



University Communication in the Digital Era: Students' Perceptions and Evaluations

La comunicación universitaria en la era digital: percepción y valoración del estudiantado

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

Communication at universities takes place in a complex context, with different levels and flows of information, where students are among the main audiences for university reputation. The main objective of this research is to analyze students' perceptions and assessments of the communication established by universities through their digital channels. This study adopts a quantitative descriptive approach, using surveys as a data collection technique. The results of this research show that students perceive direct institutional channels, such as email and the virtual campus, more positively and use them more frequently than the university's social networks. Digital channels contribute to improving communication within the university community and are an effective means of projecting the organization's identity and communicating its initiatives and activities. These platforms promote creative thinking, with aligned content that increases a climate of trust and, consequently, reinforces the university's reputation.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Palabra clave 1
Palabra clave 2
Palabra clave 3
Palabra clave 4
Palabra clave 5.

RESUMEN

La comunicación en la universidad se desarrolla en un contexto complejo, con diferentes niveles y flujos de información, donde los estudiantes se encuentran entre los principales públicos de la reputación universitaria. El objetivo principal de esta investigación es analizar la percepción y valoración que tiene el estudiantado sobre la comunicación establecida por las universidades a través de sus canales digitales. El presente trabajo adopta un enfoque cuantitativo descriptivo, con la encuesta como técnica para la recopilación de datos. Los resultados de esta investigación arrojan que los alumnos perciben de manera más positiva y utilizan con mayor frecuencia los canales institucionales directos, como el correo electrónico y el campus virtual, frente a las redes sociales de la universidad. Los canales digitales contribuyen a la mejora de la comunicación dentro de la comunidad universitaria y suponen un medio eficaz para proyectar la identidad de la organización, así como para comunicar sus iniciativas y actividades. Estas plataformas impulsan el pensamiento creativo, con contenidos alineados que incrementan un clima de confianza y, en consecuencia, refuerzan la reputación universitaria.

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1. Introduction

University communication operates within a complex environment structured across multiple levels and layers of information, in which students, faculty members, alumni, and opinion leaders shape dynamics that generate relevant observables for analysis. Qualitative evaluations make it possible to identify the forms and everyday practices of communication within the university, providing direct and useful information for decision-making processes (León, 2024). The interaction between universities and their publics can be understood as a model of responsible, sustainable, and contextually relevant communication, capable of fostering more positive academic environments and representing one of the principal areas of opportunity for communication directors in higher education institutions. This model provides valuable insights for local, regional, and national development and decision-making, given the central role universities play within society (Hernández, 2022).

Universities could benefit from higher-quality education through the integration of digital platforms into their technological infrastructure. Students enrolled in higher education institutions generally demonstrate a satisfactory level of knowledge regarding the use of digital communication platforms, as they rely on them almost daily for personal communication. Students who become familiar with digital technological tools for communication are likely to continue using them in academic contexts (Petre et al., 2025). Within the educational sphere, universities must develop learning management system platforms incorporating integrated discussion forums and videoconferencing functions in order to make communication processes more effective. Students have identified several shortcomings in these platforms, particularly their limitations as public spaces for fostering optimal communication capable of enhancing face-to-face digital interactions (Pratiwi et al., 2025).

Universities also exert a significant influence on students' perceptions of the institution itself. This influence is mediated by the presence of social responsibility within the institution's philosophical framework, the actions and statements of university authorities, and the messages disseminated through institutional media channels. In the case of certain Mexican universities, students begin their university experience with positive and optimistic perceptions regarding social responsibility; however, these perceptions tend to become less positive and less optimistic as they progress through their academic studies (Bon, 2021). At present, students place greater value on online communication channels. In the Ecuadorian context, students perceive social media and university academic platforms as the most convenient means of receiving timely information, while institutional email and university websites remain the most frequently consulted channels (Segura-Mariño, 2021). Similarly, platforms such as Facebook and tools such as email have become essential communication media within Peruvian universities due to their reach and functionality. An effective communication strategy fosters interaction and dialogue with students and staff, ensuring that stakeholders'

needs and concerns are understood and addressed, particularly during periods of crisis (Absi & Arbaiza, 2023).

Universities increasingly rely on social media both to attract prospective students and to showcase campus life. The world's leading universities tend to highlight the institution's human capital and the personal stories of students and faculty members as a means of engagement on Instagram, while also remaining attentive to the specific values of each institution and the territorial contexts in which they operate (Blanco-Sánchez & Moreno-Albarracín, 2023). Social media communication strategies vary according to institutional profile. On Facebook, the world's top universities make greater use of hashtags and primarily publish content aimed at informing the broader community about institutional matters. On Twitter, however, they additionally seek to inspire, motivate, or encourage online engagement through content related to research and development or issues of social interest. These communication strategies are associated with differing levels of engagement, particularly through the use of hashtags on Facebook and emojis on Twitter in posts generating the highest levels of interaction. Nevertheless, university websites do not necessarily receive greater web traffic as a result of having more followers, publishing more content, or generating higher levels of interaction across social media platforms (Segura-Mariño et al., 2020). Portuguese universities have likewise learned to capitalize on the influence of Facebook and Instagram in order to strengthen their connection with students. At the beginning of the academic year, these institutions tend to share a large volume of posts focused on welcoming new students, often featuring messages from university rectors or governing boards (Almeida & Morais, 2020).

In Spain, all private universities have incorporated Instagram into their communication strategies. Although these institutions do not follow a common criterion or standardized approach in their use of the platform, Instagram serves as a channel through which university-related, cultural, and social information is disseminated. However, these universities place little emphasis on publishing research-related content on this platform (Alcolea et al., 2020). By contrast, on Twitter, universities in the Valencian Community prioritize the promotion of their internationalization policies and highlight communication initiatives related to innovation and knowledge transfer (Carratalá & Menencia, 2019). Spanish universities have identified students and alumni as their principal stakeholder groups on social media, given that their comments may exert a considerable influence on institutional reputation and that understanding these audiences is essential for more effective brand management. Within this context, non-academic content has also acquired increasing relevance in social media communication planning, fostering a dynamic and active online environment that aligns with the expectations of younger audiences (García, 2018). Regarding higher education institutions in Catalonia, a lack of planning and strategic coordination in social media management can be observed, particularly among public universities in comparison with private institutions. These universities do not maintain consistent activity across different social networks, instead concentrating their efforts on one or two social media platforms (Pérez-Bonaventura et al., 2021).

University communication has increasingly shifted toward social media platforms, where universities are able to reach larger student audiences. Spanish private universities intensify their marketing communication strategies to target prospective students through social advertising more actively than public universities, whose level of recognition among individuals interested in higher education is generally higher (Abuín & García, 2022). Nevertheless, in Spain there remains a notable lack of research specifically addressing communication practices within public universities. Greater analytical and critical reflection is required regarding the role of communication within social and power dynamics, focusing not only on technical dimensions but also on social and critical perspectives. It is therefore necessary to open new lines of research on communication within public higher education institutions and to conceptualize it as a process that extends beyond economic imperatives. Such an approach would promote spaces for the collective construction and management of the common good, placing individuals, their problems, emotions, and aspirations at the center of university communication practices (Simancas-González & García-López, 2022).

Institutional websites constitute an effective means of projecting organizational identity, as well as communicating university social responsibility (USR) initiatives and activities. This channel often represents the first point of contact between students and the university, while communication related to USR exerts a positive influence on prospective students, institutional loyalty, and, consequently, the university's reputation (Erazo-Coronado et al., 2020). Digital media also contribute to improving communication within the university community through the creation of interactive websites and blogs that foster creative thinking and provide aligned content capable of strengthening a climate of trust. University communication can be further reinforced through the institution's own media channels. The promotion of traditional media within the university environment contributes to better-informed student communities. Likewise, the consolidation of the university as a cultural reference point, the increased visibility of academic research, and the enhancement of the institution's public image can be achieved through university-owned television and radio outlets (Argudo & Guerrero, 2023).

Among the fundamental elements shaping a university's reputation are the communication carried out by the institution itself regarding its activities, faculty, product quality, institutional identity, national and international prestige, and the cost of its services. The opinions formed about the institution also depend on the surrounding social environment, the advice and experiences shared by alumni or individuals connected to the university, and comments published online by other users regarding the institution (Barquero et al., 2021). The stakeholders involved in university reputation include students, faculty members, institutional leaders, public bodies, and funding organizations. This encompasses former, current, and prospective students and faculty members who either belong to or intend to become part of the institution at some stage. Within this virtuous cycle, universities that attract the highest-performing students tend to achieve better outcomes, attain higher positions in rankings, and secure stronger funding. Consequently, they are able to recruit a larger and more highly

qualified faculty, which, in turn, contributes to attracting students with stronger academic profiles (Younger, 2015).

Based on the studies previously reviewed, the principal objective of this research is to analyze students' perceptions and evaluations of the communication established by universities through their digital channels.

From this general objective, the following specific objectives are derived:

- To analyze which university communication channels (institutional websites, email, social media, virtual campuses, and instant messaging platforms) students consider to be the most effective.
- To identify the attributes students value most in the channels they use most frequently (speed, clarity, proximity, interactivity, and credibility).

In order to examine the relationship between the evaluation of channel attributes and the perceived effectiveness of institutional communication, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1. Students make more frequent use of direct institutional channels, such as email and virtual campuses, than institutional social media platforms when seeking urgent or administrative information from the university.
- H2. Students prefer institutional social media platforms over other university communication channels to obtain information about news, cultural activities, events, and aspects related to university life.
- H3. Students place greater value on the speed and accessibility of social media platforms, although they perceive them as less reliable than institutional email.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive quantitative approach aimed at analysing students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the digital communication channels used by their academic institutions. To collect the data, a structured survey using Likert-type scales was designed and administered during the first semester of the 2025–2026 academic year in order to assess how students perceived the effectiveness of digital channels. This scale made it possible to quantify students' perceptions of different attributes associated with the digital communication channels used by their educational institutions.

According to the latest available data from the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (2025), the total number of students enrolled in official undergraduate and master's degree programmes at Spanish universities during the 2023/2024 academic year was 1,667,779. The sample size was estimated assuming a 95% confidence level and a 6% margin of error, under the assumption of maximum population variability ($p = q = 0.5$), resulting in a minimum required sample size of 267 participants. Ultimately, a

sample of 276 undergraduate and master's students from 44 universities and institutions affiliated with Spanish universities (24 public and 20 private) was obtained.

The sample is non-probabilistic and was selected through convenience sampling, as it mainly consisted of students enrolled in degree programmes in which the researchers carry out their teaching activities. This choice is justified on the basis of accessibility and feasibility criteria, as it provides legitimate and direct access to the participants. The heterogeneity of the sample helps ensure that the results reflect a broader perspective on students' perceptions of the effectiveness of university digital communication channels. Students from different institutions were included to minimise the risk of the data being biased by the specific communication practices of a single university or higher education institution.

In designing the questionnaire, similar studies were taken into consideration (Casidy & Wymer, 2018; Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Segura-Mariño et al., 2021). The survey was created using a Google Forms questionnaire.

The study is structured around six main dimensions, each assessed through specific survey items:

- Message clarity and quality. Evaluation of the clarity, comprehensibility, and structure of the messages communicated.
- Frequency and timeliness. Measurement of whether information is delivered at the appropriate time and with the appropriate frequency, thereby avoiding information overload or delays.
- Accessibility and usability. Evaluation of the ease of access to information and the intuitiveness of the channels.
- Interactivity. Measurement of the degree of interaction with the channels, including the possibility of making enquiries and receiving responses.
- Trust and credibility. Evaluation of the perceived reliability of the different institutional communication channels.
- Channel preference. Measurement of students' preferred channels according to the type of information provided (urgent, administrative, cultural, etc.).

3. Results

This section presents the results obtained in relation to the research objectives established for the study. The findings are presented according to the dimensions defined in the methodology.

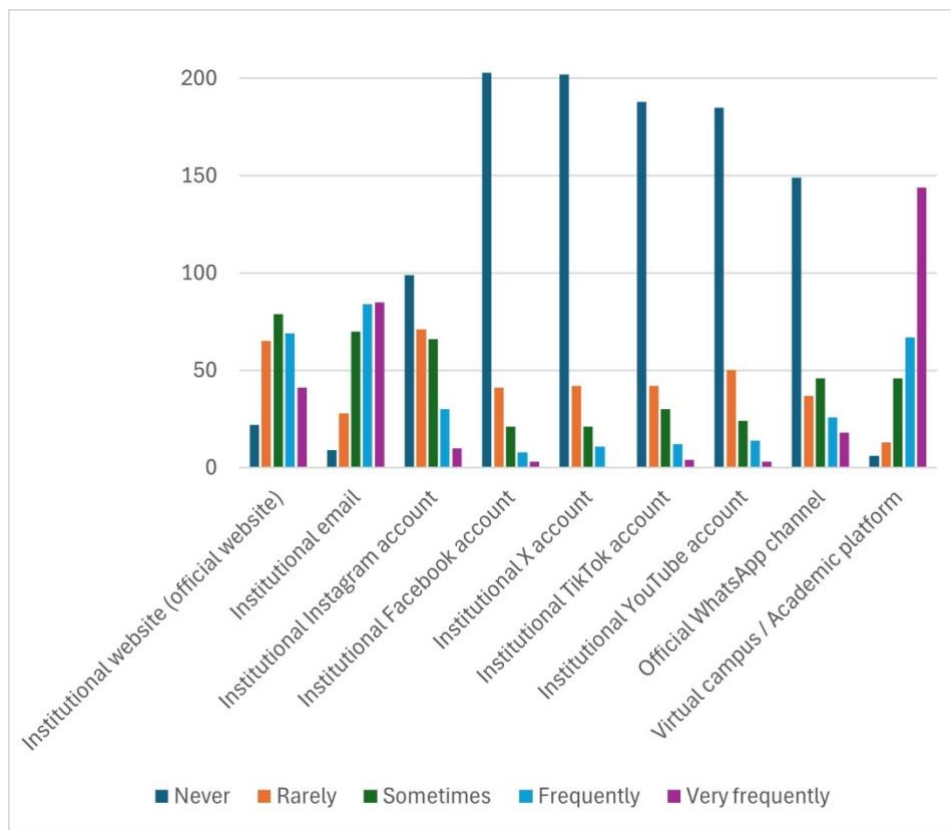
Among the students surveyed, 53.1% (146) are currently enrolled in undergraduate degree programmes, while 46.9% (129) are pursuing master's-level studies. Regarding age distribution, 17% (47) of the participants are between 18 and 20 years old; 33.3% (92) are between 21 and 23 years old; 16.7% (46) are between 24 and 26 years old; 8.3% (23) are between 27 and 30 years old; and 24.6% (68) are over 30 years old. In addition,

53.3% (147) of the respondents combine their studies with employment, while 46.7% (129) are not engaged in any work activity.

3.1. Use and Frequency of University Communication Channels

Figure 1.

Frequency of use of communication channels to obtain university information



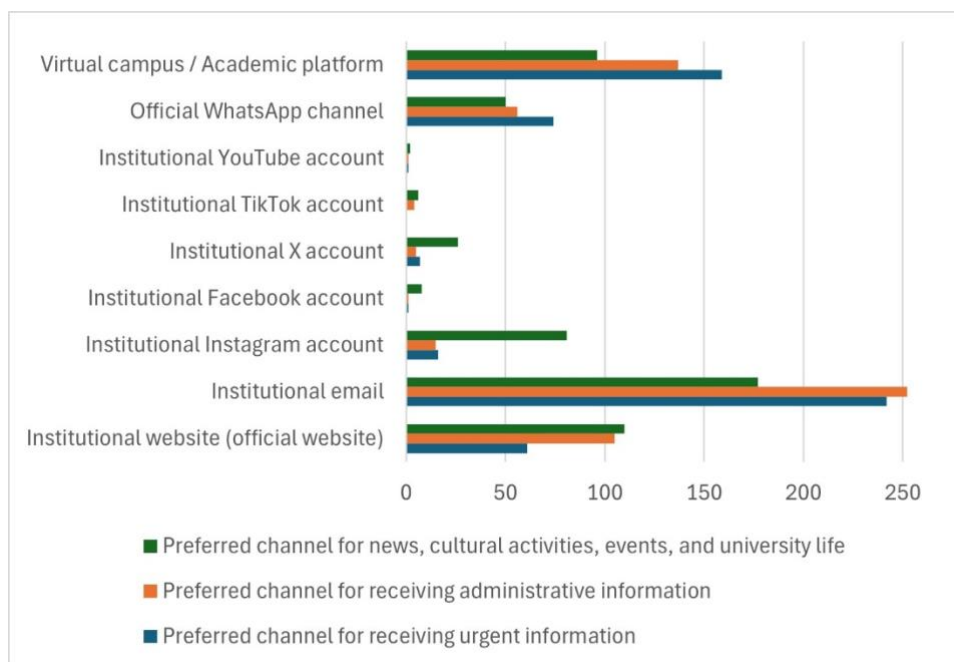
Source: Authors' own elaboration

Among the channels most frequently used by students to obtain information from the university are the virtual campus or academic platform, institutional email, and the university's official website. A total of 76.45% (211) of the students reported using the first of these channels frequently or very frequently; 61.23% (169) reported using the second; and 39.86% (110), the third.

Students devote a significant proportion of their daily time to the use of social media platforms. A total of 17.8% (49) of the participants reported spending more than four hours per day on these platforms; 34.9% (96), between two and four hours; and 34.2% (94), between one and two hours. Only 11.3% (31) spend less than one hour per day on social media, while 1.8% (5) reported not using social media at all. Nevertheless, students make less frequent use of their universities' social media channels as sources of information. A total of 73.55% (203) of the respondents stated that they had never used Facebook for informational purposes; 73.19% (202) had likewise never used X; 68.12% (188), TikTok; and 67.02% (185), YouTube. Instagram and WhatsApp are used more frequently than the aforementioned platforms, although their overall use remains relatively limited. In fact, 35.87% (99) of the students indicated that they had never used

Instagram for this purpose, while in the case of WhatsApp, the percentage of respondents who had never used it rises to 53.99% (149).

Figure 2.
Channel Preferences According to the Nature of Information Received



Source: Authors' own elaboration

The virtual campus or academic platform, institutional email, and the university's official website are the channels preferred by students for receiving urgent, administrative, and cultural information, followed by the institution's official WhatsApp channel. However, Instagram and TikTok show a certain degree of preference among students for obtaining information related to news, cultural activities, events, and aspects of university life.

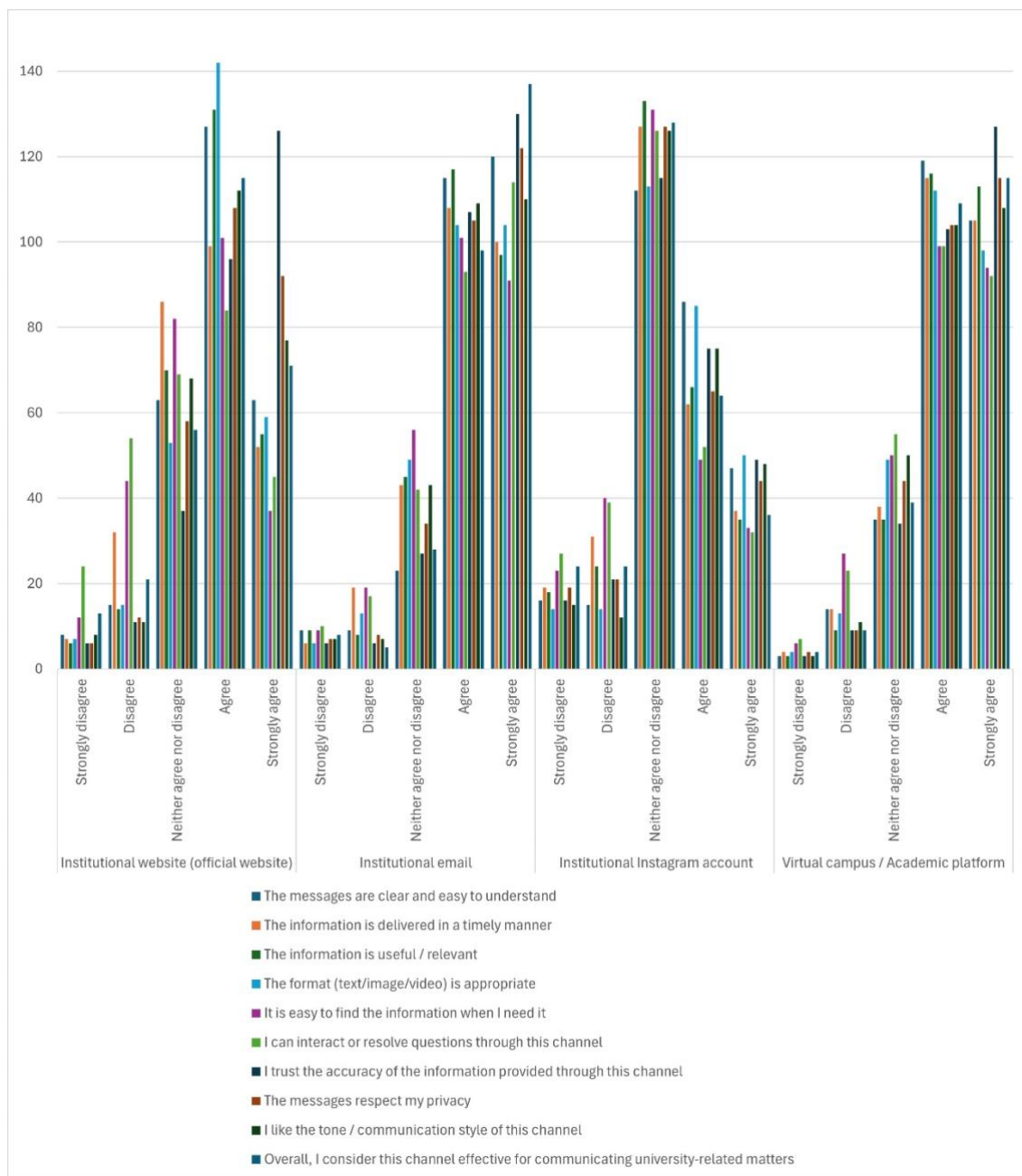
A total of 87.7% (242) of the respondents prefer institutional email for receiving urgent information, such as schedule changes or security alerts. Likewise, 91.3% (252) of the participants identified this same channel as their preferred source for administrative information, such as scholarships, enrolment procedures, or administrative processes, while 64.1% (177) prefer it for obtaining information related to news, cultural activities, events, and university life. In addition, 57.6% (159) of the students expressed a preference for the virtual campus or academic platform for receiving urgent information, 49.6% (137) for obtaining administrative information, and 34.8% (96) for accessing cultural information through this channel. On the other hand, the institutional website is the preferred channel for 22.1% (61) of the respondents for receiving urgent information, for 38% (105) for obtaining administrative information, and for 39.9% (110) for accessing cultural information. Finally, 22.1% (61) of the participants prefer the official WhatsApp channel for receiving urgent information, 20.3% (56) for obtaining administrative information, and 18.1% (50) for accessing cultural content.

Although universities' institutional social media profiles do not rank among students' preferred channels for obtaining information, Instagram and TikTok show a certain

degree of relevance as channels for accessing news, cultural activities, events, and aspects related to university life. A total of 29.3% (81) and 9.4% (26) of the respondents, respectively, indicated a preference for using these channels for this purpose.

3.2. Perception of Channel Attributes

Figure 3.
Perception of the attributes of university communication channels



Most participants perceive these channels positively, particularly institutional email and the virtual campus or academic platform. Regarding institutional email, 85.14% (235) of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the messages received through this medium are clear and easy to understand; 75.36% (208), that the information is delivered in a timely manner; 77.54% (214), that the information is useful or relevant;

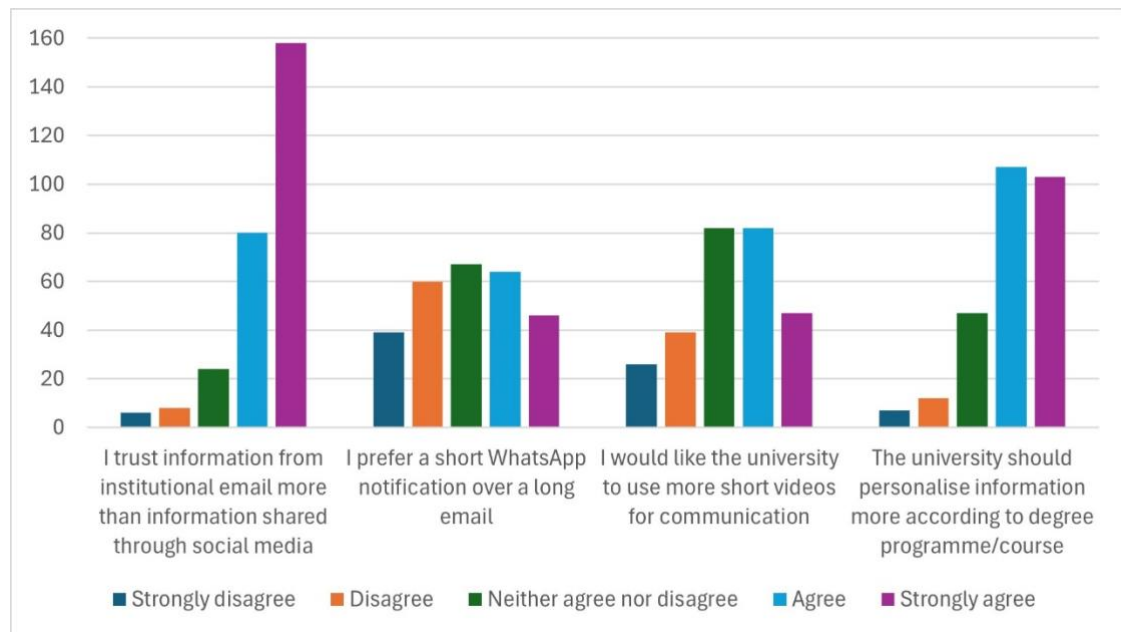
75.36% (208), that the format is appropriate; 69.57% (192), that it is easy to find the information when needed; 75% (207), that they are able to interact or resolve questions through this channel; 85.87% (237), that they trust the accuracy of the information provided through this medium; 82.25% (227), that the messages respect their privacy; 79.35% (219), that they like the tone or communication style of this channel; and 85.14% (235), that, overall, they consider this medium effective for communicating university-related matters.

With regard to the virtual campus or academic platform, 81.16% (224) of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the messages received through this channel are clear and easy to understand; 79.71% (220), that the information is delivered in a timely manner; 82.97% (229), that the information is useful or relevant; 76.07% (210), that the format is appropriate; 69.93% (193), that it is easy to find the information when needed; 69.2% (191), that they are able to interact or resolve questions through this medium; 83.33% (230), that they trust the accuracy of the information provided through this channel; 79.35% (219), that the messages respect their privacy; 76.81% (212), that they like the tone or communication style of this channel; and 81.16% (224), that, overall, they consider this medium effective for communicating university-related matters.

The perception of the university's official website and institutional Instagram account is also generally positive. Nevertheless, both channels present aspects that could be improved, particularly in the case of the social media platform. With regard to the institutional website, 68.84% (190) of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the messages received through this channel are clear and easy to understand; 54.71% (151), that the information is delivered in a timely manner; 67.39% (186), that the information is useful or relevant; 72.83% (201), that the format is appropriate; 50% (138), that it is easy to find the information when needed; 46.74% (129), that they are able to interact or resolve questions through this medium; 80.43% (222), that they trust the accuracy of the information provided through this channel; 72.46% (200), that the messages respect their privacy; 68.48% (189), that they like the tone or communication style of this channel; and 67.39% (186), that, overall, they consider this medium effective for communicating university-related matters. Finally, regarding the institutional Instagram account, 48.18% (133) of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the messages received through this channel are clear and easy to understand; 35.87% (99), that the information is delivered in a timely manner; 36.59% (101), that the information is useful or relevant; 48.91% (135), that the format is appropriate; 29.71% (82), that it is easy to find the information when needed; 30.43% (84), that they are able to interact or resolve questions through this medium; 44.93% (124), that they trust the accuracy of the information provided through this channel; 39.49% (109), that the messages respect their privacy; 44.57% (123), that they like the tone or communication style of this medium; and 36.23% (100), that, overall, they consider this channel effective for communicating university-related matters.

3.3. Overall Evaluation and Preferences

The frequency with which students ignore official university communications, such as not opening institutional emails, is relatively low. Only 4.3% (12) reported ignoring these messages very frequently, while 15.9% (44) indicated doing so frequently. A total of 32.2% (89) stated that they sometimes disregard these communications, whereas 34.8% (96) reported rarely doing so and 12.7% (35) indicated that they never ignore such messages. Nevertheless, 46.7% (129) reported having missed a service or event due to not receiving the information in time, compared to 53.3% (147) who stated that this had never occurred to them.

Figure 4.*Level of agreement with statements related to university communication channels*

Source: Authors' own elaboration

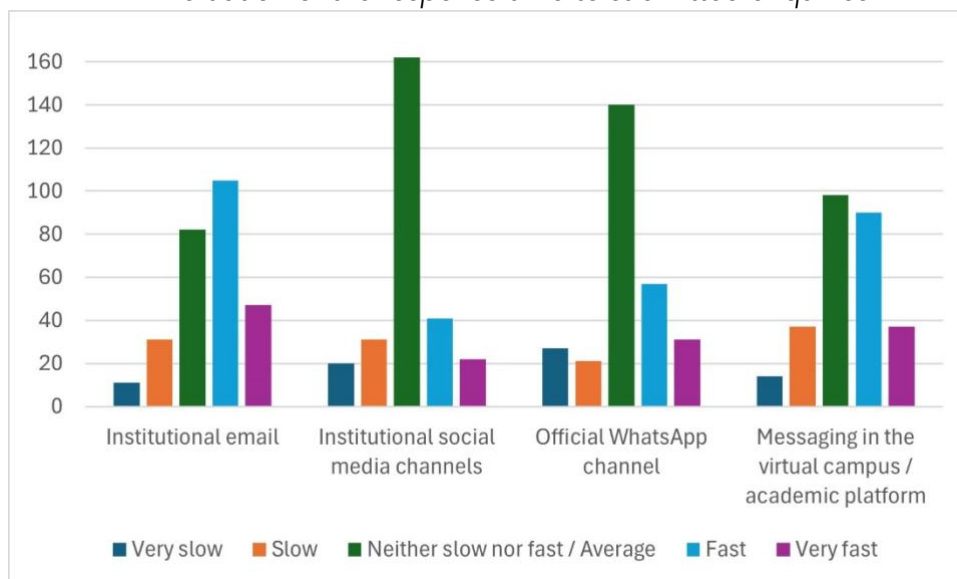
Students place greater trust in information received through institutional email than in information disseminated through universities' social media channels, while also considering that universities should provide more personalised information according to students' degree programmes or courses. A total of 86.23% (238) of the participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I trust information from institutional email more than information shared through social media". Likewise, 76.09% (210) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "The university should personalise information more".

No clear trend was observed regarding the preference for receiving brief notifications via WhatsApp rather than longer emails. Nevertheless, there appears to be a slight preference for universities to make greater use of short videos to communicate their messages.

3.4. Experience with Responses and Student Support

Figure 5.

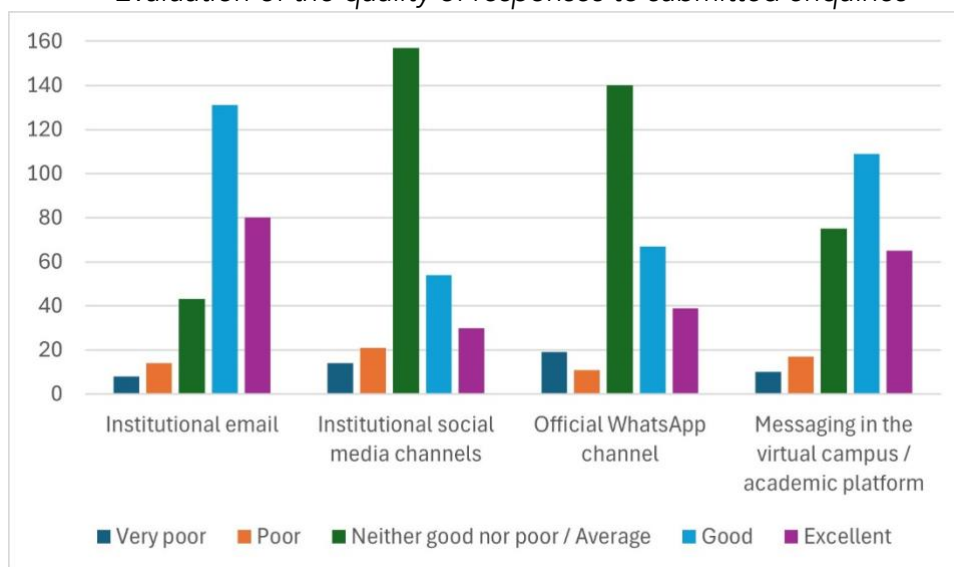
Evaluation of the response time to submitted enquiries



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Students assess the university's response time to enquiries submitted through institutional email and through the messaging functionality of the virtual campus or academic platform relatively positively. A total of 55.07% (152) of the respondents consider that the university responds quickly or very quickly when enquiries are submitted via email, while 46.01% (127) expressed the same opinion when communications are made through messages on the virtual campus or academic platform. However, students perceive the response speed to enquiries submitted through the university's social media channels and official WhatsApp channel as an aspect that could be improved. A total of 58.7% (162) of the respondents indicated that the response speed through the university's social media channels is average, while 50.72% (140) expressed the same opinion regarding the official WhatsApp channel.

Figure 6.

Evaluation of the quality of responses to submitted enquiries

Source: Authors' own elaboration

The quality of the responses perceived by students regarding enquiries related to university services tends to be viewed favourably in the case of institutional email and messaging through the virtual campus or academic platform. A total of 76.45% (211) of the participants rated the quality of the responses received through institutional email communications as good or excellent, while 63.04% (174) of the respondents expressed the same perception in the case of messaging through the virtual campus or academic platform. In contrast, 56.88% (157) of the respondents considered the quality of the responses obtained through the university's social media channels to be average, as did 50.72% (140) in the case of the official WhatsApp channel.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings support Hypothesis 1 (students make more frequent use of direct institutional channels, such as institutional email and the virtual campus, than institutional social media channels for obtaining urgent and administrative university information). The virtual campus or academic platform, institutional email, and the university's official website emerge as the channels most frequently used by students to obtain university-related information. These media are also the preferred channels for receiving urgent, administrative, and cultural information. Students perceive these channels positively, particularly institutional email and the virtual campus or academic platform, highlighting the clarity of the messages; the timeliness, usefulness, relevance, accessibility, and accuracy of the information; the appropriateness of the format; the opportunities for interaction; the tone, style, and privacy of the communications; and their overall communicative effectiveness. The perception of the university's official website is also generally positive. Nevertheless, it presents aspects that could be improved, particularly those related to opportunities for interaction and the ability to resolve questions through this medium. WhatsApp also emerges as a channel used

more frequently than institutional social media platforms, although its level of use remains relatively limited.

Hypothesis 2 (students prefer institutional social media channels over other university media for obtaining information related to news, cultural activities, events, and aspects of university life) is partially confirmed. Institutional social media channels constitute a less frequently used informational medium among students, particularly in the case of Facebook, X, TikTok, and YouTube. However, the use of Instagram is somewhat more frequent compared to these platforms, although its overall use remains moderate. Students show a certain preference for this social network, together with TikTok, for obtaining information related to news, cultural activities, events, and aspects of university life. Even so, perceptions of Instagram are not entirely positive, as more than half of the users do not positively evaluate the quality and clarity of the information published through this medium, the content format and opportunities for interaction, the communication style, privacy, and, overall, its communicative effectiveness.

The results of this study do not allow Hypothesis 3 (students value the speed and accessibility of social media more highly, but consider them a less reliable channel than institutional email) to be validated. Students demonstrate a higher level of trust in information received through institutional email than in information disseminated through the university's social media channels. Likewise, they consider that the institution should strengthen the personalisation of information by adapting it more closely to students' degree programmes or courses. Students assess relatively positively both the speed and the quality of the university's responses to enquiries submitted through institutional email and through the messaging functionality of the virtual campus or academic platform. Nevertheless, they consider that both the response time and the quality of responses to enquiries submitted through the university's social media channels and official WhatsApp channel could be improved. Approximately six out of ten respondents consider the speed and quality of responses received through the university's social media channels to be average, while nearly half of the students express the same perception regarding the official WhatsApp channel.

This study presents certain limitations, given that, although the sample includes students from 44 universities and affiliated institutions, the concentration of responses in certain institutions may reflect a convenience bias derived from the dissemination procedure. Consequently, the results should be interpreted with caution regarding their generalisation to the wider Spanish student population. Despite these limitations, this study provides evidence regarding students' perceptions of digital communication channels, as well as useful insights into their functioning and potential optimisation processes, with the aim of strengthening trust in academic institutions.

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