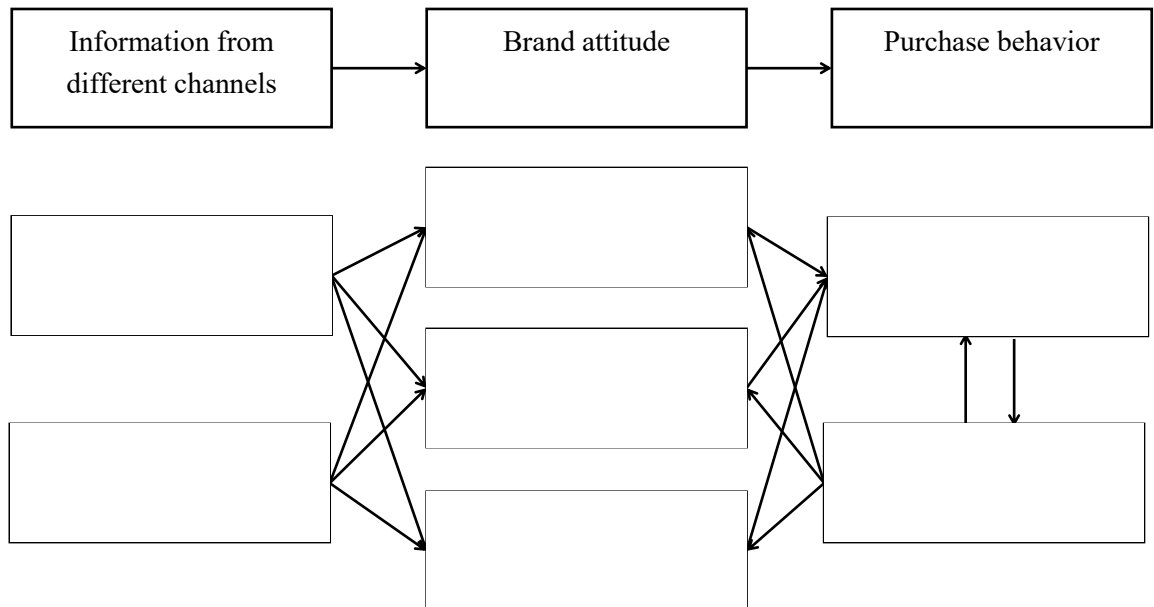


Figure 2-3: A modified model for brand attitude and related factors (developed by the researcher).

2.2.3.3 HOE Model

(1) Evolution of the HOE model

The HOE model identifies brand awareness as a fundamental factor influencing consumers' attitudes towards brands. Brand awareness is a very rich term, ranging from perceptions of the reliability and quality of a brand to a consumer's emotional attachment to it. The perception of a brand begins with the marketing information available to consumers, which is the basis for their evaluation of the brand (Grewal, Hardesty and Iyer, 2004). Only when consumers have developed a positive attitude towards the perceived quality of a brand can they make a final purchase decision (Hasim, Shahrin and Wahid, 2020). In this way, there is a close relationship between consumers' perceived quality of a brand and their willingness to buy.

People's intention to purchase a product or service is determined by their perceptions and attitudes towards the brand (Omar et al., 2020). This is precisely the intrinsic reason why most Chinese students choose private universities. During these four decades, many private universities have been established in China. However, the quality and reputation of these universities varies, and student perceptions and attitudes have had a huge impact on these brands. As with other organisations, the organisational reputation of private universities in China is assessed by students' own perceptions and impressions. According to Jie and Chaipinchana (2022), consumers' perceptions of brands are

influenced by a range of factors. These factors include both the consumers' own subjective factors and the marketing strategies chosen by the brand provider.

Various theoretical models have been applied to deal with students' brand awareness. The HOE model, which stands for "hierarchy of effects," explains the relationship between brand influence and buyers' attitudes towards the brand. The HOE model describes how consumers are influenced by advertising at different levels of perception of a product or service. The model has gone through several iterations in its history. The earliest version dates to the AID model created by E. St Elmo Lewis in 1898, which focused on Attention, Interest and Desire in order to attract potential customers. However, it was not until the 1960s that this model was fully developed. Some of the better-known models of the time included Merrill Devoe's AIDMA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Memory, and Action), Russell H. Colley's ACCA (Awareness, Comprehension, Conviction, and Action) and Everett M. Rodgers' AIETA (Awareness, Interest, Evaluation, Trail and Adoption) models. The most recent HOE models include Ivan L. Preston and Esther Thorson's Association Model and the Extended Association Model, which includes a broad understanding, perception, and identification of products/services.

In general, all these models focus on different levels of customer recognition and emotional evaluation of a product or service, ranging from lower levels of awareness to ultimate acceptance. The theory reached a stage of development comparable to the current version in the 1960s as the relationship between the product market and the end customer evolved. HOE scholars were represented by Robert J. Lavidge and Gary Steiner, who in their 1961 article entitled "A Model for Predictive Measurements of Advertising Effectiveness" used the model to study the complex advertising strategies used by marketers to build brand awareness and recognition. The two co-authors categorised the model as a measure of advertising effectiveness. The model is illustrated in Table 2-2 below.

Table 2-2: A model for predictive measurements of advertising effectiveness (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961).

ADVERTISING AND ADVERTISING RESEARCH RELATED TO THE MODEL			
<i>Related behavioral dimensions</i>	<i>Movement toward purchase</i>	<i>Examples of types of promotion or advertising relevant to various steps</i>	<i>Examples of research approaches related to steps of greatest applicability</i>
CONATIVE —the realm of motives. Ads stimulate or direct desires.	PURCHASE	Point-of-purchase Retail store ads Deals “Last-chance” offers	Market or sales tests Split-run tests
	CONVICTION	Price appeals Testimonials	Intention to purchase Projective techniques
AFFECTIVE —the realm of emotions. Ads change attitudes and feelings.	PREFERENCE	Competitive ads Argumentative copy	Rank order of preference for brands Rating scales Image measurements, including check lists and semantic differentials
	LIKING	Status, glamor appeals	Projective techniques
COGNITIVE —the realm of thoughts. Ads provide information and facts.	KNOWLEDGE	Announcements Descriptive copy Classified ads Slogans Jingles Sky writing	Information questions Play-back analyses Brand awareness surveys
	AWARENESS	Teaser campaigns	Aided recall

According to Lavidge and Steiner’s (1961) illustration, the HOE model reveals three stages of consumer perception of a brand, which the authors distinguish as consumer thinking, feeling, and behaviour as shown in Figure 2-4. These three stages are the gradual changes that occur as consumers learn more about the brand, based on their psychological perceptions (CFI Team, 2022). The level of influence is based on the behavioural psychology of the customer and can be broadly divided into three main stages, cognitive, affective, and behavioural.

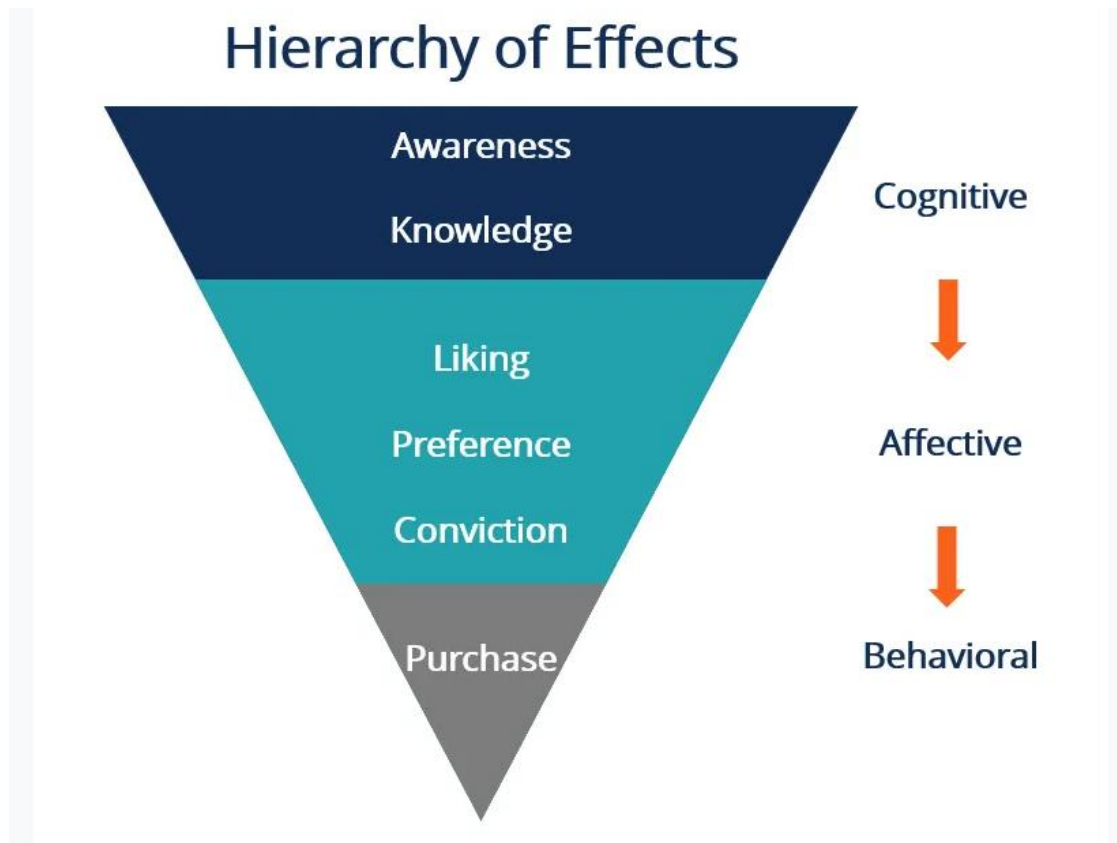


Figure 2-4: An illustration of the HOE model (CFI Team, 2022).

The model suggests that consumers' perceptions and attitudes towards selecting a brand are generally shaped by three levels of influence. These levels, which progress from superficial to in depth, are shaped by brand advertising. This model involves three stages of the cognitive process through which consumers select a brand. The first stage is perception, referring to the basic knowledge of a brand. For advertisers, this denotes the task of informing consumers about a product or service, helping them form brand recognition. The advertisement message may encompass various aspects, including the brand's name, price, features, and other crucial elements that consumers need to understand. The second stage, emotion, signifies the emotional preference for the brand. This stage illustrates how customers develop emotional goodwill and acceptance of a product or service under the influence of advertising (Gilaninia and Ghashlagh, 2018). The final stage, action, represents the decision to purchase the brand (Saputra, Indarini and Margaretha, 2020). As per the HOE model, this is the decisive phase of customer choice. Importantly, the final stage of buying a brand is not reached abruptly; rather, it is achieved by progressively influencing the customer through the preceding stages of advertising. In essence, it is only after the consumer has traversed the initial stages of

brand awareness and emotion that they can make a purchasing decision. These three stages cumulatively demonstrate a deepening psychological acceptance of the brand.

Lastly, the HOE model addresses the impact of consumer perceptions of brand awareness and brand quality. Past research indicates that consumers tend to make the final decision to purchase a well-known brand (Wu et al., 2014). This feeling, although simple and naive, is a potent factor in making the final decision. Verma (2020) highlights that most consumers rely on this naive feeling to save time and exert minimal effort in brand perception, which typically requires substantial time and effort. This brand perception is often intimately tied to the public image and reputation of the brand – a factor that private universities in mainland China must focus on to attract and retain domestic students.

(2) Advantages and disadvantages of the HOE model

The HOE model has two significant advantages. The first advantage is that it explores the role of advertising on psychological and attitudinal changes in purchasers. Secondly, the model provides a theoretical idea of the psychological changes in purchasers that advertisers can purposefully use to design and implement their branding strategies. However, a limitation of the theory is the ignorance or negligence of exposure to the wide range of contextual noise to which consumers are exposed by the wide range of information beyond advertising (Žagar, 2022). In any case, they do not usually rely on a single advertisement, and will make the final decision to purchase a brand on the basis of a variety of inputs. Instead, consumers are always in the process of either actively seeking information or passively being exposed to limited sources of information. It is the combined result of all information that influences their final purchase decision.

While the HOE model is widely regarded as having a variety of advantages, some significant disadvantages have also been identified. In general, the model leads to a conventional mindset for advertisers, reducing flexibility and creativity in brand management. In addition, the HOE model places too much emphasis on the ever-changing characteristics of consumers, which can lead to the risk of brands losing their core values. Furthermore, the model has also been criticised for neglecting the management of consistency and standardisation of brands in the age of globalisation (CFI Team, 2022).

2.3 The Consumer's Purchasing Decision

In this section, the concept of consumer purchase behaviour will first be explained. From the modified model formulated in Figure 2-3, consumers receive information through advertisements or other information that will influence the final purchase through brand attitude. The establishment of brand attitudes is a critical factor in motivating consumers to make a purchase. The introduction of the Consumer Purchase Decision Process Theory in this part can once again verify the vital influence of information gathering on the formation of brand attitudes, and the theory explains explicitly the essential links to the whole purchase process.

2.3.1 The Process of Consumer Purchase Decisions

Asshidin, Abidin and Borhan (2016) define buying as “the decision-making process and behaviour of people involved in the purchase and use of a product.” However, this definition is overly general and lacks a substantial connection to the modified model introduced in this study. The definition of business curriculum provided by Shawn Grimsley (2020) seems to better align with this study's premise.

Consumer buying behaviour encapsulates the attitudes, preferences, intentions, and decisions that consumers exhibit when purchasing a product or service (Grimsley, 2020). Considering this study's objectives and the preceding discussion, the following definitions are proposed for the study.

Buying behaviour represents the process through which consumers make a series of decisions and take corresponding actions during the purchasing, using, and disposing of services and products. This process encompasses numerous factors, including consumer emotions, attitudes, and intentions, as well as loyalty and satisfaction. This definition captures all aspects of brand attitude previously discussed. These elements contribute to the consumer's purchase decision-making process. The consumer's purchase decision is a process; hence, it is also often referred to as the consumer's buying process. Different variations of the consumer purchase decision processes exist, depending on the specific circumstances. This section situates the factors related to brand attitudes within the context of consumer purchase theory and elaborates on their influence on consumer

purchasing behaviour.

2.3.2 Model of the Consumer Purchase Decision Process

Stankevich (2017) offers an insightful critique of the consumer decision process, which facilitates the identification of a rough outline of the consumer purchase decision process. This aids in recognising the role of each brand attitude influencing factor in the process. Stankevich discusses both traditional and contemporary models of the purchase decision process from both external and internal perspectives (Stankevich, 2017). Given the broad diversity of real business transaction scenarios and the differing perspectives of researchers, the models mentioned in Stankevich's article exhibit considerable variation. From a prototype theory perspective, all these models are depictions of real-world business transaction scenarios. With these models as a reference and in response to the needs of this study, it is apparent that the traditional 'five-stage model of the consumer purchase process' (Stankevich, 2017) can serve as a fundamental theoretical framework. This framework underscores the decision-making process and aids in explicating the influence of the above-mentioned brand attitude factors. The traditional five-stage consumer purchase process model is illustrated in Figure 2-5 below.

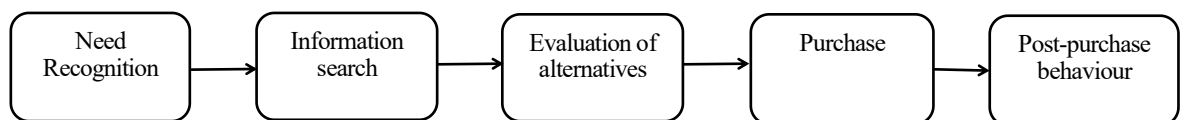


Figure 2-5: Five-stage model of the consumer buying process/purchasing decision process (Stankevich, 2017, p.10).

In this model, the first stage of the consumer purchase process is needing identification, during which the consumer recognises a need that can be fulfilled by a product or service (Stankevich, 2017). The second stage is the information search, where consumers gather information about the product from diverse sources (e.g., friends, family, advertisements, and other consumers). Their search method partially depends on the consumption problem they encounter. Should they face a complex consumer problem, they are more likely to invest more time searching for an extensive range of information. In this regard, selecting a university is deemed a complex purchase problem for Chinese students, requiring them to conduct comprehensive research and evaluation to make an informed decision. The third stage is the evaluation of alternatives (Stankevich, 2017), wherein the

consumer appraises alternatives and their appeal based on a spectrum of attributes that deliver the desired benefits. The fourth stage, purchase, sees the consumer forming an intention to buy the most preferred brand (Stankevich, 2017); it is during this stage that the purchase transpires. The final stage, post-purchase behaviour, involves the consumer assessing their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the purchase, significantly impacting their likelihood of repurchasing. To maintain focus, this study does not explore post-purchase behaviour.

The Consumer Decision Process Model can serve as one of the theoretical frameworks for this study, as it breaks down the entire decision-making process into stages. This model can aid in elucidating the process through which Chinese students select private universities in the Chinese higher education market. However, this model does have its limitations. It presupposes that consumers predominantly purchase rationally, undergoing all five stages of the decision-making process. Nonetheless, some consumers may engage less with the purchase, spending minimal time searching for information or evaluating alternatives.

Rani (2014) contends that numerous factors influence the consumer decision-making process. Environmental factors encompass culture, social status, family, and purchasing situation, while personal factors include consumer knowledge, motivation, involvement, attitude, and personality. In this study, the emphasis is on how brand attitudes impact the consumer decision-making process. Prior research has examined the effect of brand attitudes on this process. Kotler and Bliemel (2001) argue that when making a purchase decision, consumers first acquire knowledge and awareness of a brand, followed by forming positive or negative attitudes towards it. Ultimately, their purchase or rejection of the brand is based on this attitude. Jung and Seock (2016) investigated how corporate reputation influences brand attitudes and purchase intentions, discovering that consumers' attitudes towards brands significantly affected their purchasing decisions. In China, Wu and Lo (2009) scrutinised the factors influencing consumers' purchasing decisions for extensions, finding that consumers' attitudes towards the core brand notably affected their purchase of extensions. This research underscores the rationale for brand attitude formation and the factors influencing this process. Belch G. and Belch M. (2008) made one step further and discussed relevant internal psychological processes for

each stage of the model as Figure 2-6:

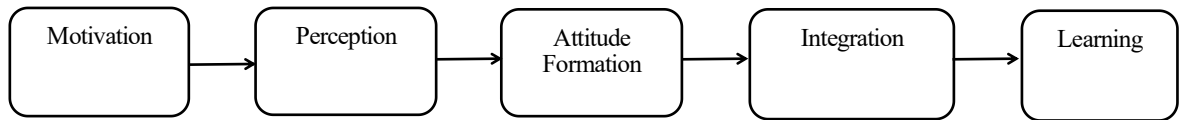


Figure 2-6: An internal psychological process for HOE model (Belch and Belch, 2008).

In order to make it clearer where brand attitudes fit into this process and to represent the stages of key psychological change for consumers, the researcher integrated above two models as Figure 2-7. The integrated model introduces “attitude formation” as an important stage of the internal psychological process. In this way, brand attitude is accurately positioned in the model to explain its influence on students’ choice of university in mainland China.

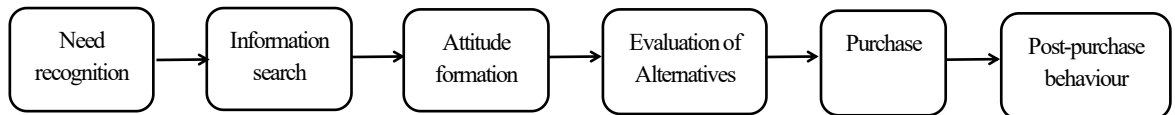


Figure 2-7: A six-stage model of the purchasing decision process/consumer buying process (developed by the researcher).

2.3.3 The Application of Brand Attitudes and Related Concepts in the Purchase Decision Process

The brand attitudes and associated factors described above can be incorporated into the model to facilitate a discussion of their impact on purchase decisions. The model has six stages. Brand attitudes can be situated in the third stage of “attitude formation” (brand attitudes are attitudes that have already formed), consumer loyalty and sentiment can be located initially in the second stage of “information search”, and purchase intention can be present in both “consumer satisfaction” and in the final stage of “post-purchase behaviour”. Like the purchase of a tangible product, the choice of a university unfolds in the same psychological process. Here, candidates’ evaluations are accompanied by their perceptions of the university’s brand value based on their personal perceptions and experiences (Osman, 2008).

Brand attitudes and associated factors play a role in the purchase decision process. Purchase intentions can function from stage one to stage four. Once entering stage one, the purchase intention persists from stage one to stage four until the purchase behaviour is completed. In stage one, the consumer develops a general intention to buy when they

realise they need to purchase a certain product or service. To purchase a product or service that satisfies their needs, the consumer must clarify their intention through an information-seeking phase, where they consult a variety of information sources. This goes beyond the information gained in marketing or promotional activities through channels like viewing advertisements, interacting with sellers, etc. They also recall information that has been stored or even internalised – their loyalty, their emotions, and their trust in a particular brand (Aaker, 1991). The discussion in section 2.2.2.1 suggests that consumer loyalty leads to positive brand attitudes that prompt consumers to consume the brand's services or/and products, and section 2.2.2.2 leads us to believe that there is a positive connection between consumer sentiment and brand attitudes. In this case, it is only natural that consumer loyalty and emotional factors are activated and utilised in the second phase of the information search.

The primary purpose of activating brand loyalty, positive emotions, and other related information is to form brand attitudes, clarify the consumer's overall purchase intentions, and evaluate potential choices of services and products. After completing the first four stages of the purchase process, the consumer's purchase intention becomes tangible and clear, and they can make the choice they desire (Aaker, 1991). Based on this clear and specific purchase intention, the consumer decides to purchase the service or product and puts this decision into action. At this juncture, they enter the fifth stage of the purchase process. After procuring the service or product, the consumer uses it, triggering a feeling of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Satisfaction is thus positioned at the final stage of the buying process.

The above discussion of relevant research suggests that factors such as consumer loyalty, trust, customer satisfaction and brand attitudes are positively correlated with purchase intentions. These factors also tend to be persistent and resistant to change after they have been formed or established. As a result, they can repeatedly influence consumer purchase behaviour. Of course, these factors and brand attitudes can be modified if sufficient new information is available, and in exceptional cases they can be completely destroyed in a short period of time (Li and He, 2013). The variability of these factors and brand attitudes is not the focus of this study and is not discussed in detail here. The above discussion provides the basis for an exploration of the factors and brand attitudes that may influence Chinese students' university choices.

2.4 The Demographic Theory

2.4.1 Theoretical Definitions

Demographic theory is a marketing theory that is becoming increasingly important for brand marketers to attract and retain more consumers (Schmitt, 2012). This theory involves the study of various information related to consumers' personal characteristics (such as age, gender, socioeconomic bracket, psychological and behavioural characteristics, etc.) in order to influence their decision to purchase a brand (Loken, 2006). This is one of the theoretical foundations used when analysing the purchasing behaviour of Chinese students when choosing a private university in the current study.

With the increased use of social media, private universities in China have taken full advantage of social media platforms to play an important role in influencing students in the country. Currently, China's youth are considered a generation that has grown up with the internet, which means that internet-based information and social media communications have a strong appeal to these students. There is no doubt that domestic students have a strong interest in browsing information on the internet and social media platforms (Su, 2012). However, this characteristic of domestic students has been integrated into a larger framework of purchase psychology or behaviour known as online shopping demographic characteristics, which were summarised by Park and Kim (2003) in their study of the impact of online advertising on consumer purchase behaviour (Figure 2-8). In their survey, they focused on the gender, age, time to use the internet and occupation of respondents. They verified that information satisfaction and relational benefit could influence purchase behaviour through site commitment.

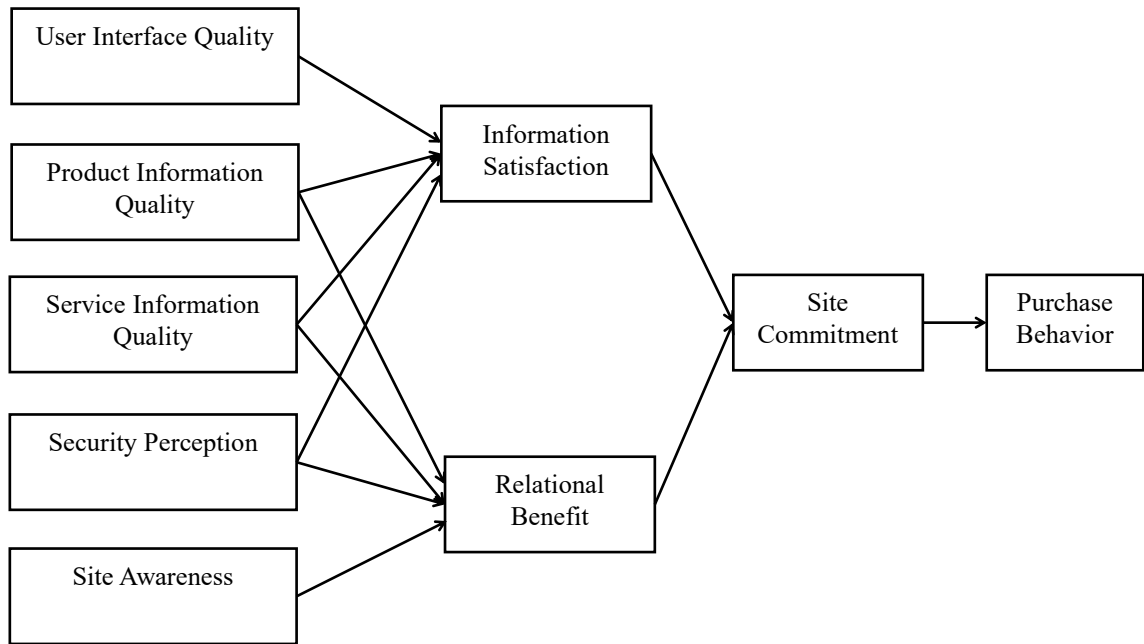


Figure 2-8: A model for the consumers’ relational purchasing behaviour in an online shopping context (Park and Kim, 2003).

The researcher integrated the findings of Park and Kim (2003) and the definition of Schmitt (2012) to obtain a model of the demographic factors influencing candidates’ behaviour in choosing a university in the context of social media, as shown in Figure 2-9. The demographic factors in the figure are all intrinsically linked in some way.

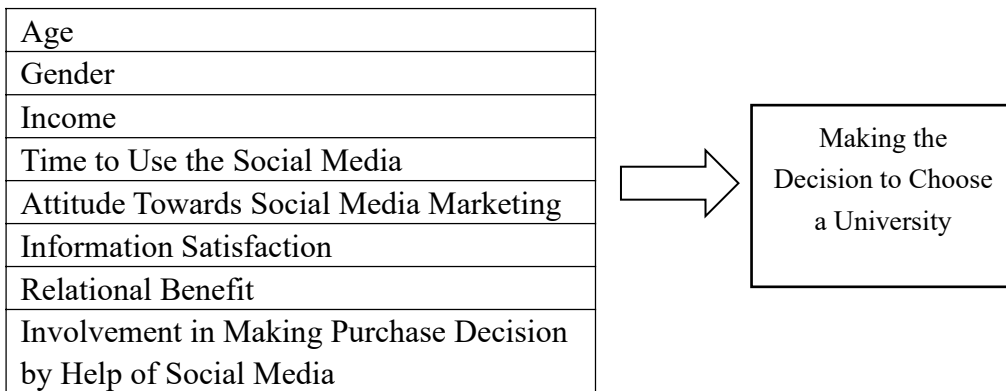


Figure 2-9: A model of the demographic factors influencing candidates’ behaviour in choosing universities in the context of social media (developed by the researcher).

The key influencing factors are discussed below:

(1) **Age:** The target demographic for this study comprises high school students preparing for college enrolment. These individuals hail from a generation that matured during a period characterized by pervasive internet and social media use. Given their frequent

internet usage, their affinity and reliance on social media are notably pronounced. As a result, they are likely more receptive to marketing efforts on these platforms.

(2) **Income:** A student's personal income level is intimately tied to their propensity to use the internet as an informational resource. Given that most high school students in the country lack financial independence, they often do not possess the fiscal resources to garner information from private universities through direct, more expensive methods like fieldwork (Su, 2012). Consequently, online searches emerge as their most accessible and economical means of acquiring the knowledge they seek (Su, 2012).

(3) **Information Satisfaction, Relational Benefit:**Section 2.3.2, titled "Consumer Purchase Process Decision-Making Process Model," underscores the pivotal role of information-seeking in attitude formation. The current younger generation is deeply entrenched in a social media-centric culture, predisposing them to assimilate online information without discernible reservations (Zhang and Zhang, 2017). Social media platforms satiate their information needs effectively, offering a plethora of content types, including images, text, videos, and facilitating constant interaction. Moreover, several social media platforms frequented by Chinese students are user-friendly and reliable. The platforms' provision to post comments or queries anonymously further safeguards the students' privacy.

Given their propensity for digital communication tools, social media content considerably sways their purchasing decisions (Liu, 2004). Hence, Chinese students are generally inclined to place trust in, and employ, social media content as a crucial aid for making significant brand purchase choices (Liu, 2004). Recognising this behavioural inclination of Chinese youth is instrumental for crafting online marketing strategies targeting private universities and serves as a foundational premise for this research.

2.4.2 Merits and Drawbacks of the Demographic Theory

One of the main benefits of demographic theory is that it aids brand advertisers in tailoring their advertisements based on the personal characteristics of their target audience and anticipating the best results in attracting and retaining their target audience based on their psychological and behavioural traits (Sandy, Gosling and Durant, 2013). Furthermore, products and services under a specific brand name are also customised to the unique needs of customers with distinct demographic characteristics. Consequently,

studying the demographic characteristics of groups is vital for positioning target customers more precisely and improving the efficiency of brand marketing. In particular, as income levels rise and people's needs become more and more individualised and differentiated, analyses based on different demographic characteristics become more critical (Pollak and Wales, 1981). However, the analysis of demographic characteristics also brings new challenges to brand marketing. Because the role played by demographic characteristics may vary in different product and service markets, which requires demographic analyses in each product market segment, resulting in higher costs. In addition, the analysis of demographic characteristics also poses more significant challenges for data processing, often requiring big data analytics techniques and more quantitative analysis methods (Islam et al. 2022). Therefore, the study, on the one hand, needs to utilise demographic theories to play a role in predicting brand attitudes; on the other hand, it also needs to utilise other theories to somewhat simplify the prediction of brand attitudes. Demographic theories must also be extended according to segmented product markets for better application in interdisciplinary research.

2.5 Social Media Context

Social media has become the indispensable context for nearly all aspects of our lives. 95% of teenagers have access to smartphones, which enables them access to social media platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, and YouTube, and nearly half of teens believe they are online almost all the time (Anderson and Jiang, 2018). Indeed, given the widespread use of social media in our daily lives, there is no further proof of the extent of social media use in this research. It is more important to explore the impact of social media on our lives, for example, how consumers use information in social media to influence their behavioural decisions when making choices.

2.5.1 The Concept of Social Media

The integration of social media into our lives and society has enriched the concept of social media, making it complex and loaded with connotations and extensions. Dollarhide (2019) describes social media as a computer-based technology that enables the sharing of ideas, opinions, and information by creating virtual networks and communities. Social media is internet-based by design and offers users quick electronic

communication content. It includes content such as personal information, photos, videos, and documents. Users typically employ smartphones, tablets, or computers to convey information through web-based software or web applications. Although social media is pervasive in the United States and Europe, China is spearheading its use (Dollarhide, 2019).

Synthesising earlier definitions in literature, Obar and Wildman (2015) identified the following commonalities in these social media definitions:

- As an application, social media is a service based on the Web 2.0 internet.
- The lifeblood of social media is user-generated content.
- Social media provides services for maintaining websites and applications through which individuals and groups can create user-specific profiles.
- The services offered by social media facilitate the development of online social networks by connecting personal data with profiles created by other groups or individuals.

Positioning the consumer buying process within the context of social media, it is therefore evident that social media influences all stages of the process to varying degrees. Social media plays an essential role in consumers searching for information that can influence important choices in our lives, including candidates' choice of university, and information is a crucial foundation for consumer decision-making.

2.5.2 Important Attributes of Social Media

To better understand social media, some of its characteristics are explained here. Agarwal and Yiliyasi (2010, p.1) identify "the unique characteristics of social media" relative to traditional media as consisting in the following:

(1) **Accessibility:** Social media sites are free or extremely low cost, accessible to anyone with an internet connection, unlike traditional media which are not free and are not affordable for everyone.

(2) **Impermanence:** Content created on social media sites can be altered at any time by the creators (individuals and groups), in contrast to content in traditional media which cannot be changed once it has been created.

(3) **Reach:** Provided there is a real internet connection and no firewalls blocking the

internet, a worldwide audience can reach social media in a very fast (at the speed of light) and easy way.

(4) **Proximity:** Social media sites can create communications with virtually no time delay. This instantaneity is a stark difference from traditional media, which often takes days, weeks, or even months to create communications between creators and audiences.

(5) **Usability:** Often, no special skills are required to create content or to start communicating through social media. However, traditional media requires special skills and training to create content and communication and often costs a lot of money (Agarwal and Yiliyasi, 2010).

These features should also be significant reasons for the rise of social media and the ongoing decline of traditional media. Traditional media such as newspapers, radio, and television have some quite evident and prominent drawbacks compared to social media (Shushara, Ustinova and Alexandrov, 2019). For instance, from a spatial perspective, there is always a distance between traditional media and the audience, and interaction between the media and the audience is absent; from a temporal perspective, traditional media usually lags behind real-world happenings, and the audience typically passively receives what traditional media offers. These drawbacks are significant reasons why social media, which boasts numerous advantages over traditional media, has replaced it. Social media at least offers these advantages: (1) they require less labour and less investment to produce news or other types of information; (2) they are more environmentally friendly since they consume less material and energy; (3) they can deliver news and information faster than traditional media; (4) interaction exists between social media and the audience; and (5) the audience has more choices (Shushara, Ustinova and Alexandrov, 2019).

(6) **Social Media as a Search Engine:** In recent years, the role of social media as a search engine has gained prominence. Beyond its traditional use for leisure, entertainment, and socialising, netizens frequently employ it as a search tool. As per the iMedia Industrial Upgrading Research Centre (2020) in a report by iMedia Consulting, social platforms are now the second most utilised channel (49%) for information gathering among internet users surveyed, coming in just behind traditional search engines (69.6%). Liang, Chen, and Ren (2023) delved into the mobile search behaviours

of social media app users and ascertained that these searches are predominantly information-oriented. This is largely due to the enhanced interactivity social media apps offer. Unlike traditional search engines, social media apps are rife with user-generated content, facilitating a bi-directional exchange between information disseminators and consumers. Notably, a multitude of professionals from diverse fields populate social media, enriching its content variety. For instance, users keen on university choices can tailor their searches accordingly. Some even curate content catering explicitly to university selection, leveraging their personal experiences and resources and subsequently broadcasting them via their accounts. This underscores social media's distinct edge in specialised knowledge acquisition.

Liang, Chen and Ren's (2023) additional observations reveal that behaviours like continued search and result sharing follow an initial query, often accompanied by a transition between apps. Reflecting on Figure 2.8 – a model illustrating factors impacting consumer buying behaviours online (Park and Kim, 2003) – a pivotal determinant is the consumer's contentment with the product or service data available online. If unsatisfied with the information on one platform, users tend to pivot and explore other familiar social media outlets. Each prominent Chinese social media platform, be it acquaintance-based networking (e.g., WeChat), knowledge-sharing (e.g., Zhihu), holistic social networking (e.g., Little Red Book, Weibo), or short-video based platforms (e.g., Douyin), possesses its unique attributes and strengths. Interactions across these platforms can compensate for any singular app's informational void.

In today's mobile-centric digital environment, prospective university applicants are deeply reliant on social media apps. This dependence, coupled with their frequent engagement, has solidified the habit of using these platforms as primary search tools. Undeniably, social media wields significant influence over candidates, especially when navigating decisions necessitating extensive information.

2.5.3 The Influence of Social Media on Chinese Students' Choice of Universities

The previous discussion illustrates that the consumer buying process becomes tangible and dynamic when placed in a social media context. A critical factor in today's social media environment is the swift development of internet-based technology, which has fundamentally altered people's communication behaviour. For candidates choosing

private universities in China, this impact has been particularly significant and far-reaching. Enough literature points out two vital factors influencing Chinese university candidates' use of social media.

Firstly, Wang, Yang and Maresova (2020) argue that the rapid evolution of media technologies today has fundamentally changed the way young people (including university students) access information. This is a stark contrast from the past when people relied on authoritative media. With the use of new media, users are not just passive recipients of information, but also creators of responsive information, which creates mutual communication between candidates themselves and university marketers (Xie, 2017). In addition, the swift development of mobile technology has facilitated today's candidates in accessing and consuming university information more easily. In any case, compared to the past when computers dominated, mobile devices have sparked a new wave of the information revolution (Zhang, 2022).

The second factor is that university marketers proactively employ social media to influence candidates and the general public. Unlike the authoritative media of the past, social media presents various advantages. Traditional paper and broadcast media have very limited interactions with audiences. However, by utilising social media, university marketers can fully exploit different forms of social media platforms to augment the efficiency of communication and interaction with their audiences (Qureshi, Khawaja and Zia, 2020). For instance, in addition to posting information about the university, university marketers can also receive prompt responses from candidates, which aids them in updating their online messages and maximising their marketing strategies via social media.

Given that social media can be integrated into the consumer buying process, its impact on Chinese students' university choice can be distinctly illustrated. The first stage of the buying process is needing identification, which is influenced by social media. In this process, the consumer triggers a general intention, typically based on the information stored in their minds or gathered from other information sources (Moon and Byun, 2016). In contemporary societies where humans are swamped and saturated by social media, it can be the principal channel through which consumers obtain information. Much of the information stored in consumers' minds is also collected from social media. For

university marketers, social media plays a pivotal role in attracting candidates. Social media has become a search engine for young people. To this end, many universities have adopted various technological strategies (Zhang, 2020). For example, a comprehensive university overview is posted on major local social media, including WeChat and Douyin. Douyin According to Chininga, et al. (2019), around 70% of young people surveyed in China today are accustomed to using online Baidu as an effective search engine. The internet in China is expanding very rapidly, “with 904 million internet users and a penetration rate of 64.5% by March 2020” (Zhang et al., 2020, p.26). The penetration rate is higher among young people, and naturally, Chinese students receive abundant information from the internet and social media from the first stage of the buying process. To make better and more appropriate decisions, students need more current and informative information, and the buying process thus transitions to the second stage. Besides traditional channels for gathering relevant information, they prefer to use social media, which should be the most convenient and least costly way to access information, as a mobile phone is enough for Chinese high school graduates to access social media platforms (Zhang et al., 2020). Information collected by students via social media platforms can either reinforce or diminish students’ loyalty, emotional responses (e.g., trust), and brand attitudes towards the university (Zhu, Peng and Zhang, 2018). Once attitudes towards the university brand are established, the purchase process proceeds to the fourth stage of ‘options evaluation,’ where students compare their options, potentially selecting several of them and indicating their intention to enroll in their preferred university, assuming they meet the criteria for those universities.

There is a significant distinction between the standard purchase process and a student’s university choice: in the former scenario, the seller essentially will not reject the product or service once the consumer decides to purchase. In the latter scenario, however, a university might reject a student’s application. Some students, despite being eligible for admission, are not accepted due to intense competition, and the number of available slots is fewer than the number of applicants. This makes the decision to choose a university require more time and effort to gather information and make a deliberate choice than a typical consumer decision.

In China, when a student completes a university application, they are in the fifth stage of

the purchase process, which concludes after the university accepts the student. If the student is not accepted by the university, the purchase process halts and is cancelled. If the student is accepted, the purchase process continues to the sixth and final stage (Tian and Liu, 2019).

Upon acceptance into university, students begin to consume the educational services and products offered to them on campus. During this 'post-sales behaviour period, students continue to utilise information from social media in addition to their on-campus experiences to guide their behaviour (Wu and Lo, 2009). No one can be entirely objective when forming a judgement on an issue. While students can form judgements about universities based on their own campus experiences, their judgements are often influenced by information from other sources and given the widespread usage of social media in universities, it has become an omnipresent and inescapable influence.

A student's experiences and judgements about a university can be transmitted to other students who will choose a university. While these judgements and experiences influence these current students' emotions, loyalty, satisfaction, and brand attitudes towards the university, they also have the potential to impact future students' attitudes towards the university and, consequently, future students' university choices (Zhang, 2022).

2.6 Background on Private Higher Education in China

Chinese private universities, an essential component of private education in the country, are significantly influenced by the tradition of private education in China. Hence, it is crucial to revisit the early history of private education in China to better analyse the context in which China's private universities have evolved. Private education, following thousands of years of development in the form of private schools and academies, reached its zenith during the Republican era. Numerous private universities emerged, adhering to modern educational norms and becoming the backbone of modern higher education in China. However, after the foundation of New China in 1949, various forms of higher education were nationalised, and private education temporarily disappeared from the historical stage. It was only in 1978, after China's reform and opening-up, that the state policy allowed private capital to enter education, leading to the rebirth of private universities (Zhou, 2016, p.2). They underwent a development process starting from scratch, progressing from weak to strong, and evolving from scale to standardisation.

In the four decades since China's reform and opening-up, private universities have made significant strides in terms of scale, teacher and student population, and quality of teaching, thereby training a considerable number of application-oriented professionals for the country. However, private universities in the UK and the US are typically more advanced than public ones, enjoying high regard, with many achieving global fame. In contrast, China's private universities lag public universities concerning the quality and social recognition of their operations.

The development of private universities in China always follows state policies and regulations and is subject to control and monitoring by governmental authorities in terms of enrolment plans, teaching quality, and operational conditions. Private universities, run by individuals or non-governmental organisations and primarily funded by tuition fees, allow the organisers a legal entitlement to a reasonable return. Therefore, China's private universities, a product of limited marketisation, can be studied using market theory in terms of branding.

2.6.1 History of Private Higher Education in China

2.6.1.1 The Origins of Private Education in China

The first phase of private education in China is referred to as "the private school period." The private school is a unique educational form in ancient China, originating in the pre-Qin period (Palaeolithic period ~221BC), inheriting and developing the tradition of family education from antiquity. In the private school period, a private school was typically run by an erudite teacher in his own residence or in a place provided by others, catering to students' educational needs (Wu, 1997). The aim of such private school education was to develop the virtue, cultivation, and knowledge of the students so that they could pass exams to obtain official positions and make a difference in society. However, due to the restrictive nature of private schooling, only a select group of people were able to receive an education, and the content of the education was relatively narrow. As the demand for education in society continued to grow, a systematic, large-scale private education began to emerge to make up for the shortcomings of private schooling. The second phase occurred during the Middle Tang period (766–835), during which many young people from poor backgrounds who wanted to apply to the imperial court

needed a place to study and learn; at the same time, paper-making technology was improving, engraving and printing techniques were being perfected, more books were being printed, and the number and size of libraries to house book collections were increasing. This led to the emergence of the academy. Private academies became the main form of educational institution in the Tang Dynasty. With their large collections of books, these private academies served as places of instruction and as schools for young people preparing for examinations. The academy was the most developed and advanced form of private education in ancient China, and its emergence marked a new period for private education in ancient China (Wu, 1997). During this period, teaching in the academy was dominated by the recitation and interpretation of the classical works of ancient China. In the Song dynasty, the private academy became a special kind of higher education institution built on the basis of the systematic synthesis and transformation of traditional governmental and private schools, combining teaching and research. The institutions that emerged aligned in many ways with what would today be recognised as being a private university (Yang, 2001).

The third phase is represented by the rise of the modern private university. Starting from the 1860s, Western industrial and commercial civilisation began to influence China, giving rise to the “Foreign Affairs Movement.” This movement involved the large-scale introduction of advanced Western science and technology and the establishment of modern military and civil enterprises, all intended to save the Qing government. As part of this movement, schools specialising in foreign languages, mining, mechanics, shipping, and telegraphy were established, and students were sent abroad to Europe and America (Yang, 1996). China started transitioning from traditional methods of education, like poetry recitation and eight-legged essays, towards Western sciences such as mathematics, chemistry, and physics. The foundation of Peking University Hall in Beijing in 1862 marked the earliest government-run modern school in China, symbolising the beginning of the modernisation of Chinese education (Yang, 1996).

The severe national crisis resulting from the defeat in the Sino-Japanese naval war in 1895 spurred the pace of educational social reform. Consequently, university halls started to be established across the country. These new style academies, unlike traditional government schools, produced new kinds of talent, including translators, military

personnel, and technical personnel. The teaching content included Western studies such as Western literature and arts. They adopted a new form of teaching organisation and implemented a semester system and class teaching. In August 1901, the Qing government issued an edict to rename academies as schools, thus marking the end of the ancient Chinese system of government-run or private academies that had lasted for a thousand years (Ma and Li, 2008).

The academic system initially lasted three years but was later extended to four. Shandong University Hall holds the distinction of being the first government-run higher education institution in Shandong Province, and it serves as the origin point of today's Shandong University.

The fourth phase is represented by the rise and fall of private universities in the Civil War. Many of the modern private universities in China have their roots in previous academies, with the Qing government permitting the private establishment of universities from the early 20th century. The Christian Church established the first private university, Dongwu University, in Suzhou, China, in 1900. The foundations of many contemporary major fields of study came from these academies. In 1903, the university department of Wenhua College was founded in the Wuhan area, eventually developing into the Central China Normal University we know today.

The New Culture Movement of 1915 promoted democracy, science, and the prevalence of Western learning in China. This movement provided intellectual liberation for young individuals and allowed the spread of new ideas, creating a fertile environment for the establishment and growth of universities. Many of today's renowned public universities, including Fudan University (founded in 1905), Nankai University (founded in 1919), and Xiamen University, originated as private universities during this period (Tian and Chen, 2007).

During the war years, it was challenging for private universities in China to function. Many were either closed or forced to relocate to the relative safety of the western part of the country to continue their educational activities (Ding and Feng, 2022). The development of education in China during the 14-year war was significantly slow. It was only after 1949, with the founding of the state, that all forms of education were nationalised, state-funded, and returned to normalcy. However, this transition marked the

end of the era for China's private universities.

2.6.1.2 The Development of Private Higher Education in Contemporary China

Private higher education in China re-emerged in the 1980s, influenced by the reform and opening-up policy. As China gradually embraced the concept of a market economy and private enterprise, the development of the economy and the increasing societal demand led to a growing need for higher education. The policy allowing private capital to run schools was gradually relaxed to meet this demand. In 1982, the government adopted the law, stating, "the State encourages collective economic organisations, state enterprises and institutions, and other social forces to organise various educational undertakings following the provisions of the law" (Zhou, 2016, p.2).

This was the first time the Chinese government uniformly permitted social forces to organise educational activities at the level of the national constitution, thereby signalling a policy allowing the private sector to establish education. In March 1982, the Chinese Social University was established, widely seen as the first private university in the country and a symbol of the new start of private higher education in China after the reform and opening-up. According to statistics, the development of private universities from 1982 to 1985 resulted in over 170 such institutions. By 1991, the total number of private universities had increased to 450 (Zhou, 2016, p.2).

After the 1990s, the Chinese government began formulating relevant regulations and policies to foster a better environment and support for the development of private universities. From 1995, private higher education witnessed exponential growth, with the number of students enrolled in private universities exceeding one million in 1996. In 1997, the State Council issued the first administrative regulations on private education, the Regulations on the Operation of Schools by Social Forces, solidifying the legal status of private education. In December 2002, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress passed the Law on the Promotion of Private Education, which gave private schools the same legal status as public schools for the first time (Zhou, 2016, pp.2–5). From 2000, the number of private universities continued to surge, growing from 175 in 2003 to 727 in 2014. By 2021, 771 private universities had state-recognised qualifications and 7.91 million students enrolled nationwide (Ministry of Education of PRC, 2022).

The number of private universities is now relatively stable, and the developmental model has transformed from scaling to standardising. In the new development landscape, the government has emphasised the quality of teaching in private universities to better fulfil societal needs. Specifically, the Chinese Ministry of Education is conducting quality assessments of undergraduate teaching at all private universities, requiring inspections within a defined period. They must meet national standards regarding faculty, teaching instruments and equipment, teaching management, and teaching quality. If they fail the assessment, they must rectify the situation within a set time; if they fail again, they must cease student enrolment. This policy has encouraged private universities to increase investment and recruit good teachers to improve teaching quality.

2.6.2 Status of Branding of Private Universities

Improving the quality of private universities also involves strengthening their branding and enhancing their brand influence on better meet student needs. Although the branding of private universities in China has made some progress in recent years, significant gaps remain compared to public universities. These gaps are due to policy and the universities' own capacity building, a crucial aspect of which is their relatively weak capability for brand development. The lack of comparable brand influence to foreign private universities severely limits the enrolment of private universities in China. The following provides an examination of the current state of brand building in Chinese private universities.

2.6.2.1 Some Progress in Brand Building for Private Higher Education

After more than 40 years of development, China's private universities have achieved globally recognised successes in terms of the number of institutions, their operational scale, and their social reputation. Private universities have effectively enhanced their brand awareness through several strategies (Wang, 2022).

The first of these is advertising and marketing. Despite the rapid economic development in China and the rising competition in the education market, some prominent private universities have begun to amplify their brand awareness through advertising and marketing campaigns. For instance, well-known private institutions like the Xi'an Translation Institute have employed unique strategies to gain visibility. Its founder and

former president, Ding Zuyi, wrote a book outlining his journey in establishing the university and aired it on daily radio broadcasts.

Secondly, the enhancement of teaching quality and faculty is a major focus. Some private universities have amplified the selection and training of teachers, introduced high-quality educational resources, and strengthened collaboration and exchange with domestic and international universities to provide superior teaching services. The Ministry of Education, as the national authority, has defined the goal for private universities to train application-oriented talents. The core competencies of these talents include the ability to apply professional knowledge and resolve practical workplace problems (Fang, 2019). Private universities regularly adjust and update their specialisations according to market and business demands, thereby improving employment competitiveness. Recognising the rise of short-form video era, the school of media studies introduced a film and television photography production major in 2018, resulting in a boom in enrolment, with over 700 students currently in the major.

Thirdly, the enhancement and improvement of campus environment and teaching facilities is an ongoing process. Private universities are steadily increasing their investments in campus environments and teaching instruments and equipment. They are dedicated to creating beautiful, study-friendly campus environments and providing modern teaching facilities and student activities to attract more talented students and teachers.

Fourth, the aspect of international development is being actively promoted. Some private universities are fostering international development strategies, partnering with foreign universities on dual-degree programmes and student exchange programmes to attract international students to study in China. This strategy has helped elevate the international reputation and brand image of the universities.

2.6.2.2 Limitations to the Development of Private University Branding

Even though private universities have achieved some progress in brand building, they still face challenges. Due to historical reasons and the prevailing status of public universities, some people maintain a prejudice against private universities. Private universities do not enjoy the same enrolment benefits as public universities, and the quality of their student population is often perceived as lower than that of public

universities. Secondly, due to insufficient investment and governmental attention, private universities face higher thresholds and costs in brand promotion. For example, mainstream media primarily disseminate information about enrolment in public universities, giving them an advantage in terms of media resources (Wang, 2022). At the same time, some private universities suffer from uneven quality, which affects the overall brand image. Therefore, private universities need to further strengthen their teaching quality, research capabilities, and social responsibility to continuously enhance their brand competitiveness. The major challenges faced by private university branding are the following.

Firstly, financial constraints significantly impact the branding of private universities. Unlike their public counterparts, which receive government funding, private universities usually operate under greater financial pressure. Their income is largely derived from a single source – tuition fees. Because public universities in China have a long history, rich resources, and government support, they enjoy greater market recognition compared to their private counterparts. As private universities are often relatively new, they need to build and develop their brand image rapidly. This endeavour requires substantial financial investment, including hiring highly qualified faculty, enhancing campus facilities, and establishing efficient management systems. Post-2020, the government has mandated high-quality development for private universities. According to the Ministry of Education of PRC(2004a), all the private universities must provide an average of no less than 8 square meters of teaching and administrative space per student. This requirement has forced some private universities to acquire land and construct buildings to meet standards, thereby dramatically increasing their financial pressure, especially when they primarily rely on tuition fee income.

Secondly, homogenisation among private universities has limited their brand building. Many private universities exhibit a high degree of homogeneity in their operational modes, program offerings, faculty, and enrolment strategies, leading to a lack of distinct characteristics and differentiation (Chen, 2017). In order to compete for market share and respond to employment pressures, many private universities tend to offer popular majors, such as economics, management, and information technology. This approach results in a rather homogeneous set of majors, with universities neglecting to develop unique

program clusters. When market demands shift, private universities may discontinue some majors, which prevents the consistent development of discipline and talent teams. This short-term behaviour hinders the formation of a university's professional advantages and distinctive characteristics (Wang, 2022). Furthermore, many private universities have adopted similar admission strategies, such as broad admissions criteria and similar major structures, leading to a similar student body. This lack of differentiation results in potential students and society at large having difficulty distinguishing between different private universities, which in turn affects brand recognition and reputation.

2.6.3 The Importance of China's Private Universities in Chinese Higher Education

2.6.3.1 Private Higher Education Is a Useful Complement to Higher Education in China

In 1978, China's gross enrolment rate in higher education was only 1.55%, which increased to 3.7% in 1988 and further rose to 9.76% in 1998. From 1999, a rapid expansion of universities was initiated. In 2010, the gross enrolment rate of higher education in China reached 26.5% and by 2020, it hit 40%. In 2019, the national gross enrolment rate of higher education reached 51.6% (Ministry of Education of PRC, 2022). This growth signifies the transition of China's higher education from an elite system to a mass education system. Private universities, which account for 28% of the total number of higher education institutions in China, have played a crucial role in this transformation by meeting the higher education needs of a substantial proportion of the country's youth, thereby becoming an indispensable supplement to China's higher education landscape.

2.6.3.2 Private Universities Are Instrumental in Developing Human Resources

China's economic development depends heavily on a large number of applied and vocational skills, with private universities serving as crucial training grounds. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the main focus of students at private universities is employment. In China, private universities typically have lower admission scores than public undergraduate universities. The primary goal of these students' post-graduation is to enter the job market rather than pursue further education. Most private universities have a pass rate of less than 10% for postgraduate students. This means that private universities need to emphasise the enhancement of practical knowledge and skills that

meet market needs. Universities should consider the market requirements while devising their specialised courses and continuously introduce new programs that align with industry demands (Fang, 2019). Moreover, private universities need to hire more teaching staff with practical experience to meet student needs better.

Secondly, the key advantage of private universities lies in their market-oriented training approach. Many private university investors and organisers are successful entrepreneurs with a solid understanding of market talent needs. This knowledge enables them to provide unique experiences in creating and training programs for their specialised courses. In addition, their enterprises can offer valuable internship and practical opportunities for students, enabling a precise match with market talent demands.

Thirdly, the government's primary evaluation metric for private universities is the employability of their students. The main government objective for private universities is to train students in practical skills. Consequently, policies have been introduced encouraging social capital to collaborate with some public vocational universities and divest them of their research-based functions. This policy direction has led private universities to prioritise the quality of student employment over academic research, a fundamental difference in orientation compared to public universities (Chen, 2017).

2.6.4 The Special Characteristics of Private Higher Education

Private universities in China exhibit distinct characteristics compared to their international counterparts, even reflected in their Chinese designation. The term 'private economy' is used to describe privately owned enterprises in China, a result of a historical period when public ownership was the principal form of economy, and the concept of private ownership underwent a gradual process of social acceptance. Similarly, private universities in China are different from those abroad. Internationally, the main difference between private and public universities lies in funding sources. In contrast, the management model, admission policies, and employment policies are often similar. Many foreign private universities even surpass public universities in teaching quality. In China, however, private universities, despite being privately funded (or jointly funded by the private sector and the government), are subjected to various government policies concerning operation and management. They also do not enjoy the same privileges as public universities in terms of admissions.

The industry-specific and organisation-specific nature of China's private universities underlines their difference from typical market-oriented enterprises. Firstly, Chinese private universities are a product of marketisation. Following the reform and opening-up of 1978, the government allowed and encouraged private capital to participate in education, including the higher education market. The current group of over 700 private universities is the result of market competition and social demand. Organisers of private universities can be non-governmental organisations, individuals, or enterprises. The establishment and operation of private universities depend on the long-term investment and business capacity of these organisers. From a market perspective, these institutions view education as a commercial activity and generate profits by providing educational services and qualifications. The Law of PRC on Promotion of Private Education stipulates that private universities in China follow a leadership system where the president is responsible under the board of directors' guidance (The National People's Congress of PRC, 2019).

According to Ministry of Education of PRC (2004b), the regulations state that "for-profit private schools shall withdraw a development fund from their annual audited net income at a rate of not less than 10% of the annual unrestricted increase in net assets or net income for the school's development". According to the regulations, apart from 10% of the proceeds channelled into the development fund for reinvestment and expansion, the rest of the proceeds can be flexibly used by for-profit schools' organisers. For the time being, most organisers extract a reasonable return from the school, reinvest in the community, and then feed back into the school.

The market-oriented character of private universities in China is reflected in their degree of autonomy over tuition fees. Although these fees must be reported to the government, they do not usually require governmental approval. With no government funding and minimal alumni donations, the primary source of income for these universities is student fees. Tuition at private universities is generally three to four times higher than at public institutions, rendering them unaffordable for some candidates. However, the abundant number of private universities, despite their lack of brand differentiation, provides more choices to those candidates who meet the admission criteria of private universities. They and their families become the recipients of private university services.

The transition from a seller's market to a buyer's market in education means more choices and autonomy for consumers (the students), making the selection of different university brands increasingly reliant on individual consumer choice (Zhou, 2018). Thus, brand research and construction for private universities are not only a necessity for market competition but also for candidates and their families. The higher the visibility and reputation of the applied private university, the more benefits for the candidates' self-confidence and future career development.

Private universities have adopted several entrepreneurial business approaches, such as the marketisation of human resources. They employ highly paid management and research personnel and adopt performance-based assessments for teacher salaries. However, compared to public universities, private universities face disadvantages in the human resources market. This is due to the governmental support and benefits such as healthcare, children's education, and housing enjoyed by public universities, leading to more secure 'iron rice bowl' teaching positions. Despite public universities modernising their human resources, creating more teacher mobility, private universities struggle to compete evenly in the human resources market (Wang, 2022). High-quality talent still primarily opts to work in public universities. Additionally, private universities actively market and promote themselves in the media. The founders of private universities are often viewed as successful entrepreneurs and start-ups, and their entrepreneurial spirit attracts and inspires ambitious students.

Private universities in China belong to the higher education sector, a public service sector. The unique nature of this sector requires private university organisers to abide by the laws of education, adhere to the leadership of the Communist Party of China, and comply with the regulations and policies of the Chinese Ministry of Education. Despite primarily being privately funded, private universities do not enjoy the same flexibility as private enterprises. This is because, due to their socially beneficial nature, their tuition fees are monitored by the government. Furthermore, to ensure the quality of education, the government controls the operations, teaching management, and conditions of private universities through various measures. These institutions need to meet the standards set by the state, and they are continually monitored and evaluated by government authorities (zhou, 2018).

Public universities in China have always had an advantage in terms of enrolment since students with higher grades are usually admitted early into prestigious public universities. Private universities' score line is usually around 100 points lower than public undergraduate universities, which favours public universities in student competition. Due to the score line limit, competition in NCEE is not fully market based.

Consequently, private universities in China possess dual attributes. Their market-oriented operations are limitedly market-oriented, that is, under the guidance, regulation, and supervision of the government. Private universities allocate their resources according to market rules. Various operational factors such as capital, technology, space, hardware and software resources, human resources, product and service supply are jointly determined by the government, the market, and society. Private higher education is subject to public interest and profit-seeking constraints (Fang, 2019). The size and role of private universities make them an important part of China's higher education, training applied talent, and promoting social progress. The market-oriented nature of private universities provides a solid foundation for researchers to apply market theory, including consumer behaviour, to study private universities' branding and recruitment strategies.

2.7 Factors Influencing Chinese Students' Attitudinal Decisions About Brands

Through marketisation and privatisation, higher education has become a common good for the state and its citizens. Higher education in China is best described as a public good, which 'in many ways contributes to and generates a global common good' (Tian and Liu, 2019, p.623). The commercialisation of higher education in China makes it suitable to use business models, such as the model of consumer's purchasing decision, to analyse how brand attitudes and related factors impact Chinese students' university choices. Section 2.2.2 introduced the four factors that influence brand attitudes: loyalty, emotion, purchase intention, and customer satisfaction. The role these factors play in shaping Chinese students' brand attitudes towards their university choice is described in the following literature.

2.7.1 Consumer Loyalty

The examination of consumer loyalty indicates a positive relationship between consumer

loyalty and brand attitudes. Consumer loyalty offers a brand a competitive advantage over other brands and stimulates consumers' willingness to purchase that brand's service offerings. Consumer loyalty, being closely associated with brand attitudes, should play a significant role in domestic students' university choices (Li and He, 2013). The consumer loyalty factor comes into play from the second stage of the consumer purchase process, when information searching begins, and continues until the actual purchase occurs. Students' loyalty to universities can be established through various channels and elements, except social media, such as obtaining information about a university from parents, relatives, and teachers. Among the influencing factors, students' interests and career plans play a vital role in fostering their loyalty to the university (Wang, Yang and Maresova, 2020).

2.7.2 Consumer Sentiment

Consumers' emotions influence their attitude towards a brand, and positive emotions towards a brand can also motivate consumers to purchase its services or products. The highest level of emotion leads to trust in the brand, which is a potent catalyst in the consumer's decision-making process during purchase. In China, students and their parents tend to choose universities towards which they have positive emotions or trust. For example, this year, some high school graduates are opting for Shandong Lanxiang Vocational and Technical College because they have positive emotions about this university and believe that they can secure a well-paying job after a few years of learning skills there. News reports indicate that students can easily find a well-paying job after graduating from this college (Suho News, 2019). The university's homepage highlights that it trains chefs for luxury hotels, technicians for vehicle maintenance and repair, and technicians for machine operation and repair, among others. The salaries of these technicians are generally high in China and even in Europe and the United States. Graduating from this college typically signifies good income and a better life, which instil good feelings and trust in this college in these students. The prospect of securing a well-paying job usually encourages these students and their parents to invest in an education from this university (Wang, Yang and Maresova, 2020).

2.7.3 Purchase Intentions

To prompt consumers to purchase a brand's services or products, marketing measures must first activate their willingness to buy, which is a 'strong predictor of purchase intention' (Shekhar and Jaidev, 2017, p.449). Purchase intentions also play a crucial role in the university selection process for Chinese students. After the college entrance examination, if a student has achieved a high enough score to be admitted to a university, a general intention to select a university or college is activated in his/her mind. Thus, the buying process is also initiated.

In order to clarify this general intention, the student needs to activate the relevant information already stored in his/her mind. Concurrently, they also need to gather information from the other sources mentioned in section 2.2.1. Utilising the information activated and gathered, alongside other factors like his/her loyalty and emotions towards the university, the student forms a brand attitude towards the university. They then compare and evaluate alternatives to make a decision.

2.7.4 Consumer Satisfaction

The discussion in section 2.2.2.4 illustrates the intrinsic connection between consumer satisfaction and brand attitudes. Consumer satisfaction significantly influences brand attitudes, which in turn play a role in determining consumers' choice of services and products. According to Zhang et al. (2020), this process is both rational and emotional for consumers and is largely influenced by different media forms' communication strategies.

When Chinese students need to choose a university, they also need to consider the factor of consumer satisfaction. Given the unique situation of students who typically purchase higher educational services only once in their lifetime, they need to acquire this information indirectly through different channels. According to Wang, Yang and Maresova (2020), the quality perceived by candidates heavily relies on their own experiences and is significantly influenced by the interactive communication between university marketers and the candidates themselves.

Students can also obtain relevant information about satisfaction from university students who are currently studying or have graduated from the university through social media. This type of information holds unique reference value because these university students

are consuming or have consumed the services provided by the university. They are the group of people who can give credible opinions about the quality of university education.

2.8 Comparison of Brand Attitudes Between Chinese and Western University Students

Since private higher education started from scratch after the founding of the PRC and has a relatively short history, and much of the public's knowledge about private universities comes from developed Western countries. They need to learn more about the current development of private universities in China, and this section attempts to compare the differences in the branding attitudes of private universities in China and the West, especially those of candidates towards private universities. There are several differences between Western countries and China, including cultural differences, differences in living environments, and differences in educational philosophies and systems. These differences mean that Western students and Chinese students encounter different situations when faced with the problem of choosing their ideal university. Based on the above discussion, this section compares Chinese and Western theories on brand attitudes, brand loyalty, decision-making models and social media. The discussion in this section contributes to a better understanding of the process of forming Chinese students' attitudes toward private university brands.

2.8.1 Brand Attitudes in Higher Education

Brand attitudes reflect a consumer's comprehensive evaluation of a brand (Martensen, 2007). Scholars from both Western countries and China share a similar understanding of brand attitudes. However, there are differences in how these attitudes form when considering higher education due to the distinct contexts of China and the West. In China, the private sector of higher education has seen rapid growth due to the surging market demand for higher education (Xie, 2017). Despite this, the marketisation of higher education in China is still nascent, in terms of enrolment, its majors and curriculum provision and tuition fee pricing, unlike Western countries like the UK and the US, where higher education has been fully marketised and industrialised. Currently, higher education institutions in China are predominantly public, with most students enrolling in degree programs at public colleges and universities (Ma and Abbott, 2016). Compared to

private universities in China, public universities, which generally have lower tuition fees and higher academic quality, are viewed more favored by Chinese students. In contrast, in Western countries, private universities often have more brand influence than public universities. For instance, the eight Ivy League universities in the US are all private, yet their brands are globally recognised. They have a long-standing history of academic and research excellence, attracting students not only from the US but also from around the world.

2.8.2 Brand Loyalty in Higher Education

Brand loyalty denotes consumers' favourable attitudes and behavioural responses to a brand (Jacoby, 1971). Factors influencing brand loyalty include the corporate image, perceived service quality, brand trust, and switching costs (Aydin and Özer, 2005). In China, brand loyalty plays a pivotal role in students' university selection. Chinese students' loyalty to universities is primarily fostered through their own experiences, interests, career plans, and various information sources, including insights from parents, relatives, teachers, university advertising and marketing, and market rankings.

In Western countries, many universities have adopted commercial practices such as developing academic programs that align with market demands and boosting advertising and marketing to increase enrolments (Osman, 2008). In China, NCEE scores directly influence students' university choice. Universities primarily provide information about their academic majors without a strong emphasis on commercial strategies like attracting potential applicants through communication and marketing initiatives (Zhang, 2017). Public universities, given their historical prominence and clear branding advantages, attract considerable loyalty from students and parents. On the other hand, private universities in China struggle to instil loyalty among students due to their relatively short history, evident gap with public universities, and ineffective communication with potential students. The branding of China's private universities has not been systematic, and Chinese students lack loyalty to private universities.

The consumer decision-making model developed by Western scholars is widely used by scholars in the Chinese context. This model can be used to understand how Chinese students choose universities. They start with need identification and then search

internally and externally for information about universities to identify the universities available to them. They then evaluate all university options based on attributes such as location, size, cost, academic quality, and choice of major (Simyari, Ghaemi and Yarmand, 2019). Then, they select specific universities after evaluating the alternatives. Finally, they assess whether they are satisfied with the choices they have made. However, the role of Chinese culture in the decision-making process is important. There is an saying in Chinese culture that knowledge changes destiny. Most children from rural areas hope to change their fate from a lifetime of farming by going to university and eventually being able to work and live in the city. According to Simyari, Ghaemi and Yarmand (2019), culture breeds ideas that largely influence young people's choice of university is very important. As a result, this group of candidates therefore places particular importance on the geographical location of the university and prefers provincial capitals or large cities.

2.8.3 The Role of Social Media in Higher Education

Around the world, teenagers are reliant on social media and are willing to invest a significant amount of time on these platforms (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017). In China, the social media landscape differs from Western countries due to the dominance of local platforms such as Weibo, WeChat and Douyin. The information that Chinese students gather through social media can either enhance or diminish their loyalty, sentiment, and brand attitudes towards a university. This distinct social media environment impacts how Chinese students access and evaluate information about universities. Such developments in social media differ substantially from traditional authoritative media controlled by government or professional organisations (Wang, Yang and Maresova, 2020). In the era of pervasive social media use, candidates can enjoy greater freedom in accessing information. For university candidates, social media provides richer information and more interactive engagement with university marketers. This plays a crucial role in shaping and influencing their recognition and willingness to enrol in a university (Wang, Yang and Maresova, 2020). Despite the differences in the social media platforms used by Chinese and Western users, the ways young people in China and the West search for and are profoundly influenced by the information disseminated via social media platforms are

notably similar.

2.9 Research Gaps

Firstly, the existing literature lacks studies focusing on the branding attitudes of Chinese private universities. While there is significant attention to the general factors influencing students' choice of university, such as location, ranking, tuition fees, specialisation, campus environment, etc. (Osman, 2008; Munisamy, et al., 2013; Ilgan, et al., 2018), there's also literature that discusses the impact of differences between private and public universities on student choices (Dronkers and Avram, 2010). However, these studies do not specifically address the unique situation of private universities in China. The Chinese government tightly controls the scale of higher education. Unlike their counterparts abroad, the enrolment plans of private universities in China are guided by government policies; the government designates a specific number of qualification places to each institution, with marginal annual increases. If a private university seeks additional academic spaces due to infrastructure expansion, approval from educational authorities is required.

In contrast to China's public institutions, private universities do not receive government financial support. Instead, they operate under a governance system of presidential responsibility overseen by a board of directors, allowing organisers to garner a reasonable return on the institution's revenue (The National People's Congress of PRC, 2019). Consequently, studying the brand attitudes of private universities requires adapting the models of international private universities while integrating theories related to Chinese public universities. The prominence and scale of private universities in China underscore their significance to the nation's higher education landscape. Thus, this research aims to address existing gaps in scholarly literature and subsequently offer targeted policy recommendations for advancing Chinese higher education.

Second, the literature needs to encompass theoretical studies exploring social media's influence on shaping brand attitudes in private universities. Current literature posits that social media plays a pivotal role in crafting a company's brand image, primarily by curtailing promotional expenses and enhancing marketing precision (Chininga, et al., 2019). As such, the analytical frameworks delineating social media's contributions to

brand marketing are equally pertinent to brand image cultivation in academic institutions. Brand image crystallizes from an individual's perception of an entity and thus mandates a nuanced representation of distinct consumer traits (Aydin, 2015). While there's abundant literature probing the nexus between branding and social media's role (Saydan and Dulek, 2019), there's a paucity of research scrutinising social media's effects on moulding brand attitudes in communication. Given that social media marketing is integral to the admission processes of China's private universities, and prospective students heavily lean on such platforms for university-related insights, it is imperative that scholarly works furnish comprehensive examinations of these evolving dynamics. This underscores the necessity for a more profound exploration into the mechanisms underpinning social media's imprint on branding within private university domains.

Thirdly, the existing body of literature has exhibited a deficiency in integrating the demographic characteristics of university candidates with social media use to study their influence on university choice decisions (Nevzat, et al., 2016). The formation of university brand attitudes is profoundly shaped by the demographic traits of the student population (Whaite, et al., 2018), including gender, age, family income level, and other elements that directly sway their brand attitudes toward universities (Qasim, et al., 2020). Concurrently, patterns of social media usage vary based on gender, age, income level, culture, and other attributes (Nevzat, et al., 2016; Wang, et al., 2020). These patterns subsequently influence university brand attitudes. This variability in demographic traits must be considered when assessing the effect of social media on university brand attitudes. Notably, the Chinese market is largely influenced by local social media platforms like Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin, highlighting the distinct localisation of social media. Yet, there's a gap in the literature that comprehensively analyses the interplay between demographic characteristics, local social media consumption, and the development of university brand attitudes. The goal is to derive analytical conclusions relevant to Chinese private universities. This research delves into the multifaceted effects of social media consumption on selecting Chinese private universities. It does so by analysing interview data from a survey detailing the social media usage behaviours of Chinese private university administrators and students. Additionally, it factors in the demographic attributes of the student population. This exploration addresses the third gap

identified in current scholarship.

2.10 Conclusion

This review of the literature on brand attitudes and the associated definitions of internal and external factors influencing brand attitudes reveals several key insights. External factors impacting consumers' brand attitudes encompass all factors originating from external sources, a crucial aspect of which is the information consumers receive in various contexts. Internal factors affecting brand attitudes refer to consumers' internal perceptions of a brand, often driven by their personal emotions. External factors, typically generated by brand marketers, are implanted into the consumer's mind, serving as important influences on the consumer's internal emotions, perceptions, and attitudes. Consequently, external factors are widely perceived by consumers as significant in shaping a brand's internal emotions. These external factors and consumers' subjective perceptions are largely interconnected. Studies have found that external factors can consistently alter and influence consumers' inherent perceptions, thereby affecting their purchase decisions.

The review also reveals that consumers' loyalty to a brand and positive sentiment towards it cultivate a positive brand attitude, which in turn propels them to consume the brand's products or services. Purchase intentions serve as another critical factor in shaping and constructing brand attitudes, as per the findings of Shekhar and Jaidev's (2017) study demonstrating that brand attitudes influence consumers' purchase intentions.

This paper reviews the history of private education and the development of private universities in China. It describes the important position and role of private universities in China's higher education market and the limitations of private university branding. Private universities, due to their market attributes, are seen as commercial entities, and hence, students, as recipients of the university's educational services, will have their purchase behaviours influenced by their positive brand attitudes towards the university (Munisamy, Mohd Jaafar and Nagaraj, 2014) This is the basis of this research's application of marketing theory to guide practice.

According to the HOE model introduced in this chapter and the theory of the consumer

purchase decision process, information search is an important prerequisite for the formation of brand attitudes. The formation of brand attitudes is a process whereby consumers' internal perceptions are constantly influenced by external factors, particularly information. This chapter, through the study of social media attributes and demographic theory, further demonstrates that social media, as the primary source of information for today's youth, plays a vital role in the search for information. Marketers of private universities can take advantage of this to communicate with candidates and promote their universities.

In addition, the researcher also found that compared with the brand attitudes of Western university students, there are some differences in brand loyalty formation among Chinese students towards private universities. Students' internal perceptions are influenced by Chinese culture in the decision-making process related to the choice of a university. Given the rapid development of information technology and the widespread use of the internet, both Western and Chinese teenagers rely heavily on social media for information, but Chinese students mainly use local social media platforms to search for information about applying to university. In this regard, there are commonalities between Chinese and Western students. At the same time, social media in China and the West are also quite different, and the localised characteristics of social media are apparent, which makes Chinese teenagers may face different characteristics when using social media. This requires researchers to conduct more in-depth investigations and analyses of Chinese local social media and adolescents' behavioural characteristics when studying the impact of social media on college choice decisions.

Chapter 3 Conceptual Framework

3.1 Introduction and Research Proposition

Students' attitudes towards the brand of a private university are closely linked to brand management. The perceptions of universities that consumers form, and the brand attitudes that follow from these, ultimately influence decision-making. According to Thanushan and Kennedy (2020), consumer behaviour consists of the processes and activities involved in the decision to purchase a product or service. Typically, this process includes a search for product information and an evaluation of product quality and fairness. It is a process that includes expectations and perceptions of the quality and usefulness of the product/service, as well as the psychological changes that go into making the final decision. Theories explaining this change relate to the psychological characteristics of consumers as well as their cognitive characteristics. The factors that influence consumers' attitudes towards a brand are usually very complex. As mentioned above, marketing is an important factor. In today's technological conditions, with internet and social media-based communication being widely used, these new forms of marketing communication are becoming increasingly important in influencing people's decisions to buy brands. In this way, there appears to be a close relationship between social media marketing and contemporary consumer attitudes towards brands. Against this background, the following proposition can be derived:

Research Proposition 1: Information received by candidates is primary factor that shapes the brand attitude towards universities.

According to this proposition, an individual's perception of a private university can profoundly influence their decision-making behaviour. People comprehend a brand's message and achieve brand awareness and attitude formation through strategies associated with strategic marketing, advertising, value recognition, and trust. Consumer purchasing behaviour is often shaped by information from various sources affecting their attitudes (Zhang and Zhang, 2017). The formation of consumers' attitudes towards brands is a dynamic process that precedes the actual decision to purchase (Stankevich,

2017) and is influenced by information from diverse sources. While some of this information is already retained in the consumer's memory, some is actively sought, and some is passively encountered. This suggests that brand attitude is a deeply subjective notion tied to the marketing tactics employed by the brand's creators, allowing consumers to gauge the brand's quality and value based on their life experiences (Tamanna, 2021). For providers of products and services, grasping the uniquely tailored needs of consumers and delivering information that aligns with consumer psychology is pivotal for successful marketing.

Research Proposition 2: Social media plays a significant role in disseminating effective information on forming brand attitude of private universities.

Candidates preparing for university admissions belong to a generation that matured alongside the internet. They are avid users of social media platforms, relying heavily on them for information-seeking purposes. The utility of social media search engines is becoming increasingly vital (Liang, Chen, and Ren, 2023). Unlike conventional media, a large portion of social media content is generated by its users. Given the escalating competition and content diversification, certain users craft specialised content aimed at university applicants. Concurrently, universities employ various social media channels to circulate information in diverse formats such as text, images, videos, and interactive dialogues. This versatility endows social media with a unique, irreplaceable edge in information dissemination.

Research Proposition 3: University marketers should optimise their use of social media for university brand promotion.

Research Proposition 3 centres on individuals' universal experiences when exposed to a brand orchestrated deliberately by the brand's promoters. As Khatoon and Rehman (2021) suggest, consumer purchasing behaviour predominantly stems from the calculated strategies of brand marketers, whose initiatives are tailored to consumers' brand perceptions. Consequently, brand promoters must elevate and expand their brand's visibility and esteem to cultivate customer trust and loyalty. This approach is also adopted by university marketers in mainland China, who are relentless in their efforts to appeal to and retain prospective students on the cusp of their university selection. Drawing from the collective experiences of these candidates, marketing strategies are

designed to boost the university's prestige and image in a market-driven economy.

As an efficient communication channel between schools and candidates, social media has emerged as a vital branding avenue for university marketers due to its cost-effectiveness and immediate outcomes. Nonetheless, there's a demand for further research and practical application in utilising social media for university enrolment objectives and brand augmentation.

3.2 The Relationship Between the Theory Used and the Research Proposition

Subsequent sections delve into the HOE model, demographic theory, and buying behaviour theory in connection with the three research propositions. The intent is to elucidate the theoretical foundation for Chinese students' attitudes towards private university brands and highlight the pivotal role of social media in this dynamic.

3.2.1 The Relationship Between the HOE Model and the Research Proposition

As indicated earlier, the HOE model is instrumental in directing brand advertisers to impact their clientele. Hence, employing this model is paramount to amplifying consumers' affinity and preference for the brand. Within this framework, the researcher advances three propositions to further scrutinise and assess the capabilities of the HOE model in fostering positive consumer sentiments.

The first proposition contends that candidates' perceptions and emotions about a brand are instrumental in shaping brand attitudes during university selection. As dictated by the HOE model, this represents the nascent phase of brand endorsement by potential consumers. Percy and Rossiter (1992) articulate that this trajectory commences with brand cognizance, encompassing familiarity with fundamental brand attributes such as its name, cost, features, and distribution pathways. Absence of such awareness invariably stymies any burgeoning interest or inclination to transact.

The second proposition asserts that social media marketing is a conduit in the genesis of brand cognizance and attitudes, subsequently swaying domestic students' preferences for private universities (Mkhitarian, 2018). This supposition is anchored in consumers' emotional discernment about their prospective acquisitions. Consumers' admiration for a brand emanates from their insights into its quality and merits, convinced of its potential to enrich their existence. Hemsley-Brown and Alnawas (2016) encapsulate this sentiment

as ‘brand passion’, connoting a profound affinity between consumers and the brand. Only upon nurturing such a sentiment are consumers poised to finalise a purchase. Social media is a pivotal conduit in modulating consumer feelings since it proliferates information integral to consumer choices (Voramontri and Klieb, 2019), thus shaping consumer viewpoints. Additionally, social media holds considerable sway over students’ brand perceptions and sentiments regarding university selections, influencing their actions (Kainde and Mandagi, 2023).

The study’s third proposition postulates that Chinese private universities have the potential to harness social media content to sculpt and elevate their brand stature, consequently attracting and securing a broader student demographic.

Given that the public image of a university, which mirrors its social and ethical reputation, is crucial in attracting potential enrollees, marketers of private universities in China have a paramount role. Specifically, their task is to diminish the psychological and emotional distance between students and cultivate robust emotional ties (Zhang and Zhang, 2017). Such a role emerges against the backdrop of the traditional scepticism of the Chinese public towards private institutions, engendering a generalised mistrust of Chinese universities. This scepticism deters potential students and their parents from opting for these universities. To counteract this, school marketers must prioritise disseminating ample information to challenge and change this ingrained stigma. Given the interactive and ubiquitously accessible nature of social media, it can be instrumental in bridging this emotional gap between schools and prospective students. Thus, university marketers can leverage these platforms to bolster candidates’ emotional affinity to the institution, providing a foundational pillar for their university selection (Wang, Education and University, 2017).

3.2.2 The Relationship Between Demographic Theory and Research Propositions

The demographic theory is a fundamental pillar in brand marketing, empowering marketers to customise products and services tailored to their target demographics (Nierop et al., 2018). In Proposition 1, brand attitude is pinpointed as a pivotal element influencing Chinese students’ preference for private universities. As per the demographic theory, this is the preliminary stage of brand endorsement, the foundation upon which

subsequent brand interactions are built. Recognising and understanding a brand marks the initial step in a customer's journey towards a purchase (Percy and Rossiter, 1992). The positive sentiments nurtured by a potential customer's emotional bond with a brand amplify as their relationship with the brand intensifies. This proposition underscores the significance of forging an emotional tie with a brand, which emanates from individuals' intrinsic psychological inclinations. Such a bond, stemming from a profound grasp of the brand, paves the way for an emotional rapport, a critical precursor to the ultimate purchasing decision (CFI Team, 2022). Comprehension of the brand consequently arises from brand familiarity, underscoring the necessity of furnishing clients with exhaustive information expeditiously.

In Proposition 2, the researcher posits that social media is a salient determinant in shaping the brand attitudes of university students during their selection process. This proposition resonates with the demographic contours of young Chinese students, known for their entrenched reliance on the internet and social media for sourcing information. As they navigate social media, candidates perpetually recalibrate their sentiments towards university brands, moulding attitudes that steer their choices. Hence, in Proposition 3, the researcher advocates for Chinese private university marketers to adeptly harness this demographic trait of Chinese students when promoting their target university brands. This entails fine-tuning their information dissemination strategies on social media platforms to optimise branding results.

3.2.3 Relationship Between the Theory of the Consumer Purchase Decision Process and the Research Propositions

The theory of purchase behaviour delineates the relationship between purchasing decisions and the behaviour of brand consumers within specific social and cultural contexts (Fader and Hardie, 2002). This theory is intrinsically tied to the three propositions introduced by the researcher. As outlined in the theory of the purchase decision process, it starts with the identification of students' needs. Following this, there's a quest for information about various available universities. During this search for information, perceptions regarding the prospective university evolve, culminating in the formulation of a brand attitude. This brand attitude can significantly sway the final

decision. Grounded in this theoretical framework, it is evident that both the platform used, and the content of the search are primary determinants of brand attitudes.

Both the second and third research propositions shed light on the contemporary behavioural patterns of Chinese students' social media use. As posited by the buying behaviour theory, the way students gather information about private universities directly steers their university decision-making behaviour. In the recent past, given the meteoric rise in the popularity of internet platforms and the pervasive adoption of social media by younger generations, marketers across diverse brand categories have been capitalizing on this distinct behavioural trait of students for brand promotion. For private universities in China, this behavioural tendency is also an asset that can be harnessed to entice students to apply, leveraging the power of social media, thereby amplifying the impact of their advertising campaigns (Zhang and Zhang, 2017).

3.3 Formation of the Conceptual Framework

According to the HOE model, the purchase decision starts with the perception of the product, followed by the emotion of the product and finally the purchase. There is a great deal of similarity in the decision-making process for candidates applying to university. Candidates need to learn more about the university, develop preferences and beliefs in the process, and finally make a choice.

According to the consumer purchase decision process theory, consumers initiate an information search after identifying their needs. This theory is applicable to the university application process as well. Once the need to choose a university arises, candidates embark on gathering information about potential universities. During this information search, an emotional attitude towards certain candidate universities is cultivated.

Similarly, demographic theory suggests that a notable characteristic of candidates is the young generation utilise social media as a search engine at a high frequency. This reliance is attributed to social media's affordability, accessibility, interactivity and the candidates' generation's inherent trust in such platforms. Hence, social media assumes a critical role in both the information search process and the formation of brand attitudes.

There are similarities and differences among the three theories used in the paper. The

similarities are: first, HOE model and purchase decision process theory both focus on the purchase decisions and emphasize the importance of consumers' attitude formation process on the decision. Second, purchase decision process theory and demographic theory are similar in emphasising the role of information search process in the consumers' decision. However, they are different in their research perspectives: HOE focuses on the psychological aspect of consumers; purchase decision process theory focuses on the information search process; demographic focuses on the individual heterogeneity of consumers' characteristics.

Integrating these three theoretical models, the researcher has developed the conceptual framework for this study, as illustrated in Figure 3- 1: below. Brand attitudes, shaped by perceptions of brands, influence students' final decisions. Social media plays a significant part in the information search process. It aids candidates in forming an attitude for a university by disseminating information about various facets of the institution, thus informing the ultimate decision.

There are also some negative effects of social media in the brand attitude formation. First, social media may enable negative information or fake news to spread all around the Internet (Wen, et al., 2015). Second, there were many inappropriate information posted which may lead the students to the negative side (Shabnoor and Tajinder, 2016). This may hurt the brand image of private universities. Therefore, we should aware that social media is two-edged sword in the brand attitude formation of private universities. The university managers should utilize the positive role of social media and avoid the negative effects at the same time.

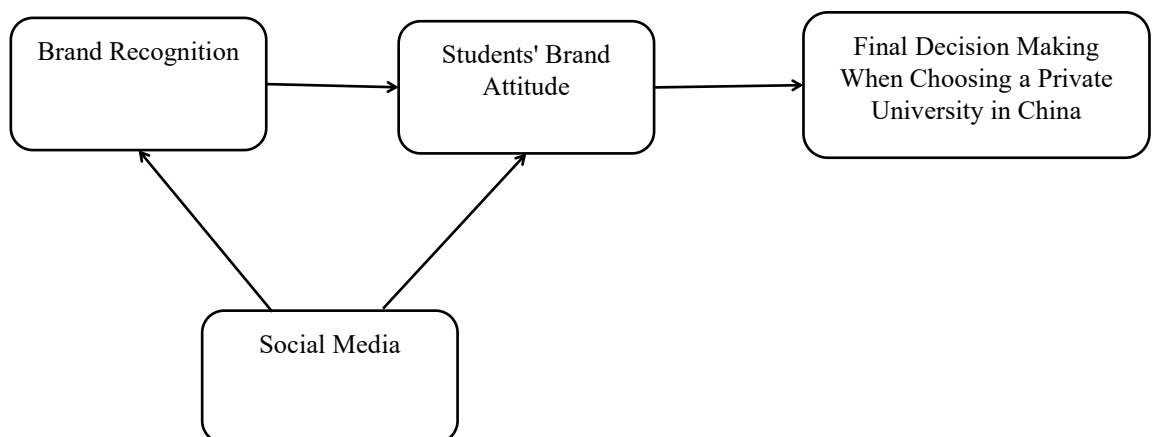


Figure 3-1: Conceptual framework (Based on HOE model, Consumer Purchase

Decision Process Theory and Demographic Theory).

3.4 Conclusion

In summary, the literature presented here delineates the primary theoretical models employed in this study and their correlation with the research proposition. These models have been proposed to establish a robust connection between the purchasing behaviour of Chinese students selecting private universities and the strategies implemented by marketers to influence domestic students' final purchasing decisions. The research proposition is grounded in contemporary brand management practices, with technological advancements and societal changes fostering unique characteristics of consumer buying psychology and behaviour.

There are compelling ties between the theoretical models used in this study. Central to these theories is the application of psychological and behavioural factors influencing Chinese students' selection of private universities. In outlining the tactics of Chinese private university marketers to attract and retain domestic students, leading them to their final purchase decisions, the researcher emphasises the formation of brand attitudes and the role of social media in candidates' information search, i.e., in shaping brand attitudes. According to the propositions presented in this study, marketing strategies for private universities in China should concentrate on the psychological and behavioural characteristics of domestic students when selecting a university. Hence, it is crucial for marketers at private universities to understand and analyse the characteristics of domestic students, based on the theories outlined in this study, for successful marketing. The research is predicated on the HOE model, consumer purchase decision theory, and demographic characteristics theory, culminating in the conceptual framework of this study. The framework posits that students' brand attitudes primarily form during the information search process, and that social media significantly influences the formation of candidates' attitudes during information dissemination, ultimately shaping candidates' university selection decisions.

In line with this, the researcher would conduct interviews with private university recruiters and students to gain a deeper understanding of the primary factors influencing the formation of brand attitudes and the role of social media in this process. One of the

salient objectives of doing so was to provide recommendations and strategies for university administrators to enhance brand building. The following chapter details the methodology of the study, including the means whereby these ends were achieved, and the justifications for their choice.

Chapter 4 Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review the research methods used in this study and to demonstrate that the chosen research methods meet the aims and objectives of the study. A research method is defined as a specific procedure or technique used to identify, select, process, and analyse information about the research topic (Flick, 2015). In line with the purpose and objectives of the research, it was noted that the researcher needed to rely on the primary information collected to develop knowledge. The research onion by Saunders and Lewis (2012) describes the different strategies and stages of the researcher's experience to determine the most appropriate research method to collect useful data.

Based on the research onion (Figure 4-1), the researcher needs to define the study concept, research methods, research strategy, timeframe and data collection methods, and determine the sampling technique. Also, this study discusses the ethical issues that may be encountered in this study and provide solutions to mitigate the ethical risks. In addition to the components shown in Figure 4-1, it is important to assess the potential ethical issues of the study.

4.2 Research Paradigm: Ontology, Epistemology, and Axiology

The discussion of research methods begins by developing an understanding of ontology, epistemology, and value theory, which refer to the different ways of looking at the philosophical underpinning of a given research project. The way in which the philosophy of research is observed determines the understanding of the specific indications and implications of research methods and then the selection of an appropriate concept to guide the research in the methodological design. Identifying social consumption is the basis for conducting research using the research method to be identified.

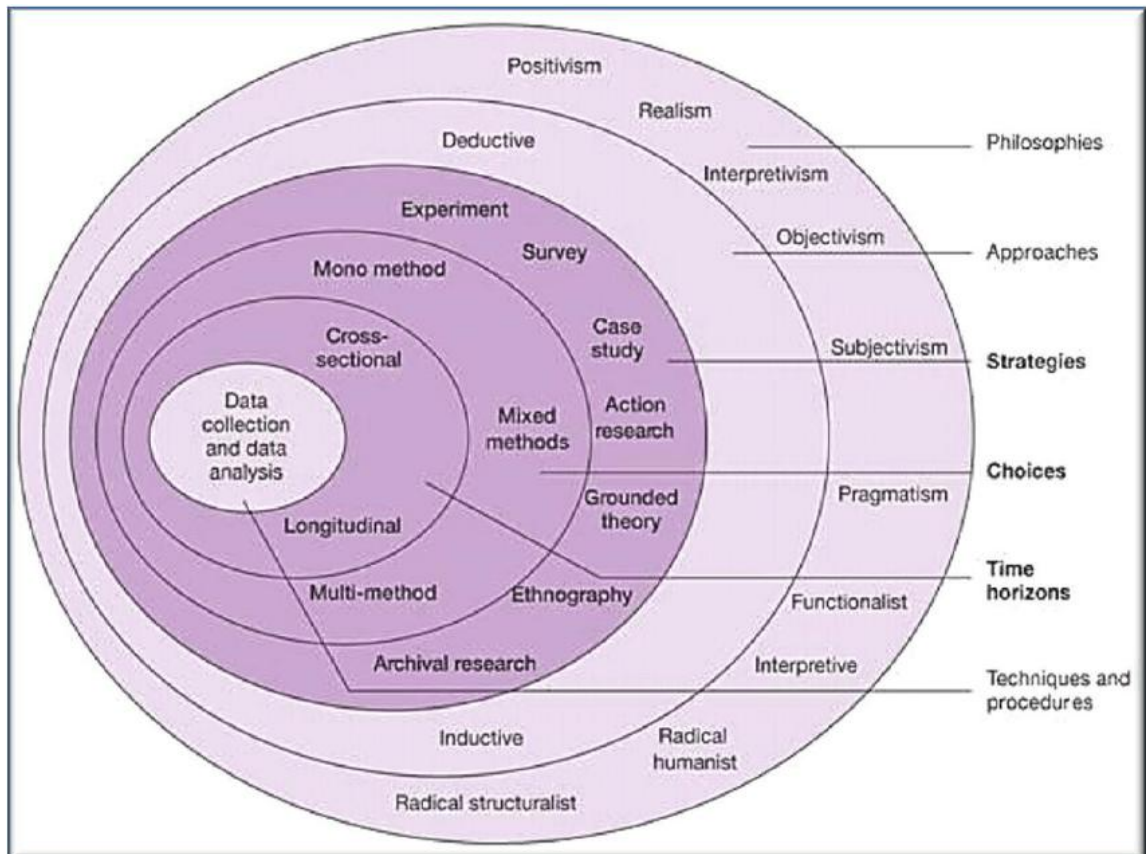


Figure 4-1: Research onion (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007).

Ontology, the theory of being, pertains to the study of reality’s nature. Under the purview of ontology, belief systems arise that reflect the researcher’s interpretation of what constitutes a fact (Ding and Foo, 2002). Ontology concerns itself with the nature of existence and the structure of reality (Zhong et al., 2019), as well as the feasibility of comprehending the world (Elder-Vass, 2007). In the social sciences, ontology has been recognised for identifying the existence and relationships between or among various social actors, cultural norms, and social structures (Czerniak et al., 2015). According to Al-Saadi (2014), humans can make assumptions about reality and existence, and ontology is about people’s beliefs regarding the nature of the actual and social world. Ontological positions develop based on the nature of the world and existence (Tekin and Kotaman, 2013). Related ontological positions include objectivism and constructivism. Objectivism assumes that reality exists independently of human beliefs or understandings, suggesting that reality and existence can be directly and accurately observed (Klakegg, 2016). Conversely, constructivism assumes that external reality exists and that the human mind has the capacity to socially construct meaning (Starr and De Oliveira, 2013). Epistemology refers to the assumptions people make about the nature of knowledge.

These assumptions relate to how people explore the world (Green, Skukauskaite and Baker, 2012). Epistemology pertains not only to the act of investigating knowledge in the world but also to the potential information of knowledge (Tekin and Kotaman, 2013). In the study of social and natural sciences, it is imperative to ensure that epistemology addresses nature and the possibility of accessing it. Social behaviour can be revealed through the application of epistemology (Al-Ababneh, 2020). The epistemological assumptions that researchers incorporate in their research methods play a crucial role in guiding their research practices to generate knowledge. In applying epistemology, researchers often adopt positivism, focusing on the search for factual knowledge and pursuing evidence and truth in the world. Facts and values are prioritised, fostering objective and value-free investigations (Scott, 2014). Under the influence of an epistemological stance, interpretivism can also be used by researchers to study the social world and its impact on individuals. It is assumed that the social world can be understood through human behaviour (Berryman, 2019). The epistemological stance can be both positivist and interpretivist (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020).

Axiology is both study of value and a theory about the nature of value (Biedenbach and Jacobson, 2016). Consequently, the researcher's beliefs about what is good or bad influence the values presented in the research (Viega, 2016). The researcher's beliefs about value affect the research process and outcomes. Value theory is intrinsically linked to the purpose of the research, and the nature of value is affirmed in the research through the researcher's beliefs. The researcher plays the most significant role in the research project, as their beliefs about the research's value have a considerable influence.

Through a review of the three different research paradigms, it is crucial to distinguish between the three concepts and to identify the most appropriate one to use. Ontological questions relate to the form and nature of reality and the possibilities for researchers to understand it (Scott, 2014). Under the influence of ontology, only real beings and facts are explored. Epistemological questions are about the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the identified phenomena and events. Based on understanding, facts can be assumed through the efforts of the researcher. Through objective assumptions, it is expected that the existence of the world can be explored in an objective manner. As with value theory, the beliefs of the researcher play an important role and the constraints of the

research are set by the researcher . These three different research paradigms and concepts lead to different practices and assumptions about research and understanding of the world.

This study intends to adopt an epistemology, as it is crucial to gather evidence and gain an understanding of the facts of the world. Simultaneously, the disadvantages of ontology and value theory are acknowledged. Ontology tends to seek absolute truth and does not consider the researcher's abilities, creating difficulties and obstacles for the researcher to complete the investigation on the research topic. Value theory, on the other hand, allows the subjective beliefs of the researcher to determine the process and focus of the research. This study does not aim to let the researcher determine specific practices. To conduct an objective study of the phenomenon of brand building in private higher education in China, epistemology might be the most appropriate choice.

4.3 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy primarily concerns the nature of the reality under investigation (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). It refers to the beliefs that researchers hold about the way in which data about events or phenomena are collected, analysed and used (Crossan, 2003). In identifying a research philosophy, researchers undergo the process of converting doxology into epistemology. Doxology refers to what is considered to be truth, while epistemology refers to what is known to be truth (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2008).

The nature of the knowledge developed from research is significantly influenced by the researcher's choice of research philosophy (Holden and Lynch, 2004). Research philosophy impacts the way researchers conduct research by defining the research questions, design, and specific procedures (Hughes and Sharrock, 2016). According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007), there are three significant philosophies that researchers can adopt when investigating the academic and research performance of private universities in China: positivism, realism, and interpretivism. These research philosophies represent the different ways in which humans understand reality and develop knowledge (Hammersley, 1993). In this section, a review of the three research philosophies is necessary before selecting the most appropriate one.

4.3.1 Positivism

Positivism is the philosophy in the natural sciences that insists on developing factual knowledge through observation and precise measurement (Comte, 2015). Positivism is valued for its ability to develop general knowledge and truth about reality, with a focus on collecting and analysing data free from human bias (Park, Konge and Artino, 2020). Facilitating objective research and data analysis is an important feature of positivist research (Bryant, 1985). Simultaneously, it is crucial for researchers who adopt positivism to maintain the independence of their research, meaning that they should not project their own views onto the object of study or relate to their own interests (Bryant, 1985). Positivist researchers believe that reality is stable and repetitive, allowing them to observe events or phenomena to serve the purpose of predicting future events (Levin, 1988). Positivism is supported by the philosophical position of the natural sciences that observable reality in society is amenable to analysis and generalisation (Park, Konge and Artino, 2020). By practicing positivist research, researchers aim to use current research to predict future events and activities (Comte, 2015).

In order to facilitate objective research based on positivism, the data collected from positivist research should be observable and quantifiable (Comte, 2015). Quantifiable observation is vital to positivist research because it allows for statistical analysis of the collected quantitative data (Michel, 2003). Collins (2018) explains that positivism relates to an empiricist view of humans, which suggests that human experience plays an important role in the design and development of research practices. Furthermore, positivist researchers believe that there are observable elements that can be collected and utilised by the researcher to develop knowledge (Bryant, 1985). Wilson (2014) states that positivist researchers focus on discovering measurable and observable facts or patterns. The observed and measured events or phenomena should facilitate the development of meaningful knowledge with credibility (Adam, 2014). During the research process, the researcher's goal is to determine the causal relationships between the collected data and to seek generalisations of the results. It is a challenge for the researcher to identify variables before seeking relationships between them (Adam, 2014).

The strength of positivism lies in the objectivity of the research process, data collection, and analysis (Hunt, 1991). Positivism is concerned with the scientific testing of

hypotheses, and its aim is to obtain logical or mathematical proof through statistical analysis (Heshusius and Ballard, 1996). It is valid for researchers to use the philosophy of positivism to derive precise, objective, and quantitative data based on practices that accommodate large sample sizes (Adam, 2014). However, positivism does not apply to all research topics, especially those in the social sciences. Subjects such as time, space, experience, and feelings are not quantifiable, and therefore the limitations of positivism become apparent (Braithwaite, 1993). In addition, human researchers tend to rely on their experiences when developing knowledge and designing research practices, suggesting that it is challenging for researchers not to project their subjective views and insights into the research process (Laudan, 1996). Positivists tend to rely on the current state of the phenomena they investigate, implying that the use of positivist practices is unlikely to generate novel insights (Chia, 2002).

4.3.2 Interpretivism

Interpretivism is a research philosophy that stands in opposition to positivism, as the development of interpretivism is rooted in a critique of positivism (Walsham, 1995). The rise of interpretivism was based on the acknowledgement that the use of positivism to collect data led to a perceived lack of understanding of events and phenomena in reality (Ryan, 2018). It was deemed useful to explore the complexity of social phenomena by developing an empathic understanding of how the subjects of research perceive and view the world (Walsham, 1995). With the adoption of interpretivism, researchers need to rely on their personal understanding and perspective, and then develop knowledge of the subject of study (Chowdhury, 2014). Interpretivism prefers to focus on the development of in-depth variables relevant to the research context (Wagenaar, 2012). In the development of understanding based on interpretive practices, human subjective perspectives and experiences are considered meaningful (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). Humans cannot be separated from their knowledge and experience, which implies that subjective knowledge contributes to the development of truth (Bevir and Rhodes, 2012). Interpretivism is often employed in the study of social sciences, unlike the study of natural sciences. In interpretivist research, the richness of individual insights is appreciated, enabling researchers to develop knowledge based on data of shared

meanings, language, experiences, and feelings (Walsham, 1995). According to Chowdhury (2014), there are various variants of interpretivism, namely hermeneutics, phenomenology, and symbolic interactionism. Hermeneutics refers to the focus on developing knowledge based on biblical sources and wisdom literature, which does not lend itself to the development of business insights (Dowling, 2004). Phenomenology seeks to understand events and phenomena based on direct personal experience (Flood, 2010). Symbolic interactionism focuses on the identification of symbols as they are perceived as social goals that provide shared meanings for developing an understanding of reality (Blumer, 1986). Interpretivists believe that there are no absolute truths, and therefore it is reasonable to seek relative truths to understand changing research contexts (Walsham, 1995).

The interpretivist philosophy suggests that it is commendable for researchers to engage in subjective interpretation while collecting quantifiable data (Goldkuhl, 2012). In interpretivist research, gaining social and empirical insights is prioritised (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007). There is flexibility in adopting interpretivism as the researcher has the opportunity to use primary or secondary data collected from observations and interviews to facilitate the research purpose (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020).

Regarding the shortcomings of interpretivism, its collection of subjective views implies a rejection of knowledge based on universal laws, suggesting that the validity of interpretivist findings may be questionable (Chowdhury, 2014). All research participants can exhibit different understandings of interpretivism, and the information they provide may vary, suggesting that the results of interpretivist research are unlikely to be generalisable or predictive of other events (Williams, 2000). As qualitative data is often collected from individuals to support interpretivist research, it is assumed that there may be bias in the information provided by research participants (Heshusius and Ballard, 1996). In terms of the reliability and representativeness of the data collected by interpretivist studies, these studies may be less successful in providing researchers with reliable results for generalisation.

4.3.3 Identification of Research Philosophies

The three research philosophies have been evaluated above, and their respective strengths and weaknesses have been outlined. Concurrently, the choice of the most appropriate research philosophy to guide the design and conduct of research is crucial. The researcher's selection of a research philosophy aligns with the design of the research methodology and the context of the research question (Chia, 2002). Upon identifying a research philosophy, research methods can then be delineated to ensure that effective procedures and practices are adopted.

The research methodology for this thesis involved collecting data from the heads of admissions at 12 private universities in China and from 13 first-year students at three private universities. The study aimed to gather and analyse the perceptions and experiences of professionals. In this case, among the three research philosophies, interpretivism is more fitting for exploring and uncovering in-depth insights based on the perceptions and experiences of individuals. Therefore, interpretivism is employed in this study to develop suitable research methods and practices. Based on the experiences and insights of the individuals involved in the study, the researcher assesses the information they provide and interpret the primary data they offer (Bluhm et al., 2011). By adopting an interpretivist research philosophy, the researcher can gain a deeper understanding of the behaviour and beliefs of the research participants. The interpretivist philosophy is also suitable for the proposed study as it enables the researcher to gain insight into the lives of the interviewees (Thomas, 2003). In contrast to this approach, the researcher could adopt a positivist study; however, individuals are complex and dynamic, with different understandings of the same object, making a positivist philosophy unsuitable in this case. Moreover, realism would also be avoided as the researcher would be collecting data from humans, making realism an unsuitable research method.

4.4 Research Methods Approaches

In terms of research methods, Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007) identified two main types of research methods that researchers can employ, namely inductive and deductive methods. Bryman and Bell (2011) explain that the deductive approach involves identifying research hypotheses from a literature review before the researcher collects

data. The implication of using the deductive approach is that the researcher needs to compare the research hypothesis with the original data collected from the study and identify potential gaps. Validating the research hypothesis derived from the literature review helps the researcher to arrive at the study's findings (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2008). As for the inductive approach used in the study, it differs from the deductive approach as it does not require the development of research hypotheses (Cooper and Schindler, 2003). The inductive approach develops new theories based on the data collected and analysed by the researcher (Singleton Jr. et al., 1988).

To study the branding of private higher education in China, the researcher employed an inductive research approach. The decision to choose an inductive research method is closely associated with the adoption of an interpretivist research philosophy (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2008). Additionally, it is crucial to ensure that the chosen research method is appropriate for the qualitative research selected to achieve research depth, rather than superficial subjective findings (Thomas, 2003). Through an inductive approach, the researcher explores meaning from the collected data and identifies research patterns and relationships. It is vital to develop theories based on the analysis of research data (Soiferman, 2010).

The aim of this study is to explore social phenomena such as the factors influencing candidates' formation of brand attitudes in the process of choosing a private university and the communication characteristics of the university's brand. As such, this study aims to provide theory for the current practice of branding and communication strategies in private higher education. The study's choice of interpretivism is inherent to the qualitative research and inductive analysis methods employed to achieve the research objectives.

The interpretivist inclination to explore relative truths based on personal views and experiences suggests that it is appropriate to use an inductive approach to develop knowledge and insights about the object of study (Singleton Jr et al., 1988). An inductive approach to research implies that the researcher creates a theory in the field rather than adopting a pre-existing theory (Thomas, 2006). This means that the researcher moves from a specific case to a general principle. Therefore, the findings presented in this study will serve as a revised theory on the branding of private universities in China. An

inductive approach would afford researchers greater flexibility (Saunders et al., 2016). This flexibility is crucial to research, particularly as researchers will be able to bring about change in the design of the study (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013).

4.5 Research Strategy

In terms of research strategies, researchers can use different strategies and methods which may include experiments, case studies, surveys, ethnography, field theory, action research (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007). When selecting research methods and strategies it is important to ensure that there is consistency between the chosen research method and the research philosophy and approach. As mentioned above, an interpretivist philosophy allows the researcher to approach selected participants and explore the professional experiences and insights of the research participants. It is important to choose a strategic tool to facilitate the goals of collecting qualitative data and developing theory based on the research context. A survey is a research method used to collect data from a predefined set of respondents to gather useful information and insights into the research topic (Moy and Murphy, 2016). The process of conducting a survey usually involves the action of developing a questionnaire to collect information from respondents (Saris and Gallhofer, 2014). Survey research is used to collect quantitative data from a group of respondents and involves multiple questions at the same time. Survey respondents tend to choose from the given answers, suggesting that closed-ended questions are effective for facilitating a quantitative research approach (Saris and Gallhofer, 2014).

Given that the aim of this study was to investigate the branding and practice of private higher education in China, and considering the choice of using a questionnaire, it was assumed that individuals participating in the case study project would only be able to answer the questions and not elaborate on the rationale and reasons behind their thinking and actions. In this way, this study would not be able to gather in-depth information and gain more understanding of branding activities and strategies (Dowrick et al., 2015). It is also important to note that the sample size for the case study was a total of 25. A sample of this size does not lend itself to the use of a questionnaire to gather information. Based on the discussion above, it is assumed that conducting interviews and designing

interview questions that allow respondents to elaborate on their experiences and provide answers to the questions would be more appropriate for this study. Ethnography is a type of qualitative research that allows researchers to engage with and immerse themselves in a specific community or organisation to observe the behaviour and reactions of individuals (Hirsch and Gellner, 2020). The goal of ethnography is to explore cultural phenomena from the perspective of the research subjects (Wolf, 2012). It enables researchers to conduct social research to examine the behaviour of participants in specific social situations, aiming to understand the interpretations of group members (Dharamsi and Charles, 2011). Researchers using this method need to be mindful of what participants observe in their local environments (Dharamsi and Charles, 2011). The researcher's physical presence in the setting is crucial to gather information directly from the identified group (Bird, 2020). However, ethnography was not the appropriate research method for this study, as its focus was not on the ethnographic characteristics of the participants, but on the branding activities employed by a university in the private sector (Cruz and Higginbottom, 2013). Contrary to the cultural and social context required for ethnography, this study is strongly linked to the business environment. Its aim was to examine branding practices based on personal experiences and perceptions, and the respondents assembled cannot be considered an ethnographic group.

Grounded Theory is a research method associated with theory generation that necessitates systematic data collection and analysis (Noble and Mitchell, 2016). It is often employed systematically to comprehend qualitative research subjects, aiming to identify social relations and behaviours of groups within a social process (Wuest, 2012). Grounded Theory can support a constructivist view of the research field, offering in-depth insights and enabling researchers to identify emerging patterns in the collected data (Charmaz, 2014). With Grounded Theory, researchers do not need to formulate research hypotheses, but instead concentrate on identifying new theories.

Action Research is an interactive process of inquiry that facilitates problem-solving actions implemented in a collaborative environment, with reflection being an integral part of this process (McNiff, 2013). During action research, researchers typically evaluate and analyse data using a designed approach (McNiff, 2013). It is often used to develop the research subject's self-reflection by engaging with social situations

(Naughton, 2020). Action research can take various forms and content, with the researcher acting more as an observer and questioner, rather than a participant (Blumberg, Cooper and Schindler, 2014).

A case study is a research method where researchers cultivate a detailed and comprehensive understanding of a complex issue within a specific context (Tasci et al., 2020). Case studies are utilised in social science research to examine a broad range of principles and factors (Amerson, 2011). When conducting a case study, researchers aim to maximise the collection of empirical material, ensuring valuable data is amassed to constitute a case (Schipani, 2012). Commonly used in qualitative research, case studies enable researchers to gather qualitative data, thereby fostering in-depth insights and knowledge. By adopting a case study strategy, the researcher can define the phenomenon and collect data based on the identified occurrence (Amerson, 2011). Implementing this strategy, researchers can centre their research on a single case or event and accumulate data considered pertinent to the case, thereby generating knowledge (Amerson, 2011). This approach is suitable when the researcher aims to uncover holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events. The specific research strategy for this study is to conduct a case study, with each interview with a university administrator regarded as an individual case. The researcher conducted a total of 25 case studies. As multiple case studies are carried out, the researcher can offer insights into each case and compare findings across cases. The decision to use the interview research method aligns with the philosophy and purpose of the study. The advantage of conducting multiple case studies is the breadth of data collected, which suggests that the data gathered reflects multiple perspectives relevant to the research (Stake, 2013).

To investigate branding in private universities in China, the researcher employed a case study approach and primary research to gather current data. This strategy allows exploration and evaluation of solutions to problems, as well as the recommendation of changes for the organisation (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007). In interpretivist research, interviews are the most used research method for obtaining primary and qualitative data from individuals (Driscoll, 2011)

4.6 Study Design

4.6.1 Data Collection Methods

For this study, a decision was made to use a case study to collect valuable data as the foundation for the research, and the research tool employed was an interview rather than a questionnaire. Questionnaires usually consist of a sequence of questions designed to gather information from respondents via statistical research and surveys (Brace, 2018). A notable feature of using questionnaires is that the results are organised in a statistical format. In a questionnaire survey, a set of questions is arranged for the researcher to ask the respondent, who then provides the expected answers. Questionnaires are devised for researchers to collect statistical information, assisting in quantitative research and understanding the interrelationships among the variables identified in the study (Geuens and De Pelsmacker, 2017). Typically, the answers to each question in the questionnaire are predetermined by the researcher, implying that the respondent is not free to provide answers that exceed the set responses (Taherdoost, 2016a). The advantage of using questionnaires is that researchers can gather statistics and results to bolster quantitative research practices. However, the limitation of questionnaires is that they do not allow the researcher to glean insights from the respondent, especially because respondents can only answer each question by selecting from the provided options. Questionnaires are not feasible in this study because quantitative data is not deemed the most appropriate type of data to collect for understanding the phenomena identified. Questionnaires are not suitable for generating qualitative insight and knowledge as they are more appropriate for collecting quantitative data. Although both closed and open-ended questions can be included in questionnaires, closed-ended questions are often used in surveys.

As for the exact format of the interview, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with all selected administrators of admissions departments and representatives of freshman students at private universities. The decision to use one-to-one interviews was made so that the researcher could seize the opportunity to observe the interviewees' responses and pose additional questions. Face-to-face interviews allow for direct interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee (Dipboye, 1994). Interviews enabled the researcher to gather the necessary information to investigate the branding of

private universities in China in a more meaningful manner (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Interviews are verbal discussions between participants and the researcher on topics related to the research questions (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Concerning the duration of the interview, it should be noted that interviews typically take between 30 and 45 minutes depending on the interviewer's practices with other individuals. The potential duration of the interview was communicated to the interviewees prior to the interview, as they need to allocate enough time for participation in this study.

Although interviews can take various forms and content, the researcher utilised face-to-face interviews within a semi-structured framework for investigating research questions and making recommendations for branding private universities in China. By employing semi-structured interviews, the interviewer and interviewee have the flexibility to exchange information and adopt a dialogue approach, which suggests that the interviewer can ask additional questions to complete the research practice (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013). Depending on the experience and knowledge of the interviewer, relevant questions were posed to seek supplementary information to enrich the research (Thomas, 2003). The choice of interview method allows the researcher to develop into more in-depth questions and enables deeper exploration, which in turn aids in better achieving the research objectives (Carson et al., 2001). Furthermore, the interview method is considered more reliable as it provides the researcher with greater control over the interview process. In contrast to interviews, researchers can utilise structured interviews in the form of questionnaires, but by using questionnaires, researchers will not be able to engage in deep communication (Thomas, 2003). Standardised questions can limit and narrow the creativity of both the interviewer and the interviewee. Once the research strategy is determined, the researcher will also need to identify interview questions prior to interviewing the participants.

For the remainder of the study, data collection was carried out through interviews. This implies that the data collected for this study was primary data. It is necessary to clarify the difference between primary and secondary data. Primary data is defined as data collected directly by the researcher. Secondary data are those that have been previously collected by other researchers. The advantage of using primary data for research is that the researcher can make decisions on specific data collection processes and methods,

thereby ensuring that the data collected aligns with the researcher's objectives and research intentions (Glass, 1976). However, secondary data can be gathered from various sources which may include government documents, journal articles, books, internal records, or industry reports (Glass, 1976). For this study, the research topic required current and up-to-date data based on the experiences of professionals currently employed in private universities in China. Therefore, it was crucial to collect data that reflected these raw experiences. The choice of the interview research methodology satisfied the need for primary data collection for this study. With respect to the type of data to be collected, the researcher had the option of collecting both qualitative and quantitative data. Quantitative data is data presented in numerical form, signifying that the researcher can present the data in numerical and statistical terms (Remenyi and Williams, 1996). In terms of qualitative research, it indicates that the data collected is in a qualitative format, i.e., audio, text, and image information (Remenyi and Williams, 1996). As interviews were selected for this study to collect primary data, the data collected was inherently qualitative. Qualitative data was collected to match the requirements of the interviews. Specifically, the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with selected participants. During the interview process, permission was obtained from the participant to record the interview, which allowed the researcher to revisit the conversation that took place between the interviewer and the interviewee and extract useful information. As the interview process was recorded, the interviewer needed to process the information gathered from the interview for data transcription. Data transcription is used in interview methods to ensure that audio information can be transformed into textual information for data presentation and analysis (Widodo, 2014). Another crucial consideration in this study relates to the issue of language. This research study is written in English, while the interviews were conducted in Chinese. This is because the participants selected for this study are Chinese, and it is most convenient for them to use their native language, eliminating potential language barriers as a hindrance to research. The role of the researcher is to translate the transcribed conversations between the interviewer and the interviewee. The researcher for this project is proficient in translating from Chinese to English, hence the researcher was responsible for this task. The researcher aimed to ensure that the data collected can be used to explore the factors influencing prospective

students' attitudes towards brand formation in the process of choosing a private university, as well as communication strategies for private university branding, and that the collected data aligns with the research objectives.

In summary, the research methods chosen for this study suggest that collecting primary data in a qualitative form is the most suitable practice for building arguments. Also, the researcher needs to exert effort in data transcription and translation to ensure that the collected data can be used effectively for data analysis. Data collection and analysis are crucial to this research, particularly because the researchers need to analyse data to develop insights and understand research questions.

4.6.2 Pilot Study

Sample saturation is one of the most important principle for researchers to determine the sample size of qualitative research. Sample saturation means that there will be no new concepts or factors appearing after interviewing a certain number of interviewees (Bowen, et al., 2008). There're different opinions for the number of saturation point. Some authors suggested the sample should be 4-30 (Sim et al., 2018) to reach sample saturation. Hennink, et al. (2017) found that after interviewing 9 interviewees, 90% of the concepts can be captured. In this study, the researcher conducted the pilot study, if there's no new information or patterns, then the sample size reached saturation. This process was carried out for administrators and students respectively.

To determine the sample size of the administrators, a pilot study was conducted in which five university administrators were interviewed, and the researcher found that the responses were strikingly similar. This pilot study allowed the researcher to identify potential issues in the design of the research questions and then revise these questions for the next phase of the study (Tenenbaum and Driscoll, 2005). In the pilot study, respondents could also provide the researcher feedback, which helped adjust the interview questions. Five respondents who had worked in the admissions department of a private university for more than three years were invited for this preliminary study. Their comprehension and responses to the questions were closely observed to improve the clarity and relevance of the research questions. After interviewing five respondents, the researcher continuously interviewed three more and recognised that there were no new

information or patterns emerging. Consequently, the researcher concluded that the sample size had reached saturation and did not require expansion.

The same method was applied when interviewing students, with identical results. Before finalising the student sample size, the researcher conducted a pilot study in which five first-year students at private universities were interviewed. Except for the fifth respondent, who rarely used a mobile phone, he thinks social media played a minor role in the university choice. The other four respondents noted that social media significantly influenced their university choice. Moreover, the student's answers to the primary factors affecting their application to private universities were similar. The researcher interviewed three additional students to verify whether the interview data had reached saturation. These respondents indicated that social media was crucial in choosing a private university. Based on this, the researcher believes that the number of 13 student respondents represents the thoughts of most students and is a sample size that is likely to be comprehensive.

4.6.3 Sampling Technique

In research, a sample is defined as a subset of individuals selected from a larger population for measurement. To ensure the competency of the data collected from the sample, it is crucial that the sample population is representative (Singh and Masuku, 2014). Utilising appropriate sampling techniques is beneficial for researchers to access individuals and study them effectively (M. N. Marshall, 1996). The most prevalent sampling methods used in research include probability sampling methods and non-probability sampling methods. Probability sampling techniques imply that all subjects within the target population have an equal chance of being selected for the sample (Taherdoost, 2016b). In contrast, non-probability sampling methods imply that researchers select samples following a non-systematic process, which does not ensure that all individuals within the target population have an equal chance (Vehovar, Toepoel and Steinmetz, 2016). The advantage of utilising a probability sampling method is that the sample is more representative of the target population.

For this study, the target population comprises administrators currently overseeing admissions at private universities in China and candidates undertaking nationwide

college entrance examinations, a sizeable target population. According to statistics, the number of participants in the National College Entrance Examination in 2023 alone totals 12.91 million (Xinhua News Agency, 2023). However, in employing probability sampling techniques, it is challenging for the researcher to ensure that all individuals have an equal chance of being selected. This is because the researcher does not have access to all individuals within the target population. Consequently, non-probability sampling practices are deemed more suitable for this study.

The selection of the primary research sample can impact the outcome and quality of the study (Etikan and Bala, 2017). It is vital to ensure that the specific practices employed in selecting respondents yield useful and valid primary data. Given the large size of the target population, it is important to use effective methods to recruit individuals who fulfill the study requirements to participate in the interviews.

Out of various sampling techniques, the voluntary sampling technique was deemed the most suitable for this study. A voluntary sample is defined as a sample comprising participants who voluntarily decide to participate in the study (Murairwa, 2015). Respondents typically choose to participate in the study because they possess strong opinions, they are eager to share, and they are interested in the research topic (Murairwa, 2015). The researcher disseminated a request to recruit respondents online and across social media networks, aiming to attract those interested in the research topic to contact the researcher.

Establishing the sample for random sampling was challenging in this study due to the difficulty of determining the total sample size, coupled with the challenges in surveying the random sample in its entirety. In this study, several samples were identified who volunteered to participate in the survey, primarily through their own network of professional relationships. Although these samples were not selected randomly, subsequent analysis demonstrates that they possess sufficient reliability and validity to represent the sample to a certain extent. Concurrently, this study positions itself as a case study rather than a quantitative study, focusing on the representativeness of the sample and the feasibility of being surveyed.

In the process of determining the sample size, it is vital to consider if the size is adequate to thoroughly describe the phenomenon and answer the research questions (Shetty, 2018).

However, this does not mean that a larger sample size is inherently superior to a smaller one. For qualitative research, there is not a hard and fast rule for determining the number of respondents. Luborsky and Rubinstein (1995) argue that the sample size should meet the need for saturation in sampling, and that the size of the sample is related to the specific research objectives. Typically, in qualitative research, a sample of approximately 12 to 26 participants is deemed suitable for the study.

In qualitative research, the data collected from the study is not analysed through statistical processes. Instead, detailed information is gathered for thematic analysis. In such cases, the quality of the sample takes precedence over the size of the sample. Locating around 25 participants within the target population can prove beneficial in answering the research questions by adequately elucidating the phenomenon to the researcher. Therefore, in this study, 12 administrators from various private universities and 13 first-year students from three different private universities were selected. They have a more comprehensive understanding of the admission procedures at private universities and the unique communication characteristics of university brands. Qualitative research does not necessitate a large sample size, as its goal is to delve into the depth of individual insights (Marshall and Rossman, 2014). Therefore, the planned sample size of 25 was deemed appropriate for this study.

The recruitment announcement explicitly stated participant requirements. All respondents had to be at least 18 years old to participate legally and autonomously. For the administrators, a minimum work experience of three years in the admissions department of a private university in China was stipulated. This experience requirement ensured that participants could contribute meaningful insights based on their professional experiences. Table 4-1 below provides detailed information about the 12 private university respondents (administrators) who participated in this study. This includes their gender, age range, position, years of experience, the number of students enrolled at their universities, and the geographical location of their universities. The respondent code is presented as R plus number.

Table 4-1: The information of 12 administrators from 12 private universities in Wuhan. (collected by the researcher)

Code	Gender	Age Scope	Position	Department	Working Years	Total number of students	Location of University
R1	M	61–70	Vice Principal	Student Recruitment	25	20,000	Economic and Technological Development Zone, Wuhan
R2	M	51–60	Director	Admissions Office	30	22,000	Qingshan District, Wuhan
R3	F	41–50	Director	Admissions Office	21	11,000	Hongshan District, Wuhan
R4	M	41–50	Deputy Director	Admissions Office	23	18,700	Hongshan District, Wuhan
R5	F	41–50	Dean	School of Electronic Information and Engineering	15	20,000	Wuchang District, Wuhan
R6	F	31–40	Director	Admissions Office	10	15,000	Jiangxia District, Wuhan
R7	F	41–50	Dean	School of Journalism	9	21,000	Jiangxia District,
R8	M	31–40	Deputy Director	Admissions Office	17	15,000	Hongshan District, Wuhan
R9	F	31–40	Director	Admissions and Careers Office	14	16,000	Hongshan District, Wuhan
R10	M	61–70	Vice Principal	Student Recruitment	29	15,000	EastLake New Technology Development Zone, Wuhan
R11	M	61–70	Vice Principal	Student Recruitment	31	13,000	Jiangxia District, Wuhan
R12	F	41–50	Deputy Director	Admissions Office	12	17,000	Jiangxia District, Wuhan

The sample of students interviewed for this study were chosen considering various

factors to ensure the sample was representative. The researcher selected 13 students from three distinct types of private universities in Wuhan, China. Five students came from a liberal arts-based university, five from a science and technology-based university, and three from an art-focused university. These students were from 13 different provinces in China, representing 41% of China’s provincial administrative units. Though the number of students enrolled in these private universities was mostly similar – with most institutions having over 10,000 students – no significant differences could be discerned. However, there were gradients in the distribution of students’ high school examination results. The student sample chosen by the researcher covered different score segments, providing a reasonably representative sample as shown in Table 4-2. Table 4-3 shows the first-year students selected from the three main subject directions, representing different NCEE score segments. The student code is presented as S plus number.

Table 4-2: 13 First-year students from three different private universities in Wuhan. (collected by the researcher)

Code	Gender	Age	Subject Area	Native Place (Province)	NCEE Score
S1	M	20	Art	Guangdong	360
S2	F	21	Art	Guangxi	360
S3	F	20	Liberal Arts	Hubei	506
S4	M	21	Science and Engineering	Anhui	463
S5	M	21	Science and Engineering	Hunan	445
S6	M	19	Liberal Arts	Sichuan	495
S7	M	19	Science and Engineering	Jiangxi	460
S8	M	19	Liberal Arts	Heilongjiang	461
S9	M	19	Science and Engineering	Xinjiang	415
S10	F	20	Art	Shandong	348
S11	M	20	Science and Engineering	Henan	428
S12	F	20	Liberal Arts	Hebei	459
S13	M	20	Liberal Arts	Zhejiang	460

Table 4-3: The subject and rating classification for the 13 first-year students from private universities in Wuhan. (collected by the researcher)

Subject Area	Total / Rating	Excellent	Medium	Poor
Liberal Arts	5	S3, S6	S8, S12, S13	
Science and Engineering	5	S4, S5, S7	S11	S9
Art	3	S1, S2	S10	

When the research sample is decided, we have to design the content of questionnaire. The questions to be asked to interviewees should be closely connected with the research objective and reflect the research intension from different aspects. The relation between interview questions and research objectives is described in table 4-4.

Table 4-4: The relation between interview questions and research objectives

Research objectives	Interview questions	
	Students	Administrators
Objective 1. Construct a comprehensive conceptual framework that analyze the determinant factors of brand attitude for private universities in China. And incorporate the role of social media in the framework.	Question 1. What is the main reason why you chose to enroll in a private university? Question 2. What ways and channels are used when searching for information about private universities?	Question 1. What are the main factors candidates considering when choosing a private university? Question 2. According to the marketing strategies and methods, how to make candidates have a positive attitude towards the school? Question 3. What factors related to brands may affect candidates' positive attitude?
Objective 2: By employing thematic analysis to evaluate the interview data and integrating the salient findings into the conceptual framework, a brand attitude model tailored for the Chinese private higher education sector will be devised.	Question 3. What are some of the social media outlets that students have followed when choosing to apply to a private university? Question 4: What is found on social media platforms for information related to choosing a school?	Question 6. What forms of media have you chosen to spread your university's brand and message? Question 7. Which forms of media do you think are most effective? Question 8. What specific strategies and methods has the school adopted to build its brand? Question 9. What social media are currently used in your university? Question 10. How often do you update your social media account? What kind of content do you usually post?
Objective 3: Based on the theoretical and case studies, the thesis tries to provide practical	Question 5. The magnitude of the role of information disseminated on social media in determining the choice of	Question 4. When candidates have a positive attitude towards a private university, do they attach importance to the brand of a private university?

<p>suggestions for private universities to enhance their enrollment quality.</p>	<p>a private university. 0 is no role at all; 6 and above 6 is playing more than half a role; and 10 is the most significant role, determined entirely by the information on social media. Question 6. What should you post on your current private university's social media to help with enrolment?</p>	<p>Question 5. Have you researched the channels for students to search and obtain university information? What channels do candidates often use?</p>
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4.7 Data Analysis Methodology

4.7.1 Qualitative Data Analysis

After collecting qualitative data, it is necessary to choose an appropriate method of analysis. Various methods are available for the analysis of qualitative data, including content analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, and frame analysis (Dey, 2003). Each of these methods represents a unique way of analysing the data collected from a study. The thematic analysis is valuable for working within a participatory research paradigm, with participants as collaborators (Braun and Clarke 2006). The researcher accordingly considered it a suitable method for this study.

In qualitative data analysis, thematic analysis is a key approach that focuses on examining patterns and themes in data. (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2011; Castleberry and Nolen, 2018). Thematic analysis can take an essentialist or realist approach, reporting on participants' experience, meaning, and reality; or it can adopt a constructivist approach. It can also adopt a "contextualist" approach that falls between two perspectives: essentialism and constructivism (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A theme is a recurring pattern identified in a dataset (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018). Thus, themes can be identified when recurring themes or concepts are observed in the collected data (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012). Notably, the criterion for defining a topic is that it should support the researcher in answering the research question and accomplish the goals and objectives of the research.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the thematic analysis method can be divided into six steps: familiarization with the data; generation of initial codes; seeking themes;

reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and delivering reports. Based on this, the researcher designed a thematic analysis method suitable for this study. The initial data obtained by the researcher were audio recordings of the interviewees. The researcher first transcribed all the interviews and carefully analysed the wording of each interview to compare the views of the different participants in the study (Thomas, 2006), which was dealt with in a positive manner, looking for meaning and patterns in data. Some researchers have even argued that the process of transcription should be considered “a key stage in interpretive data analysis” (Bird, 2020) and considered an act of interpretation in which meaning is created, rather than viewing it in the mechanistic sense of speech written on paper (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). During the initial code generation phase, the researcher organises the data into meaningful groups. In inductive analysis, encoding the data is not an attempt to put it into a pre-existing coding framework or the researcher’s previous analysis. Thus, this topic analysis is data-driven (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The researcher did not limit to any theoretical framework during the coding process.

Coding can be done manually or through a software program. Given the limited number of interviewees in the study, the researcher chose to do it manually. After all the data have been preliminarily coded and organised, the researcher looks for themes and thinks about the relationship between codes and themes. The researcher introduces methods to identify keywords and use keyword identification to search for relevant content around these keywords (Bang, 2015). In qualitative research, keyword analysis provides investigators with a new tool to define keywords in texts based on prior knowledge and understanding of the research context (Seale and Charteris-Black, 2010).

Identifying keywords should be linked to research questions and objectives, since keywords must contain key knowledge to enhance understanding of the situation (Seale and Charteris-Black, 2010). After identifying keywords, use the specified keywords to explore the occurrence of keywords and the related context, which is crucial for identifying themes. After determining the theme, the researchers will further review and define the theme; for example, among the factors that affect university selection, some closely related content will form sub-themes.

In the final step, generating analytical content, the discourse provides sufficient interview

data to demonstrate the generality of the topic (Braun and Clarke 2006). The researcher will quote excerpts from the interviews to support the main findings of the analysis. In the study, the researcher will first describe the characteristics objectively based on the interview data and then go beyond the appearance of the data and try to explain the essential reason for these.

Content analysis is a method by which researchers classify and synthesise collected data for analysis and understanding (Liu, 2016). In communication studies, content analysis methods have been developed to meet the need to analyse large volumes of textual content (Mayring, 2014). In contrast, discourse analysis typically involves analysing the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, focusing on the natural flow of the conversation (Smith and Firth, 2011). In narrative analysis, investigators need to extract valuable information from data according to the research context (Dey, 2003). Topic analysis proves helpful when analysing subjective information, as it allows researchers to categorise large amounts of data into different topics (Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas, 2013). The advantage of adopting thematic analysis is that it is easier for scholars to interpret the large amount of data collected from the preliminary study according to their experience (Alhojailan, 2012). This study adopted a thematic analysis method, which flexibly analyses the collected data, especially to identify patterns in the data, which helps to understand the research objects and questions. The thematic analysis helps produce qualitative analyses suited to informing policy development (Braun and Clarke 2006).

4.7.2 Time Horizon

The time horizon is a critical aspect of research design. Generally, researchers have two options: cross-sectional studies and longitudinal studies (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007). This study aimed to investigate the branding strategies and practices of private universities in China using a cross-sectional approach. Cross-sectional studies are a practice where researchers collect data from study participants once and do not repeat the process (Blumberg, Cooper and Schindler, 2014). The exploration in this study was based on interviews conducted over a defined short period. The goal of this project was to investigate the current branding strategies used by private universities in China, implying

no need to explore the historical development of branding strategies. Therefore, a cross-sectional study is appropriate to understand the current state of Chinese private universities concerning branding activities and strategies. In addition, the resources available for this study, such as time, cost, and university contact, were limited. These constraints made a cross-sectional study a more suitable approach for this research.

4.8 Research Ethics

During initial research with respondents, it is crucial to ensure the potential harm and risks to participants are minimised (Gajjar, 2013). This research was conducted adhering to the strictest research ethics, adding value to the findings. Key ethical principles practiced in this research included informed consent. All research participants were fully informed of the implications of participation and the objectives of the research. It was crucial for participants to understand the potential impact they could make through their contribution to the research. The consent form detailed their rights in choosing to participate in the study (Thomas, 2003).

Additionally, the researcher ensured free consent, which means all participants were free to decide whether they wanted to participate in the study (Bluhm et al., 2011). Only those who signed the consent form agreeing to the terms and procedures participated in the study. Any individuals with concerns about the study could opt not to participate. Participants were free to withdraw from the interview at any point after notification. If any individual wished to withdraw their data from the study, they could do so by notifying the researcher, and the collected data would be removed at their request.

In addition to ensuring informed consent, the researcher will also ensure the anonymity of the participants and the organisations they represent. Both the name of the university and the identities of the individuals involved in the study will be kept confidential throughout the research process (Bryman and Bell, 2015). This is particularly important given that all participants recruited for this study work in the same industry and may not wish to disclose their identity (Wiles et al., 2008). Furthermore, the interview questions did not probe into the personal lives of the interviewees, making it impossible to ascertain the identities of the participants through data analysis. Ensuring anonymity effectively protects the privacy of research participants (Gajjar, 2013).

Furthermore, maintaining objectivity is key. Researchers must design, collect, and interpret data objectively, without allowing personal biases or opinions to influence the research process (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013). The researcher upheld principles of integrity, fairness, respect, and open-mindedness throughout the process (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007).

The participants for this study were recruited using a voluntary sampling technique. This means that only individuals with an interest in and experience of the subject matter participated in the study. It is vital to ensure that all participants voluntarily agree to take part in the research and are not coerced into participation. Voluntary sampling techniques are crucial for avoiding ethical risks.

Data security is another critical aspect of this study. The data collected from participants will only be used for this research project. Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed into text for data analysis, and all data will be stored securely on password-protected digital devices, with only the researcher having access to it. To further ensure data security, all primary data collected for this study will be stored digitally for six months, after which it will be permanently deleted by the researcher.

4.9 Validity and Reliability

In research design, it is essential to examine the validity and reliability of a study, both crucial indicators for evaluating the quality of research. Reliability is a measure that tests for stability and consistency. According to psychologists, three types of consistency need to be assessed: over time, across projects, and across researchers. Reliability over time suggests that research can be tested and retested by the consistent results it provides. In terms of cross-project reliability, internal consistency is established (Leung, 2015). Reliability across different researchers implies that different researchers' efforts in the study will yield the same results. Researchers can test for both internal and external reliability (Leung, 2015). Internal reliability refers to internal consistency, indicating that the measure aligns with the researcher's requirements. In contrast, external reliability denotes that the study's measure can be generalised and employed in various scenarios (Drost, 2011). To ensure the study's reliability, it is assumed that the same results can be consistently achieved when researchers use identical methods in similar situations

(Mohajan, 2017).

Validity, on the other hand, is a method used to measure the accuracy of what a researcher plans to measure. High validity in a study indicates that the study's results reflect the true state of affairs in the world (Thomas and Magilvy, 2011). Researchers can explore different types of validity in their research designs, including face validity, content validity, criterion validity, and discriminant validity. Face validity refers to the extent to which a measure is valid in assessing interest constructs, meaning that the researcher's intent is accurately reflected in the research design (Hayashi Jr, Abib and Hoppen, 2019). Content validity refers to the perspective that covers the interest constructs (Leung, 2015). The content gathered from the study should mirror reality and the concepts defined in the research context. Criterion validity relates to metrics that correlate with other variables, especially when they are expected to be relevant. As for discriminant validity, it tends to rate variables that are conceptually distinct. Identifying unrelated concepts and variables is helpful for identifying discriminant formulae (FitzPatrick, 2019). To assess a research method or design's validity, it is crucial to ensure that various types of evidence are collected.

In qualitative research, reliability pertains to the stability of multiple encoders of the dataset by the respondents (Darawsheh, 2014). It is critical to ensure the qualitative research conducted is well-designed and honest in its process, especially because interviewees need to participate honestly to inform the researcher. There is a need to identify the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee and ensure that this relationship adheres to the expected process as indicated by the researcher (Rose and Johnson, 2020). As for validity in qualitative research, researcher bias, reactivity, and interviewee bias are often crucial aspects that need to be demonstrated.

The importance of demonstrating high reliability and validity in this research cannot be overstated. Assuring the validity and reliability of the data collected is crucial in qualitative research. There are several strategies that can enhance reliability and validity. Extended participation time, for example, increases the researcher's involvement in the project, thus expanding their understanding of the context and the relevant aspects of the study. Triangulation, which involves using a mixture of different methods, can also help increase validity and reliability. For this study, a case study approach was adopted,

allowing for a flexible method of gathering information that is relevant to the aims and objectives of the study (Rose and Johnson, 2020). Peer debriefing can be used to provide feedback and support to researchers, helping to improve the research process. These peers can be sourced from universities and colleges, taking advantage of their knowledge and experience (Hayashi Jr, Abib and Hoppen, 2019). The procedures followed for data collection and communication with respondents were transparent, contributing to the study's reliability. In terms of validity, the accuracy of the process and data collection demonstrated the validity of the study design.

4.10 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has outlined and explored existing research methods and justified the chosen research method to suit the research question and objectives. The Research Onion model (ROM) provided the necessary framework to identify the key components of research methods. This began with understanding the philosophies of research: ontology, epistemology, and axiology. For this study, an interpretivist approach under the umbrella of epistemology was deemed appropriate. This approach seeks to explore relative truths based on personal views and experiences, suggesting that an inductive method is more suitable for developing knowledge and insights about the subject of study. After practicing interpretivist research, inductive methods were employed to develop new theories from the data gathered in the case studies. Several case studies were conducted in the context of private higher education in China to deepen the understanding of the process of candidate brand attitude formation. The research tool of interviews was used to collect qualitative data from respondents. This method aligns with the research objectives, emphasising that collecting primary data in a qualitative form is the most suitable approach for this thesis. Furthermore, careful efforts were devoted to data transcription and analysis to ensure that the collected data could be effectively utilised. Both data collection and analysis are critical to this study, as they enable the researcher to derive insights and make recommendations based on the data.

The voluntary sampling technique was considered the most appropriate for this study, allowing administrators and student representatives from various private higher education institutions enrolled in the study to participate and provide their perspectives

and insights. An appropriate and feasible target sample size identified for this study was 25. This study used thematic analysis to analyse the qualitative data collected, and the researcher was able to use the analysis to identify patterns in the texts collected. The researcher used thematic analysis to flexibly analyse the data collected, particularly because patterns in the data collected could be identified, which helped to suggest strategies for branding in private higher education.

The researcher asked the respondents to sign an informed graphical consent form to eliminate as many risks and hazards as possible to the study participants. Regarding the reliability and validity of qualitative research, the researcher followed procedures to improve reliability.

Chapter 5 Data Analysis

5.1 Introduction

The data analysis presented in this chapter focuses on a thematic analysis of data gathered through face-to-face interviews with private university administrators and current students. The aim is to provide an accurate depiction of the characteristic facts illuminated by the data. The purpose of this chapter is to objectively represent the factors influencing attitudes towards private university brands, hence providing factual support for refining the conceptual model. The primary methods of data analysis include: first, categorising the survey data to identify the main causes for each research question; and second, summarising and generalising the various survey questions to discover preliminary causes related to the research questions of this study. Therefore, the research in this chapter is primarily concerned with the objective representation of data-based facts from the private university brand attitude survey, rather than theoretical discussion.

5.2 Data Analysis and Conclusions Based on Interviews with Private University Administrators

5.2.1 *Analysis of Administrator in Interview Data*

In the interviews, the 12 respondents were first asked about the main factors Chinese students consider when choosing a private university. The majority of the respondents mentioned factors such as NCEE score, geographical location, employment rate, the university's majors, the size of the university, and the popularity of the university. From the results of the interviews, the score of the entrance exam emerged as the most significant factor, with nine out of twelve respondents sharing this view. This is because the score of the entrance exam determines which universities a candidate can apply to. As stated by R3 (the respondent code is presented as R plus number), "with the same score, you can only get a specialist degree at a public university, but if you choose a private university, you can get a bachelor's degree." Retamosa, Millán and García (2021) also found a preference for universities located in provincial capitals over those in small

and medium-sized cities. Six out of the twelve respondents expressed the view that it would enhance enrolment if the university were situated in a provincial city. Additionally, the interviews revealed that the living conditions provided by the university also significantly attracted candidates. One-third of the administrators believed that prospective students were quite concerned about the accommodation conditions of the university. R11 highlighted how “some private universities have newer and better dormitory conditions, such as having separate bathrooms and washing machines, which would be more attractive to candidates.”

Furthermore, four respondents highlighted that choosing a private university increases the likelihood that students will be able to select their preferred major. As R3 pointed out, “with the same score in the entrance examination, candidates can opt for popular majors as they wish. However, with the same score, they can only select some less popular majors at a public university.” Three administrators underlined that the high employment rate of the majors offered was also a critical factor in attracting candidates to apply. R11 noted, “candidates appreciate the fact that some private universities develop special majors and thus can offer better employment opportunities.” R2 stated, “Students focus on two things, one is the suitability of the entrance examination score line, and the other is the employment rate.”

Moreover, both R4 and R5 mentioned that candidates would consider the size of the private university when choosing a university. Currently, private universities with more than 10,000 students are the most popular ones. Private universities that have a larger campus and beautiful environment are preferred by candidates. R5 and R9 both expressed that candidates value the popularity of private universities, with R5 saying directly, “The main factors candidates consider are not only the score, location, and size, but also the popularity and recognition of the university.” R9 mentioned that “Candidates focus on employment rates, location of the university, and also other soft factors such as the popularity of the university.” Both R8 and R11 mentioned that candidates value the campus environment, with R11 noting that “some private universities have newly built campuses with a better environment, which gives them an advantage in attracting candidates.”

Four administrators mentioned other influences closely related to the university’s brand.

R1 discussed how “candidates will look at whether the private university has a license to operate issued by the education administration. Whether the university’s prospectus and advertisements have the approval number from the education administration in the current year.” This suggests that candidates’ considerations in choosing a university are related to brand trust. Two respondents both mentioned that students consider the soft power of the university. R9 noted that “soft power includes the brand of the university, social influence, and professional setting.” R12 suggested that “candidates take into account the history of the university, in addition to the NCEE scores and the location of the university.” Only one administrator mentioned that candidates pay attention to the university’s faculty.

In conclusion, the private university administrators surveyed believe that candidates consider a variety of factors when choosing a private university. These factors include key aspects such as entrance examination scores, location, living conditions, majors, and employment rates, as well as the size of the university, its reputation, campus environment, faculty, and the history of the university. All of these factors have varying degrees of influence on students’ attitudes towards the brand of private universities.

When asked which marketing strategies and methods are generally used by private university administrators to influence candidates’ inclination to apply for admission (Q2), the interview results demonstrated a variety of approaches. Among these, the selection and promotion of marketing channels, as well as methods for enhancing the university’s reputation, were deemed the most significant (Ren, Chen and Shan, 2015). Seven out of the 12 interviewees believed that universities should adopt a multi-channel approach to promotion, with all of them highlighting the active use of social media. R11 mentioned that “promotional channels include admissions magazines, official university websites, and authoritative information posted on Weibo and WeChat platforms. Usually, the first choice of universities is to use Douyin to interact with candidates, answering questions and showcasing the campus environment and academic achievements.” Douyin is a Chinese version of TikTok, a sister app. Beijing-based parent company ByteDance holds both, but Douyin launched before TikTok, and its robust algorithm evolved the foundation for TikTok and is vital to its global success. Douyin has a whopping 600 million daily users (Yeung and Wang, 2023). Like TikTok, it is a short-form video app,

but Douyin does not operate outside China. The extraordinary popularity of Douyin has led private universities to take the use of it very seriously. Private universities have fully leveraged rapidly evolving internet, cloud computing, and social media technologies to enhance candidates' access to a wide range of information about universities (Zhang and Chai, 2019). R2 notes that "Chinese students today have more freedom to choose social media channels to access information about the universities they are interested in. These channels include almost all popular online communication platforms, including university websites, Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin, all of which are very popular forms of social media in China." Four respondents, R1, R9 and R11, suggested that online marketing should be complemented by offline promotion by universities in the high schools where the candidates live. R11 noted that "high school class teachers play a very important role in the precise marketing of private universities."

Additionally, three interviewees suggested that differentiated marketing is crucial. R8 noted that "the unique scenery of the campus can be advertised, or the higher percentage of examinations can be highlighted to promote the learning atmosphere of the university. If the tuition fees are lower compared to other private universities, this can also be promoted." R10 talked about how "the location advantages of the university can be emphasised, such as the university being located in a provincial capital city." R2, R3 and R11 all pointed out the need to promote the branded majors and the effectiveness of the talent development set by the university. R2 said, "Our university has medical majors that have better certification rates and employment rates than similar universities in the province." These strategies, therefore, underline the importance of personalised and well-rounded marketing methods in influencing candidates' inclination to apply for admission in private universities.

One-third of the respondents stated that, to create an attitude of inclination to apply, efforts must be made to strengthen the university brand. R4 noted that "universities should utilise marketing to shape student psychology, and word-of-mouth marketing is one of the most effective ways to generate trust. This process necessitates precise targeting and methodological choices. Classroom teachers in high schools are significant conduits for word-of-mouth marketing." R6 highlighted that "universities first need to identify their target candidates in advance and foster their initial awareness of the

university brand. Subsequently, by analysing the competitive environment, candidates' psychological preferences, and the university's strengths, they should choose social media or official media platforms with high traffic for marketing and promotion. This strategy will help deepen candidates' impressions. Lastly, efficient marketing must be supplemented by excellent service. For instance, if a candidate who is interested in a university posts a question on social media, the university's admissions officer must provide immediate feedback." R7 pointed out that "encouraging candidates to favour the university is primarily a branding issue. The university needs to have a strong social reputation and positive word-of-mouth."

In summary, the formation of brand attitudes is a process of psychological change and development for candidates, influenced by brand perceptions and external factors. Researchers have discovered that private universities leverage a wide range of marketing channels to impact candidates, aiming to sway students' final decisions. Current literature has revealed a robust relationship between brand channels and candidates' attitudes towards their chosen university (Qingzhu and Liu, 2020). In private universities' marketing campaigns, marketers have underscored shifts in candidates' media usage; many universities today are placing greater emphasis on candidates' emerging habits of accessing information. This is especially applicable to candidates from newly developed regions (Gong, Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner, 2020). For example, Moriyasu (2021) reported that universities in Asian countries have made significant strides in enhancing student interest and personal attitudes to bolster enrolment by leveraging rapidly evolving social media technologies. Universities have acquired extensive knowledge in this regard, and this insight has been beneficial for university administrators, providing practical advice for universities to refine their marketing strategies (Li, 2021). Universities have been concentrating on innovative methods to allure candidates as technological advancements and social conditions evolve. Marketers began by emphasising the importance of universities comprehending the characteristics of their target audience when selecting marketing channels. University marketers have conducted extensive research on the demographic characteristics of candidates. Chou, Wu and Chen (2011) argue that students' attitudes towards universities are profoundly influenced by the social media channels they frequent. Meanwhile, Zhang (2020) investigated the

psychological factors of Chinese university candidates in the contemporary era, contending that today's Chinese students are strongly influenced by the novel social characteristics they encounter. Thus, for university marketers, acknowledging these changes can aid in devising suitable strategies to attract and retain candidates.

Question 3 investigated the primary factors influencing candidates' choice of university relative to branding. The researcher sought to comprehend through interviews how brand perceptions shape candidates' attitudes towards university selection. From the interviews, the factors mentioned by the respondents were relatively concentrated, and the consensus was that a university's strengths could significantly sway candidates' university preferences. All respondents emphasised the university's intangible strengths, often giving more space to these qualities.

In terms of defining these intangible strengths, R6 listed nine factors, "including the university's history, social reputation, unique characteristics, faculty strength, research capabilities, living facilities, university-enterprise resources, and development potential." R3 observed that "brand-related influences encompass the university's historical background and cultural heritage. For instance, some now-independent private universities, which were initially dependent on parent institutions – usually prestigious Chinese universities – in their early growth stages." An example provided was Hankou College, where the researcher works, formerly an independent affiliate of Huazhong Normal University. It has adopted the parent institution's strong attributes following a decade-long nurturing period.

R5 emphasised the factors affecting attitudes towards university selection as including "the university's societal influence and the propagation of campus spirit and culture." R9 noted that "Soft strengths encompass the university's educational philosophy, specialised education, and quality teaching and learning." Out of the twelve respondents, four underscored the importance of faculty, and three mentioned the utilisation of social media in disseminating campus culture and students' distinctive activities.

In question 4, the researcher aimed to ascertain whether brand attitudes could impact candidates' decisions to enrol in a private university. The question was predicated on the assumption that once candidates develop a certain degree of recognition and preference for a university's brand, they are likely to form an attitude

towards it. Ten out of twelve administrators interviewed explicitly agreed that brand attitudes could influence the application decision. R9 noted that “a strong brand is about the competitiveness of the students. Candidates place significant emphasis on the brand, reputation, and societal influence of private universities.” Respondent 1 commented on how “the popularity and prestige of a private university create a potent branding effect and, to a degree, serve as a magnet that draws parents and candidates.” Four respondents mentioned that candidates pay special attention to the history of private universities. R10 explained how “candidates examine the origins of private universities. For instance, some private universities, which are offshoots of public universities in China and gained independence at a later stage, are generally trusted more by candidates.”

However, two respondents believed that brand attitudes have minimal influence on application decisions. R2 argued that “due to score constraints, applicants might lower their expectations for the brand of a private university to secure a university admission.” R8 contended that “candidates are more focused on the university’s food and accommodation provision, as well as future job prospects, than its brand.”

In the conducted survey, a considerable majority of respondents concurred that attitudes towards university branding substantially influence prospective students’ application decisions. Viewing student university choice as a shopping and spending process, Gong, Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner (2020) posited that consumer behaviour might result from strategic university marketing, which plays a pivotal role in shaping students’ attitudes and decision-making. Intrinsic factors such as consumer sentiment, brand attitudes, loyalty, and brand preferences may also shape the final choice.

Interview question 5 prompted the researcher to ask administrators about the typical channels that candidates use to learn about private college admissions. As per the interviews, eight of the twelve administrators concurred that student’s source and garner information about universities via an array of channels, including both online and offline mediums. R1 highlighted that “Online channels include the university’s official website, WeChat, Weibo, Douyin and other social media platforms.” He considered these to be significant windows and information sources for students and parents to learn about universities. R3, R8, R9, and R12 all concurred that the most vital online channels incorporate the search engine Baidu, universities’ official websites, and the voluntary

application-filling app. R12 added that “through searching for information about private universities through different online channels, students and parents can obtain relatively more comprehensive university information.”

Out of the 12 respondents, five of them underscored the importance of online channels and offline promotion. R3 noted that “Offline promotion primarily includes admissions consultation sessions held by private universities, campus open days, and specialist institutions for higher education training.” R2, R5, R8, and R11 all indicated that one information source about private universities for students is referrals from current students and graduates. Regardless of whether it occurs online or offline, word of mouth is integral for students to learn about private universities. R11 opined that “the most crucial channel for students to learn about private universities is recommendations from seniors and high school class teachers.” Three out of the twelve respondents, R6, R9, and R12, thought that the students’ primary information channel to learn about universities was online. Only R10 indicated that he had not explored the issue of the channels through which students apply.

Interview question 6 asked administrators about the forms of media their university utilised to communicate the university’s brand and message. Throughout the interviews, all 12 respondents acknowledged using social media to various extents to relay the university’s message and enhance the university’s brand. The most utilised social media platforms were Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin. Among the 12 respondents, 7 disclosed using both traditional media and social media channels. R2 said, “Traditional media includes authoritative provincial and municipal radio and television stations, newspapers, and recruitment magazines. The university chooses traditional media, such as authoritative provincial and municipal TV stations and newspapers, to disseminate information and promotional films about the university. The university also posts graphics and videos on the social media platforms of well-known newspaper groups.” R5 commented, “Teachers from our university, including the director of the recruitment office, will represent the university in some of the TV programmes, focusing on the overall scale of the university, its characteristics, and its talent development goals.” R5 also emphasised self-publishing, saying, “Self-publishing works can reflect the university’s cultural atmosphere from a specific student’s perspective.” Four other

respondents noted that they exclusively used online channels to broadcast information about their university. R6 mentioned, “Online channels primarily refer to official information platforms and social media.” R7 combined online social media with offline activities. R7 stated that “their university’s offline channel approach was to visit high schools to make presentations and communicate with high school class teachers.” R5’s university also conducts offline promotions, revealing, “The university sends teachers to give talks to high school training institutions, which hold large consultation sessions in public places, and we then send a group of more professional promoters, consisting mainly of our university admissions staff and students from the university, to promote admissions. What parents are most concerned about is probably the quality of the university’s training. The students are our work, this is the most intuitive and the easiest to convince parents.”

In the interviews, most respondents indicated that the social media, could have a more effective impact on university promotion. R4 observed that “traditional media such as newspapers may not be as effective as in the past. WeChat and Douyin have developed from traditional official newspapers, etc., have a higher impact. However, the cost of such media is higher than the cost of universities running their own self-published media.” Moreover, R11 said, “Social media provides a channel for students and parents to communicate directly with universities.” R6 highlights that “Through social media such as Weibo, Douyin, and WeChat, students and parents can address their concerns to the public websites of private universities. In this way, they can obtain more information they want and better understand the university.”

In question 7, the researcher inquired about the forms of media administrators perceived to be most effective for private universities to communicate their university’s brand. R4 shared, “I personally think that new media is stronger, traditional media is really not very effective at this stage.” R6 believed, “Regardless of the media, I think the first thing is to secure the traffic and data to maximise the effect. Secondly, whether the content we plan to spread is attractive and catches the eye. Now, in terms of user feedback, we have found the short video format to be the most effective, such as Douyin.” Both R2 and R11 agreed that social media platforms such as WeChat public numbers of well-known media groups, Douyin, hot recommendations from bloggers on Weibo, and online communities of university staff and students’ friends are all effective

ways of spreading the word. R12 also highlighted that “social media, which is operated on an ongoing basis, is the most effective form of communication for university brands.”

Question 8 asked administrators about the specific strategies and methods private universities have adopted to communicate their brand. In the branding section of the interview, more than half of the respondents indicated they had focused on elements of concern to students. As mentioned earlier, students and parents are likely to consider the university’s majors, career status, location, and educational resources. Five administrators all pointed out the application of the university’s characteristics in branding. The university’s characteristics include professional traits, cultural features, campus aesthetics, and characteristics of the staff and students. R1 said, “Our universities have optimised their professional offerings and developed brand major. With this advantage, they can attract more students. In addition, they have paid attention to the economic situation of their region to optimise their majors. In other words, this university has developed majors that prepare students for the labour market needs of the region.” R6 stated: “The establishment of a university brand should be a long-term maintenance process. A university’s brand needs to be constantly optimised and should not just be built over a period of time but accumulated and built upon over the years. From my current perspective, I think it is more about spreading the university’s brand culture and creating a unique identity for our university. For example, we can create a unique colour scheme or a unique logo for the university’s promotional materials. The university’s campus construction can also have our unique architectural look, that’s where we’re headed.”

In response to the interview question about brand positioning, R8 suggested, “finding the university’s positioning and highlighting the university’s differentiating features. For instance, if the university has a unique campus scenery that other universities lack, we will promote it through various media, enticing students’ parents as well as the local community to visit the university and share their experiences, thereby earning the title of ‘most beautiful campus in the private sector’.” R11 posited, “Branding of the university can be achieved by building an excellent management and teaching staff, and consistently promoting and showcasing outstanding students.” R3 added that “universities need to encourage students to participate in various competitions; the constant winning of awards by students can help enhance the university’s reputation.”

According to R6, “a crucial aspect of branding a university lies in establishing a good

brand image, encompassing both a marketing strategy and a development strategy. In the marketing strategy, the university can utilise different forms of media, especially social media, to promote the brand and boost its reputation. As for the development strategy, the university emphasises providing a conducive environment and opportunities for students to develop their professional skills at the placement site.” Two other respondents felt their universities were more inclined towards storytelling in brand building. R4 suggested, “Brands need stories and stories need characters. By employing distinguished faculty members and well-known alumni to narrate the brand’s journey, we can better engage students.”

As noted in the literature review, social media has several advantages and features, including lower costs, content flexibility, quick audience reach, proximity, and usability (Agarwal and Yiliyasi, 2010, p.1). These attributes can aid private universities in cost-saving, quick information dissemination, attracting a broader audience, and engaging effectively with them. Consequently, almost all respondents agreed that social media could be more efficient promotional tools. The responses indicated that social media has been employed for university brand promotion. Therefore, this study will explore how private universities utilise social media and the strategies they adopt.

Question 9 asked what social media platforms are currently in use by the administrators’ universities. The subsequent section will present a statistical analysis of the specific social media usage by private universities when communicating their brand.

Table 5-1: Statistical results on the types of social media used by administrators’ private universities. (data collected from the interview)

Code	What social media are currently used in your university?
R1	WeChat, Weibo, Douyin
R2	WeChat, Weibo, Douyin
R3	Internet, Weibo and WeChat
R4	Weibo, WeChat, Zhihu and Baidu
R5	Official website, WeChat, Weibo, Douyin
R6	Weibo, Baidu post bar, WeChat, Douyin, QQ
R7	Official WeChat account, official website, Douyin account, Quark App
R8	Official WeChat account, official website, Douyin account, Quark App
R9	Weibo, Douyin and WeChat official account
R10	Baijiahao of Baidu, Weibo, Toutiao.com. and Douyin

Code	What social media are currently used in your university?
R11	Weibo, WeChat and Douyin
R12	Weibo, WeChat and Douyin

(Data collected from the interview with administrators.)

In the platform selection section, Weibo, WeChat and Douyin were the three most used platforms by the universities surveyed as shown in Table 5-1.. R1 noted that “social media has a wide audience and users have been using it for a long time. Mainstream media platforms, such as official WeChat and Weibo are gaining credibility as the number of followers continues to grow and the credibility of the accounts grows.” R6 points out that “social media is inexpensive to invest in, is highly interactive with candidates and can target people in the first place. It also has a quicker and more complete feedback of information.” R12 says, “Using social media platforms has several benefits for universities, including lower costs, higher reach, better interactivity and greater platform stability. The larger user base of social media can increase the chances of reaching potential candidates. Social media has always been a focus of marketing for universities.”

Question 10 asked private university administrators how often their private university updates its social media accounts and what content it usually posts on social media. The table below provides statistics on the data and content.

Table 5-2: Statistics on the frequency of content updates and content statistics of private universities on their social media accounts. (data collected from the interview)

Questions	How often do you update your social media account?	What kind of content do you usually post on?
R1	Regularly	Regular updates Updates, events, deeds, reports and news
R2	Regularly	News, events, deeds, reports and news
R3	Weekly	Positive information about the university
R4	Irregularly	Updated About campus activities
R5	Irregularly	About Campus Activities
R6	Regularly	About the features of the university
R7	Daily	About the features of the university
R8	Weekly	University dynamics and major profiles

Questions	How often do you update your social media account?	What kind of content do you usually post on?
R9	Three times a week	Events in the campus
R10	Irregularly	Events, activities, stories, reports and news
R11	Irregularly	Events, activities, stories, reports and news
R12	At least twice a week	About events in the campus and news report about the university

(Data collected from the interview with administrators.)

The daily operational management interview section revealed that seven respondents updated the university’s social media content frequently as shown in Table 5-2. Among them, five mentioned that their university’s WeChat public account was refreshed at least once a week. As R2 indicated, “the university’s social media accounts are updated daily during school hours and 2–3 times a week during the winter and summer holidays.” R9 added, “The university’s social media accounts are updated three times a week.” Meanwhile, R5 mentioned, “social media is updated whenever there is news in the university. Furthermore, some of the university’s functional departments and colleges have established official accounts on WeChat and Weibo. Beyond promotion, these social media platforms have developed various service functions, such as checking courier and final exam results, to maintain students’ attention and encourage frequent use.” However, four interviewees indicated occasional updates on their university’s social media accounts. According to R7, “During the admissions season, the accounts are updated daily, and less frequently at other times.”

Across the interviews, it emerged that the content updated on social media accounts was similar across universities, mostly focusing on university events and activities. The majority of the interviewees believed that their university’s social media and website content positively presented the university image to prospective students. R10 elaborated that “Social media updates include: 1. campus news; 2. notable achievements of outstanding teachers and students; 3. media coverage of the university; 4. topical social news; 5. developments in students’ thinking; and 6. current affairs.”

5.2.2 Findings from the Analysis of the Administrator Interview Data

The analysis of the interviews with 12 university administrators unveiled that Chinese students consider multiple factors when selecting a private university as shown in Figure 5-1. Primarily, three-fourths of the administrators agreed that the NCEE score was the

most critical factor as it dictates the range of universities a candidate can apply to. The factors considered by secondary school students when choosing a private university, in order of prominence based on interviewees' responses, include entrance examination scores, location, living conditions, majors, employment rate, history, university size, campus environment, faculty.

The administrators identified numerous branding-related factors influencing candidates' attitudes towards private universities. All administrators dedicated considerable attention to emphasising the importance of the university's 'soft power' – non-tangible factors that influence a university's appeal. According to the respondents, there are nine factors that constitute a university's soft power: its history, reputation, campus culture, professional characteristics, faculty, teaching quality, research strength, university resources, and development potential.

Eight out of twelve administrators interviewed revealed that students used a wide variety of channels, both online and offline, to search for and access information about universities. All the respondents reportedly used social media to different extents to disseminate university information and promote their brand. Eight of them regarded social media as the most effective platform for promoting their universities. The most popular social media platforms were Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin. Seven respondents noted that their university's social media content was regularly updated, with five indicating that their WeChat accounts were updated at least once a week.

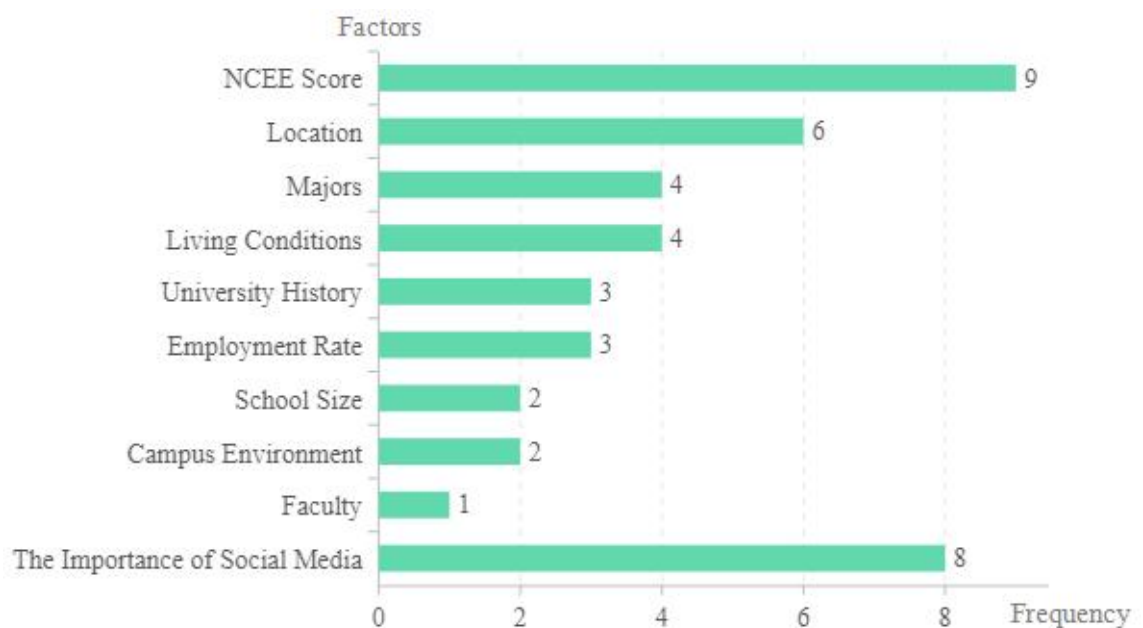


Figure 5-1: Factors students consider when choosing a private university in China (data collected from the interview with 12 administrators).

5.3 Analysis of Data Based on Student Interviews and Conclusions

5.3.1 Analysis of Private University Student Interview Data

In addition to the 12 administrators, the researcher also interviewed 13 first-year students currently enrolled in private universities. It was crucial to gather student feedback to understand how their perceptions of brand attitude influenced their decisions to attend a private university.

The researcher first asked students: **1. What is the main reason why you chose to apply to a private university?** Every student recognised that the first choice was based on the scores of NCEE. Then the interview data revealed that the location of the university was the primary consideration for twelve out of thirteen students. S2 (the student code is presented as S plus number) noted, “There were two universities to compare, but the other one was too remote, whereas this one had a subway station right in front of it, easy access and close to the city centre, so I chose this one.” S10 shared, “I value the location of the university because it’s a good location for future employment.”

Eleven students mentioned valuing the living conditions at the university, mainly including the dormitories and canteens. Three students all mentioned using the Quark App, a fast AI-powered search app owned by Alibaba. S3 noted, “I joined a QQ group for interested candidates and saw the VR panoramic dormitory photos in the group, which I found quite satisfying.” S6 added, “For aspects of university conditions and student life, I mainly used short videos taken by students and teachers on Douyin to get an idea.”

All ten students agreed that the offered majors were their first consideration and chose their private university based on an appealing major. S9 noted, “A good major will lead to good employment.” S4 added, “I saw a video on one of the majors at this university and thought it was doing well, so I got a good feeling about this university and ended up applying for other majors at the same university.”

Eight students mentioned that the aesthetics of the campus was also a significant factor in their decision to apply to the respective university. S1 explained, “When making my choice, I also searched on different social media. I saw a video of the university’s cherry blossoms on Little Red Book and it instantly added to my favourable opinion.” S2 said, “I was impressed by the view of this university’s campus, such as the trees and grass, when I saw it on Douyin.”

For six of the students, the university’s employment rates were highly influential, ranking

just after the importance of the offered majors. Most students reported not finding actual employment rates when researching but expressed confidence in the future employment prospects of their chosen major. This suggests that a majority of high school graduates opt for university majors with a career-oriented mindset. Five respondents placed the quality of the faculty as the second most important factor, usually researching the faculty within their intended major via the university's website. S2 noted, "I looked for faculty when I was finally evaluating the university, and I was satisfied with it before I chose to enrol in the university." S12 said, "The faculty was the most important factor for me in applying to this private university, and it ranked first." Five students also considered the size of the university a significant factor. S9 explained, "I came to the university for a site visit before I volunteered, and I think the size of the campus was very important and gave me a lot of good feelings about the university right away." Five students pointed out the university's history as an essential factor. S6 stated, "I was told that our university was one of the first private universities to be established in the country and has a lot of experience in this field. It also has a very deep history in so many years of development." S6 also focused on the university's previous affiliation with a major national university. Both S12 and S13 emphasised the learning ethos and examination rates as important factors in their decision. Three interviewees considered teaching equipment as one of their valued factors.

In summary, except NCEE score, 12 students ranked the university's location as their top consideration. Eleven highlighted the importance of the living conditions at the university, mainly the dormitories and canteens. Ten students prioritised the offered majors and chose their private university based on this. Eight cited the campus aesthetics as the primary reason for their application. Half of the students considered the employment rate as a deciding factor after the majors. The size of the university was mentioned by half of the respondents. Five students identified the university's history as a significant factor in their decision.

In question 2, the researcher asked students about the methods and channels they use when searching for information about private universities. The following table presents the data from the interviews.

Table 5-3: Methods students use when searching for information on private universities. (data collected from the interview)

Question	What methods do you use to search for information about private universities?
S1	Art examination institutions, university official website, Baidu, Little Red Book
S2	Little Red Book, Douyin, Visit campus, teachers of professional institutions, seniors
S3	Micro blog, Kuaishou, Baidu post bar, relatives and friends
S4	Douyin, Baidu Post bar; Visit the campus, high school class teachers, seniors
S5	University website, Quark App
S6	Douyin, WeChat, Weibo, the official website, call the recruitment office
S7	Weibo, QQ group, Baidu Post bar, Quark App, Douyin
S8	Douyin, bilibili, university internet celebrity, official WeChat
S9	bilibili, campus visit, QQ group
S10	Wechat, Weibo, Douyin, Little Red Book, Zhihu, call the recruitment office
S11	Douyin, internet celebrity
S12	Weibo, WeChat, feedback from past students
S13	Douyin account, university official website, internet celebrity account

(Data collected from the interview with students.)

During the interviews, each of the 13 students disclosed that they used at least one social media application to seek information about private universities as shown in Table 5-3. S3 explained, “When I was deciding between universities, I compared them by looking at the comments and posts on Baidu forums. The positive feedback from users greatly influenced my final choice. After checking the name of the university on social media, Big Data began to suggest videos of this university and similar ones.” S10 mentioned, “I contacted the admissions office of the university I was applying to but felt too shy to ask many questions. Social media helped answer my questions and allowed me to view videos.”

Four students stated they initially used the university’s official website to gather information about the institution, subsequently turning to other social media platforms

for additional information. As per these students, the website's information was more valuable and official. For insights about university conditions and student life, they relied primarily on short videos created by students or teachers on Douyin. Three students followed the university's internet celebrities account for more detailed glimpses of the university. S4 stated, "I saw a big vlogger from my current university talking about the university library on Weibo, which made me feel good about it." S8 mentioned, "I followed the university's internet celebrity's social media accounts, and they often recommend some beautiful scenery on campus, which I find very appealing." Three students, S2, S4, and S9, chose to visit their prospective university and explore the campus in person. S2 expressed, "I was very satisfied with the look of the university. I also ate in the university canteen and observed the state of the current students." S2, S12 shared, "I learned more about the private university I was interested in by chatting with alumni via WeChat." S4 added, "When choosing a private university, I mainly sought advice from my high school class teacher and past graduates." S1, S2 consulted professional institutions and followed their guidance. S3 mentioned, "My relatives gave some guidance on choosing a major, which significantly influenced my decision."

In summary, students predominantly sought information via online social media, supplemented by other online or offline channels. Every student interviewed used at least two social media platforms to gather information about private universities. Eight students utilised Douyin making it the most frequently used social media platform among the interviewed students. In addition, four students initially consulted the university's official website before turning to various social media platforms for more information. All these are online information search channels. Furthermore, three students opted to visit the campus in person, an offline method. In brief, students primarily sought information online, with social media platforms being the most extensively used. Fewer than a quarter of students also consulted their high school class teachers, professional bodies, and known alumni.

In question 3, the researcher asked students which social media accounts they followed when they chose to enrol in a private university. By 'following', which means subscribing, being able to use the social media platform at any time to search for information, view graphics and videos, and allowing the account to send regular updates.

The following table presents the data from the interviews.

Table 5-4: Statistical results of students' choice of social media type when applying to private universities. (data collected from the interview)

Social media Registered	Number of people	Students Code
Official Weibo account	8	S1, S2, S3, S4, S6, S7, S10, S12
Official Douyin account	7	S1, S2, S4, S8, S10, S11, S13
WeChat official account	6	S2, S3, S6, S8, S10, S12
Little Red Book	2	S1, S10
Quark App	2	S5, S7
University Vloggers	2	S8, S13
QQ group	2	S7, S9
Baidu post	1	S7
Zhihu	1	S10

(Data collected from the interview with students.)

Upon being asked whether they used social media to find information about private universities, all 13 students confirmed they had followed at least two or more official social media accounts of the institution as shown in Table 5-4. Eight students followed the official Weibo account of their university of interest. S2 and S3 mentioned they kept up with Douyin's video tweets to learn more about the campus environment and daily student life. S6 disclosed, "I followed the WeChat accounts of the private university I was interested in to see the list of students who had taken the exam and the names of the universities they had been accepted to. I discovered that several students had been accepted to prestigious universities both domestically and internationally, which bolstered my confidence and goodwill towards that university." S7 added, "I joined the QQ student group to stay updated with the university's happenings and felt a strong sense of connection to it." S1 stated, "I found many beautiful images of the university by subscribing to the Little Red Book account of my university of interest, especially pictures of the cherry blossom forest, which made me feel very positive about studying in

such a place.”

In summary, all interviewed students affirmed they followed at least two or more official university social media accounts. Weibo, Douyin, and WeChat emerged as the most followed social media platforms among students. Following these accounts allows students to receive regular updates from the university in various forms, thereby enhancing their understanding of the institution and fostering a sense of engagement. Generally, students showed a preference for short videos from the university’s social media accounts, offering a visual and more realistic impression of the institution.

For question 4, the researcher inquired what kind of content students found on social media platforms that was pertinent to their choice of university. The data derived from these interviews is presented in the following table.

Table 5-5: Statistical results of information found by students on social media platforms about private universities. (data collected from the interview)

Interested information	Number of people	Students Code
Location	10	S1, S2, S3, S6, S7, S8, S9, S10, S11, S13
Living conditions	9	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S10
Majors	7	S2, S3, S4, S7, S10, S11, S12
Employment rate	4	S3, S6, S7, S10
University size	3	S3, S9, S10
Campus environment	1	S13

(Data collected from the interview with students.)

Through interviews with students, the researcher found that the information that students could find on social media platforms included: location, living conditions, professional profile, employment rate, university size and campus environment as shown in Table 5-5. More than half of the students mentioned that they could find this information on social media platforms.

Question 5 asked how much of a role information disseminated on social media plays in the decision to choose a private university when asked of students. 0 was no role at all; 6 and above played more than half of the role; and 10 was the largest role, entirely determined by information on social media. The table 5-6 presents the data from the interviews.

Table 5-6: Statistical results of scoring the role of information posted on social media on students’ choice of private universities. (data collected from the interview)

Questions	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13
Score (0–10)	5	7	7	8	2	6	10	7	5	10	10	8	9

(Data collected from the interview with students.)

When questioned about the degree to which information shared by social media accounts influenced their choice of university, ten out of the 13 interviewed students scored 6 or above on a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 signifies a major influence. Two students scored 5, and one student gave a score of 2 as shown in Table 5-6.

Three students, S7, S10, and S11, gave a perfect score of 10. S7 stated, “My decision to choose a university was entirely based on the information provided by social media platforms.” S10 also scored a 10, sharing, “I initially called the university’s admissions office, but didn’t receive a satisfactory answer. There were no pictures or videos for reference, so I turned to social media platforms. I ended up choosing the private university I’m at now, and I believe all the decisive information came from social media.”

S4 gave a score of 8, remarking, “2 points came from the impact of visiting the campus in person.” S3 scored a 7, stating, “My choice of university relied heavily on my own research on social media platforms. However, for my major choice, I took advice from relatives. So, 3 points are attributed to the advice from friends and relatives.” S6 gave a score of 6, expressing, “6 points mainly come from social media content, especially Douyin’s tweets about students’ daily lives. The remaining 4 points are mainly from the official website and advice received from the admissions office over the phone.”

Two of the remaining students gave a score of 5. S1, who scored a 5, said, “The other 5 points come from a gut feeling, and I can’t specify exactly what it was.” S9 also scored 5, and added, “Another 5 points are from visiting the university in person.” S5 gave the lowest score of 2, stating, “I believe that social media plays a minor role and is optional. I rarely use my phone, but I did use the Quark App to find out about dormitory conditions when researching private universities.”

In summary, ten out of the thirteen students surveyed scored 6 or above, collectively agreeing that social media played a crucial role in their decision to attend a private university. Two students scored 5, indicating that social media played an equal role to campus visits and personal intuition. Only one student, who generally used his mobile phone sparingly, scored a mere 2 points.

With question 6, the researcher asked students what content should be posted on social media at your current private university to help with recruitment. The following table presents the data from the interviews.

Table 5-7: Statistics on students’ suggestions for content to be posted by universities on social media accounts. (data collected from the interview)

Suggested Content	Number of people	Students Code
Campus Environment	8	S1, S2, S3, S7, S8
Campus Culture	4	S5, S6, S7, S10
Living Conditions	4	S2, S3, S4, S7
Teacher Teaching	4	S3, S4, S6, S12
Teaching Facilities	4	S1, S2, S4, S13
Majors	3	S3, S9, S11
Research Strengths/Awards	3	S5, S6, S10
Employment Rates	2	S8, S13
Location	1	S11

(Data collected from the interview with students).

When students were asked what type of content they would like to see posted on their university’s social media, several themes emerged. They expressed a desire for more content about the campus environment, campus culture, living conditions, teaching staff, and teaching facilities as shown in Table 5-7.

Eight students expressed interest in seeing more content showcasing the campus environment. S3 said, “At the university I’m currently attending, we have a beautiful plum forest that blooms magnificently during the season. I suggest we could make some short videos to promote the university’s scenery on Douyin.” S7 added, “On social media,

my favourite platform is Douyin. I think the university should promote more of the university's scenery and food offerings on Douyin. I started watching videos on Douyin because the university's woods looked beautiful, and it piqued my interest in the university." S8 suggested, "Universities should use social media more to promote cultural events on campus, student competitions, and such. These activities vary from university to university and could serve as unique selling points for potential candidates." According to S4, "The teaching environment is very crucial. Therefore, it is important to introduce more about the university's laboratories, and the university could make high-quality short videos to showcase the calibre of the teaching staff. Also, students place significant importance on the conditions of the dormitories, and updates regarding them should be consistent." S6 noted that "universities should highlight more outstanding students and teachers, such as students who have received awards. This would be more appealing to prospective students." S13 stated, "I wish the university would promote more about its facilities, like laboratories, sports grounds, etc."

In conclusion, the students interviewed suggested that their universities' social media should actively publish about the following areas: campus environment, campus culture, living conditions, teacher qualifications, teaching facilities, program offerings, research awards, employment opportunities, and location. Of these, the campus environment was identified as the element that students feel needs the most attention for effective university recruitment promotion.

5.3.2 Conclusions from the Analysis of Students' Interview Data

Through student interviews, the researcher found, as shown in Figure 5-2, firstly, that students generally felt that their NCEE score was a limiting factor in choosing a university, and that they had to choose a university that suited the NCEE score they received. In addition, the top three reasons for choosing a private university were: location of the university, living conditions, and majors. According to the interview, the main way students search for information about the university is through online social media, with Douyin being the most used social media platform among the students surveyed. All the students said that they follow at least two or more official social media accounts of the universities. The official accounts of Weibo, Douyin and WeChat were

the social media apps that students followed the most. Information that students can search for on social media platforms includes location, living conditions, majors, employment rate, university size and campus environment. Ten out of thirteen students surveyed agreed that social media provided an important basis for choosing a private university. Eight out of thirteen students expect private universities to focus on campus environment, campus culture and living conditions, with the campus environment being the most important element of the students' recruitment campaign.

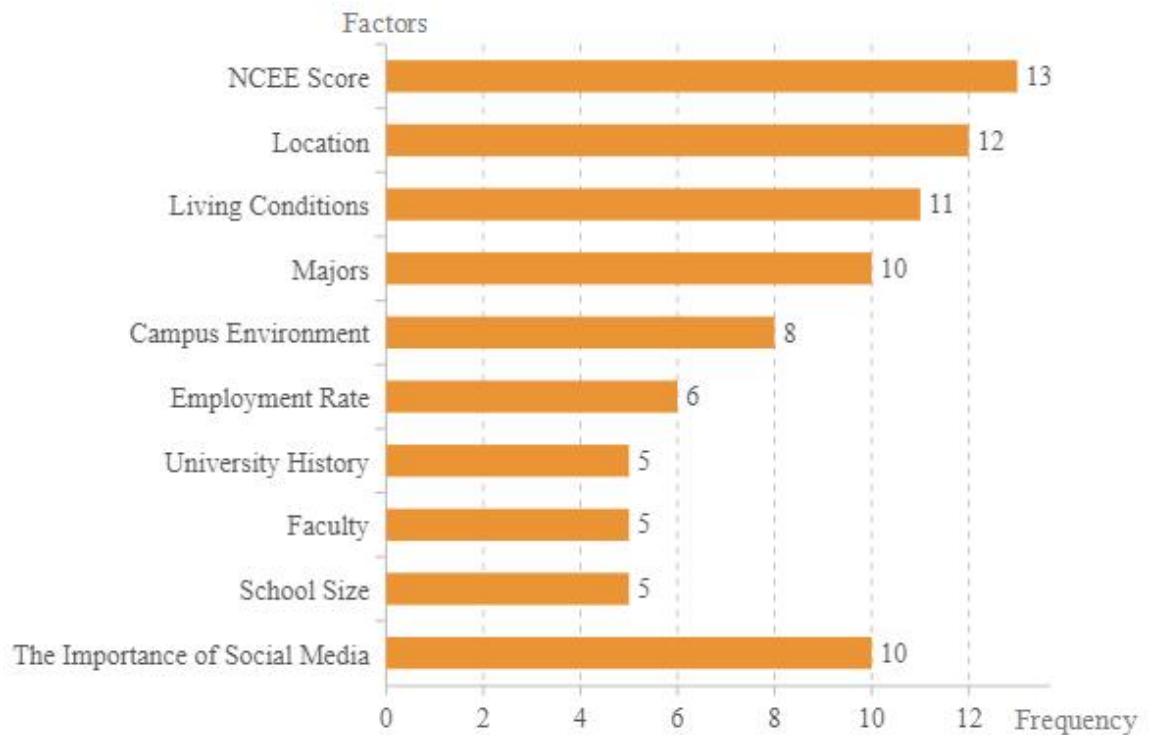


Figure 5-2: Factors students consider when choosing a private university in China (data collected from the interview with 13 students).

5.4 Conclusion

The following main conclusions can be drawn from the findings of the analysis collected from the administrators and students sampled for this study as Figure 5-3. Firstly, administrators and students agreed that NCEE scores are a prerequisite for choosing a private university. Candidates in this score range are just about matched with private university admissions, so the NCEE score determines which universities candidates can apply to.

Secondly, apart from the NCEE score, the three most important reasons candidates consider for choosing a private university are answered by administrators and students in

the same way. In descending order of choice, they were location, living conditions, and majors. Eight out of twelve administrators believe that social media is the most effective media platform for promoting their university. All the students surveyed said that they follow at least two or more official social media accounts of the university. Ten out of thirteen of the students interviewed felt that social media provided an important basis for their choice of university.

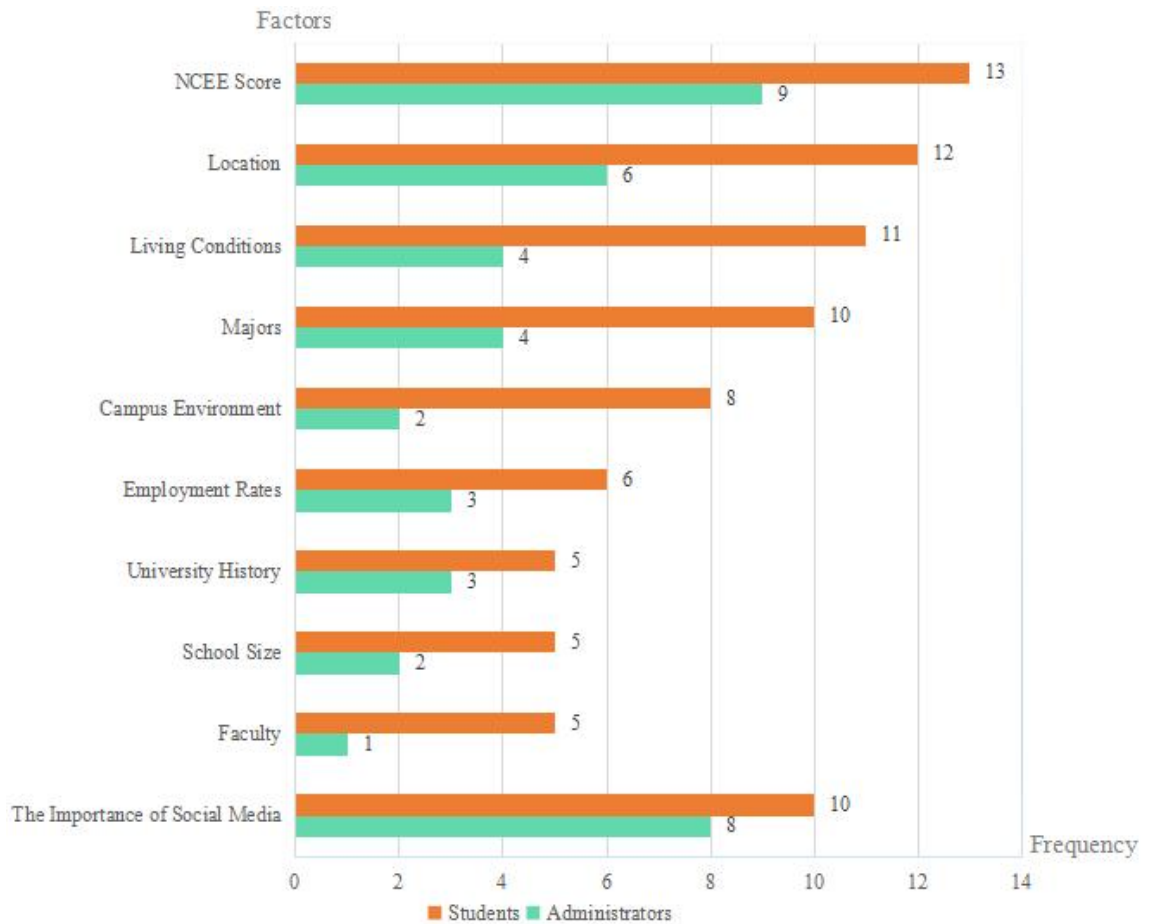


Figure 5-3: Key findings from the data analysis (data collected from the interview with 12 administrators and 13 students).

Chapter 6 Discussion

6.1 Introduction

The researcher conducted two rounds of face-to-face interviews. The first round involved interviews with twelve private university administrators to ascertain their beliefs regarding the primary factors influencing students' attitudes towards branding upon enrolment at the university. These factors included NCEE score, location, living conditions, majors, employment rates, university history, campus environment, university size and faculty. In the second round, the researcher conducted further interviews with thirteen current university students. Through the collation and analysis of the data, it was determined that there was a high degree of consensus between administrators and students concerning the factors that influence brand attitudes and choice decisions.

The main factors influencing the formation of students' brand attitudes can be categorised into two broad categories: hardware and software conditions of the university. According to the data analysis, the top three most cited hardware conditions influencing students' brand attitudes are location, living conditions, and campus environment. The software conditions primarily encompass university majors, employment rates, university history. The researcher found that both administrators and students perceived social media as the most effective channel for disseminating information about the university's hardware and software conditions. Administrators now incorporate social media into their daily work, using it as a strategic tool for content promotion and recruitment. The interviewed students indicated that they primarily use social media to gather information about the university during their application period, particularly as it provides a comprehensive view of the university's hardware and software conditions. Social media not only broadens students' access to information about private universities but also offers valuable decision-making support through constantly updated texts, pictures, and videos. It has become a major information source for students to evaluate different options and make decisions. This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the reasons why hardware and software conditions influence students' attitudes towards brands and

further elucidates why social media is the most effective channel for conveying this information.

6.2 Key Influences on the Formation of Students' Attitudes Towards Branding

6.2.1 The Process of Forming Students' Attitudes Towards Applying for Private University Brands

Interviews with private university administrators revealed that the process of choosing a university reflects the influence of geographical location on the choice of private university, followed by a filtration of universities based on professional preferences and the professional strengths of each university. These influencing factors were categorised into software and hardware conditions, which were observed to have different effects on decision-making. Consequently, this study proposes two influencing factors: hardware conditions and software conditions.

In the interviews with students, the researcher found that the process of the formation of students' brand attitudes consisted of the following steps, as shown in the diagram: Firstly, students will locate a number of universities they expected to be admitted to in the university admissions handbook based on their NCEE scores as well as their ranking, from which they would find a few private universities suitable for their application. Secondly, based on their university preferences and preference for a particular city, they will identify one or several private universities in that city that they can apply to. Thirdly, they will search whether any of these universities have a major that they like. Fourth, they continue searching for basic information about the university, including its living conditions, history, campus environment, such as buildings and natural features. After the above process of searching for information, students will eventually develop a brand attitude towards a particular university. As the attitude builds up, students will eventually make up their mind to apply to the private university. This process is illustrated in Figure 6-1.

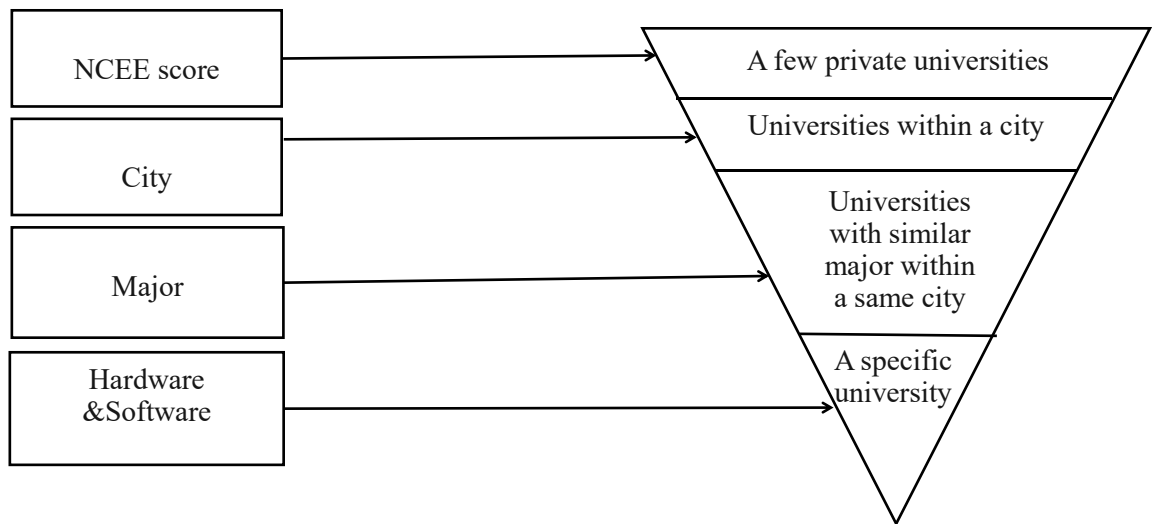


Figure 6-1: The process of forming students’ attitudes towards applying for a private university in China (developed by the researcher).

To proceed with the study, the study initially defines three key terms that emerged from the interviews: “hardware conditions,” “software conditions,” and “social media.” Firstly, hardware and software conditions. These concepts, predominantly employed in the computing field, delineate the distinction between the physical and the intangible. Hardware corresponds to physical, visible devices or equipment, such as monitors, keyboards, mice, CPUs, etc. Software, on the other hand, refers to a variety of systems and procedures that perform specific tasks via the hardware. According to Ministry of Education of PRC (2004a), “hardware” in university construction pertains to the physical environment resulting from substantial investment, encompassing university buildings, teaching facilities, equipment, and other tangible materials. “Software,” contrastingly, relates to the human management component of the university and corresponding management measures, inclusive of the quality of teachers, the education system, the cultural atmosphere, and other intrinsic elements of the management process. In this study, “hardware conditions” at a private university refer to the requisite physical conditions for university operation, primarily the geographical location, living conditions, and scale of operation. “Software conditions” denote the setting of majors, employment rate, university history, faculty strength, and so forth.

Secondly, social media. The term “social media” was first introduced in the 1990s. In section 2.5.1, social media was defined as a computer-based technology that enables the sharing of ideas, opinions, and information by creating virtual networks and communities

(Dollarhide, 2019). The academic understanding of social media has largely centred on its intersection with media and digital technology, emphasising the public's capability to view, receive, generate, and transmit information through internet technology. In this study, social media is defined as a new type of electronic medium that utilises digital technology to disseminate information. This definition aligns with prevalent academic and industry interpretations of social media and avoids undue ambiguity. Considering the emergence and development of social media in China, the primary forms include forums (Baidu), blogs (Weibo), Videos (Douyin), online social networking sites, and client-based social software supported by mobile digital technology, for instance, WeChat.

Through interviews with students, the researcher identified a particular pattern of decision-making by students when applying to private universities. There was a distinct chronological order in which different hardware and software factors influenced students' attitudes towards the brand, within the constraints of their NCEE score.

Firstly, the hardware condition of whether the university is in a provincial capital city plays a role in students' university choice behaviour, then the hardware conditions within the university and the software conditions continue to play a role. Social media plays a very important role in the dissemination of this information, particularly in relation to the hardware and software of the university, which has a direct impact on the formation of students' attitudes towards the brand. The value of this analysis of the decision-making process is that it allows for targeted advice to be given to private universities on how to focus and sequence their brand communication in line with students' decision-making habits.

6.2.2 The Impact of Hardware Conditions at Private Universities on Students' Attitudes Towards Branding

In the interviews with administrators and students, the researcher discovered that the majority of candidates in this band would base their enrolment in an undergraduate program at a private university on their NCEE scores. The primary factors influencing students' attitudes towards branding were consistent for both administrators and students as shown in Table 6-1. The university's location emerged as the most critical factor in selecting a private university. This primarily refers to whether the university is situated in

a provincial capital city. For students choosing a public university, a higher-ranking university often corresponds with a more favourable location within the capital city. Public universities have clear rankings and associated entrance examination scores, leaving students with limited choices, primarily influenced by their scores.

Table 6-1: Statistics on the answers of the administrators and students interviewed on the hardware conditions of private universities. (data collected from the interview)

Hardware	Administrators Numbers	Students Numbers
Location	6	12
Living conditions	4	11
Campus environment	2	8
University size	2	5
Teaching instruments and equipment	1	3

In contrast, for private universities, there is a broader range of options for the same score, and there is no single decisive factor. Four possible scenarios can emerge for students with the same NCEE score. One scenario is a choice between a specialist program at a public university and an undergraduate program at a private university. In such cases, it is common for individuals to opt for a bachelor's degree over a specialist program due to its higher competitiveness in the job market, given its advanced educational level and social recognition. The second scenario is that, given the same score, a student could choose a popular major at a private university, while a public university might only offer less popular or less-demanded majors. Another possibility is that students may favour a private university located in a provincial capital city over a low-ranking public university located in a remote city or suburb. These three factors also provide competitive advantages for private universities when contending with public universities. In the last scenario, when choosing among two or three private universities, students generally prioritise universities located in a provincial capital city. If multiple options exist within a provincial capital city, proximity to the city centre and accessibility become deciding factors. Based on interviews with administrators and students, it was found that the primary reasons students choose a university located in a provincial capital city include the following.

Firstly, the unique characteristics and advantages of private universities are not sufficiently distinct, and their development tends to be homogeneous. Therefore, in comparison to public universities, private universities rely more on the location advantages offered by larger cities. Secondly, candidates for private universities generally do not have strong aspirations for further study post-graduation, and they are mostly oriented towards application-based roles. As such, these students are more career-focused when choosing a university, and their main goal is to secure good employment. The convenience, developed economies, and better support and employment opportunities in provincial capitals are crucial considerations for these candidates. Thirdly, candidates for private universities have more choices regarding living conditions. The brand advantages and intense competition of public universities often mean candidates do not dwell heavily on their future university's living conditions. Private university candidates, however, have a wider range of universities to choose from and can consider the differences in the quality of life at various private universities. This often includes the services and lifestyle opportunities the city hosting the university can offer, such as leisure, entertainment, and dining options. They also consider whether the city has additional universities and the convenience it offers for further studies or examinations.

The allure of provincial capitals is amplified by the fact that this cohort of candidates belongs to Generation Z, which has distinctive characteristics. Some scholars define Generation Z as those born in 1994 and later (Ibrahim et al., 2015), while others include those born from 1995 through 2010 (Seemiller and Grace, 2017). The defining factors of this generation include an abundance of material goods, widespread adoption of technology in all aspects of life, the degradation of ethnic environmental identity, and information overload. According to Juodzbalis and Radzevicius (2015), as shown in Figure 6-2, Generation Z consumers' characteristics, they exhibit realism and materialistic in their attitudes. Digital devices and social networks influence them when they select luxury fashion brands. As a lifetime choice, the university can be considered an extreme luxury and a significant consuming experience.

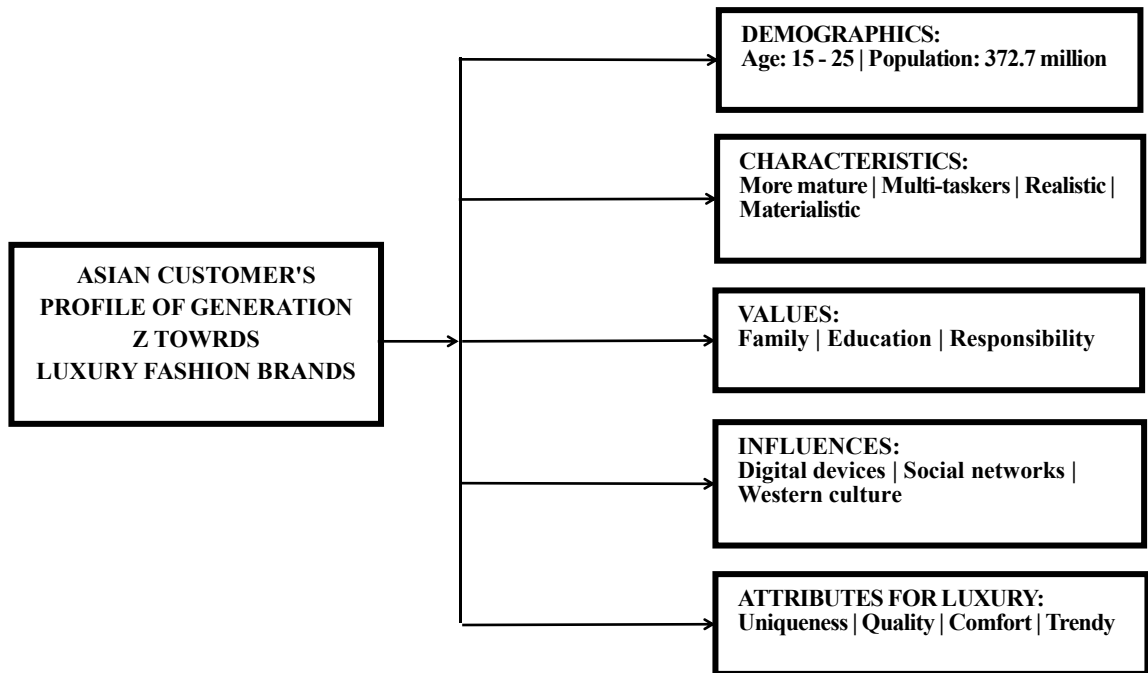


Figure 6-2: Theoretical model of Asian Generation Z customers' profile towards luxury fashion brands (Juodzbalis and Radzevicius, 2015).

Hardware is a major determinant of the quality of life during university studies. Unsurprisingly, young people concentrate on the conditions of food and housing at university, especially accommodation. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory posits that the most fundamental human needs are physiological and security needs, and that higher-level needs such as spirituality and self-actualisation only arise after these foundational needs are met. Therefore, concern for university living conditions is a direct manifestation of individuals satisfying their psychological needs. As such, young people preparing to enter university have elevated expectations of their living conditions.

There is consensus among both administrators and students that the size of a university is very important. In this study, 'university size' refers to both the number of enrolled students and the physical area of the institution. Currently, well-established and fully developed private universities typically have more than 10,000 undergraduate students. A large student body is a signal that the university has gained community recognition. Whether a university is large enough impacts the quality of student life for the next four years and serves as an indicator of the institution's strength and future development prospects.

Eight students cited the university environment as a critical factor in their

decision-making process, a factor also mentioned by two administrators. Candidates were concerned about the architectural style of the university buildings and the natural beauty of the campus. Once basic needs such as food and accommodation are satisfied, spiritual needs come into play. The architectural style of a private university, its natural scenery, and other physical facilities significantly influence students' spiritual needs. Given Generation Z's high expectations regarding material and spiritual needs, they pay close attention to various physical conditions when forming brand attitudes about university selection.

According to Maslow's need hierarchy theory (Kaur, 2013), human needs are categorised into different levels, with the satisfaction of needs progressing from lower to higher levels. Therefore, in this study, in line with Maslow's theory, the needs of university students for private universities are categorised as follows. Firstly, the most fundamental level consists of basic physiological needs, which, for the purpose of this research, primarily refers to food and accommodation conditions. Secondly, there is a demand for campus area and student body size, representing students' desires to enhance their capabilities. In this study, this need is principally influenced by the size of the university. Lastly, at the spiritual level, preferences are influenced by the aesthetics of the university environment. Candidates show a preference for universities with beautiful scenery, which can provide mental pleasure as shown in Figure 6-3. The interview shows that more students pay attention to the school environment than school size, indicating that this generation has high spiritual needs.

Among the hardware conditions, teaching equipment is also a major factor influencing the choice of a private university, as mentioned by administrators and students alike. Higher education is a service provided by universities. Because the private university community does not have a strong brand, it is a service that needs to be experienced before it can be judged. Until students enter a private university experience, they can only judge it by what they can visually see. One easily visible factor is teaching equipment. State-of-the-art teaching equipment reflects the strength of a private university and the commitment of its organisers to teaching and learning.

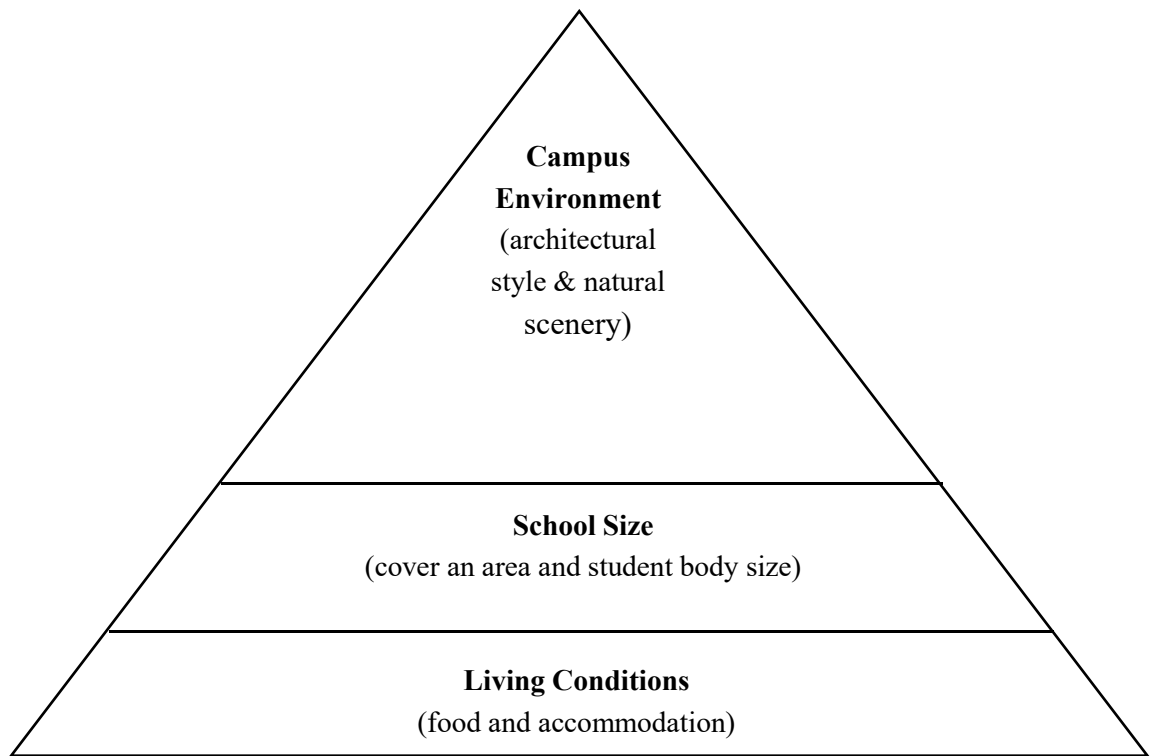


Figure 6-3: The main levels of need that students consider when choosing a private university (developed by the researcher).

In terms of hardware conditions, both administrators and students consider that location, living conditions, size of the university, campus environment, and teaching equipment are important factors in shaping attitudes towards the brand. Location and living conditions were the most important influencing factors for both administrators and students. More students thought that the campus environment had a more important influence than the size of the university. According to the interviews, many students were attracted to the university because of a beautiful, scenic campus.

6.2.3 The Impact of Software Conditions at Private Universities on Students' Attitudes Towards Branding

Among the software factors, both administrators and students concurred that the availability of a preferred majors at a private university is the most significant determinant in university selection as shown in Table 6-2. During the interviews, it was observed that many students' choice of majors was employment oriented. At their age, most students lack the knowledge and experience to determine whether they are suitable for a specific major, thus relying primarily on their personal preferences and the

anticipated job prospects of the majors (Nanayakkara et al., 2019). Accordingly, aligning with existing literature, high employment rates are a primary reason students choose particular majors (İlğan et al., 2018; Ashraf et al., 2017). Most respondents indicated they did not find actual data on the employment rates of their chosen majors, but used recommendations from their parents, relatives, friends or their own general knowledge (Wong et al., 2020) to gauge the employment prospects of a specific majors and make decisions accordingly. This signifies the importance of social media communication about job prospects of majors for students' university selection decisions (Ng et al., 2020).

Table 6-2: Statistics on the answers of the administrators and students interviewed on the software conditions of private universities. (data collected from the interview)

Software conditions	Administrators Numbers	Students Numbers
Majors	4	10
Employment rate	3	6
University history	3	5
Faculty	1	5

Choosing a major with a career-oriented mindset is common among Chinese students. Securing good employment remains a perennial challenge for university graduates. According to Ministry of Education of PRC (2022), the number of general undergraduate graduates nationwide rose from 2.79 million in 2011 to 4.28 million in 2021. This growth, compounded with the effects of the 2020 pandemic and a slowing Chinese economy, has led to increased employment pressure (Xiao and Li, 2020).

In the interviews, administrators also clarified that when candidates' NCEE scores meet the admission criteria for public universities, they might opt for a private university because of their preferred major. As echoed in existing literature, the structure of major offerings, encompassing both professional competencies related to employment and the development of various soft skills (such as social skills and adaptability), is a vital factor influencing attitudes towards the brand of a private university (Teng and Ma, 2019). Given equal merit, students may forego the opportunity to attend a public university and opt for a private university just to choose a major that better aligns with their desires.

Candidates from private universities do not generally have a clear academic advantage compared to those from public universities. According to the China Academy of Management Science ranking (2018), private universities' highest postgraduate entrance examination rate is 18%, and most private universities are less than 10%. Therefore, most private university students opt for employment after graduation. Employment is a major concern for young people in the highly competitive talent market. Chinese students' parents also have positive attitudes towards universities with high employment rates (Zhang and Chai, 2019), viewing these as an indication of promising futures for their children (Ren, Chen and Shan, 2015). Three administrators highlighted high employment rates as a significant factor in attracting candidates. Many candidates show particular interest in the specialties offered by some private universities, especially those developed in partnership with businesses, believing these majors will provide them with improved future employment opportunities. Most students interviewed mentioned the importance they or their parents attach to employment rates, but in fact, they often considered the choice of major and employment rates together, viewing the choice of a popular major as a guarantee of future employment prospects. Thus, they see employment rate as an important influencer, yet it is rooted in the choice of major.

Both administrators and students agreed in the interviews that a university's history and reputation are key factors influencing candidates' choice of university. Respondents generally cite the university's history and reputation together. Because a university's reputation, built over time, confers a sense of reliability, especially with private universities of long-standing history. The reputation of a university can sway students' decisions independently of other factors (Sulaksono, et al. 2021). This parallels consumer behaviour when purchasing goods, as brands with a longer history engender more trust. Scholars like Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán (2001) argue that brand trust is a sense of security consumers feel towards a brand, based on its reliability and trustworthiness. This trust is particularly significant when consumers face uncertain or risky environments, and the dependability of a brand can make consumers want to rely on it, positively impacting their trust in the brand. University reputation is a critical factor for university students when choosing their institution (Brech et al., 2017). During interviews, administrators noted that developing from a reputable Chinese institution into

a private university gives a favourable impression to candidates, although its impact on decision-making is limited. Extended branding, also known as additional or subsidiary branding, is a practice followed by some private universities in China, which leverage the strength, influence, and branding effect of public universities during their inception. Despite eventually becoming independent entities, these private universities continue to benefit from the influence of their public counterparts due to their shared history. However, this influence tends to diminish as the university asserts its independence. Students view this historical association positively, though it is not a decisive factor in their university choice.

In the interviews, five students identified the quality of a university's faculty as a major consideration, indicating they usually research online about faculty members of their chosen major. Only one administrator highlighted faculty development, asserting that students consider the university's conditions, including its faculty, teaching quality, and management. This consideration is important as research suggests that teacher quality is a significant determinant of educational quality and greatly impacts students' university choice (Qasim et al., 2020). Therefore, better faculty quality at private universities implies better professional impact and student employment rates. Additionally, in the social media era, university teachers can leverage their online traffic to promote the university's brand. As such, both administrators and students view faculty as a crucial aspect of a university's soft power and a significant influencer on brand attitude.

In conclusion, the "soft" conditions of private universities, including the quality of the faculty and the reputation of the university, significantly influence students' attitudes towards the brand. One of the most important factors is the potential for a university's professional offerings to lead to improved employment outcomes. Students also consider the university's reputation and history when forming their brand attitudes. Furthermore, students tend to research the faculty's status after choosing a specialisation.

6.3 Social Media Is an Effective Communication Channel for the Hardware and Software Conditions of Private Universities

6.3.1 The Advantages of Social Media for the Promotion of Generation Z

Utilising social media platforms to engage consumers is a key marketing strategy in

today's corporate world (Jayasuriya et al., 2018), with higher education being a sector significantly impacted by this trend (Salem, 2020). Social media platforms reach a wider demographic than traditional media outlets, such as TV, radio, and newspapers. Simultaneously, consumers tend to trust the messages disseminated through social media more than those broadcasted via traditional media (Bruhn, Schoenmueller and Schäfer, 2012). The current higher education demographic, primarily born after the new millennium, grew up alongside the development of social media and, therefore, is more susceptible to its influence. In academia, this Generation Z demographic is recognised as a distinct consumer group. A clear trend is minors accessing the internet at younger ages, with most starting to use the internet either in primary school or even before starting primary school. This statistic confirms that Generation Z is a digitally native generation, with the internet being an integral part of their daily lives. All 13 students interviewed in this study reported spending over three hours daily on social media, which is designed for ease of use and is particularly user-friendly for Generation Z.

In terms of promoting information exchange, social media can significantly reduce barriers and costs (Wang, Yu, and Wei, 2012). Hence, social media communication in private universities can save potential students a great deal of time and financial resources. The video feature, in particular, allows students to virtually explore the natural environment, dormitory conditions, and student life at a university, saving them travel expenses. Additionally, once a student searches for a specific university on any social media platform, the platform's big data algorithm consistently pushes information about that university or similar private universities to the student. This continuous flow of information about university developments that interest the student enhances the efficiency of their information search.

Social media has the distinct advantage of constant content updates, engaging students continually. Candidates can find most of the information they are interested in on these platforms. Beyond text messages, social media can provide a more comprehensive view of the university through images and videos (Mazurek, 2018). It also offers a space for different groups to exchange information, enhancing the efficiency of communication (Nevzat et al., 2016; Himelboim et al., 2014). According to CNNIC (2022), short video users exceeded one billion for the first time, with a user usage rate of 94.8%. Short

videos have become a prevalent application in China, particularly among Generation Z. Most students surveyed believe that social media's video function provides a more realistic representation of the university's buildings and campus style, thereby offering substantial information to aid in their university choice.

Additionally, the transparency of information on social media increases its credibility (Smilansky, 2017). The content posted by university-created social media accounts is available to almost any user, and other students can see users' comments. These characteristics effectively boost the credibility of social media, assisting candidates in their decision-making process.

From a managerial perspective, interviews with 12 administrators identified the advantages of social media as including low investment, efficient communication, high impact, high student usage, platform stability, and ease of use. Compared to traditional media like television, radio, and newspaper advertising, social media operating costs are significantly lower. Since social media platforms are run by large corporations, universities do not need to concern themselves with technical issues or extra costs for technical maintenance, and these platforms operate consistently. Research has shown that the use of social media does not significantly increase universities' brand marketing costs (Mazurek, Korzyński and Górska, 2019).

Social media allows for immediate communication, where audiences can respond and express themselves promptly after receiving the message content, with no time lag (Skulme and Praude, 2016). Unlike traditional one-way communication, social media facilitates an interactive, two-way communication model, marking its primary advantage over traditional media. Social media quickly establishes user groups, where users form a stable group and maintain ongoing communication due to shared professional interests or goals. Some private universities organise candidates interested in their university into a WeChat or a QQ group to promote the university, distribute information, and answer questions collectively.

Social media can also take advantage of its big data computing technology to profile platform users more accurately (Zhao et al., 2023), so that marketing messages can be delivered with precision, pushing content directly to the information terminals of users who are likely to be interested. Private universities can use this feature to improve

communication efficiency. During the admissions season, many private universities focus heavily on promoting their brands through interactive social media such as Douyin and WeChat.

In the case of the researcher's university, during the admissions season, the university conducted a live broadcast on Douyin to promote the university. During the live broadcast, staff from the university's admissions office introduced the basic information about the university, its specialties, and accommodation conditions. During one time 90-minute live broadcast, the number of viewers reached 1,171,900, generally candidates who were preparing to apply for private universities and parents of candidates, and the screenshot of the mobile live broadcast is as follows in Figure 6- 4. The most frequently asked questions during the live broadcast, in descending order, were: 1. Candidates asked whether their scores would allow them to be admitted to a particular major at the university. 2. They asked about the future career paths of the majors they were interested in; 3. Candidates' questions match well with the findings of the analysis of the interview data. The two screenshots below are both taken from a live video promotion at the university where the admissions season took place. In the left screenshot, candidates asked about the accessibility of the university and the majors they were interested in. The right screenshot shows a query about what the university's dormitories are like.

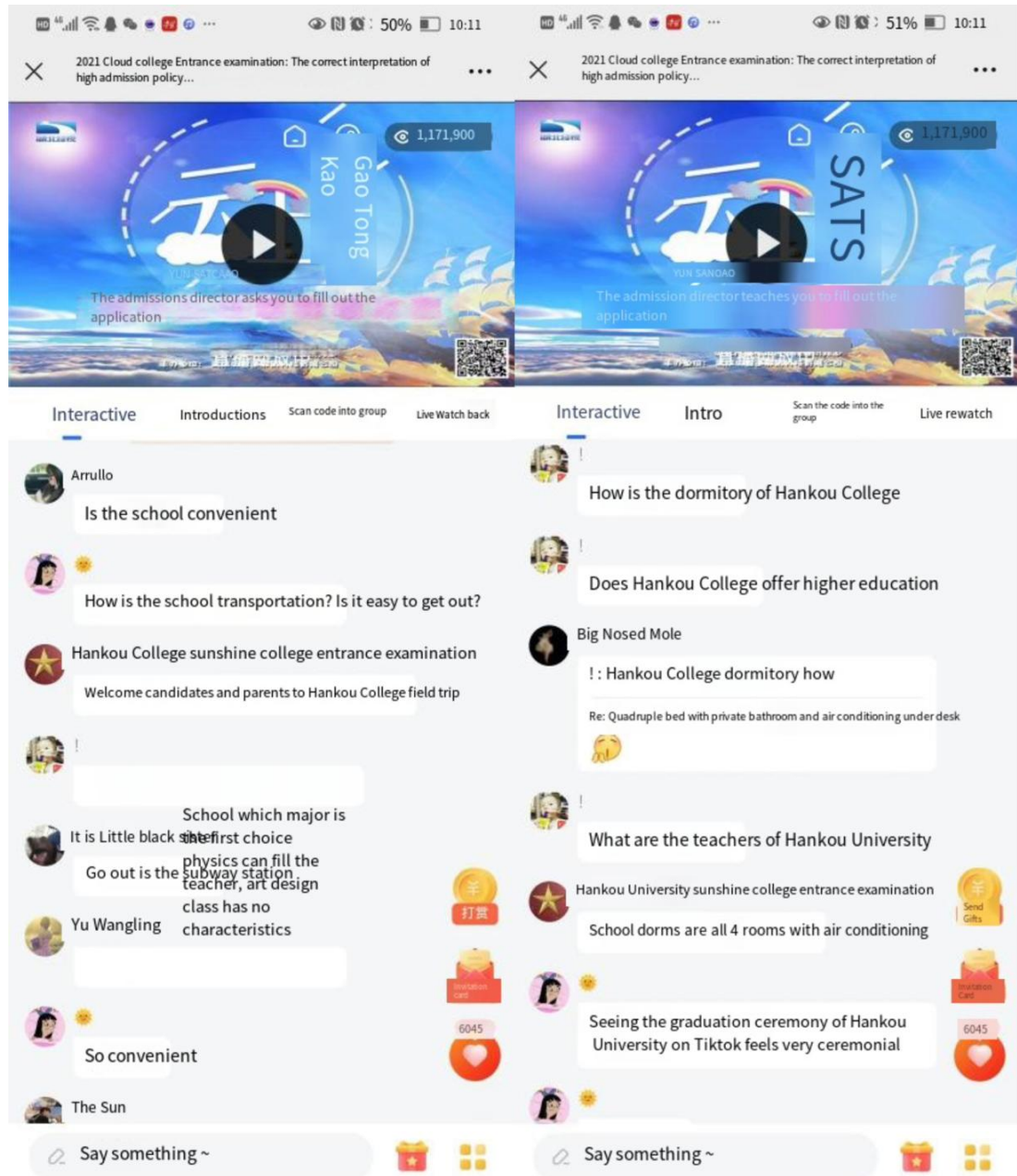


Figure 6-4: Screenshots of a private university’s mobile phone promoting the university using Douyin Live. (screenshots collected from a private university’s Admissions Office).

6.3.2 Correlation Between Students’ and Administrators’ Views on Social Media

First, the relevance of the responses concerning the choice of information dissemination channels. In interviews with administrators and students, the primary channels for seeking university information were identified. Two-thirds of administrators agreed that students look for information through a mix of online and offline channels. A quarter of the administrators believed that candidates primarily utilised online channels to gather information about private universities. Conversely, half of the students considered that

the channels they used for information search were both online and offline. Every student used at least two social media platforms to seek information about private universities. Two-thirds of students employed short Douyin videos to learn about universities. In conclusion, both administrators and students share a common understanding of online media communication and an emphasis on self-publishing.

Second, the relevance of the responses concerning the choice of social media type. When asked which social media platforms their universities used to communicate the university's brand and messages, administrators cited Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin – the most frequently used platforms by the surveyed universities. This aligns perfectly with students' responses when asked which social media platforms they followed when choosing to apply to a private university. Every student followed at least two of the university's official social media accounts. Official accounts of Weibo, Douyin, and WeChat were the most followed social media platforms by students. Therefore, there is a high degree of consistency between administrators and students regarding the use of Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin among the self-media.

Third, the response to the role of social media. When asked about the most effective media, two-thirds of administrators considered social media to be the most efficient platform for promoting their university. When students were queried about the influence of social media information dissemination on their university choice attitudes, ten out of thirteen agreed that it was beneficial. Over a quarter of students believed that social media provided all the information needed to choose a university. Thus, both administrators and students hold a positive view of the role of media in conveying the university brand.

Fourth, responses to the content of social media communications. Information that students can search for on social media platforms includes location, living conditions, major offerings, employment rates, university size, and campus environment. The researcher found that the main reasons students choose to apply to private universities include location, living conditions, majors, campus environment, employment rate, and university size. It is evident that the information sought by students on social media platforms can address the primary concerns they have when applying to private universities.

Through interviews with administrators of private universities, the researcher found that the information currently published by the university is mainly about events and activities of the university. In the student interviews, the students interviewed expected the private university's self-publishing to focus on: campus environment, campus culture, and living conditions, with the campus environment being the most important content that the students felt deserved the attention of decision-makers. administrators therefore have a strong relevance to the main content of social media communication about private universities.

6.4 A Conceptual Model of Brand Attitude for the Private Higher Education Market in China

Through the literature review, this research employed the unique attributes of the marketisation of private universities and marketing theory, initially established a general conceptual framework in the third chapter and realised the research objective 1. Through the analysis of the interview data in this chapter, the researcher integrated the key findings into the conceptual framework and established a conceptual model of brand attitudes applicable to private universities in China so that this research achieved the research objective 2.

The conceptual model is based on the conceptual framework developed from the literature review and the analysis and summary of the interview data. The initial conceptual framework is based on three theoretical models: the Hierarchy of Effect, the Five-Stage Model of Consumer Decision-Making and the Demographic Theory. The conceptual model is based on the analysis of interview data as Figure 6-5 and this study only discusses the part within the dotted line of the model. The researcher found that the brand attitude of students can be influenced to a large extent through the communication of the hardware and software conditions of the university as shown in Arrows ① and ②, which ultimately influences the decision to enrol in a private university. The administrators and students interviewed agreed that the most effective media channel for disseminating this information was social media, as shown in Arrow ③. Therefore, the researcher added two important influencing factors to the conceptual model, namely hardware conditions and software conditions. It was also further clarified in the model

that the hardware and software conditions influence students' attitudes towards the brand through communication on social media platforms. The place and role of social media in communication is reflected in the model.

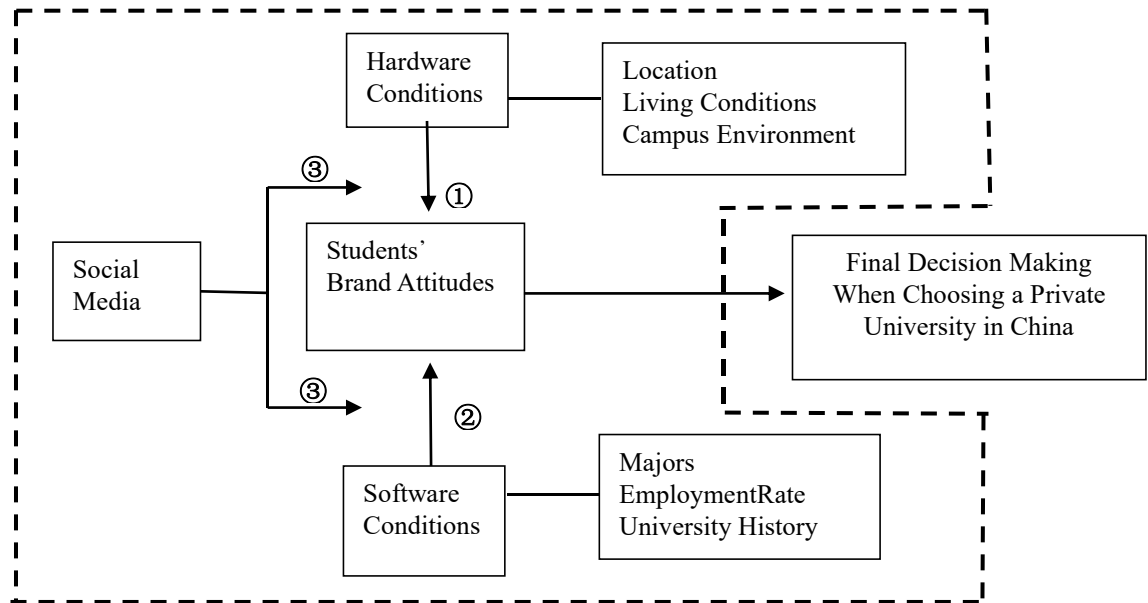


Figure 6-5: Conceptual model of students' brand attitudes when choosing a private university in China (developed by the researcher).

The core contribution of the conceptual modellies in two aspects. Firstly, it proposes two influencing factors, hardware conditions and software conditions, which have different effects on the formation of brand attitudes in private universities and can provide targeted policy recommendations for the optimisation of brand marketing strategies of private universities in the future. Secondly, it further analyses the moderating effect of the use of social media on the formation of brand attitudes in private universities, based on which corresponding suggestions can be developed for the design of brand marketing paths in private universities. The second is to further analyse the moderating effect of social media use on the formation of brand attitudes in private universities, to provide suggestions for the design of brand marketing paths for private universities. Based on the analysis of data from interviews with private university administrators and students, the researcher identified two main factors that influence brand attitudes, namely hardware and software conditions. It was further found that social media plays an important role in the dissemination of both factors. On this basis, this study has achieved research objective 2, and developed a conceptual model of brand attitude that is appropriate for the higher education market in China.

6.5 Conclusion

Through interviews with administrators and students, the researcher found that students can influence their attitudes towards the brand through their knowledge of the university's hardware and software conditions. The main hardware conditions were location, living conditions, and campus environment; the software conditions mainly included the majors, employment rate, and university history. There is a temporal order in which the different hardware and software factors influence students' attitudes to branding within the constraints of the NCEE score. Firstly, the location of the university plays a role in students' choice of university, then the internal hardware and soft factors continue to play a role. Social media can be more effective in helping private universities to communicate their hardware and soft skills. This is because of the nature of social media and its low cost of use and efficiency of communication. Social media is also the most used media tool in the daily life of the young generation of candidates, and it is the main source of information for candidates in their decision-making process when choosing a private university.

The main contribution of this research is to develop a conceptual model by applying consumer purchase decision theory and demographic characteristics theory to interviews with administrators and students at private universities, using the behaviour of choosing to enrol in a private university as the subject of the study. This led to the identification of the main influencing factors of brand attitudes and social media as a platform medium to help the influencing factors come into play. The intellectual contribution of this thesis is twofold. The first contribution is to the study of brand attitudes. The focus of this study is to discover the factors that influence the formation of brand attitudes when candidates choose a private university. The researcher used data analysis to propose two main categories of influencing factors, hardware conditions and software conditions, and further analysed the moderating effect of social media on both categories of factors. In contrast to previous studies, the main focus is on the basis of students' decisions, but there is no link to brand attitudes. The researcher identifies the main influencing factors (i.e., bases for decision-making) by examining the process of the formation of brand attitudes. There is also no specific research in the literature on the topic of private universities. The second contribution of research is to the branding of private universities

in China. China has the largest number of university students in the world, 23% of which are in private universities. This research on the brand attitude toward private universities can help provide some reference suggestions for the branding of private universities in China. To realise the research objective 3, the research will offer strategies and approaches to aid the private universities' goals of improving enrolment quality and enhancing brand influence in the next chapter.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

7.1 Conclusions of the Study

7.1.1 Purpose of the Study

The original purpose of this research was to provide a theoretical basis and practical suggestions for brand building for private universities that are large in scale and urgently need brand recognition and brand influence to help them obtain greater sway in the market and improve the quality of their enrolment. China's private universities started from scratch after the founding of the country in 1949, and have proliferated in the last two decades, with the size of the student body reaching 30% of the higher education market. Under the supervision and guidance of the government and the Ministry of Education, private universities have made significant progress in teaching quality, faculty, facilities, and campus environment. Some newly built private universities have achieved levels of parity with leading national universities in terms of aspects such as floor space and building facilities. However, the development of private universities is still constrained by several factors, some of which are difficult to change in the short term, such as the short history of development and inequitable policy frameworks vis-à-vis public universities. However, some factors can be improved through private universities' efforts, such as the low brand recognition of private universities, and the need for brand influence to be strengthened.

The year 2023 is the ninth year the researcher has worked as an administrator at a private university. Every summer, the researcher organises and participates in the recruitment process. This June, the researcher hosted a two-hour online live broadcast as the university's spokesperson to introduce the university's environment and communicate with candidates and netizens. The researcher has gained insights into the remarkable progress of private universities and how society has changed its perception of private universities. However, many people still have little knowledge of private universities or are prejudiced against them. The mainstream media tends to promote and praise public

universities, especially the first tier of public universities, while still having reservations about private universities. In this environment, the branding of private universities needs to be strengthened, especially as social media has become a significant source of information for Chinese people and the most critical position for organisations to market their brands. The researcher believes that social media can be used as a breakthrough for brand enhancement of private universities. However, private universities' understanding, and application of social media still need to be improved. In particular, there are no systematic theories and methods on how social media can accurately enhance the brand and admissions quality of private universities. This weakness is the starting point for the researcher to conduct this study. The study sought to identify deficiencies in terms of what private universities can improve through their efforts and combine the current new media technology and the new behavioural habits of teenagers to obtain solutions to the problem.

7.1.2 Theoretical Basis of the Study

This study mainly uses the theories of brand marketing, consumer purchasing behaviour, demographic, and other theories to explore the factors influencing students' choice behaviour with respect to private universities. Private universities in China have the attributes of a market proposition, and universities provide candidates with the service of four-year higher education. The current students enrolled in private universities are the young generation who grew up following the internet, and their process of choosing a private university is very close to the process of choosing to buy a product or service, from psychology to behaviour. Based on the above characteristics of the research object, the researcher chose marketing theories, including brand marketing theory, consumer purchasing behaviour theory, and demographic theory, and regards the process of students' enrolment in private universities as a significant purchasing behaviour to be studied. Based on the literature, the researcher found that brand attitudes are influenced by the information consumers receive in different situations and that external factors can influence internal feelings toward a brand. Also, combining the behavioural characteristics of consumers (i.e., young students) towards the use of social media, a general conceptual framework was obtained that responds to the fact that students' brand

attitudes are influenced by the information disseminated by social media, which influences the final purchasing decision.

7.1.3 Choice of Research Methods

This study mainly uses case interviews and qualitative research methods. Through the conceptual framework established based on the literature, the researcher needed to continue to explore what factors influence the formation of students' brand attitudes, i.e., what kind of information disseminated by social media can help students develop good attitudes towards schools when applying to them. The proposal is a complex social science issue, and brand attitudes result from exogenous factors acting through endogenous factors to form feelings and preferences, as well as an experience. The researcher believes that the depth of this study dictates the choice of philosophical research ideas that will explain the idea, which can construct unknown and richer understandings and interpretations of social worlds and contexts (Saunders,2019). The researcher attempted to explain the reasons and motivations behind why the students did what they did to choose this result. Interpretivism qualifies the researcher to look at the private university as a research target from the perspectives of different groups of people. In this way, the researcher chose two groups of people in the university, administrators in charge of enrolment and first-year students and interviewed them, and used case study methodology to examine the main factors that influence attitudes towards brands, as well as to explore the role social media plays in this.

The interview methodology allows the research participants to express themselves more clearly and thoroughly, facilitating a more profound understanding by the researcher. The researcher can observe the respondent's expression and reaction on the spot and ask questions about unclear points promptly, as they arise. The interview is more helpful for the researcher to deeply understand the interviewees' feedback on the questions. The researcher first interviewed twelve administrators of private universities. The reasons for choosing this group were that most of them have been working in the enrolment department of the university for more than ten years; they are experienced, have a keen insight into the students, and have much deep understanding of the problems of private universities; and they are also the organisers and practitioners of the branding of private

universities. After interviewing the administrators, the researcher interviewed the first-year students. Since the theme of the study is to explore how students' branding attitudes affect their decision-making in choosing a school, it is also essential to understand what students believe. Interviewing both groups allowed for comparisons and mutual validation to reduce error. For example, students may have reservations about specific personal reasons when answering questions about making their own choices, and administrators may exaggerate their perceived strengths when answering questions about their school. Thus, getting feedback from both groups on the same question can also help administrators improve their working methods. For example, the researcher asked administrators what they post on social media and then asked students what they think should be posted to attract students to enrol. There were differences in this answer, suggesting that what administrators practice may not be the most effective promotion. For example, eight of the thirteen students interviewed cited the school's environment, especially the beautiful scenery, as an essential factor in their consideration. Therefore, administrators still need to place a very high priority on the school's natural environment in their efforts to promote it.

7.1.4 Importance of Social Media in Communicating with Students for Private Universities

During the interviews, the researcher realised that the information searched by students, especially the videos they preferred, could not be separated from the communication role of social media. With a more than 95% usage rate in China, social media has become an indispensable part of national life. Regarding brand marketing, social media has the advantage of being low cost, fast acting, and a stable platform. These advantages can save private universities a great deal of money and time to build their brands and provide an unprecedented and efficient channel. The interviews show that students are very receptive to social media for information and trust the school, as reflected in the videos. Social media builds a long-term and efficient communication bridge between candidates and schools, and private universities should pay more attention to and make good use of social media.

In conclusion, the interviews with administrators and students gave the researcher a

wealth of data and a deeper understanding of the topic. Some of the findings were unexpected. For example, administrators and students agreed that the school's location was the most crucial factor for students to consider besides NCEE score, even more than the major. The finding is entirely different from what the researcher expected. After thematically analysing a large amount of data, the researcher summarised the main factors influencing students' brand attitudes and combined them with the behavioural characteristics of Generation Z and the characteristics of social media to analyse the reasons behind the influencing factors and form a conceptual model applicable to the private higher education market in China. In this new model, the researcher added software and hardware conditions to the factors influencing brand attitudes, and clarified that social media is the leading media channel for spreading software conditions and plays an essential role in forming brand attitudes.

The following are the research conclusions of this paper, which fall mainly into three categories:

Firstly, this research established that both hardware and software conditions play key roles in shaping candidates' attitudes towards private university brands. Among these factors, NCEE scores emerged as a crucial determinant for students when choosing a private university. The scores in the college entrance examination define the range of universities that students can choose from. Apart from NCEE scores, the primary hardware conditions that candidates consider include the university's location, living conditions, and campus environment, while software conditions comprise majors, employment rates, and the university history.

In the selection process, given the constraints of entrance examination scores, there is a sequential order in which the different hardware and software conditions influence students' brand attitudes. The university's location, particularly if it is in a capital city, plays a significant role in students' decision-making, followed by the university's internal hardware and software conditions.

Secondly, social media has a substantial impact on the dissemination of private universities' hardware and software conditions. The study found that the vast majority (eight out of twelve) of private university administrators view social media as the most effective platform for promoting their institutions. All surveyed students had used at least

two or more official university social media accounts to learn about their preferred universities during the selection process. A significant majority (ten out of thirteen) of students felt that social media served as an important basis for their university choice, with these platforms providing necessary information, including text, pictures, and videos, about the universities.

Thirdly, this research proposes several strategies and methods for private university branding. The findings suggest that candidates' attitudes towards a private university's brand mirror their experience of choosing a service product's brand in consumption scenarios. Candidates are drawn towards universities that offer quality education, possess high social reputation, empower prestige, and promise good future professional and personal development opportunities. For Chinese private universities, the key to attracting students lies in expanding marketing channels through innovative social interaction approaches, particularly in today's digital age. With social media and digital technology developing at an accelerated pace, social media marketing has become the primary and most effective method for universities to attract and retain students, necessitating careful planning and design by private universities.

7.2 Knowledge Contributions

This thesis contributes to knowledge in three main ways. Firstly, it fills some of the theoretical gaps in the existing literature on private university brand attitudes, develops the study of the factors influencing private university brand attitudes and, in particular, introduces the factor of social media into the analysis of private university brand attitudes, which is complementary to the existing research models of private university brand attitudes. Secondly, it establishes an initial conceptual model of brand attitude toward private universities in China, proposes a general analytical framework for brand attitude toward private universities in the world's largest higher education market like China (Ministry of Education of PRC, 2021), and conducts a case study to develop policy insights for the branding development path of private universities in China. Thirdly, it develops a reliable brand attitude research methodology.

7.2.1 Contribution to Literature

This study makes its first contribution to the research into brand attitudes in private

universities. Existing literature on brand attitudes has predominantly focused on general goods or services, such as food, cosmetics, airline services, and tourism services. These categories of products and services are essentially marketable commodities with relatively defined consumer characteristics. The issue of students' attitudes towards private university brands, as explored in this research, has more complex characteristics. It necessitates discussions on both the individual characteristics of their consumers, i.e., candidates, and the influence of social, cultural, and policy aspects. It is also crucial to identify the key factors influencing brand attitudes based on the unique traits of private universities in China.

Moreover, China's private universities are a distinct service product with both market-oriented characteristics, such as being primarily run by social capital without public financial input, and public product attributes, such as enrolment scale, fees, and teaching quality, strictly regulated by the government. Despite being the largest private university sector in the world, existing literature has not adequately addressed the issue of branding for private universities in China. This study is the first to tackle the topic of students' attitudes towards the branding of private universities.

Based on the HOE model, consumer purchase decision process model, demographic theory, and other general theoretical frameworks for brand analysis, this study incorporates Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs analysis with case interviews and thematic analysis. It seeks to examine the process of brand attitude formation and its influencing factors in private universities in China. The study ultimately proposes a conceptual model of brand attitude in private universities.

With the development of our country's economy, the demand for higher education is proliferating., it is improbable that all this demand will be met by the government, which will result in the continuous expansion of private universities. Other developing countries are also likely to witness a rapid surge in demand for private universities in their economic development phase. Consequently, the findings of this research are enlightening and instructive for the branding development of private universities in China. It also holds reference value for the branding of universities in other countries, especially developing ones.

The second contribution of this study relates to the role of social media in influencing

brand attitudes. This study brings to the fore an in-depth discussion and analysis of the effect of social media on university brand attitudes in the context of the information age. This research is instrumental for accurate university marketing, shedding light on how social media shapes the perceptions and choices of Generation Z, the main demographic making university choices.

As per the demographic analysis of the study, Generation Z significantly relies on social media for accessing university information. This generation's consumption habits, shaped heavily by social media, have necessitated changes in university marketing strategies. By analysing interviews with university administrators and students, the research reveals many consistent perceptions about the role of social media. Both groups agree that social media plays a crucial role in communicating private university brands and holds substantial value. Both university administrators and students are willing to communicate and interact through various social media platforms.

However, the analysis also reveals perceptual differences between the two groups. These differences pertain to the disparity between what university administrators communicate via social media and what students wish to see. For example, students value the aesthetic appeal of the campus environment when choosing a private university, while university administrators do not place a high priority on marketing this aspect. These differences impact the effectiveness of social media in university brand communication and, therefore, the efficacy of precise brand marketing.

The existing literature does not provide such a comprehensive analysis of the role of social media in university brand communication, especially concerning the perceptual differences between administrators and students. The findings of this study thus offer university administrators new perspectives for developing effective recruitment strategies to attract and retain candidates. This research helps bridge the communication gap between university marketing efforts and student expectations, ultimately contributing to improved student enrolment and satisfaction.

7.2.2 A Conceptual Model of Brand Attitudes for Private Universities in China

The theoretical research and survey interview analysis led to the development of a conceptual model illustrating the influence of students' brand attitudes on their selection

decisions for private universities in China. This model, depicted in Figure 7- 1, identifies two primary categories of factors that shape candidates’ brand attitudes: hardware conditions and software conditions. Hardware conditions include location, living conditions, and campus environment. Software conditions, on the other hand, consist of factors like majors employment rates, and university history. This model proposes that the dissemination of such information influences the formation of candidates’ attitudes towards the university’s brand.

Previous literature has addressed some of these factors but has not provided a systematic analysis differentiating between the two aspects, hardware and software conditions. A clear distinction between these elements will aid universities in planning more precise brand marketing strategies. Universities should adapt the focus of their brand communication based on the different stages of student decision-making. For instance, in the early stages of promotion, universities might highlight the advantages of the city where they are located; in the later stages, the focus could shift to the university’s software conditions, like employment rates and major offerings. The brand attitude model also elucidates the moderating role of social media in disseminating these conditions, which contributes to shaping a positive brand attitude in students.

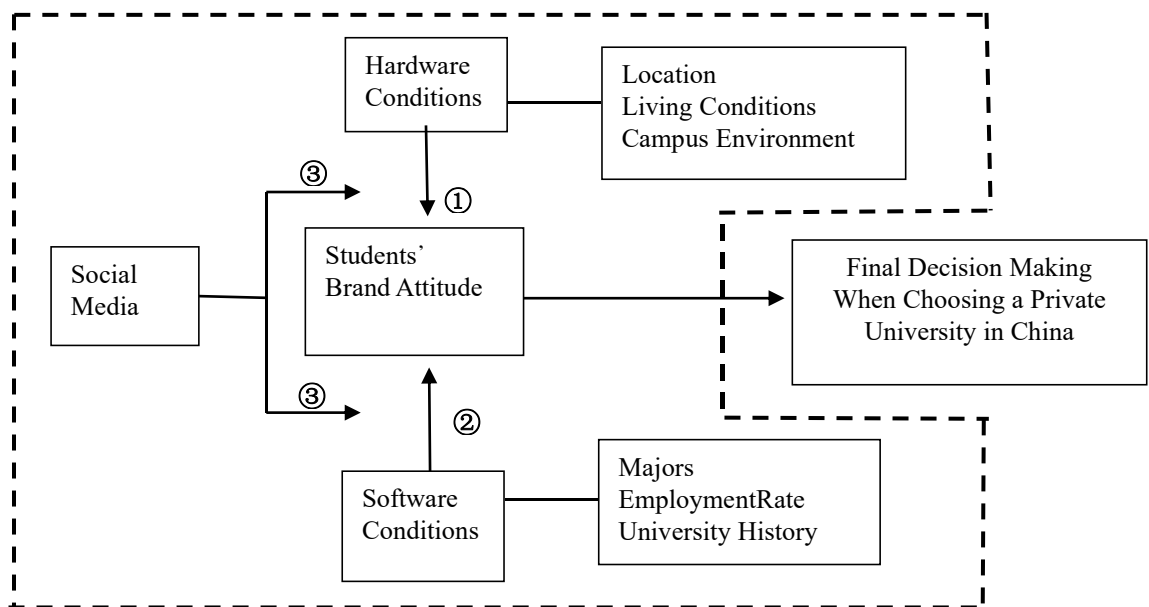


Figure 7-1: Conceptual model of brand attitudes for private universities in China (developed by the researcher).

7.2.3 Methodology Appropriate to Brand Attitude Research

The philosophical foundation for this study is interpretivism, which emphasises understanding and interpretation beyond mere collection and analysis of facts. Interpretivism takes into account linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts, asserting that understanding is influenced by preconceptions, values, and background knowledge, making it subjective and relative, not objective or neutral. This approach relies on logical explanations observed by researchers.

The reason for employing this approach is the understanding that candidates' behaviour in choosing universities is influenced by their personal experiences and values. Candidates rely on their perceptions, impressions of the university, and the information they can access about the institution. Given the profound variability in communication behaviour among candidates and how technological innovation has significantly altered the ways candidates access university information, studying candidates' communication behaviour is crucial for university marketers.

This study adopted a primarily qualitative and inductive approach, with the researcher predominantly conducting one-to-one semi-structured interviews. These interviews served as a vehicle for the respondents to express their views and attitudes about their ideal university in China. This method enabled the researcher to observe candidates' responses closely and collect authentic and credible data regarding candidates' perceptions of effective university marketing in China.

The interviews were conducted using free responses from the research sample, relieving communication pressures during the interview process and providing the researcher an opportunity to ask more in-depth questions. This approach facilitated a more profound exploration of the research topic.

The researcher opted for thematic analysis, a qualitative data analysis method, to identify specific themes in the candidates' perceptions of Chinese universities. This method focuses on identifying patterns of meaning within the collected data and is often used in theoretically informed research frameworks.

Thematic analysis played a crucial role in the study. The researcher compared each interview to understand the similarities and differences in responses from various participants. Additionally, the data was organised based on the different responses,

forming a foundation for thematic analysis. This approach enabled the researcher to maintain objectivity throughout the analysis process, ensuring that the conclusions drawn were based on the authentic views and experiences of the participants.

7.3 Recommendations and Implications

Based on the theoretical analysis and findings from the case study, the study suggests several recommendations for branding and recruitment strategies for private universities in China. The policy recommendations presented may enhance university branding efficiency, provide guidance for private universities in their branding journey, and could be applicable not only to universities in China but also to those in other countries.

Firstly, university administrators should develop branding strategies that consider the process of students' brand attitude formation. The student's choice of a university mirrors the consumer decision-making process, which is not a snap decision but happens over different stages, according to the theory of the consumer purchase decision process. After gathering information, students are more likely to select a university if they have developed a positive brand attitude towards it. This necessitates that university administrators thoroughly analyse the main processes and information sources students in their region use to make their university choice. For instance, in China, candidates have a 16-day period after their college entrance exams to await their scores, a time typically used to gather information through various channels. According to the findings of this study, the geographical location of the university is a primary consideration for university candidates. Once they have decided on a specific city, students then select their universities and majors. Therefore, when marketing their brand, universities should not only highlight the strengths and characteristics of the university itself but also promote the city where the university is located. Aspects such as employment opportunities, quality of life, and developmental potential of the city are crucial.

At the same time, private universities often face brand competition from other universities within the same city. This requires university administrators to thoroughly analyse the strengths and weaknesses of other private universities in the same city and identify their unique competitive advantages, especially those factors highly valued by candidates in forming a brand attitude. For example, the university's standout specialties,

the unique natural beauty of the campus, the provision of separate bathrooms, among other factors, can be integral parts of the university's branding strategy.

Secondly, administrators of private universities must leverage the features of social media to enhance university branding efficiency. Research shows that social media is the primary channel students use to gather information about university brands. The real-time, interactive nature of social media can effectively augment the precision of university brand marketing, delivering brand images to those who need them most, in less time and at a reduced cost. However, according to interview findings, current use of social media by private university administrators to communicate the university brand image has some shortcomings. The information disseminated by university social media platforms does not fully meet interviewees' needs. Therefore, this study suggests strengthening the interaction and communication between university brand information suppliers, such as the brand promotion department, and information seekers, the prospective high school students, on social media platforms.

For administrators, it is essential to respond promptly to questions posed by university candidates on social media. Generation Z, accustomed to immediate responses due to the use of internet search engines, places high importance on the speed and manner of responses. Therefore, private universities should organise and train dedicated staff to answer candidates' questions about the university during the admissions season. University administrators not only need to promote, communicate and interact with the university brand during the admissions period but also focus on maintaining the university's brand image in their daily operations. administrators should continue to innovate in terms of online platforms and content; for instance, creating social media spokespeople for the university, involving student netizens in spreading the university's image, and trying to design and create university IPs, such as AI IPs. These could allow the university to engage with interested candidates as a tangible entity and share the university's daily life.

Enrolled students, university staff, and parents can all potentially be indirect distributors of the university's brand message, and their everyday experiences, along with word of mouth, can significantly influence students' university choice (Aguirre et al., 2015). Further, active use of social media platforms is necessary to position the university's

brand and create a distinct brand image. Content innovation could focus on producing and promoting content that is closely related to the hardware conditions identified in this thesis, including location, living conditions, and university size, and the software conditions, including specialisations, employment rates, and university history.

Thirdly, private university administrators should study and understand more accurately the characteristics and patterns of the younger generation's behaviour in contemporary China when seeking university information. This is vital in an era where social communication and interaction have undergone major changes. In university selection decisions, prospective students equate to consumers, needing to sift and choose between various candidate universities once they achieve their admissions scores. Due to the large number of private universities with little brand recognition, these institutions face significant competition in student recruitment. Therefore, administrators of private universities should carefully study the genuine needs of these student groups, particularly by conducting an in-depth analysis of their demographic characteristics and applying Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory to understand their psychological traits when making university choices.

It is crucial to explore how candidates continuously adjust their perceptions and behaviours due to shifting social, economic, and cultural conditions, focusing on the factors that influence brand attitudes formation. Notably, in the interviews, 12 out of 13 student respondents agreed that the university's location was the most critical factor in their private university selection, with provincial capitals particularly favoured. This indicates that private university choice is influenced by social, economic, and cultural development factors, in addition to the university itself.

From the interviews, it was apparent that the content of university social media accounts is very similar, mainly about university events and activities. Students suggested that their university's social media accounts could concentrate more on posting about the campus environment, culture, living conditions, teaching staff, facilities, professional offerings, research awards, employment, and location. The campus environment was considered the most important element to emphasise in recruitment campaigns. Private universities can create rich imagery, text, and short videos about their beautiful campuses for posting on various social media platforms, providing a more visual experience for

those who cannot physically visit the campus. University administrators should recognise the differences between traditional media and social media in terms of communication formats and exploit the contrasts between online and offline marketing to develop a marketing plan tailored to the younger generation.

Fourthly, administrators of private universities should actively adapt to the changes in marketing channels brought about by social media communications, consistently optimising their social media promotion strategies and striving to maximise the effectiveness of social media marketing. administrators should fully acknowledge the important role of social media in brand marketing among the student population. With China having the highest number of social media users in the world and a very high penetration rate among young students, comprehensively studying the role of social media in brand marketing for private universities holds unique significance for these institutions in China.

The interview study presented in this research demonstrates a high level of agreement between university administrators and students regarding the role of social media, particularly its capacity to disseminate university brand messages at a lower cost. To enhance the role of social media in brand communication for private universities in China, it is recommended that university administrators study the behavioural characteristics of the younger generation, which include their content preferences, media formats, and update frequency preferences. In addition, they should actively exploit the rapidly growing live market in China to boost private university branding. For instance, they could design and create a university IP, such as an AI IP, which would enable the university to interact with interested candidates and share the university's daily life. Universities capable of doing so could actively use cutting-edge technologies like AI and ChatGPT to establish an artificial intelligence communication platform operational around the clock to meet students' information needs.

Based on the findings of this research, administrators should implement a focused social media outreach programme that addresses both the hardware and software conditions influencing the formation of candidates' brand attitudes. This includes thoroughly examining the current usage of social media platforms and the types of content that university candidates are interested in. It is equally important to understand the

challenges of using social media platforms in university marketing, which include the overwhelming volume of information on self-published media, leading to limited student attention allocated to private universities; the resource constraints that private universities face in terms of investment; and a lack of specialisation in social media communications, among others. Recognising these challenges and developing a plan to tackle them is crucial to ensure the sustainability of social media marketing.

Administrators need to develop distinct marketing strategies based on the characteristics of social media. Contemporary candidates have a wide range of media options, each with different characteristics to assist marketers in achieving their marketing objectives (Lai, Yu and Woo, 2020). It is therefore important for university administrators to have a clear understanding of the unique features and benefits of each social media platform to maximise marketing effectiveness. For instance, LinkedIn is ideal for professional networking, while Facebook is more suitable for maintaining social interaction. As per the interviews, candidates enjoyed viewing pictures and reading insightful text on Little Red Book, while they preferred watching short videos on Douyin. When developing their marketing plans, marketers can use various forms of social media to achieve different promotional results. It was found that video has become a widely accepted and favoured form of communication among the younger generation.

The authenticity and visibility offered by video are highly desired informational content for candidates when choosing a university. This is a common behavioural trait among many social media users. As Kelly Zhang, CEO of Douyin, stated on her official social media account in February 2023, Douyin video search has reached 550 million monthly active users. She pointed out that, as the most direct way to obtain information, search is also video based. In the following year, Douyin will increase its investment in search (IT Home, 2021). University administrators should pay particular attention to the planning and production of video content on social media, which will make the university's brand communication more effective. Overall, these recommendations unveil new facets of customer care influenced by rapidly evolving social media technologies. They are expected to allow university marketers to communicate more effectively with candidates and to tailor their marketing strategies to their behavioural profiles at different stages.

Fifthly, administrators must not only persistently innovate marketing strategies, but they

should also invest in the continuous improvement of the university's infrastructure and resources. administrators can plan and produce video and graphic content around both the tangible aspects (location, living conditions, campus environment) and the intangible aspects (majors, employment rates, history) that students are interested in. Then, promote this content through social media platforms to communicate effectively with students. However, all this content must be grounded in truth. This is because private universities should not only attract candidates by optimising their marketing strategies, but they also need to create a positive word-of-mouth effect by ensuring students' satisfaction once they enrol.

administrators should be aware that social media marketing is just a part of the branding process, but the crux of the work lies in the continuous improvement of the university's infrastructure and resources through investment in human and material resources. For instance, if a university wants to establish a new campus, it should first consider the location and accessibility of the campus in a provincial capital city. Although this may pose a financial burden in the short term, due to higher land use costs and human resource expenses often associated with provincial capitals, students place a great importance on the location of a private university as it significantly impacts their quality of life and future employment opportunities. Therefore, establishing a new campus in a provincial capital city would help the university to develop a better brand image in the long run, which would be beneficial for the university's long-term growth.

In addition, universities can improve student accommodation by building new dormitories or refurbishing existing ones. In terms of software conditions, administrators should continue to strengthen professional development and form specialised specialties that will become the core competencies of the university. Optimise the structure of specialties, through various efforts to compress the homogeneous specialties set up and increase the construction of talent teams and the scale of enrolment of specialised specialties. At the same time, private universities should take advantage of the flexibility of their mechanisms to strengthen cooperation with enterprises and try to adopt the "3+1" training model, i.e., three years of training in universities and one year of practical training in enterprises, in order to better equip students with market knowledge and abilities and to meet the changing needs of enterprises. It is also possible to adopt an

order-based training model, in which the training programme is customised according to the employment needs of enterprises and students are employed upon graduation. Increase the construction of a team of practical tutors and introduce enterprise administrators or skilled personnel as part-time tutors for the university in order to practically enhance the cultivation of practical experience and practical skills of students.

7.4 Limitations

7.4.1 Limitations of the Research Methodology

This study primarily employed qualitative research methods and case studies, with no quantitative research conducted. Due to the constraints of the research, this study did not administer a large sample of questionnaires, but instead conducted field interviews for specific cases and utilised thematic analysis to identify factors influencing brand attitudes. The limitation of this methodology is that it can only determine the direction of a factor's influence, but not the magnitude of the effect, making it challenging to quantitatively rank the degree of influence of each factor. While the qualitative research conducted in this study can suggest some direction for university administrators' brand marketing and specific strategies to improve the shortcomings of private university administrators in China, further empirical research is required to precisely identify the persisting issues in the brand image development process.

The significant value of empirical research is twofold: firstly, it facilitates causality analysis, i.e., determining whether a factor (e.g., tangible and intangible aspects of a university) is the cause of another outcome variable (e.g., university selection decisions). Regression analysis methods allow inferences about causal effects based on statistical significance. Secondly, it helps to determine the specific effect size of an influencing factor. Based on quantitative statistical analysis, it is possible to determine not only the significance of a particular factor's effect but also the effect size of its influence on the outcome. This enables policy recommendations to be ranked for decision-makers and limited marketing resources to be allocated to areas with the greatest impact. Due to the lack of a large sample size, this study was unable to conduct a detailed examination in terms of causal analysis and impact effects. This constitutes the primary shortcoming of this study and suggests a direction that needs further exploration in future research in this

area.

7.4.2 Limitations of Sample Selection

Due to constraints, this study did not select high school students who had just completed their college entrance exams and were in the process of making university choices. Instead, the researcher interviewed students who had just enrolled in their freshman year, asking them to recall the process and basis for their decisions during their university applications. These students' responses may not have been accurately remembered due to the passage of time, or they may have been subjectively biased because they were already enrolled at the university in question. The key difference for these enrolled students, compared to those who are not yet enrolled, is that they have already made their university choices and are not considering alternative options. Consequently, the factors they considered during their university choice process might be limited.

While the responses of the enrolled students largely met the research needs of this study, they may have had difficulty recalling the complete context of their choice at the time of the survey, as it was conducted approximately six months after they made their decision. This is the second potential shortcoming of this study. Future research could optimise the selection of research participants by interviewing high school students who are yet to enrol at a university. This would provide a more diverse range of situational choices and could help ascertain the influence of different factors on attitudes towards university branding.

7.4.3 Limitations of the Conceptual Model

Based on the market-oriented attributes of private universities in China, this study applies market theory, demographic theory, and social media features to construct a conceptual model of university brand attitudes, then conducts interviews with both administrators and students and based on the results of the analysis of the interview data, ultimately develops a conceptual model that applies to the private higher education market in China. Because of the limitations, the 12 administrators interviewed by the researcher were all from 12 private universities located in the same city of Wuhan; the student interviewees were from 13 provinces in China, and the interviewees did not cover every province and city in the country, so the results of the interviews are still subject to geographical

limitations.

7.5 Directions for Future Research

The research in this paper still has unfinished business and can be further expanded in the following aspects in the future.

Firstly, more in-depth quantitative research can be conducted by expanding the sample size. There are many factors affecting the brand attitude of private universities, and future research can conduct quantitative research on the quantitative impact of social media on each element of brand attitude, of which this paper has only obtained some of the main influences through a limited number of case studies. A further research goal is a need to identify whether the impact of social media on brand attitudes is significant and the ordering of the magnitude of the impact effect of these influencing factors so that more specific and effective brand-building strategies can be proposed for private universities to focus limited marketing resources on the factors that are most capable of improving the quality of enrolment. To achieve this goal, obtaining a statistically representative sample through a more significant number of structured questionnaires and conducting descriptive statistics and regression analysis is necessary. On the one hand, it is necessary to expand the sample area in an enormous scope, which should include at least major cities with a high concentration of private higher education, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Xi'an, Guangzhou, etc., in addition to Wuhan selected for this study, and also include some samples from non-provincial capitals as comparative analyses; on the other hand, it is necessary to expand the number of samples even further to meet the basic requirements of regression analyses, such as The number of school samples can reach 60, the number of interviewed university administrators reaches about 150, and the number of interviewed students reaches about 600.

Secondly, the study's design can be improved by adding a survey and interview study for students who have not yet begun their university studies. Given the constraints of this study, the interviewees were freshman students, from whom perceptions about their attitudes towards the private university brand were gathered through recollections and scenario analysis. However, the potential bias in students' recollections of past events and the completed nature of their decision-making process could limit the ability to fully

replicate their experience from the beginning of their choice to the final decision. Therefore, future research should incorporate behaviours from the category of candidates who have recently completed the college entrance examination and are interested in choosing a private university, as this will enhance the robustness of the study's findings. In order to accomplish this goal, it is necessary to select some students who have just taken the college entrance examination for interviews after the completion of the national general college entrance examination, usually in the middle and late June of each year, in order to ensure the representativeness of the sample, a certain number (about 30) of high schools should be selected nationwide. About ten students should be selected from each school, with about 300 samples for survey interviews.

Thirdly, future studies should aim to test the general applicability of the conceptual model derived from this research. This study has generated a conceptual model of brand attitudes towards private universities in China based on case analysis. To validate and enrich this conceptual model's general application value, further tests could be carried out. For example, a specific sample of high school students can be selected for a situational survey, and various combinations of hardware conditions, software conditions, and other elements can be made for them to choose from. At the same time, different social media display conditions can be provided to observe the impact of different factors on them. How significant is the impact of choice? In addition, after the college entrance examination, a round of surveys can be conducted on students who have just taken the college entrance examination to obtain their various considerations for university choice. After their admission, observe The results of their actual choices and the main factors they consider to verify which factors are the main influencing factors for their final decision-making.

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Appendix 2: Interview Questions

The Interview questions for 12 administrators of private universities in Wuhan

Question 1. What are the main factors candidates considering when choosing a private university?

Question 2. According to the marketing strategies and methods, how to make candidates have a positive attitude towards the school?

Question 3. What factors related to brands may affect candidates' positive attitude?

Question 4. When candidates have a positive attitude towards a private university, do they attach importance to the brand of a private university?

Question 5. Have you researched the channels for students to search and obtain university information? What channels do candidates often use?

Question 6. What forms of media have you chosen to spread your university's brand and message?

Question 7. Which forms of media do you think are most effective?

Question 8. What specific strategies and methods has the school adopted to build its brand?

Question 9. What social media are currently used in your university?

Question 10. How often do you update your social media account? What kind of content do you usually post?

Interview for 13 First-year students at private universities in Wuhan

Question 1. What is the main reason why you chose to enrol in a private university?

Question 2. What ways and channels are used when searching for information about private universities?

Question 3. What are some of the social media outlets that students have followed when choosing to apply to a private university?

Question 4: What is found on social media platforms for information related to choosing a school?

Question 5. The magnitude of the role of information disseminated on social media in determining the choice of a private university.

0 is no role at all; 6 and above 6 is playing more than half a role; and 10 is the most significant role, determined entirely by the information on social media.

Question 6. What should you post on your current private university's social media to help with enrolment?

Appendix 3: Table of the Interview for 12 Respondents and Coding

Table of Interview for 12 respondents and coding

Question 1. What are the main factors candidates considering when choosing a private university?		
Keywords	R1	1) Certification from National Ministry of Education Condition of the university (teacher resources, quality of teaching and management level)
	R2	1) NCEE score, 2) location, employment rate of the graduated students
	R3	1)NCEE score, 2) Preferred major or major with 3) Higher employment rate of the graduated students
	R4	1) Feasibility of being matriculated 2) Major 3) Scale of the university
	R5	1) Score 2) Environment 3) Scale of the university 4) Reputation
	R6	NCEE score
	R7	NCEE score
	R8	1) Tuition fee 2) Environment and location 3) Living condition 4) Employment rate
	R9	1) Employment rate 2) Location of the university 3) Other soft power elements
	R10	NCEE score
	R11	1) NCEE score 2) Advantage of location 3) Choice of major 4)Living conditions and studying environment in the university 5)Employment situation
	R12	1) NCEE score, 2) History of private university, 3)Geographic location
Quotes to support the analysis	R1	1) Certification from National Ministry of Education from 2) To investigate whether the private university has certification from education administration; Whether there has approval number from education administration of that year in admission guide and advertisement. 3)Whether the university can offer official reception and invoice when students pay the fee.
	R2	1)Adaptation of the score line, Advantage of location and priority of provincial capital. 2)Employment, employment rate and priority of the schools or majors which can lead to a better job.
	R3	1)Limitation of the college entrance exam score: it is better to have the regular college course in private university than to have the junior college education in public universities. 2)Choice of major: students can choose a preferred major or a major with a better employment situation in private university.
	R4	In private universities, he might consider the following elements: 1)The feasibility of being matriculated by the university 2)Whether the major in the university is his favourite 3)Whether the university is the large scaled one.

	R5	<p>1)When considering personal factors, these elements should be involved: First and the most important is the score.</p> <p>2)Second is about the environment of the city and area where the university locates.</p> <p>3)When considering the factors of universities, the following elements should be involved: First is about the scale of the university. Second is about the fame and awareness of the university.</p>
	R6	Students choose the university based on their NCEE score.
	R7	It depends on his NCEE score.
	R8	1)Tuition fee 2) Environment and location 3)Living condition 4.Employment rate
	R9	<p>1)First of all, they care about matriculation rate and employment rate, such as employment rate, industry and city where there graduated students are employed and rate of postgraduate students</p> <p>2)Then, it is about the geographic location, type of city and the belonged economic area where the university locates.</p> <p>3)Other elements, such as brand, reputation, influential power in the society, majors and the facilities for living around the university</p>
	R10	NCEE score
	R11	<p>1)Adaptation of college entrance exam score</p> <p>2)Advantage of location, especially that the advantage of relative rich higher education resources in Wuhan has a high attractive power to students in other provinces and in other cities.</p> <p>3)Choice of major. It can ensure that students can choose the major as their will in the private universities with a certain score.</p> <p>4)Living and study environment in the university. Some private universities have relative better and new facilities and installations.</p> <p>5)Employment situation. Some private universities have a certain achievement in some special major contribution which lead to a particular attractiveness in employment and entering a higher grade for study. For example, some majors have in-depth cooperation with companies, with professionals from the companies coming to the school for classes and students having the opportunity to visit and do internships in the companies.</p>
	R12	1)College entrance exam score, 2)History of private university, 3)Geographic location
Finding:	<p>Score of college entrance exam: 8 in the 12 interviewees agreed with the statement about the score and the reason for students.</p> <p>Employment situation: 3 in the 12 interviewees agreed with the statement that students choose private universities for a preferred major or a better major for finding a job. 4 in 12 interviewees have mentioned employment situation as the element for consideration directly.</p> <p>Environment: environment includes the living condition, university scale and the city where the university locates. 7 of 10 interviewees have mentioned these elements. Reputation: 3 of 12 mentioned reputation of the university and awareness of the university brand.</p>	
Question 2. According to the marketing strategies and methods, how to make candidates have a positive attitude towards the school?		

keywords	R1	Multiple channels for advertisement
	R2	Multiple channels and advantage of the university
	R3	Advantages of the university
	R4	Marketing strategy
	R5	Recognition of the university
	R6	Identifying target consumers and making the strategy based on the competitive environment
	R7	Brand of the university
	R8	Differentiation
	R9	Combination of online and offline promotion
	R10	Differentiation
	R11	Combination of online and offline promotion
	R12	Combination of online and offline promotion
Quotes to support the analysis	R1	University uses multiple channels for promotion and meeting the demand of students and their parents to seek for the information of the university: Paper media promotion Social media promotion Interpersonal promotion Admission consultant meeting promotion Offline promotion in high school, etc.
	R2	Advertisement on college entrance exam admission magazines and some digital channels. Hot search about university culture and special activities on Weibo Professional major of the university, medical major in our university is better than other private universities in exam for professional certification and employment rate.
	R3	To promote the achievement of the university in multiple channels To promote the quality of talents in the majors of the university To show the convenience of transportation and advantage of location of the university To show the environment in the university, teaching condition and living condition.
	R4	Using marketing strategy for having certain psychological influence on students. Word-of-mouth is the most trustful marketing tool. But it needs to avoid over promoting which can lead to the resistance feeling.
	R5	The marketing strategy might focus on improving recognition of the university
	R6	First of all, we need to identify target students and build up the recognition of our brand for the first step. Secondly, we need to analyse competition, preference of students and advantage of our university. And then to choose the suitable marketing platform for promotion and enhancing the impression among target students. Thirdly, we need to provide the good services with the good marketing.

	R7	It is about the brand of the university. It needs a good reputation in the society.
	R8	1)Differentiation promotion, such as promoting the unique view in the university and the marketing of the most beautiful private university 2)Emphasising the rate of students who take the exam for postgraduate qualification, promoting the good atmosphere for study. 3)Emphasising the advantage in tuition fee as the lowest one in private universities and the highest cost performance.
	R9	Recommended by high school and current students to new students. Consultants in offline activities, consultants in online live broadcasting, searching with manual for registering the exam.
	R10	Emphasising the advantage of the school location which is the provincial capital.
	R11	1) Advertisement on college entrance exam admission magazines and some apps, especially the magazines and paper released by provincial enrolment commitments which have also released the enrolment plan. 2) Authority information released on official website of university, Weibo and WeChat platform. 3) Having different reports, such as the achievement of the university, famous major and reports about excellent teachers and students, on comprehensive or professional paper, websites or Weibo. 4) Using the live broadcasting platform, such as TikTok for answering questions or showing the university environment and achievement. 5) Enhancing the advantage of special or famous majors in the university, improving the influential power in the industry and recognition of the brand and gaining the recommendation from competent department or peers. 6) Gaining rewards in official channel or industrial competition for improving the brand competitive power. 7) Recommended by students from the university or teachers in high schools.
	R12	1) Advertisement 2) Social media accounts operated by universities. 3) Promotion in high schools
Finding:	2 of the 12 interviewees have emphasise the promotion of the majors in the university. 4 of the 12 interviewees have argued about they would have promotion for differentiation. 4 of the 12 interviewees have argued that they would promote the advantages of their universities, including different elements, such as the location, the fee and the most important is the brand and the reputation of the university. 5 of the 12 interviewees have mentioned the combination of online and offline channel for having the promotion. They have mentioned the use of online channel, such as website, social media platforms and online reports, and the use of offline channel, such as traditional media and promotion activities in high schools. Also, word-of-mouth promotion has been mentioned.	
Question 3. What factors related to brands may affect candidates' positive attitude?		
keywords	R1	Soft power of the university
	R2	Advantages of the universities
	R3	Soft power of the university

	R4	Major-based contribution
	R5	Spiritual influence
	R6	Soft power of the university
	R7	Soft power of the university
	R8	Advantage of the university
	R9	Soft power of the university
	R10	Marketing and soft power of university
	R11	Soft power of the university
	R12	Resources of the university
Quotes to support the analysis	R1	<p>1) Goals of the university Our university focus on the practical ability, innovation and comprehensive quality of the students. Courses in the university works on shaping students to be the excellent students with reasonable knowledge structure, higher comprehensive quality, sustainable development ability, social responsibility and strong competitive power.</p> <p>2) Setting of the majors. First-class majors, first-class courses and majors of special features</p> <p>3) Teaching resources condition</p> <p>4) Facilities, school environment and living condition</p> <p>5) University culture</p> <p>6) University reputation</p>
	R2	<p>1) Good situation of employment situation among graduated students</p> <p>2) Located in provincial capital.</p> <p>3) Lower fee</p>
	R3	<p>1) One is the historical development and cultural heritage of the university, especially the original body of the early era.</p> <p>2) The influential power of the university in the society</p> <p>3) Whether the major of high practical features in the university has a good corporation relationship with some large-scale enterprises</p> <p>4) Whether the environment and living condition in the university are comfortable.</p>
	R4	<p>1) For higher education, there are lots of related things which can be helpful for contributing the brand of a university,</p> <p>2) If the university is focusing on the major-based brand contribution, the contribution of the majors is too abstract. It needs the contribution based on the facilities and internal resources. Resources of teachers can be the base of the brand and the foundation of the major.</p> <p>3) Brand story with certain cultural meanings and the spirit of cultural heritage can contribute to the brand. Moreover, the core competitive power of our school is the contribution of majors. It is the work which should be done well for every university which can help the universities to build up a good brand.</p>
	R5	<p>1) Public influential power in the society</p> <p>2) Transmission of spirit and power</p>

		3) Transmission and acquisition of fragmentation information
	R6	There are nine elements which can influence on the brand of the university, including history of the university, geographic environment, reputation in the public, features of the major, teaching resources, scientific research ability, facilities, resources of enterprises cooperated with the university and development potential. These nine elements are important elements considered by students and their parents.
	R7	1)School principals, school features 2)History and accumulation of the school 3)Promotion, brand image on WeChat platform and QQ space which are popular among students. 4)Setting of majors 5) International communication 6)University culture 7)Environment, living condition, installation and facilities. 8)Geographic location, big cities, first-tier cities can be more popular. 9)Teaching resources
	R8	1)Tuition fee 2) Natural view in the university 3)Atmosphere for study
	R9	School mission features in education and high-quality resources of teaching can influence on students' choice.
	R10	1)Advertisement on college entrance exam admission magazines and software during the university enrolment season 2)Hashtag search on Weibo about the university culture and special activities 3)Excellent majors.
	R11	1)Reputation 2) Employment situation 3)Location of the university 4)Environment in the university 5)Teaching resources 6.Standard of tuition fee 6) Condition of living facility
	R12	1)Score of the university 2) Special major 3)Famous teacher 4)Activities in the university 5)Recommendation on social media
Finding:	9 of the 12 interviewees have mentioned the soft power in the university. The soft power refers to many visible and invisible elements, such as the major, the historical heritage of the university and the environment in the university. Through different elements, these universities trying to attract students based on showing the good environment, good condition of facilities and installations, a positive atmosphere for study and the competitive teaching resources in the university. Through different elements, such as the culture and history of the university, private universities can show the uniqueness. 1 interviewee has argued about the major-based contribution of the university. 1 interviewee has mentioned the spirit of the university. In general, all the interviewees agree that the resources in universities, including visible and invisible ones, can influence on the brand of the university. 1 interviewee has emphasised the importance of resources, which refer to the teaching resources and major development in the university.	
Question 4. When candidates have a positive attitude towards a private university, do they attach importance to the brand of a private university?		
keywords	R1	Yes. Brand is a combination of different elements.
	R2	No. It is about the differences between public university and private university
	R3	Yes. Brand is about what can students get from the university
	R4	Yes. But students care about different elements.
	R5	Yes. It is what can the students gained from the university.

	R6	Yes. Brands can bring different benefits to university and students.
	R7	Yes. It is about the origin of the university.
	R8	No, students care about living condition only
	R9	Yes, it is about students' competitive power in the future.
	R10	Yes. It is about the origin of the university.
	R11	Yes, brand is about the resources in the university and the future of students
	R12	Yes. It is about the origin of the university.
Quotes to support the analysis	R1	Brand of private university is the combination of fame, reputation, competitive power, culture and attractiveness. A good brand is the effort made by generations of teaching staffs and it is the invisible asset for the university. Therefore, the fame and reputation can have a good brand effect and attract students and their parents.
	R2	Famous private university might be popular. But students who reach the score to enter private universities might not have such a high demand for brand.
	R3	If students have no choice but private universities because of the limitation of their scores, brand of private universities are very important to them. First of all, ranking of the university is cared by students and their parents in China. Secondly, the excellent majors of private university are important. Because graduated student's practice ability and willingness to obey orders are competitive power in labour market. Finally, whether the cooperated enterprises have a good reputation and influential power is also important. It is an important part of the high-quality education that students can receive in the private university.
	R4	1) When students accept a university, they must have certain reasons. They might appreciate management, or quality of teaching, or cultural contribution, or the acceptance degree in society. I think we can contribute more on cultural contribution and social acceptance. 2)Rational students might care about teaching quality. If students are not rational, they might care about whether they have companions for playing balls or games.
	R5	My answer is yes, and students care about the private universities. Score is the most important element they consider. Their personal quality, ability and score decide which university they will be in in the future. 1)Development in the university and after graduation 2)The acceptance degree of university brand in the society for employment 3)Social events in the university can have certain continuous influence on students after the graduation.

	R6	They would certainly care about the brand. Name of the university, logo, school principal, education quality, features and university culture can be shown in the brand. A fame and good reputation can make students to have a positive attitude towards the university. A good image of the university can help the university to gain support from society, trust from parents and identity from students and teachers. It can optimise and enlarge the space for existence and development of the university, integrate teaching resources and gain more opportunities for the university. It is invisible wealth and can be transformed to visible physical wealth for the university to develop in a good circle. With this brand effect, school effect, development effect among students and teachers and effect of serving families can be shown.
	R7	Students care about brand of private university and history of the university. For example, some private universities are developed from the branch campus of famous public university.
	R8	No, they might care about the living quality, food quality and the employment situation of the university.
	R9	Yes, brand, reputation and influential power of the university in society are considered by students when they apply for the university. These elements can decide their competitive power in employment and further study in the future.
	R10	Students pay attention on the origin of the private university. For example, some private universities are developed from branch campus of famous public universities. Students trust this kind of private universities more.
	R11	With suitable scores, students pay more attention on the brand of the university. One is the history of the university might be related with the accumulation and the features of the university. Secondly, it is related with the recognition in the society and the trust degree among students and their parents. Thirdly, it might lead to certain advantage in further study and employment.
	R12	Yes. Students would care about the history of the private university and whether it is developed from famous universities.
Finding:		Ten of the 12 interviewees agree that candidates care about brands of the university. Five of these ten interviewees mentioned that brand is about the resources in the university and decides what students can get from the study. It is about the competitive power of students in the future. Three of the ten interviewees have mentioned that brand is about the origin of the university. The rest two of them mentioned brand is about different elements. Two of the 12 interviewees disagree with that statement that students care about brands. It about the difference between public university and private university.
Question 5. Have you researched the channels for students to search and obtain university information? What channels do candidates often use?		
keywords	R1	Multiple channel
	R2	Multiple channel
	R3	Multiple channel
	R4	Multiple channel
	R5	Multiple channel

	R6	Mainstream channel
	R7	Multiple channel
	R8	Multiple channel
	R9	Multiple channel
	R10	No answer
	R11	Multiple channel
	R12	Online official channel
Quotes to support the analysis	R1	<p>1)Official website of university, WeChat,Weibo, TikTok and other new media platforms are important channel and information resources for students and their parents.</p> <p>2)General Manual for Enrolment of universities, advertisement video</p> <p>3)Reports and promotion on different social medias.</p> <p>4)Searching engines are also important, such as Baidu, which is an important channel for student's parents to get information.</p> <p>5)Word-of-mouth promotion of teachers, students and graduated students from the university.</p> <p>6)The major channel for students to gain information about private university is the contents released by official channel of universities.</p>
	R2	<p>1)Recommendation by class teachers or teachers.</p> <p>2)Recommendation by enrolment magazine or online advertisement.</p> <p>3)Weibo and Baidu search</p> <p>4)Recommendation from senior students.</p> <p>Recommendation from class teachers and senior students are the major channels.</p>
	R3	<p>1)To know the general situation of the university from official website.</p> <p>2)To know the ranking of the university on internet.</p> <p>3)To get more information from radio, television and other new media.</p> <p>4)To have the offline enrolment promotion of the private university</p> <p>5)To get authority information from competent department of education administration, mainly from the public information released in enrolment magazines.</p>
	R4	One is enrolment plan, the other is advertisement.
	R5	<p>1) The first one is official media (newspaper, television advertisement and official websites)</p> <p>2)The second one is famous training organisations</p> <p>3)The third one is fragmentation information gained from the promotion channel on new media.</p> <p>Beyond these three types, the word-of-mouth promotion among friends or relatives can also be found. But this situation is rare.</p>
	R6	Students search the information of universities from mainstream education information platform, such as China Education online which covers most of the high schools, and another platform which is assigned by our university, and Sunshine college entrance exam information platform operated by Ministry of Education and other exam and enrolment service websites in different provinces.

	R7	Yes, we have survey among fresh students to know their information collection channel about university information. Students usually use WeChat, QQ Space, official website of university, Open Day of University and newspaper.
	R8	1)Official enrolment magazine 2)Recommendation by senior students 3)Promotion via lectures 4)Official accounts of university 5)Online brochures and short video for promotion.
	R9	Official website, official accounts, search engine, application fulfilling app and social media software.
	R10	No
	R11	1)Recommendation in enrolment magazine and internet advertisement 2)Recommendation by high school class teachers and teachers 3)Different enrolment promotion and consultant meeting 4)Weibo and Baidu search. 5)Recommendation by school mates or senior students The major channel is enrolment magazine, recommendation of high school teachers and consultant meeting.
	R12	Yes, official information releasing platform, Baidu and social media.
Finding:	Only one interviewee has not given the answer about the channels for students to get information. Two of the 12 interviewees have mentioned that students get information from official mainstream channel, mainly online channel. Nine of the 12 interviewees mentioned multiple channels for students to get information, including online channel, offline activities and word-of-mouth promotion.	
Question 6. What forms of media have you chosen to spread your university's brand and message?		
keywords	R1	Mainly online channel
	R2	With both traditional media and new media.
	R3	With both traditional media and new media.
	R4	With both traditional media and new media.
	R5	With both offline activities, mainstream media and new media.
	R6	Mainly online channel
	R7	With both offline activities and online channel
	R8	Mainly online channel
	R9	Mainly online channel
	R10	With both traditional media and new media.
	R11	With both traditional media and new media.
	R12	Mainly online channel
Quotes to support the analysis	R1	Official platforms of the competent department and other medias with influential power.
	R2	1)Authority traditional media, such as TV station and paper with provincial or city level authority.

		<p>2)Social media platform or new internet media of famous newspaper group</p> <p>3)Recommendation by hot search of Weibo influencers.</p> <p>4)University blogger’s social media platform.</p> <p>5)Online community of students and teachers’ friends’ circle.</p>
	R3	Local radio and TV station. Local traditional newspaper media. New medias, such as Weibo, WeChat and Douyin.
	R4	The official media of our university might properly use traditional one. We have advertisement on radio and television and one newspaper and magazine. But new media can have a better effect. Thus, we have concluded a good experience about combination of new media and traditional media from last year’s campaign.
	R5	<p>1) In official media part, our teachers, such as enrolment office director and representative of the university, have taken part in some programs in television station for introducing the university, such as scale, features and goals for training talents.</p> <p>2) In the consultation meeting, staffs from our university have the speeches in different cities. Some organisations might have the large-scale consultation meeting in the public. We send some professional promotion staffs, including enrolment staffs and students, for making the promotion. Parents might pay more attention on the outcome or works of the university. Students are the direct works, and it might make parents feel happier.</p> <p>3)New media. I prefer relaxation and entertainment. New media can use entertainment to show the vision of some nobodies to show the cultural atmosphere of the university.</p>
	R6	Combination of education information platform and social media.
	R7	Using WeChat, QQ and university website for online promotion. Visiting some high schools in offline activities.
	R8	<p>1)Official enrolment magazine</p> <p>2)Website for university enrolment</p> <p>3)University-owned website, official account and Douyin account</p>
	R9	App developed by Gaokao.eol.cn
	R10	Newspaper, official website of university and WeChat
	R11	Traditional media, such as authority newspaper in cities and provinces and enrolment magazine. Traditional media in educational field or enrolment promotion and online media platform. New media platform of famous media groups. University official website, Weibo, WeChat and other new media platforms. Hash tag and promotion in Douyin and influencer recommendation on Weibo. Online community based on teachers and students’ social circle.
	R12	University website, WeChat, Douyin, bilibili and other different medias.
Finding:		Five of the 12 interviewees figured out that they use both traditional media and new media for spreading the message. Five of the 12 interviewees mentioned that they use mainly online channel. While two interviewees stated that they use both online channel and offline activities.
Question 7. Which forms of media do you think are most effective?		
keywords	R1	Official enrolment manual, offline interaction and online interaction

	R2	Online platforms
	R3	New media
	R4	New media
	R5	Offline channel might be more important
	R6	Short video is the most effective
	R7	Official website is the most effective
	R8	Offline activities and online platform
	R9	Online platforms
	R10	Online platforms
	R11	Traditional media and online platforms
	R12	Social media
Quotes to support the analysis	R1	enternal manual of enrolment, reception for students and their parents to visit the university or consult via telephone, consultant for college entrance exam is the method which can be accepted well by students and their parents. In recent years, new media platform has gained more attention from students and their parents because the platform can both release information and interact with other users. Students and their parents can seek for consultant by leaving the commend.
	R2	Online platforms mentioned in the later four options in last question have a better outcome with lower investment.
	R3	New media, such as Weibo and official account of WeChat.
	R4	Personally speaking, new media has better effect. Traditional medias do not have a good effect at present.
	R5	For parents: 1) Magazines about college entrance examination 2)Recommendation from class teacher 3)Official media For students 1) Class teacher 2)New media 3)Social media platform
	R6	No matter what kind of media, the most important is to know the calculation of flow and data for maximising the effect. Secondly, we should make sure that the promotion contents are attractive. The feedback from users shows that short video is the best way for promotion, such as Douyin.
	R7	The most effective method is enrolment information net of university. Another one is WeChat and Douyin, Quark and bilibili.
	R8	1)Promotion lecture in high schools 2) Organising certain cultural and sports activities in high schools 3)Filling the application and in consultation meeting.
	R9	Official website, official account, searching engine used by mobile phone and computer for attracting the flow and App for application fulfilling, etc.
	R10	Internet methods and social media
	R11	The first three platforms mentioned in the answers of Question 6.
	R12	Continuously operating social media.
Finding:	Four of the 12 interviewees mentioned new media and social media as the most effective form. Seven interviewees have mentioned online platforms which involve both social media	

		and some websites as the most effective form. Three of the 12 interviewees have considered offline activities as the most effective form.
Question 8. What specific strategies and methods has the school adopted to build its brand?		
keywords	R1	Promoting the features of private university and internal resources.
	R2	Using the internal resources for enhancing brand image.
	R3	Building up the brand image based on professional resources.
	R4	Using human resources for brand image building
	R5	Enhancing responsibility for brand image building
	R6	Using features of the university for brand image building
	R7	Using features of the university for brand image building
	R8	Using features of the university for brand image building
	R9	Using features of the university for brand image building
	R10	Using features of the university for brand image building
	R11	Building up the brand image based on professional resources.
	R12	Building up the brand image based on professional resources.
Quotes to support the analysis	R1	1)Using the content development as the main point and using the system of private university and market operation system for finding the innovative way in higher education development. 2)Using the local economic development as the base for optimising the major setting. 3)Enhancing the teaching resource development 4)Developing brand awareness. Private university needs to develop the awareness of the brand based on having something which are rare among competitors and developing the better majors while others have the similar ones. And paying more attention on content development and feature development. 5)Enhancing the promotion of the brand in and outside the university.
	R2	1)Having branding strategy through using traditional and new media for improving the fame and reputation of the university. 2)Building up sub-brands through different elements, such as teaching, students management, special activities and logistics management. 3)Enhancing the cooperation with enterprises in practice base and using word-of-mouth among enterprises for promoting students' quality.
	R3	Branding of a university can be related with different elements. First, the image creating. Most of private universities are developed from the cooperation between public universities and enterprises. Thus, they have certain heritage from the public university. Secondly, private universities can develop some majors based on the advantage which is inherited from the public university and social demand. Thirdly, encouraging students to take part in competition of different majors for training creativity of students and promoting the university brand.
	R4	Famous teachers and famous graduated students are important resources for brand building. A brand needs stories and stories need characters.

	R5	There are two levels of strategies for branding, one is the main responsibility level, the other is social responsibility level. Main responsibility level is to do our duties well and show a good image to the public.
	R6	In my opinion, private universities should build up the brand and it is necessary for the sustainable development. Brand contribution is not a short period project, but a long-term maintenance and continuous optimisation process. According to my vision, I want to inherit the brand culture of the university and create the unique features of our school.
	R7	Our university care more about the contributing and upgrading of enrolment information website. We have introduced our university and major among some high schools for enrolment. Having the continuous promotion and branding on social media, such as WeChat and Douyin, because this channel needs low cost but have significant effect.
	R8	Finding the correct position of the university, emphasising the differentiation of the university.
	R9	Innovative planning: delicious food, natural view and good appearance become the major innovative resources which attract students. Creative contents: displaying certain activities of the university based on the viewing habit and preference of students, such as rich activities in different clubs and influential power of alumni association for increasing the identify of students. Creative works: promoting the real view in the campus and showing it in different channels, such as promotion video and campus VR.
	R10	Building up the sub-brands based on teaching, management of students, special activities, logistics management. Enhancing the cooperation between practice and employment base and promoting the quality of students via the enterprises.
	R11	1)Using different levels and types of official authority platforms which have strong professional degree, high authority and large influential power for evaluation and awarding; 2) Contributing excellent management and teaching resources for improving the comprehensive ability of the university. The core guarantee for education quality is teachers. 3.) Emphasising campus environment and condition contribution and increasing the recognition among students. 4) Enhancing the cooperation between enterprises and university for improving employment quality. The main goal for studying is to find a good job. 5) Enlarging the training and promotion about excellent students for further study for setting the model and increasing attractiveness.
	R12	Drawing excellent teachers into the university, increasing teaching condition, continuously using social media for branding and holding special activities in the university.
Finding:		For building up the brand image of the private university, interviewees have emphasised different internal resources. Seven interviewees have mentioned the feature of university for brand building. Three interviewees mentioned professional resources for brand building. One mentioned human resource, such as excellent teachers and students. One mentioned performing responsibility of private university for brand building
	Question 9. What social media are currently used in your university?	
keywords	R1	WeChat, Weibo, Douyin

	R2	WeChat, Weibo, Douyin
	R3	Internet, Weibo and WeChat.
	R4	Weibo, WeChat, Zhihu and Baidu
	R5	Official website, WeChat, Weibo, Douyin
	R6	Weibo, Baidu post bar, WeChat, Douyin, Tencent and QQ
	R7	official WeChat account, official website, Douyin account and Quark account
	R8	Weibo, Douyin and WeChat official account
	R9	Baijiahao of Baidu, Weibo, Toutiao.com. and Douyin
	R10	Weibo, WeChat and Douyin.
	R11	Weibo, WeChat and Douyin
	R12	Weibo, WeChat and Douyin
Quotes to support the analysis	R1	WeChat official account, Weibo and Douyin 1)Larger user population and longer using time per day. 2)Main social media platforms, such as official account on WeChat and Weibo. With the increasing of credibility of these social media, population of the followers can increase. 3)Competent department of education administration increasing the importance of new media matrix and involving WeChat and Weibo into evaluation system.
	R2	Weibo, WeChat and Douyin. These social medias need lower investment and have higher influential power. There are a large number of students using these and the interaction is frequent. Also, these platforms are stable and easy-to-use.
	R3	Internet, Weibo and WeChat. The population of mobile phone users is high. According to the authority department data, population of mobile phone users is more than 160 million which is higher than the total population. And mobile phone App is the first choice for separating information.
	R4	We use almost every social media platform and mainly focusing on the platforms which are used frequently by students, such as Weibo, WeChat, zhihu and Baidu community.
	R5	Official website, WeChat official account, Douyin and Weibo.
	R6	We mainly use Weibo, Baidu post bar, WeChat, Douyin, Tencent and QQ for promotion. The cost of social media is low while the interaction function can be strong. It can focus on target population and gain the completed feedback.
	R7	Our university has official WeChat account, official website, Douyin account and Quark account.
	R8	Weibo, Douyin and WeChat official account because these social media are popular among current high school students.
	R9	Baidu, Weibo, Toutiao.com. and Douyin. The viewing amount of these social media is large, and the positioning is accurate.
	R10	Weibo, WeChat and Douyin. Lower investment, larger influential power, more students' users, better interaction between users and stable platform with easy-to-use feature.

	R11	Weibo, WeChat and Douyin. These platforms have more students' users, high interaction between users and easy-to-use.
	R12	Weibo, WeChat and Douyin. Lower investment, larger influential power, better interaction and stable platform.
Finding:	Weibo, WeChat and Douyin are the top three platforms used by interviewees' universities. These platforms have similar features, such as lower investment, larger user population and easy-to-use. Only one interviewee has not mentioned WeChat. Another two interviewees have not mentioned Douyin.	
Question 10. How often do you update your social media account? What kind of content do you usually post on?		
keywords	R1	Regularly Events, activities, stories, reports and news
	R2	Regularly Events, activities, stories, reports and news
	R3	Weekly Positive information about the university
	R4	Irregularly About the activities in the campus
	R5	Irregularly About the activities in the campus
	R6	Regularly About the features of the university.
	R7	Daily updating during enrolment season About the features of the university.
	R8	Weekly updating Events in the university and introduction of majors
	R9	Three times a week. Events in the campus
	R10	Irregularly Events, activities, stories, reports and news
	R11	Irregularly Events, activities, stories, reports and news
	R12	At least twice a week. About events in the campus and news report about the university.
Quotes to support the analysis	R1	Information has been regularly updated on official website. New media accounts would update the information more frequently but irregularly. News in university, activities, events in the university, media vision, personal report and some campaign can be reported.
	R2	Daily updating in semester and twice or three times a week updating during summer and winter holidays. Information includes news in university, stories of excellent teachers and students, media report about the university, social events, opinions of students and political events.
	R3	The university would update the contents of social media every week. The information is mainly some positive information about the university for improving the reputation and influential power.

	R4	Once we have activities, we would update the media.
	R5	The updating frequency of social media, such as Weibo and Douyin, is not as high as the frequency of official website. Official website and WeChat official account have daily updated and event updating. Every functional department in the university has their Weibo account and WeChat official account for having more communication with students. Beyond the promotion function, some more new functions have been developed on social media, such as delivery status inquiry and score inquiry.
	R6	he daily updating frequency is once a week. But during the promotion period, the frequency would be once in three days, daily updating or several times a day. Social media is the public promotion platform. Thus, we show the architecture features, such as library and laboratory, rich activities in campus and show the signature to the public. Also, the unified objectives, principles, logo and slogan of the university can be shown in the behaviour of students and teachers and separated to the public.
	R7	During the enrolment period, our enrolment office updates social media contents daily. The social media contents are about the major in the university and expressed in the way that young students like.
	R8	The update frequency is once in a week. The contents are mainly about the campus life information, awards gained by students and university and enrolment general rule and major introduction in enrolment season.
	R9	The updating frequency is three times a week and involve latest events in the campus, pictures and articles, living broadcasting, video and news, etc.
	R10	Irregularly. Updating contents involve events in the campus, story of excellent teachers and students, media report about the university, hot events in the society, trend among students and political events.
	R11	When there have any important events in national or educational fields, any big events in the university, any achievement or any story about excellent teachers and students, the accounts would have the updating. The contents are about events in the campus, stories of excellent teachers and students, media reports about the university, social events and thoughts of students.
	R12	The updating frequency is at least twice a week. Contents involve events in the campus and media report about the university.
Finding:	Eight of the 12 interviewees mentioned regular updating of their accounts. Four of the 12 interviewees argued that their accounts have irregular updating. The contents of the updating are similar, mainly about the events, stories and news report about the university. Two interviewees mentioned the contents are about features of their universities. One interviewee stated that they introduce majors in updating during enrolment season.	

Appendix 4: A Table of the Interview for 13 Students and Coding

Question 1. What is the main reason why you chose to enrol in a private university?			
Keywords and Data Statistics	Factors	Number of Students	Student Code
	Geographic location	12	S1, S2, S3,S4,S5,S6,S7,S8,S9,S10,S11,S12
	living conditions	11	S1, S2,S3,S5,S7,S8,S9,S10,S11,S12,S13
	Professional Settings	10	S2, S3,S4,S5,S6,S7,S8,S9,S10,S11,S13
	Campus environment	8	S1, S2,S4,S7,S8,S11,S12,S13
	occupation rate	6	S3, S5,S6,S7,S9,S10
	School History	5	S1, S4, S6, S8, S11
	School Teachers	5	S2, S3,S4,S8,S12
	School size	4	S3, S9, S10, S11.
Quotes to support the analysis	S1	“Searching on different social media when making a choice. I saw a video of the school’s cherry blossoms on Little Red Book, and it instantly increased my liking for the school.”	
	S2	“There were two schools for comparison, but the other school was too remote, while this school has a metro station right in front of the school, which is convenient and close to the city centre, so I chose this school.” “At that time, I saw the view of this school’s campus on Douyin, such as the trees and grass. I was impressed. “	
	S3	“I joined a QQ group dedicated to interested candidates, where I saw the VR panorama of the dormitory photos and felt more satisfied.”	
	S4	“I saw a video on Douyin introducing a particular major at this school, and I thought it was well run, so I got a good feeling about it, and ended up applying to other majors at the same school.”	
	S5	“On social media apps, I saw a full view of the school’s dormitories and was more than satisfied with the living conditions.”	
	S6	“I have learnt that our school was one of the first private universities created in the country and has a lot of experience in this field. It also has a very deep history over the course of so many years.”	
	S7	“Because of the limitations of my scores, I’m mainly interested in my major and location. I’ve always preferred the city of Wuhan, and my cousin works in Wuhan.”	
	S8	“The location of the school I’ve chosen is good, with the metro station right outside the door. I’ve seen some internet celebrity videos on Douyin and bilibili, which are about the school’s library, the	

		teaching building, and the school's cherry blossom forest, which is one of the aspects I like more. “	
	S9	“A good major lead to a good job. When I think about choosing a major, I also think about the employment situation of that major at the same time.”	
	S10	“I value the location of the university because a good location is better for future employment.”	
	S11	“I think there is more room for choosing a major in a private university, so you can choose the one you like.”	
	S12	“Faculty was the most important factor that ranked at the top of my list for applying to this private university. Also, the location of this university has a great advantage as it is closer to my home.”	
	S13	“First of all, it is the undergraduate degree, the private university can let me get a bachelor's degree. The other thing is the hardware of teaching and the environment of the school, which I also value. “	
Finding:	Twelve out of 13 students cited the location of the university as the most important consideration. Ten interviewees all said that the major setting is the first priority, and they chose this private university because there are majors, they like. Eleven of them all mentioned that they valued the living conditions of the school, mainly including the dormitory and canteen. Eight respondents all mentioned the campus environment as the main reason that attracted them to apply for this school. Six respondents ranked placement behind major setting. five of the 13 students interviewed mentioned that they valued the school's history and faculty. Four students mentioned that they look at the size of the school. One student mentioned that when he searched for information about a school, he paid more attention to the school's examination rate, and another student mentioned that she placed more importance on teaching equipment and facilities.		
Question2. What are the ways and channels used when searching for information about private universities?			
Keywords and Data Statistics	Search Channels	Number of students	Students' Code
	Douyin	8	S2, S4,S6,S7,S8,S10,S11,S13
	School Official Website	4	S1, S5, S6, S13
	Visiting the Campus	3	S2, S4, S9
	Class Teachers and Alumni	2	S4, S12.
Quotes to support the analysis	S1	“When I was choosing a school, I specifically consulted a professional examining organisation, and they advised me based on my scores. “	
	S2	“I visited the campus, and at that time I was pleased with the view of the present school grounds. I also ate in the school cafeteria and observed the state of the students.”	
	S3	“When I was choosing between several schools, I compared them by reading the comments on Baidu forums and postings. The positive comments from users greatly influenced the final choice. Since looking up the name of the school on social media, big data keeps pushing videos of this	

		school and similar schools.” “My relatives gave some guidance in choosing a major that greatly influenced my decision.”
	S4	“I saw an introduction to the school library on Twitter by a vlogger at the school I’m at now, and I felt good about it.” “When choosing a private university, I mainly referred to the advice of my high school homeroom teacher and former graduates.”
	S5	“I rarely use my mobile phone, and when searching for information, I’ve mainly used the Quark App to see the school’s dormitories. “
	S6	“I mainly learnt some information on the school’s official website, WeChat and Weibo public number, which I think is more valuable and official, for example, the employment rate and geographic location of these information will have the corresponding brief when the webpage is searched. For the two aspects of school conditions and student life, I mainly learnt about them through the short videos made by students or teachers on Douyin.”
	S7	“I joined a QQ chat group set up by the school for candidates, so I can keep up to date with what’s going on at the school and ask questions at any time.”
	S8	“I follow the school’s Internet Celebrity’s social media accounts, and they recommend presenting some of the beautiful sights on campus, which I think are great to see.”
	S9	“I travelled to Wuhan and took a site visit to two universities I was interested in. The campuses of the two universities were different, and I ended up choosing the one with good transport links.”
	S10	“I called the admissions office about this college I’m now applying to but was too embarrassed to ask too many questions. Social media can help answer my questions and there are videos available.”
	S11	“At that time, I followed the online student at my current university and learnt something about the school from the daily routine she shared, especially the videos. “
	S12	“Chatting with alumni through WeChat, I learnt more about the private universities I was interested in.”
	S13	“Firstly, I checked the school’s official website for information about the school and then searched for more content, especially short videos, on Douyin. “
Finding:	Students’ information search is based on online social media with a mix of other online or offline channels. Every student interviewed used at least two social media platforms to search for information about private universities. Eight of the students used Douyin to search for information about the university, and Douyin was the most used social media platform among the students. In addition, four students first used the official website of the university and then went to different social media platforms to search for information. All the above are online channels for searching information. Besides, three students visited the campus in person, which belongs to the offline channel. In short, students	

	mainly searched for information online, with social media platforms being the most widely used. At the same time, less than a quarter of the students consulted their high school class teachers, professional organisations and alumni they knew.		
Question 3. What are some of the social media outlets that students have followed when choosing to apply to a private university?			
Keywords and Data Statistics	social media	Number of students	Student Number
	Weibo official account	8	S1, S2,S3,S4,S6,S7,S10,S12
	Douyin Official Account	7	S1, S2,S4,S8,S10,S11,S13
	WeChat Official Account	6	S2, S3,S6,S8,S10,S12.
	Little Red Book	2	S1, S10
	Quark App	2	S5, S7
	Internet Celebrity account	2	S8, S13
	QQ group	2	S7, S9
	Baidu online forum	1	S3, S7
	Zhi Hu	1	S10
Quotes to support the analysis	S1	“By subscribing to the university of interest’s Little Red Book account, I’ve seen a lot of beautiful pictures of the school, especially of the cherry blossom grove, and it makes me think it’s a very good choice to study in a place like this.”	
	S2	“I get to know the school’s campus environment and the students’ daily lives through the video pushes of Douyin.”	
	S3	“I checked the students’ comments about the school inside the Baidu forum. Also, I searched for schools of interest on Twitter, especially seeing the natural environment of the school.”	
	S4	“I followed the accounts of internet celebrities on Twitter, from which I learnt about the school library and so on. I also watched some short videos on Douyin that introduced the school’s majors.”	
	S5	“I rarely use my phone, and when it comes to searching for information, I’ve mostly used the Quark App to see the school’s dorms.”	
	S6	“By following the WeChat public number of the private university, I was interested in, I learnt about the list of students who took the exams and the names of the schools they were admitted to in that class. I found that a few students were admitted to prestigious domestic and international schools, which added to my confidence and goodwill towards that university.”	
	S7	“I joined the QQ group where I can interact with the school’s teachers at any time. “	

	S8	“I learnt about various aspects of the school mainly from a series of short videos produced by the school on Douyin.”	
	S9	“My mum told me about the QQ group for school candidates, where I can learn a lot of information about the school.”	
	S10	“I prefer to read the Little Red Book. The writing in it is more in-depth and the content is more specific.”	
	S11	“For social media, the main thing I like to look at is Douyin, and once I started collecting a private university, Douyin would often push the same type of university to me.”	
	S12	“I mostly followed short video accounts on Twitter.”	
	S13	“I follow the school’s official WeChat the most, and I’ve followed internet celebrity’s account, but not a lot. “	
Finding:	All the students interviewed reported following at least two or more official social media school accounts. Among them, the official accounts of Weibo, Douyin, and WeChat are the social media platforms that students follow the most. By following these accounts, students can receive regular updates from the university in different forms, which increases students’ understanding and stickiness to the university. Students generally responded that they like to watch short videos pushed by the university’s social media accounts, so that they can understand the university’s situation intuitively and more realistically.		
Question 4: What is found on social media platforms for information related to choosing a school?			
Keywords and Data Statistics	Search for information	Number of students	Student Code
	Geographic location	10	S1, S2, S3, S6, S7, S8, S9, S10, S11, S13
	Living conditions	9	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S10
	Professional Settings	7	S2, S3, S4, S7, S10, S11, S12
	Occupation rate	4	S3, S6, S7, S10
	School size	3	S3, S9, S10
	Campus environment	2	S13, S8.
Quotes to support the analysis	S1	I saw the living quarters of the school on Douyin, the food in the different dining halls.	
	S2	I watched the live stream on Douyin to learn about the college and the profession.	
	S3	I joined the official WeChat of the school I was interested in, and learnt a lot about the school, such as the employment rate, the construction of a new campus, and so on.	
	S4	“I saw a video on Douyin introducing a particular major at this school.”	

	S5	“I saw the conditions of the student accommodation in the Quark software. “I’m happy with a room for four people with an ensuite bathroom.”												
	S6	“I learnt about the school’s detailed location on the official WeChat I follow.”												
	S7	I learnt about the school’s specialisation and employment rate on Quark App. I checked the netizens’ comments about the school inside the Baidu forum.												
	S8	I’ve seen some internet celebrity videos on Douyin and B-site, which are about the school’s library, the school building, and the school’s cherry blossom forest, which is one of my favourite aspects of the school.												
	S9	I learnt about the location of the school from the QQ group, and there is a metro station right in front of the school.												
	S10	“I used the official WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin, Little Red Book, and on these social media I searched for information about all aspects of the school. “												
	S11	“I followed the school’s official WeChat, especially the majors I’m interested in, and this college’s WeChat account. Learned a lot of news about the college.”												
	S12	“I learned a lot about the major, including the faculty, on the school’s official WeChat account.”												
	S13	“I tuned in to the school’s promos on my Douyin account, and a lot of them were shots of the campus scenery.”												
Finding:	The researcher found that students can search for information on social media platforms including geographic location, living conditions, major settings, employment rates, school size, and campus environment. Of these, location, living conditions, and major settings were all mentioned by more than half of the students who could find this information on social media platforms.													
Question 5. the magnitude of the role of information disseminated on social media in determining the choice of a private university. 0 is no role at all; 6 and above 6 is playing more than half a role; and 10 is the biggest role, determined entirely by the information on social media.														
Keywords and Data Statistics	Student Code	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13
	Score (0-10)	5	7	7	8	2	6	10	8	5	10	10	8	9
Quotes to support the analysis	S1	“The other five points came from intuition, and I can’t say exactly what it was.”												
	S2	“The other three points came from my visit to campus.”												
	S3	“The choice of school relied heavily on my own search of social media platforms to find out, and for the choice of major, I took advice from relatives. So 3 points come from the advice of friends and relatives.”												
	S4	“And 2 points from the impact of visiting the campus.”												
	S5	“Social media plays a very minor role and is optional. I usually rarely look at my mobile phone, but I still used the Quark App when I was searching for information about private universities to find out the conditions of the dormitories.”												

	S6	“6 points for major social media content, especially Douyins tweeting about students’ daily routines. 4 points mostly from official websites and calls to the admissions office for advice.	
	S7	“I made my decision to choose a school all on the information provided by social media platforms.”	
	S8	“As well as social media, I’d search the school’s official website because that information would be more authoritative.”	
	S9	“Five more points came from field trips to schools.”	
	S10	“Because at first I called the school’s recruitment office, but I didn’t get a satisfactory answer and there were no pictures or videos to refer to. So I started searching using social media platforms, and ended up choosing the private university I’m at now. I think the information is known from social media.”	
	S11	“I basically get all the information I want to know from various social media searches, so it’s very influential and basically decisive for me. “	
	S12	“For the other 2 points, I asked about the experiences of past seniors.”	
	S13	The other 3 points were for checking the school’s official website at the beginning, and then searching for information and watching videos through different accounts on social media.	
Finding	10 out of 13 students surveyed scored 6 as well as 6 or more. All of them believe that social media provides an important basis for choosing a private university. Three students scored a perfect score, and they believed that social media played a full role in choosing a private university. Two students scored five out of five and they believed that social media played a half influential role. Site visits to schools and intuition played the other half of the role. Only one student scored a 2 because he rarely uses his mobile phone in general.		
Question 6. What should you post on your current private university’s social media to help with enrolment?			
Keywords and Data Statistics	Content of the Marketing	Number of students	Student Code
	Campus environment	8	S1, S2,S3,S7,S8
	Campus Culture	4	S5, S6, S7, S10
	living conditions	4	S2, S3, S4, S7.
	Teachers teaching	4	S3, S4, S6, S12
	teaching facilities	4	S1, S2, S4, S13
	Professional Settings	3	S3, S9, S11.
	Research/Awards	3	S5, S6, S10
	start a career	2	S8, S3
	geographic location	1	S11
Quotes to support the analysis	S1	I think candidates will look more at the natural environment of the school, as well as the teaching equipment.	
	S2	The school should have given more information about the dormitories and the catering options.	
	S3	“The university I’m attending now has a very beautiful plum forest during the plum blossom season, and I suggest	

		that we can make some short videos to promote the school’s scenery on Douyin.”
	S4	“The teaching and learning environment are very important, so it is important to introduce more about the school’s laboratories, while the school can produce quality short videos to promote the strengths of the faculty. Students also place a lot of importance on the conditions of the hostel, and all of this content needs to be kept up to date. “
	S5	I think the school should feature more research awards and news of student activities.
	S6	“Schools should feature more outstanding students and teachers, such as student awards. These would be more appealing to students.”
	S7	“Of all the social media outlets, the one I hold in the highest regard is Douyin. I think the school should promote more of the school’s scenery and food on Douyin.”
	S8	“Schools should use social media more to promote cultural events on campus, competitions for students. These activities are different for each school and can attract candidates through differences and their own majors.”
	S9	I think the speciality is the most important thing for the candidates, so the school should give a detailed account of the speciality.
	S10	“I would suggest that there could be more events or competitions posted on social media that are part of the campus culture.”
	S11	“At that time, I followed the college’s WeChat account. Learned a lot of news about the college. This is very useful, should introduce more about the profession.”
	S12	“I learned a lot about the major, including the faculty, on the school’s official WeChat account.”
	S13	“I hope the school can promote hardware facilities more, such as laboratories, such as sports grounds, and so on. “
Finding:	The students interviewed suggested that their university’s social media could actively post about the following: campus environment, campus culture, living conditions, faculty teaching, teaching facilities, specialisations, research awards, careers, and location. Among these, campus environment is the content that students believe needs to be given the most importance in the promotion of school enrolment.	

Appendix 5: Interview Transcript for an Administrator from a Private University (Respondent No.11)

Researcher: Please answer the following questions, interviewer and school's information will not appear anywhere, and the data is for my research only. There are ten questions in total for the interview. The first question is, what are the main factors Chinese students consider when choosing a private university?

R11: The first one is the candidates' scores in the college entrance examination. Students can only choose a suitable university according to their scores in the college entrance examination; secondly, the location advantage of the university, especially the university resources in Wuhan city, the benefit is obvious. Especially for the county, the attraction of rural candidates is relatively strong. Again, is the choice of profession. For identical NCEE scores, if the candidates choose a private university, their favourite professional admissions chances will generally be more significant. Fourthly, candidates are concerned about the campus's living conditions and learning environment. Some private universities have newer and better dormitory conditions, such as separate bathrooms and washing machines, which will be more attractive to candidates. This is also very competitive. The last is the employment situation. Candidates attach great importance to the specialties built by some private universities because they can provide better employment. For example, some majors cooperate with enterprises, with tutors from enterprises coming to the school for classes, and students can visit enterprises and do internships.

Researcher: Second question, what effective marketing strategies and methods does your school adopt to attract candidates?

R11: Our school mainly adopts a combination of online and offline methods: firstly, advertisements in magazines and apps for college entrance examination admissions, including magazines and newspapers with official admissions program information; secondly, authoritative information released by the school's official website, Webo, and WeChat accounts; thirdly, promote your school in comprehensive or professional newspapers, websites, and Webo, focusing on promoting your school, including your school's school achievements, branded professions, outstanding teachers and students' deeds, etc.; fourthly, using live webcast platforms such as Douyin to answer candidates' questions and show the campus environment and school achievements; fifthly, strive to build the school's majors, constantly improve the influence and recognition of the professions, and seek to obtain the recommendation of the higher authorities and peers; the next is that the school strives to receive official honors and industry awards to enhance its brand image; the last but not the least, the school should go to the candidate's high school for offline promotion. Strive to get alums and high school teachers to recommend our school. High school classroom teachers are essential for the precise marketing of private universities.

Researcher: Third question, what are the main factors influencing candidates' choice of school related to branding?

R11: The soft power of the school is significant.

Researcher: Can you explain your definition of soft power?

R11: The soft power I am talking about here is intangible factors instead of hardware conditions – for example, the school's reputation, the employment rate, and faculty. Of course, in addition to

the soft power, there are some other factors candidates will also be more concerned about – for example, the location of the school and the campus environment.

Researcher: The fourth question is whether you think brand attitude can influence candidates' decision to apply to private universities. This question can also be interpreted in this way, do candidates value the brand of private universities? Why?

R11: Brand is very important to candidates as it relates to the university's resources and the student's future development. With the right score, candidates do value the brand of private universities. This is because a better brand generally has the following advantages:

1. It has a more extended history of running schools and has accumulation and characteristics.
2. It is more recognised by society and trusted by parents and candidates.
3. A university with a good brand will have a more significant advantage for the candidates' further studies and employment.

Researcher: The fifth question is, according to your understanding, what are the channels for candidates to get information about private universities? What are the most important channels?

R11: The channels for candidates to search for private universities are relatively diversified. For example, there are advertisements in admissions magazines and networks, recommendations from high school homeroom teachers and teachers, and various admissions counseling sessions. In addition, there is also the use of social media, such as blogging searches and communicating with older students on WeChat. The most important channels are admissions magazines, recommendations from high school teachers, and admissions counseling sessions.

Researcher: The sixth question is what forms of media your school uses to communicate the university's brand and message.

R11: Our school uses a combination of social media and traditional media. Traditional media include provincial and municipal authoritative newspapers, admissions magazines, and educational websites. The use of social media is vibrant as it provides a channel for students and parents to communicate directly with the school. We will use the social media platforms of well-known media groups and the school's official website, Weibo, WeChat, Douyin, and other official social media accounts. We will also ask netizens on social media to recommend the school. Another channel is to promote our school in the friend circle community of students and teachers.

Researcher: The seventh question is for private universities, which form of media is most effective in communicating the school's brand?

R11: In recent years, social media has increasingly impacted students. Social media also has significant advantages in brand communication. However, there are multiple channels for candidates to search for information. There are also traditional media that continue to play a role. For example, the admissions magazines that candidates read.

Researcher: Eighth question: What specific strategies and approaches has your school taken to branding? Why?

R11: Our school's strategy in branding is mainly to use professional resources to build a brand image. Brand building can be achieved by making an excellent teaching staff because the core guarantee of teaching quality lies in the quality of teachers. At the same time, increasing the promotion of outstanding students and setting up role models can enhance the school's attractiveness. In addition, strengthening the campus environment and dormitory conditions can improve the recognition of students. Strengthening the in-depth cooperation between schools and enterprises can improve the quality of employment because the ultimate goal of young people studying is to find a satisfactory job. All these efforts can enhance the impact of

the brand.

Researcher: The ninth question is, what social media does your school use?

R11: The leading social media currently used in our school include Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin.

From what I understand, these media are the most used apps by students. Because these platforms are free and open, they are interactive. Students can ask questions or write comments at any time. Also, these platforms are stable and easy to operate for these students.

Researcher: The tenth question was how often the school updates its social media accounts. For example, how often does the school post new content on the official WeChat account?

What content is usually posted on these social media accounts?

R11: Our school social media accounts are updated irregularly when there is news. We usually post essential information about the country and the field of higher education, primary school events, typical stories of outstanding teachers and students, news reports about the school in the media, hot news in society, and students' thoughts.

Researcher: That 's all. Thanks a lot for your time .

Appendix 6: A Student Interview Script (Student No.6)

Researcher: Please answer the following questions, interviewer and school's information will not appear anywhere, and the data is for my research only. There are six questions in total for the interview. The first question is, what are the main reasons why you chose to enrol in this private university?

S6: A private university means a broader range of choices and suits my learning style better.

Researcher: By broader choice, do you mean in terms of majors?

S6: Yes, I think the majors in our school are more in line with my interests. The major I'm studying now is Web and New Media, which many other schools do not offer, but I'm interested in the new media and web development aspect, so I'll choose this major.

Researcher: With the same admission score, what factors will you base your final decision on when there are two or more private universities to choose from?

S6: I would look at the overall strength of the school and its location. I was more attracted to the city of Wuhan. Because my relatives at home also had the experience of going to school in Wuhan and the idea of coming to a university in a foreign province, I might have thought at the time that it would be good for my independence and growth. I also learned online that our school's employment rate is high. In addition, the school's history is also significant. I knew from the internet that our school was one of the first private universities in China. Over so many years of development also has intense precipitation.

Researcher: In addition to these reasons mentioned above, what other factors influenced you to apply for this school then.

S6: I remember seeing some reports about graduate school on our school's official WeChat public number at that time, that is, I thought that our school's rate of graduate school was quite good, and many seniors and sisters had realised their aspirations, which was a kind of motivation for me at that time as well.

Researcher: My second question is, what ways and channels have you used when searching for information about private universities?

S6: I mainly learned some information on the school's official website, WeChat, and Weibo public number, which is more valuable and official. For example, the information about employment rate and geographic location will have a corresponding brief when searching the webpage. Regarding school accommodation and student life, I mainly learned about them through short videos made by students or teachers on Douyin. I also called the school's admissions office to ask some questions, but I was too embarrassed to ask too many questions, so I mainly searched for information online.

Researcher: My third question is, what social media did you follow when applying to a private university?

S6: I mainly followed our school's official Weibo and WeChat at that time. By following the WeChat public number of the private university I was interested in, I got to know the list of students who took the exams and the names of the schools they were admitted to in that class. I found out that many students were admitted to prestigious schools at home and abroad, which added to my confidence and goodwill toward that university.

Researcher: My fourth question was to ask the students what they found on social media platforms for

information about choosing a school.

S6: I mainly find out some information on the school's official website and WeChat, which I find more valuable and authoritative. For example, information on employment rates and geographic location will be introduced when searching on the webpage. The two aspects of school accommodation and student life mainly learned about them through the short videos made by students or teachers on Douyin.

Researcher: My fifth question is, how useful do social media accounts disseminate information in making your school choice? 0-10, please rate. 0 is no role; 6 and above 6 plays more than half of the role; 10 is the most significant, and the information on social media ultimately determines the decision to choose a school.

S6: I rate this as a 6. The six comes mainly from social media content, especially the students' daily life pushed by Douyin. Since I didn't have the chance to go on a field trip, I had to learn a lot of information from the internet, and many daily details are hard to find on the school's official website. I will refer to some comments and messages on the internet but also keep a rational attitude toward complicated information.

Researcher: What are the main ways to get information about the school for the remaining 4 points?
The four points are mainly from the official website and calling the admissions office for advice.

Researcher: 6th question what do you think should be posted on the social media accounts of the private university you are currently attending that could help with admissions?

S6: The school's official Weibo and WeChat public accounts should continue progressing, while greater attention should be devoted to relatively new social media such as Douyin and B Station. In terms of content, let us add some of the student's daily life, and at the same time, it is easier to bring them closer to the students applying for the exams; there is also the possibility of showing more of the school's research strength, academic achievements, and awards. Lastly, the school's outstanding students and teacher representatives can be publicized more on social media platforms, such as students' awards. Because I once saw some inspiring stories of seniors and sisters on the school's WeChat public account. These are very inspiring to me and will also be very inspiring to everyone else.

Researcher: That 's all. Thanks a lot for your time .