

AI Search in Higher Education:

*How Prospects
Search in 2025*



OCTOBER 2025



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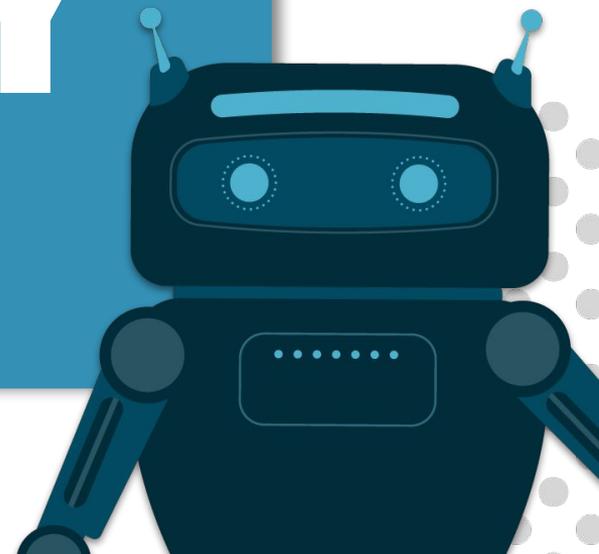


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SUMMARY
and key findings



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UPCEA's study, *AI Search in Higher Education: How Prospects Search in 2025 with Search Influence*, revealed significant insights into how prospective students use various online platforms to research college and universities. It also highlighted emerging trends in AI usage—including how frequently prospects interact with AI chatbots and search engines—and the potential concerns prospects might have using these tools.

Many respondents reported using AI-powered tools on a daily or weekly basis, and some specifically use these

tools to research professional and continuing education programs. While traditional search engines and university or college websites remain the most relied-on sources of information, there is still a market for AI search engines, considering a notable proportion of respondents expressed no concerns about using AI-powered platforms for institutional research.

What You'll Learn

- How prospects use online platforms to research education
- Which AI tools prospects use and how often
- How AI is shaping trust and influence in the enrollment journey



Respondents were least likely to engage with social media as a trusted platform to provide institutional resources, though recommended products or services on social media are likely to increase respondent consideration.

As social media and AI-powered tools continue to evolve and enhance their capabilities, institutions must stay informed about differences in search behavior across platforms so they can optimize their webpages to reach a wider prospective student audience.

Institutions must stay informed about differences in search behavior across platforms so they can optimize their webpages to reach a wider prospective student audience.



KEY FINDINGS

50%

of prospects
use AI tools
at least **weekly**.

82%

of prospects
are more likely to
consider
programs on page
one of search results.

Prospects rely on
search
engines (84%)
and university
websites (63%)
to explore programs.



1 in 3

prospects
trust AI tools
for program
research.

79%

of prospects **read**
Google's AI Overviews .

56%

of prospects are more
likely to **trust brands**
cited by AI .

Search behavior
is becoming
increasingly diversified:

84% use
search engines,
61% YouTube,
50% AI tools.

KEY FINDING #1

Over a quarter (26%) of respondents said they use AI-powered tools to search for information online on a weekly basis, 24% said on a daily basis, and 18% use it a few times a month. 17% said they never use AI-powered tools to search for information online.

50% of prospects use AI tools at least weekly.

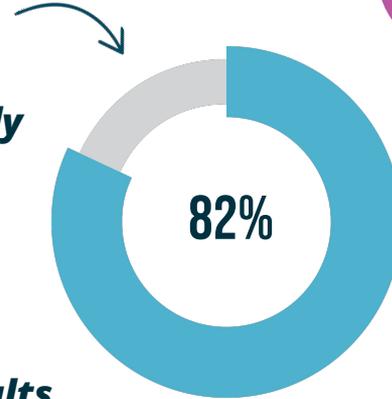


If AI tools can't find you, half your audience won't either.

KEY FINDING #2

Over a third (35%) of respondents said a result on page one would make them much more likely to consider a product or service, 47% said somewhat more likely. Together, 82% of prospects are more likely to consider programs that appear on page one of search results.

82% of prospects are more likely to consider programs on page one of search results.

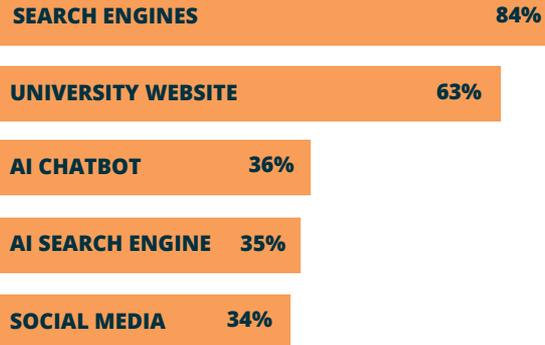


You must be on page one to get into the prospects' consideration set.

KEY FINDING #3

When searching for a professional and continuing education program, respondents are most likely to use traditional search engines (84% extremely or very likely), followed by university or college websites (63% extremely or very likely). Respondents are least likely to use social media platforms (36% not very or not at all likely).

Prospects rely on search engines (84%) and university websites (63%) to explore programs.

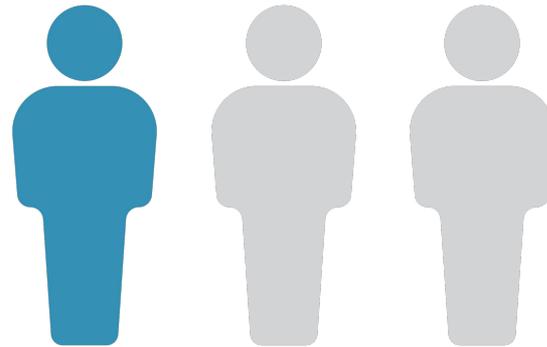


Invest in search and your website to stay competitive in the enrollment journey.

KEY FINDING #4

Nearly a third (32%) of respondents have no concerns about using AI search tools to research professional and continuing education programs, while 28% have concerns around AI's validity/reliability/accuracy, and 7% have privacy/security concerns.

1 in 3 prospects trust AI tools for program research.



You can win over students and AI with credible, optimized content.



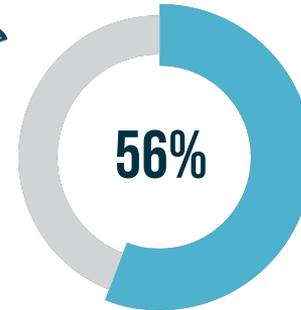
KEY FINDING #5

79% of prospects read Google's AI-generated overviews, and 56% are more likely to trust brands cited within them.

Read Google's AI Overviews.



More likely to trust brands cited by AI.

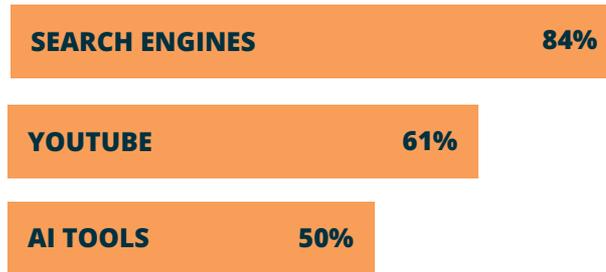


If you're not in the AI Overview, you're not being considered, and you're not getting the application.

KEY FINDING #6

Search behavior is becoming increasingly diversified. 84% use traditional search engines to search for PCE programs, and they also use AI tools (50%) and YouTube (61%) in the same way they do a search engine.

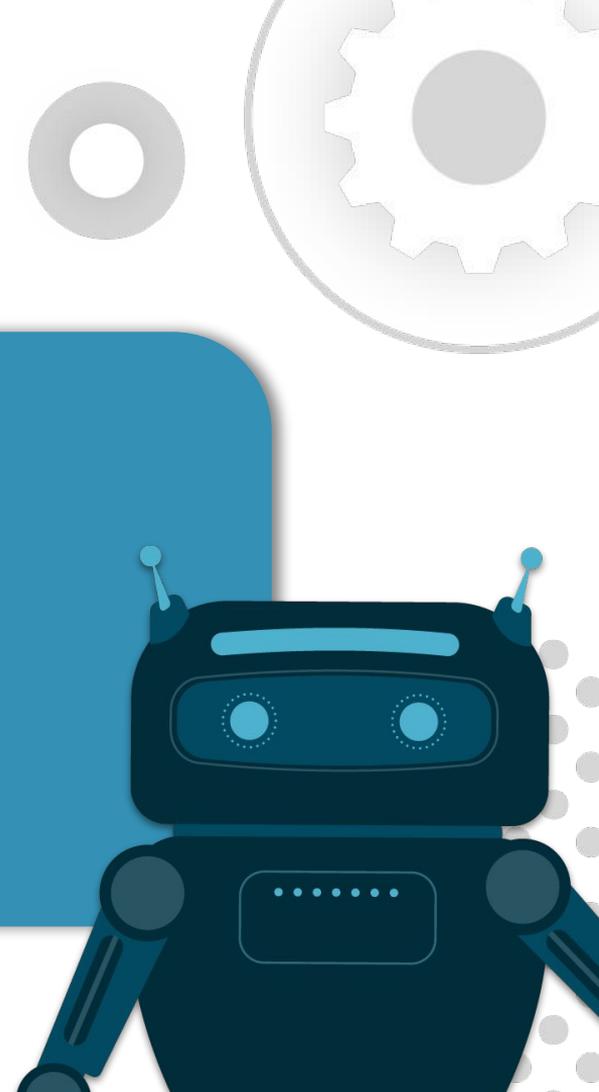
Search behavior is becoming increasingly diversified: 84% use search engines, 61% YouTube, 50% AI tools.



Your content must perform across search, video, and AI.



Search Influence
INSIGHTS



Higher Ed Marketers Must Expand Search Strategy to Include AI Search

1

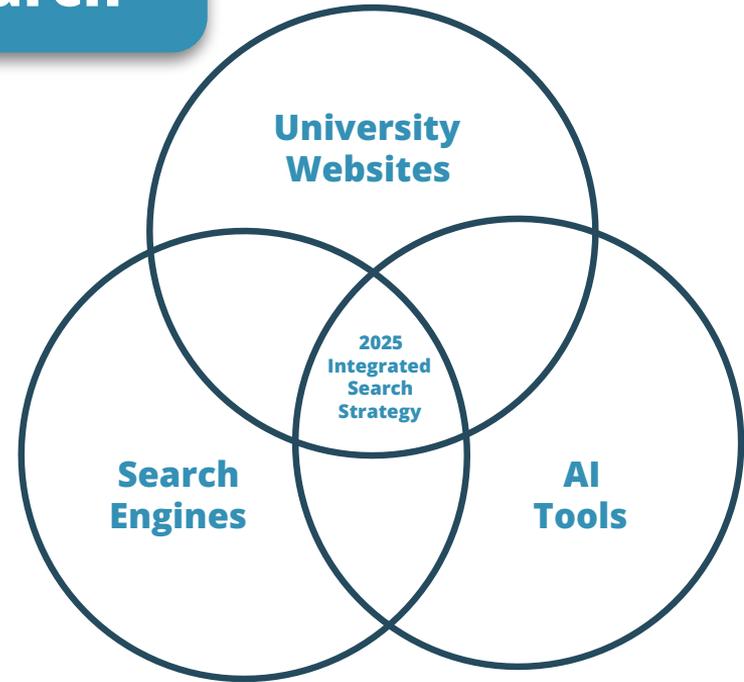
Our data proves prospects use and trust AI tools and still rely on search engines and university websites.

2

Visibility in both AI and search is now the baseline for enrollment.

3

Integrating AI into SEO ensures your programs are discoverable across every major research channel.



Without SEO, You Don't Show Up in AI.

1

AI tools don't invent content.
They surface authoritative content.

2

Weak SEO = AI won't surface your programs.

3

Strong SEO = citations, entities, and structure
that fuel both Google and AI.



Without AI, You Don't Get the Enrollment.

1

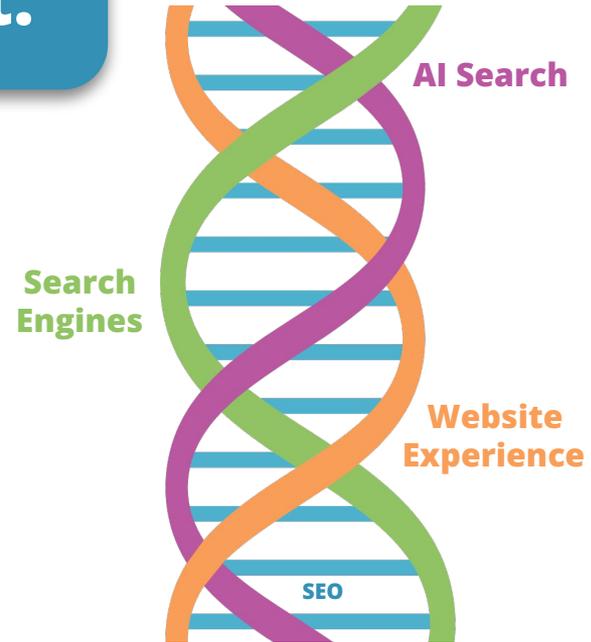
Half of your prospects use AI tools weekly, making it a primary entry point into the enrollment funnel.

2

If you're not visible in AI search, you won't make it into your prospect's consideration set.

3

SEO is the connective tissue: it feeds AI, search, and your website experience.



The Good News: Acting Now Puts You Ahead of Most Institutions.

1

Turn AI into an opportunity, not a threat.

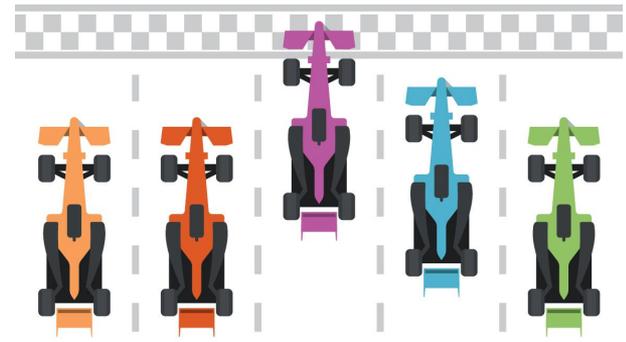
2

Many institutions haven't yet adapted their strategy for AI search.

3

Early movers will win visibility in both AI and Google, ensuring they're found, considered, and chosen.

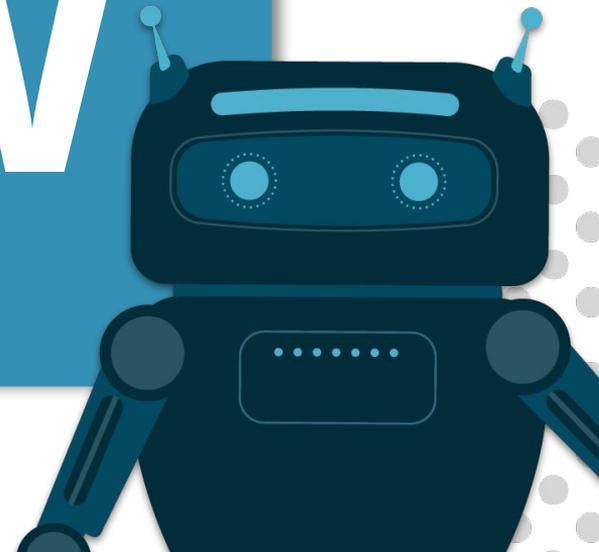
I N S T I T U T I O N S



Be an Early Mover in AI Search

→ **GET GUIDANCE FOR YOUR INSTITUTION**

OVERVIEW



Artificial Intelligence as a Search Engine

Artificial intelligence has revolutionized the way individuals across the globe handle everyday tasks, both personally and professionally. According to a Pew Research Center survey, 27% of Americans interact with AI at least several times a day, while 28% do so at least once a day or several times a week.¹ In professional industries, 78% of survey respondents say their businesses use AI in at least one function, most often in information technology or marketing and sales.²

Collectively, these studies illustrate the fact that AI has cemented itself as a key component of both professional and everyday digital interactions, reshaping the way we search for and process information.

Not only is AI usage becoming more frequent, but the tasks it's trusted to perform are also expanding. In 2024, OpenAI introduced ChatGPT search, a new version of the chatbot designed to function like a typical search engine, much like Google or Yahoo, quickly gathering data from the web, summarizing key findings, and providing links to sources.³ Perplexity is another popular AI search engine that answers users' questions and also offers embedded search features for exploring in-depth

AI-Powered Search Is Here —
Why It's Time to Invest in SEO

→ [**READ MORE**](#)

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2023/02/15/public-awareness-of-artificial-intelligence-in-everyday-activities/>

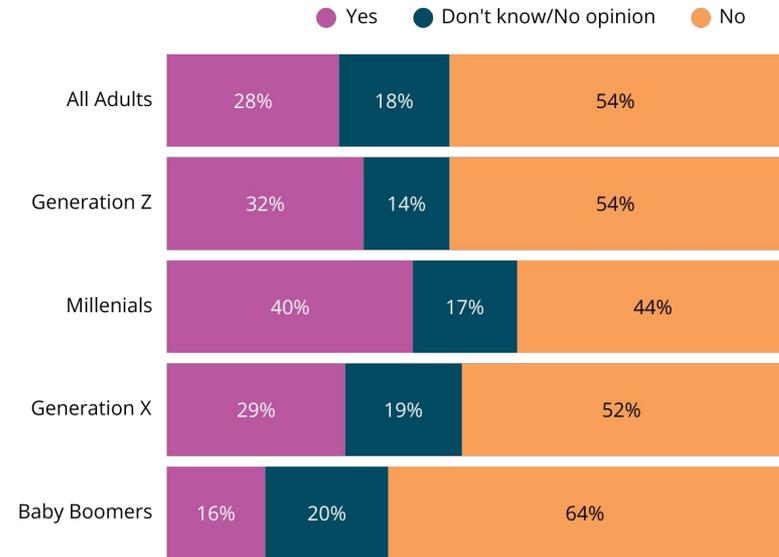
² <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/quantumblack/our-insights/the-state-of-ai>

³ <https://openai.com/index/introducing-chatgpt-search/>

topics, providing users with comprehensive information and data for learning and enrichment.⁴ Potential benefits to using AI search engines such as ChatGPT Search or Perplexity Pro Search over traditional search engines include enhanced understanding; improved efficiency and speed; a personalized user experience; multimodal interactions; and better handling of complex queries.⁵

In a 2023 study, 28% of adults said they would switch to an AI-powered search engine, with Millennials being the most likely (40%), followed by Generation Z (32%) and Generation X (29%).⁶ The survey results are illustrated in Figure 1. As AI becomes more accurate, expansive, and capable, it's reasonable to expect these percentages will rise in 2025.

Figure 1: Share of Adults Who Would Switch to an AI-Powered Search Engine by Generation
(Source: Statista)



⁴ <https://www.perplexity.ai/hub/getting-started>

⁵ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/navigating-ai-revolution-2024-what-means-search-engines-binmile-v1hic/>

⁶ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1377993/us-adults-ai-powered-search-engines-usage-choice/>

Framing Search Queries for Institutional Visibility

→ [READ MORE](#)

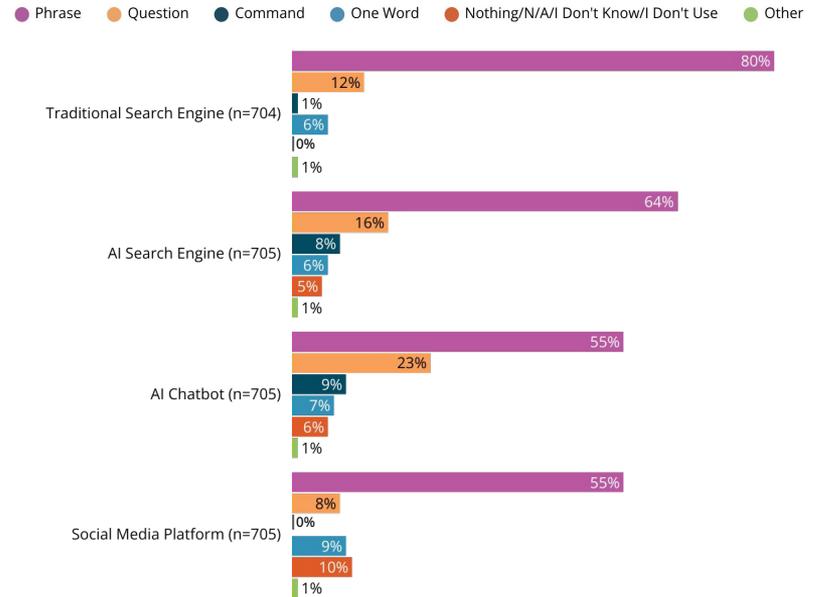
While it's clear that AI-powered chatbots and their associated search engines are becoming increasingly popular among everyday users and professionals, it raises the questions of whether and how AI is impacting student searches for professional and continuing education programs. Historically, students have found the right program and institution through web searches (54%), followed by specific college websites (34%), social media (23%), an email from a school (20%), or friends and classmates (20%). Given that web searches are the

primary method of exploring potential programs, the arrival of high-functioning AI-powered search engines may prompt students to use these platforms over traditional search engines.⁷ Though traditional search engines and university websites remain trusted resources for institutional research, it's clear that new avenues are emerging for prospects. It's crucial for institutions to stay informed about how these newer platforms differ in both the information they collect and the types of queries users submit.

⁷ <https://eab.com/resources/blog/adult-education-blog/the-top-5-ways-prospective-graduate-and-adult-learners-are-finding-your-programs/>

In this study, respondents were asked to submit the exact phrase or question they would type into four types of platforms—traditional search engine, AI search engine, AI chatbot, or social media platform—if they were interested in pursuing a Master of Business Administration (MBA). A phrase is defined as a short search statement containing multiple words (e.g., “Best MBA near me”). A question is phrased as an inquiry (e.g., “What is the best MBA program near me?”), and a command instructs the platform (e.g., “Find the best MBA program near me”). A one-word search involves using just a single term (e.g., “MBA”).

Figure 2: Search Phrase Type by Platform



Optimizing Institutional Webpages and Resources

While the content of these searches was relatively similar across platforms, the style of query showed more variation. Across all search engine platforms, a phrase was the most common query type. However, respondents were more likely to type a question or command into an AI search engine or chatbot than into a traditional search engine or social media platform. They were most likely to use a one-word search on a social media platform, yet also the most likely to say they wouldn't use social media to research a potential MBA program.

Given that prospects use different search engine platforms in varying ways to explore professional and continuing education, institutions should optimize their webpages to attract each unique adult learner. One effective approach is to integrate AI chatbots programmed to understand user needs, offer user-friendly interfaces, personalize responses, and provide human support as needed.⁸ Notably, prospects are more likely to type a question into an AI chatbot than any other search platform, indicating that institutions should program chatbots to answer common questions associated with each respective program. Additionally, chatbots can store inquiry data for

⁸ <https://www.educationdynamics.com/chatbots-in-higher-ed/>

future use, further personalizing the student experience and serving as an ongoing resource. They can also assist with academic advising, onboarding, course recommendations, and everyday support,⁹ ultimately expediting the inquiry process and ensuring a smooth transition to higher education.

Overall, these findings underscore the shifting landscape of prospective student search behavior. Traditional search engines may still be the prevailing method of choice, but the growing popularity of AI-powered platforms, and the inclusion of AI Overviews in traditional search engines, show new opportunities for institutions to engage a broader audience.

By embracing strategies like chatbot integration and targeted SEO, colleges and universities can keep pace with evolving user preferences and remain competitive in an increasingly digital world.

***These findings underscore
the shifting landscape
of prospective student
search behavior.***

⁹ <https://element451.com/blog/chatbots-in-higher-ed-what-you-should-know>

The background features a white space with various grey icons: circuit lines with nodes in the top left, a gear and a ring in the top right, and a dark blue robot with light blue accents in the bottom right. A blue banner with rounded corners spans the middle of the image.

SURVEY

results

A horizontal row of ten grey squares is located at the bottom left of the image.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVE

UPCEA and Search Influence developed an in-depth survey to explore how AI impacts the search behavior of professional and continuing education students, from the platforms they rely on to the ways and frequency they use AI, as well as any concerns they have about its role in their decision-making.

The survey took place from March 11th to March 13th, 2025. In total, 1,061 individuals participated in the study, of which 760 met all qualifications, and 705 completed the entire survey. An internet panel was used to distribute the survey.





QUALIFYING

questions



QUALIFYING QUESTIONS

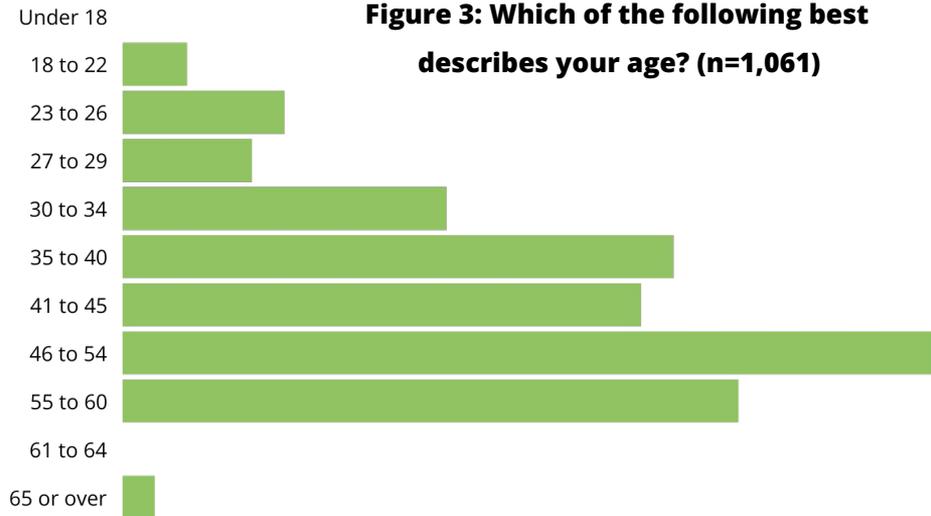
AGE OF RESPONDENTS

14%

Respondents
Ages 27-34

A quarter (25%) of respondents are 46 to 54, 19% are 55 to 60, and 17% are 35 to 40.

Respondents under 18 or 61 and over were terminated from the survey.



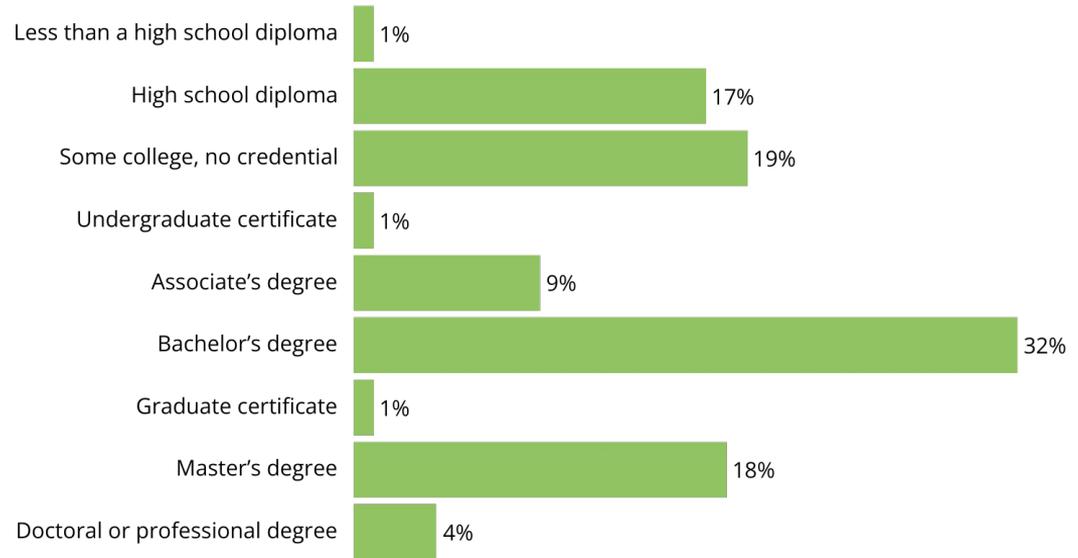
QUALIFYING QUESTIONS

EDUCATION LEVEL

Nearly a third (32%) of respondents have a bachelor's degree as their highest level of education, 19% have some college but no credential, and 18% have a master's degree.

The 1% of respondents who have less than a high school diploma were terminated from the survey after the next survey question.

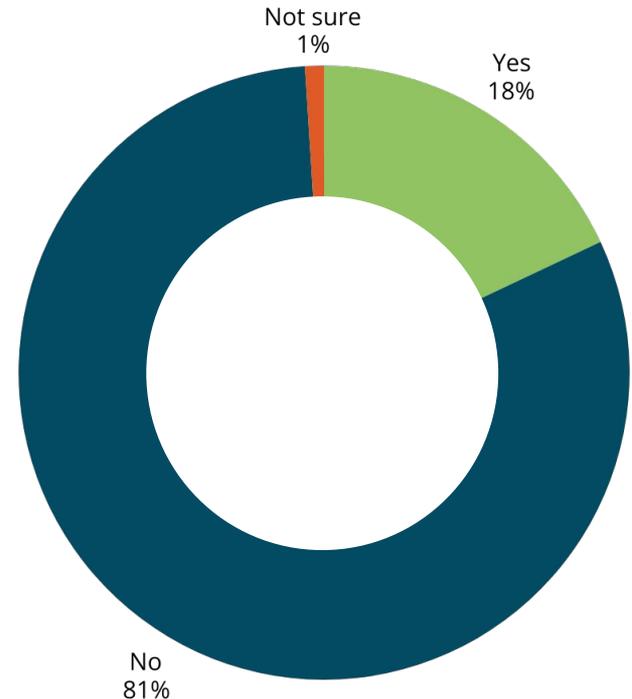
Figure 4: What is the highest level of education you've completed to date? (n=1,048)



PCE ENROLLMENT

Figure 5: Are you currently enrolled in a professional and continuing education (PCE) program? (n=1,048)

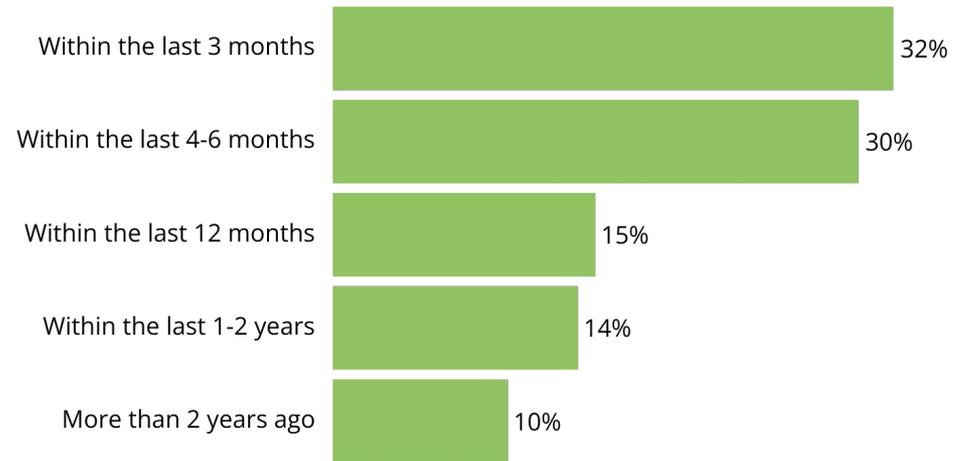
Eighteen percent are currently enrolled in a professional and continuing education (PCE) program. The 81% who were not and the 1% who were not sure were directed to skip the following two survey questions.



PCE ENROLLMENT REGENCY

Nearly a third (32%) of respondents enrolled in a PCE program within the last 3 months, 30% within the last 4 to 6 months, and 15% within the last 12 months. Respondents who have enrolled within the last 1 to 2 years or more than 2 years ago were terminated from the survey after answering the next survey question.

Figure 6: How recently did you enroll in a professional and continuing education program? (n=185)



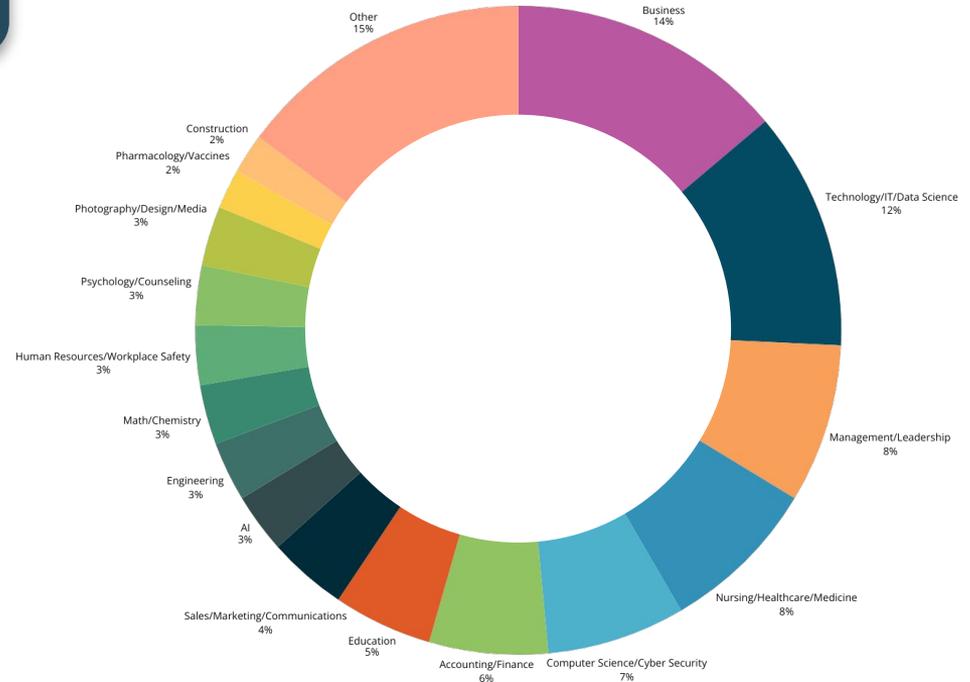
QUALIFYING QUESTIONS

PCE SUBJECT AREA

Among respondents who are currently enrolled in a PCE program, 14% are enrolled in a business program, 12% in a technology/IT/data science program, 8% in management/leadership, and 8% in a nursing/healthcare/medicine program. Responses mentioned fewer than three times were placed in the “Other” category, which included programs in law, history, and language, among others.

Nearly half of respondents (49%) are extremely (24%) or very interested (25%) in advancing their skills or knowledge through professional and continuing education, and 29% are somewhat interested. The 22% not very or not at all interested were terminated from the survey.

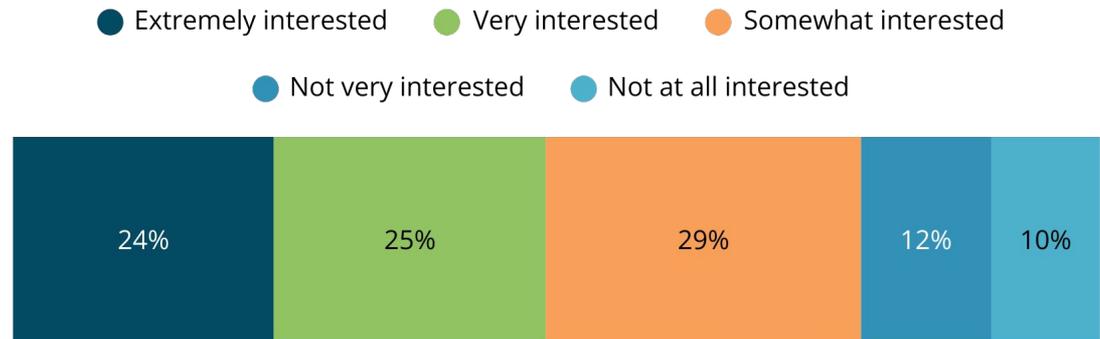
Figure 7: What is the subject area of the professional and continuing education program you're currently enrolled in? (n=185)



PCE INTEREST

Younger respondents expressed significantly more interest in advancing their skills or knowledge through professional and continuing education than older respondents.

Figure 8: How interested are you in advancing your skills or knowledge through professional and continuing education? (n=992)

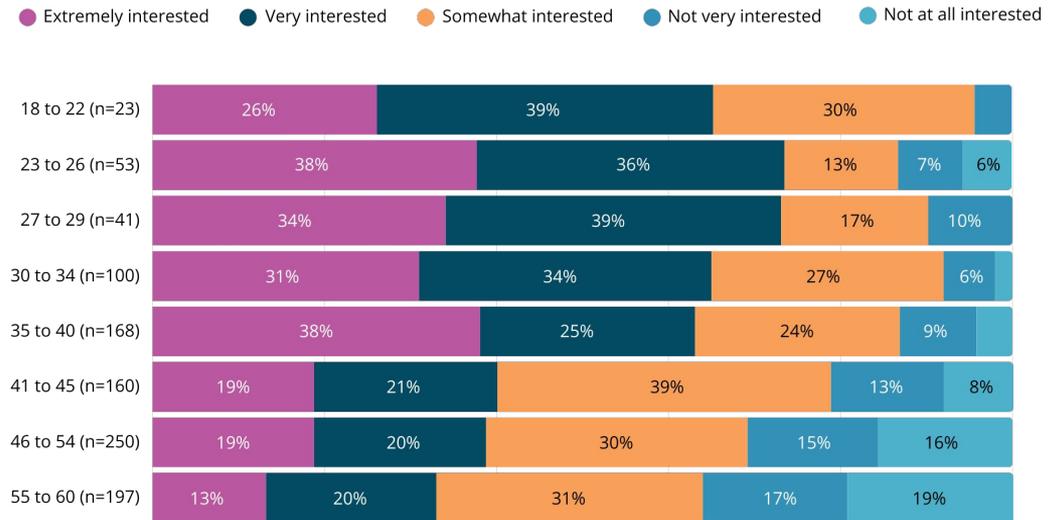


PCE INTEREST BY AGE

Prospects under 35 are nearly twice as interested in professional and continuing education than older adults (41+).



Figure 9: How interested are you in advancing your skills or knowledge through professional and continuing education? By Age





QUESTIONS *for*
QUALIFIED
RESPONDENTS

QUALIFIED RESPONDENTS

THE DATA IN THIS STUDY IS BASED ON 760 SURVEY ANSWERS FROM:

1

Adults aged 18-60

2

Interested in advancing their skills or knowledge through professional and continuing education

3

Not currently enrolled in a professional and continuing education program

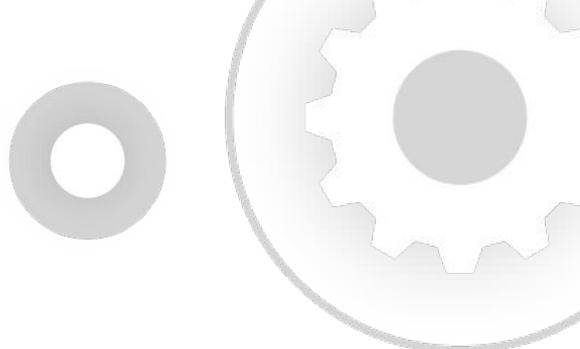
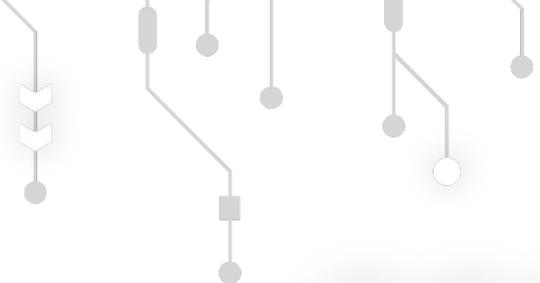
4

At a minimum, high school graduates
18% have a master's degree; 32% bachelor's degree; 19% some college but no credential

5

68% are employed full time

Responses are from adults interested in professional and continuing education.

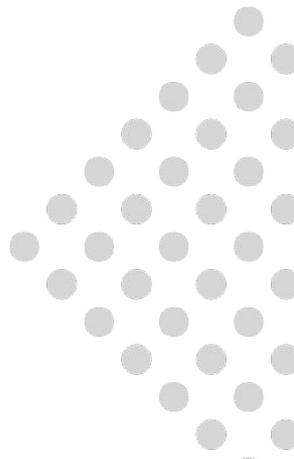


SURVEY RESULTS

GENERAL SEARCH BEHAVIOR

This 13-question section explores search habits of qualified respondents on AI tools and AI search, traditional search engines, and social media. The data is about their search habits in general.

Visit the next section to learn about prospect behavior when searching for professional and continuing education programs.



HOW OFTEN DO THEY USE AI SEARCH?

Over a quarter (26%) of respondents said they use AI-powered tools to search for information online on a weekly basis, 24% said on a daily basis, and 18% use it a few times a month. Seventeen percent said they never use AI-powered tools to search for information online.

Figure 10: How frequently do you use AI-powered tools (such as ChatGPT, Perplexity, or Gemini) to search for information online? (n=760)



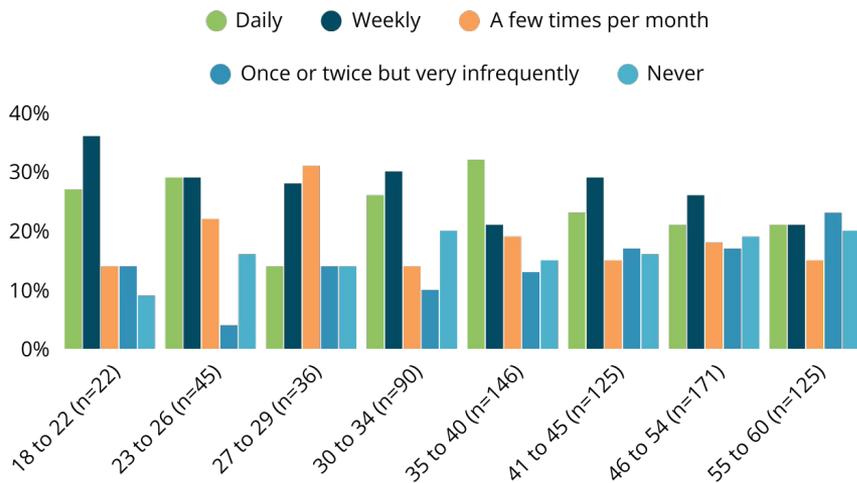
What Matters Now in Search Visibility

→ [READ THE LATEST](#)
[ON AI SEARCH AND SEO](#)

HOW OFTEN DO THEY USE AI SEARCH? BY AGE

Younger age groups are slightly more likely to use AI-powered tools on a daily or weekly basis, while older age groups are more likely to use them infrequently or never.

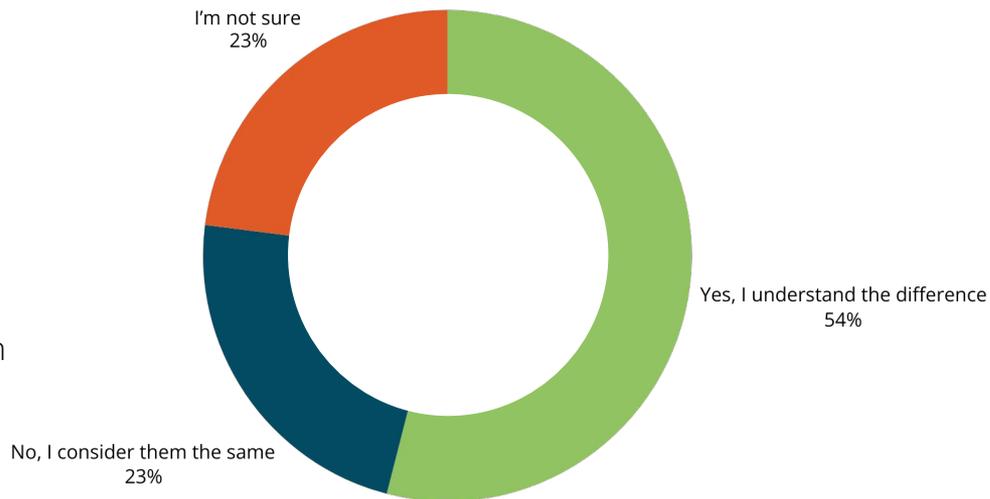
Figure 11: How frequently do you use AI-powered tools (such as ChatGPT, Perplexity, or Gemini) to search for information online? By Age



AI TOOL DIFFERENTIATION

Figure 12: Are you able to differentiate between an AI search engine (such as Perplexity or SearchGPT) and an AI chatbot (such as ChatGPT or Gemini)? (n=760)

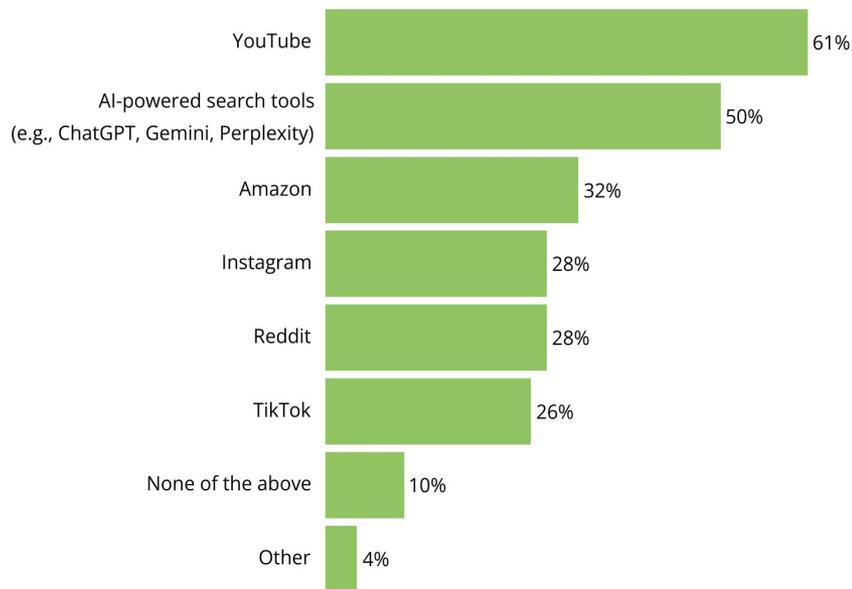
Over half (54%) of respondents said they understand the difference between an AI search engine and an AI chatbot, while 23% consider them the same, and 23% were not sure.



WHERE DO THEY SEARCH SIMILARLY TO GOOGLE?

Figure 13: Which of the following platforms do you use to search for information in a way similar to how you would use a traditional search engine (such as Google, Bing, etc.)? Select all that apply. (n=760)

Sixty-one percent of respondents use YouTube to search for information in a similar way that they would use a traditional search engine, 50% use AI-powered search tools, 32% use Amazon, 28% use Instagram, and 28% use Reddit.



DATA THAT DEMANDS ATTENTION

The majority of
**prospects use YouTube (61%)
and AI search (50%)**

just like they would a traditional search engine.

YOUTUBE

61%

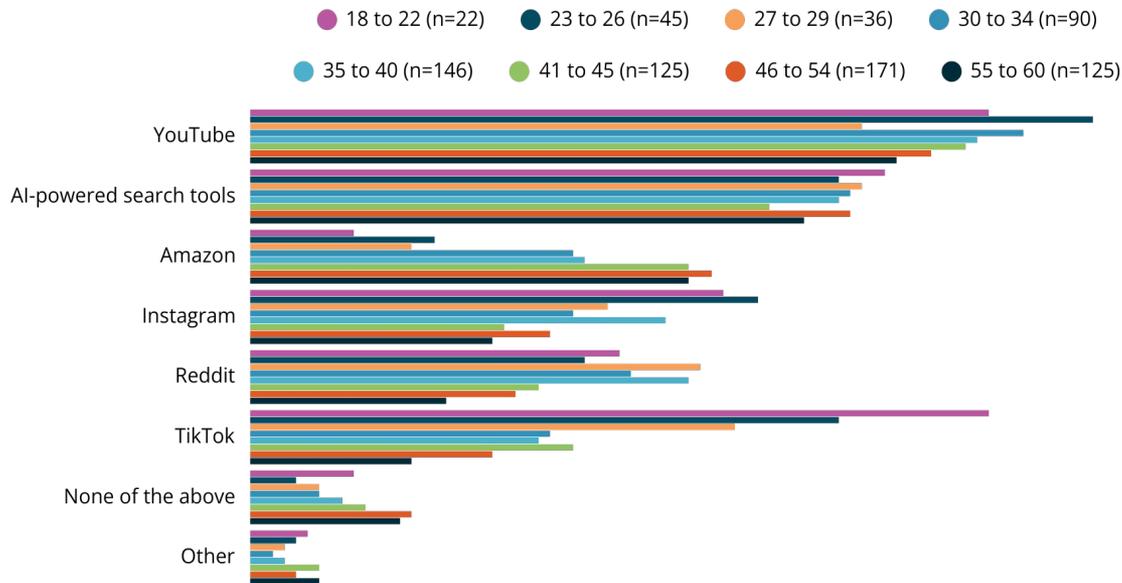
AI TOOLS

50%

WHERE DO THEY SEARCH SIMILARLY TO GOOGLE? BY AGE

Figure 14: Which of the following platforms do you use to search for information in a way similar to how you would use a traditional search engine (such as Google, Bing, etc.)? Select all that apply. By Age

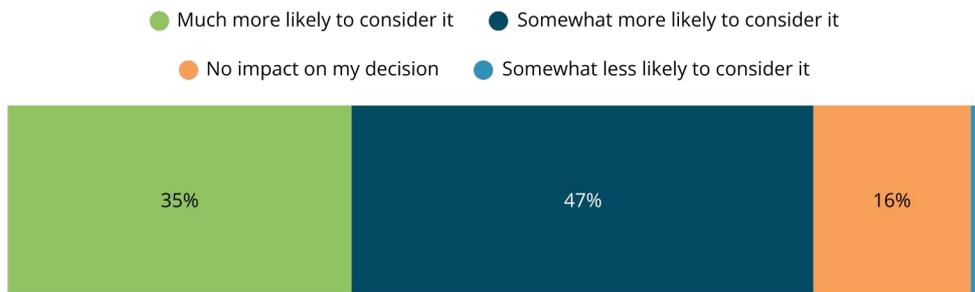
While all age groups are most likely to use YouTube as a platform to search for information, younger age groups are significantly more likely to use social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, while older age groups are more likely to use Amazon.



DO PAGE 1 RANKINGS INFLUENCE CONSIDERATION?

Over a third (35%) of respondents said that when searching for a product or service, if a relevant result appears on the first page of search engine results, this would make them much more likely to consider it, while 47% said it would make them somewhat more likely to consider it, and 16% said it would have no impact on their consideration.

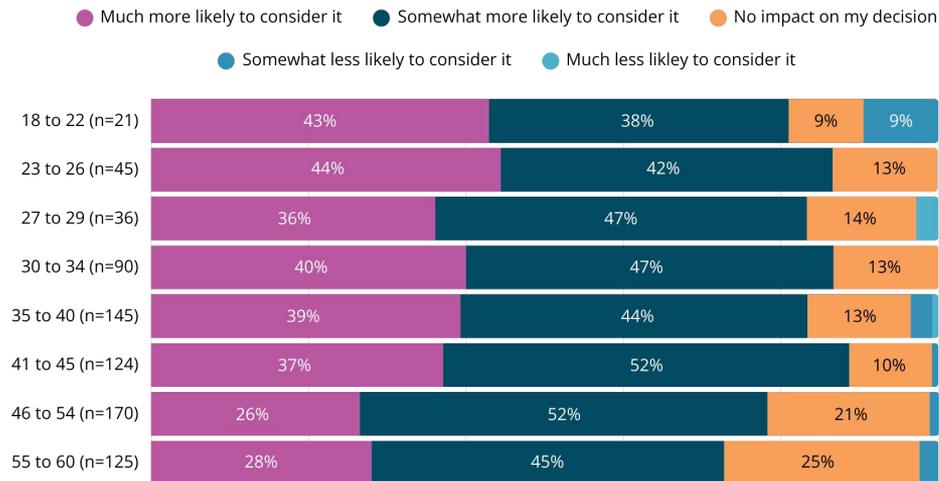
Figure 15: If searching for a product or service, and a relevant result appears on the first page of search engine results, how would that affect your likelihood of considering it? (n=756)



DO PAGE 1 RANKINGS INFLUENCE CONSIDERATION? BY AGE

Figure 16: If searching for a product or service, and a relevant result appears on the first page of search engine results, how would that affect your likelihood of considering it? By Age

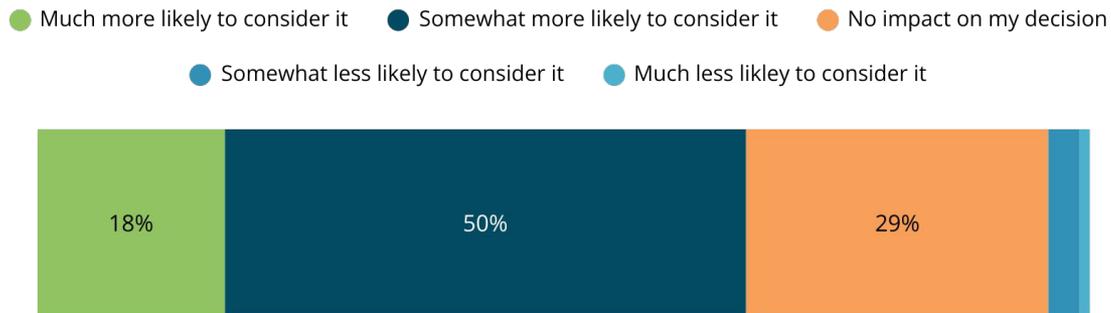
When searching for a product or service, all age groups were likely to say that if a relevant result appears on the first page of search engine results, this will make them much more likely or somewhat more likely to consider it.



DOES SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE CONSIDERATION?

Eighteen percent of respondents said that if a product or service were frequently mentioned or recommended on social media, this would make them much more likely to consider it, while 50% said it would make them somewhat more likely, and 29% said it would have no impact on their consideration.

Figure 17: If a product or service were frequently mentioned or recommended on social media, how would that affect your likelihood of considering it? (n=756)



DATA THAT DEMANDS ATTENTION

Nearly 7 in 10 prospects say frequent

social media recommendations

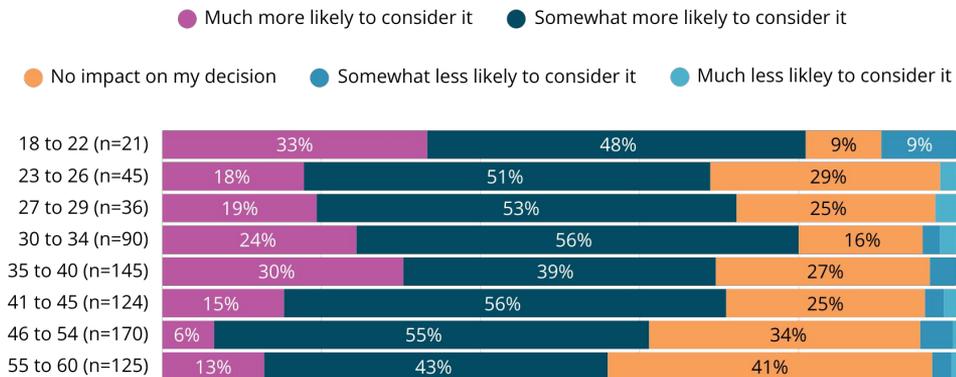
make them **more likely to consider** a product.



DOES SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE CONSIDERATION? BY AGE

For the youngest age group (18 to 22), if a product or service were frequently mentioned on social media, this would make them much more likely or somewhat more likely to consider it (81%), while the oldest age group was the least likely to say that (56%).

Figure 18: If a product or service were frequently mentioned or recommended on social media, how would that affect your likelihood of considering it? By Age



DO THEY READ AI OVERVIEWS?

Seventy-nine percent read the AI-generated overviews provided when using traditional search engines. The 14% who do not and the 7% who were not sure were directed to the “PCE Program Search Questions” section of the survey.

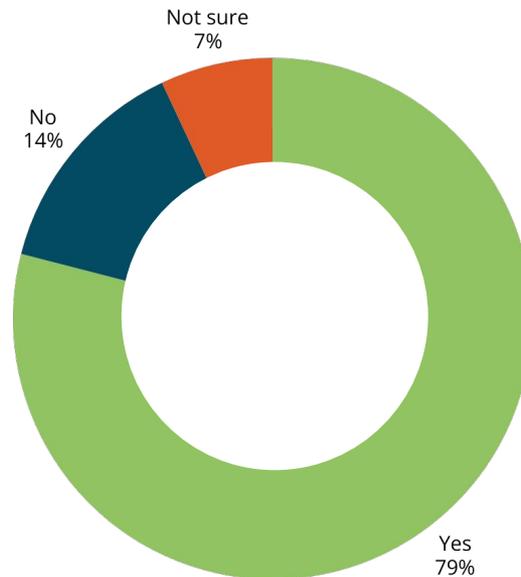


Figure 19: When using traditional search engines (Google, Bing, etc.), do you read the AI-generated overview if it is provided? (n=755)

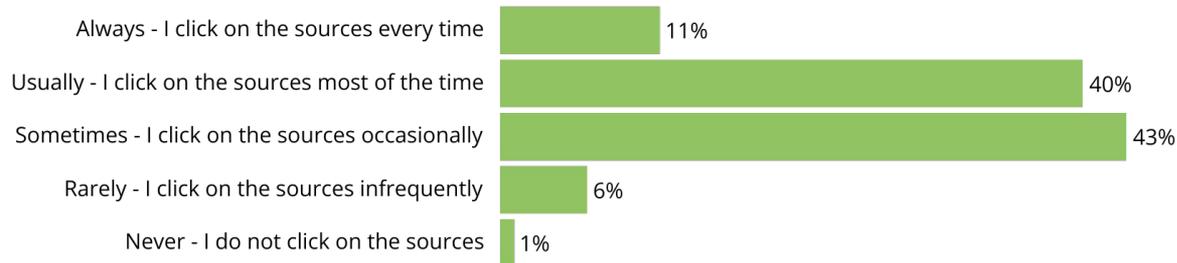
DO THEY CLICK AI OVERVIEWS?

AI Overviews' Impact on SEO

→ [READ MORE](#)

Among respondents who read the AI-generated overview, 43% said they click on the sources occasionally, 40% said they do most of the time, and 11% said every time.

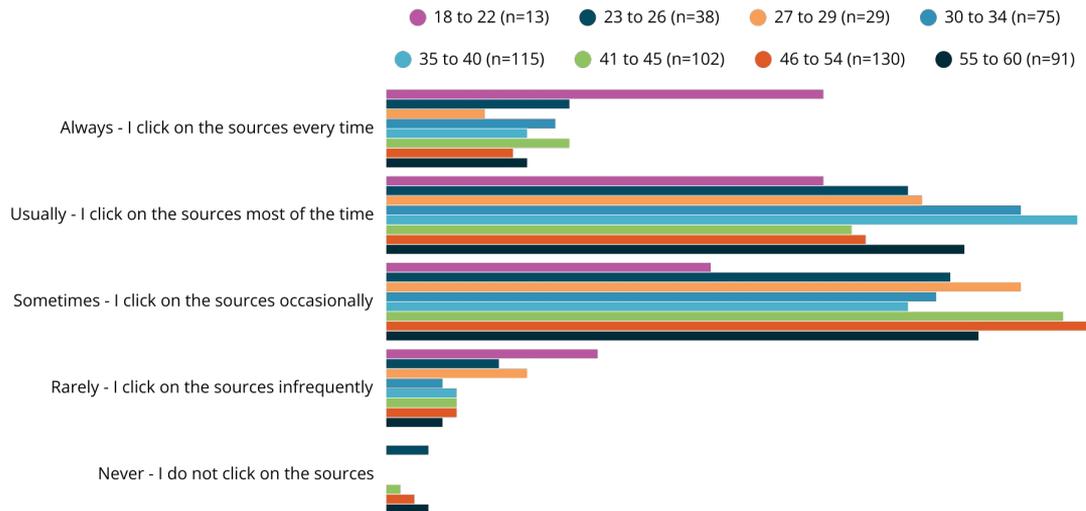
Figure 20: How often do you click on the sources provided in the AI-generated overview? (n=593)



DO THEY CLICK AI OVERVIEWS? BY AGE

Figure 21: How often do you click on the sources provided in the AI-generated overview? By Age

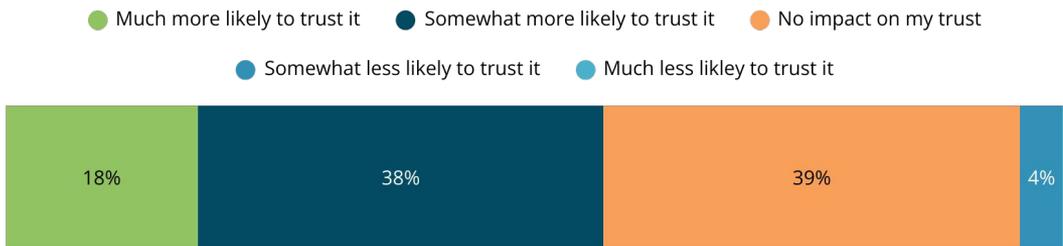
All age groups are most likely to click on the sources provided in an AI-generated overview either most of the time or occasionally. The youngest age group is significantly more likely to always click on the sources.



DOES AI INCLUSION INFLUENCE TRUST?

Eighteen percent of respondents said that when a website is included as a source in an AI-generated overview, this makes them much more likely to trust it, while 38% said it makes them somewhat more likely to trust it, and 39% said it has no impact on their trust.

Figure 22: When a website is included as a source in an AI-generated overview, how does it impact your trust in that website? (n=593)



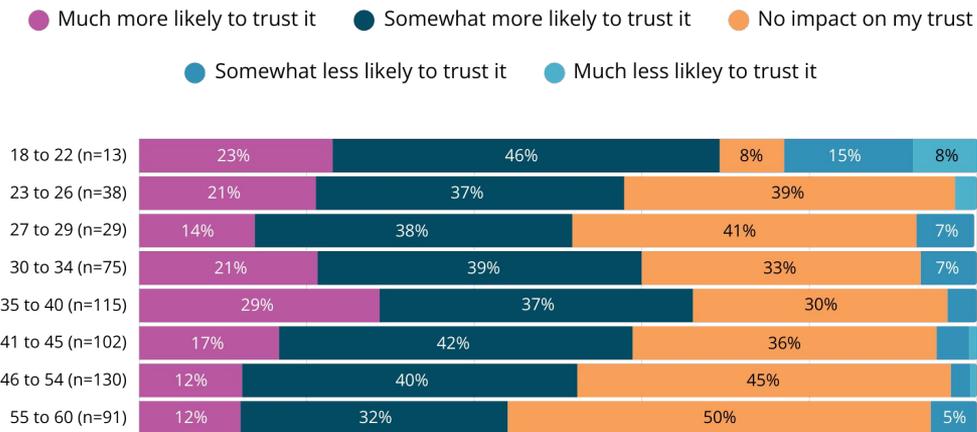
Trust Grows When AI Overviews Link to Your Content

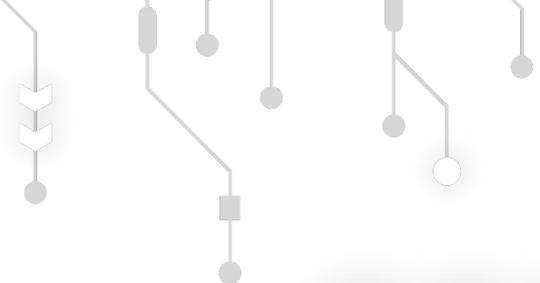
→ [**LEARN HOW AN SEO ROADMAP CAN HELP**](#)

DOES AI INCLUSION INFLUENCE TRUST? BY AGE

Figure 23: When a website is included as a source in an AI-generated overview, how does it impact your trust in that website? By Age

When a website is included as a source in an AI-generated overview, for younger age groups, this would make them much more or somewhat more likely to trust it, while for older age groups, it would have no impact on their trust.

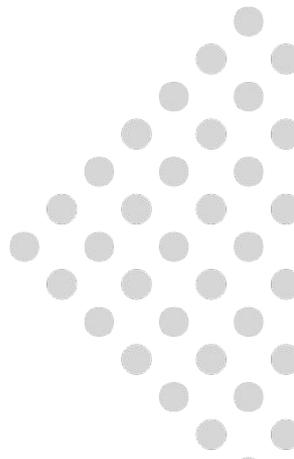
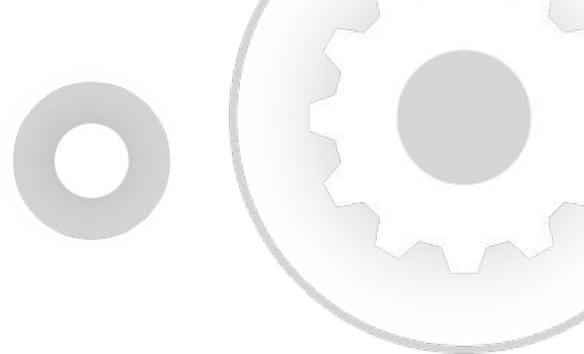




SURVEY RESULTS

PROFESSIONAL & CONTINUING ED SEARCH BEHAVIOR

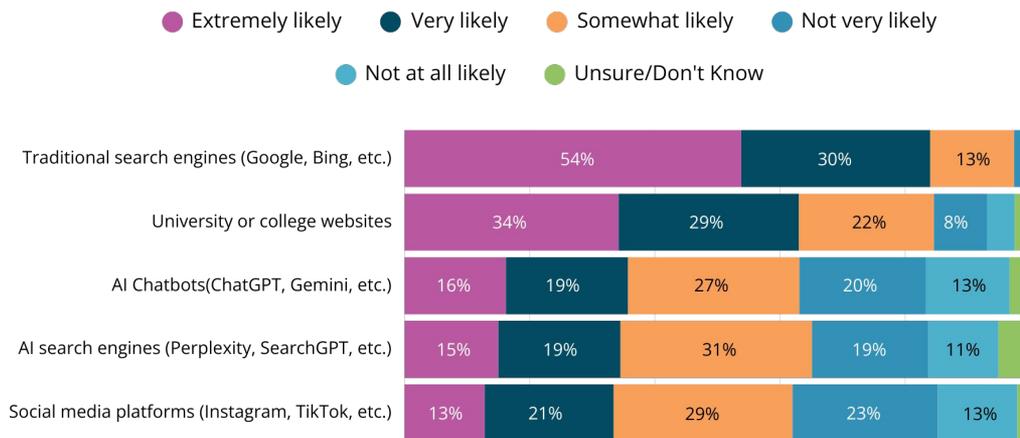
This 22-question section explores prospect search habits specifically when researching professional and continuing education options. It dives into how they use AI tools and AI search, traditional search engines, and social media when looking for and evaluating programs.



WHERE DO THEY GO FOR INFO?

Figure 24: When searching for a professional and continuing education program, how likely are you to use each of the following platforms to obtain information? (n=749)

When searching for a professional and continuing education program, respondents are most likely to use traditional search engines (84% extremely or very likely), followed by university or college websites (63% extremely or very likely). Respondents are least likely to use social media platforms (36% not very or not at all likely).



AI platforms demand the same attention as social media advertising, where institutions spend \$166K annually.

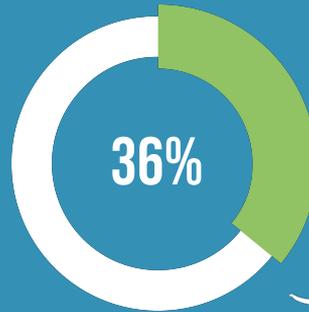


DATA THAT DEMANDS ATTENTION

84% of prospects use search engines to research professional education, and **36% use AI search and chatbots.**



Use search engines

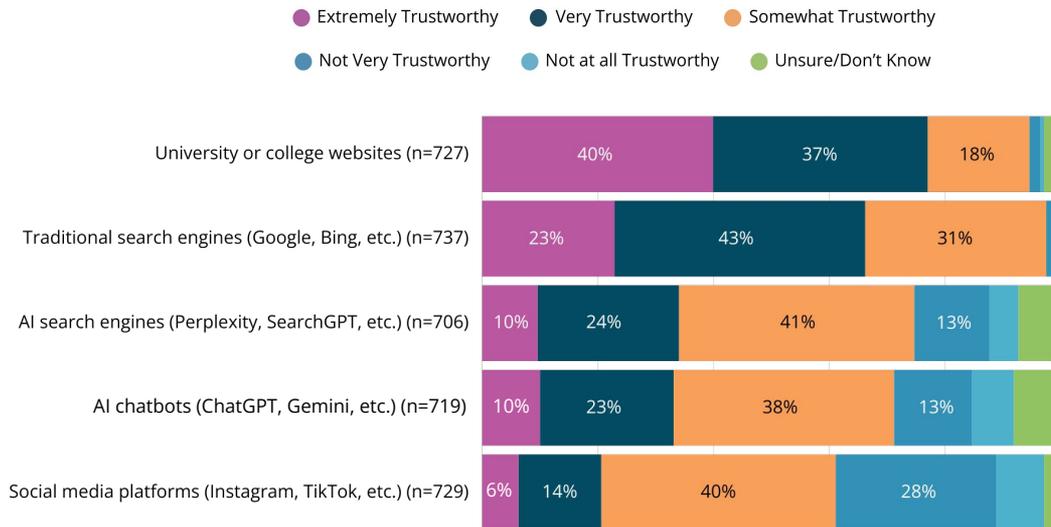


Use AI Search and chatbots

WHAT SOURCES DO THEY TRUST?

Figure 25: When searching for a professional and continuing education program, how trustworthy are the following sources?

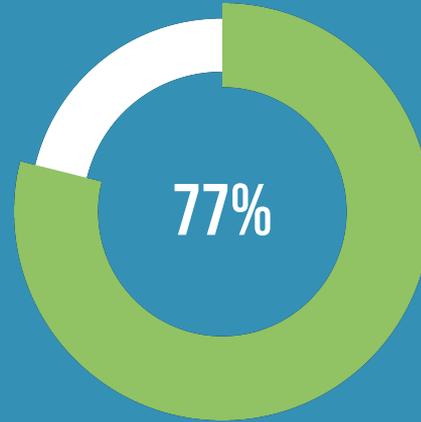
Seventy-seven percent of respondents said that university or college websites are extremely or very trustworthy when searching for a professional and continuing education program, followed by traditional search engines (66% extremely or very trustworthy). Social media platforms were ranked as the least trustworthy source (36% not very or not at all trustworthy).



DATA THAT DEMANDS ATTENTION

77%

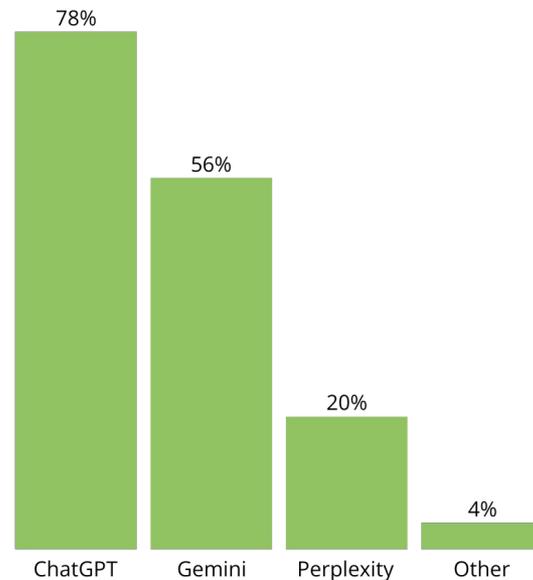
of prospects **trust**
university websites
over other sources.



WHICH AI PLATFORMS DO THEY SEARCH?

Figure 26: Which of the following AI search platforms / AI chatbots would you use to research professional and continuing education programs? Please select all that apply (n=482)

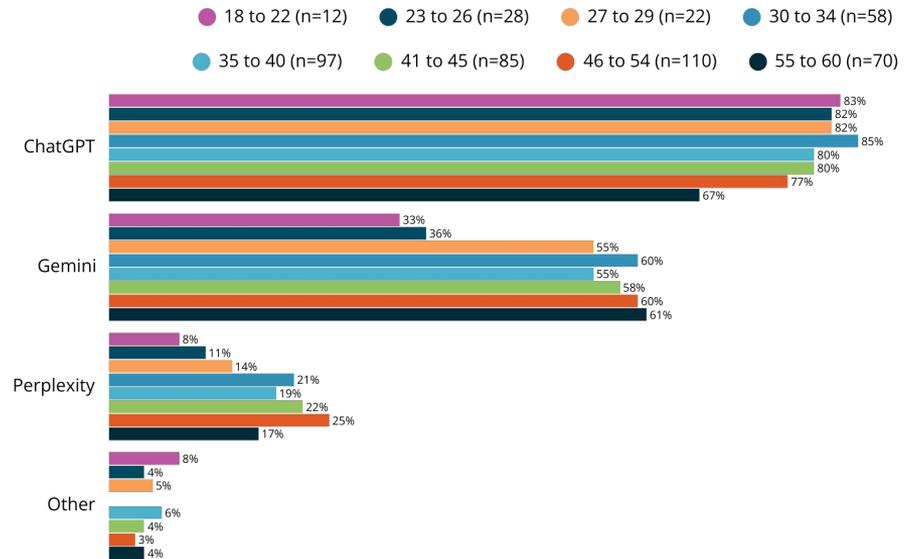
Among respondents who are likely to use AI platforms for researching professional and continuing education, 78% said they would use ChatGPT, 56% Gemini, and 20% would use Perplexity.



WHICH AI PLATFORMS DO THEY SEARCH? BY AGE

Figure 27: Which of the following AI Search platforms / AI chatbots would you use to research professional and continuing education programs? Please select all that apply. By Age

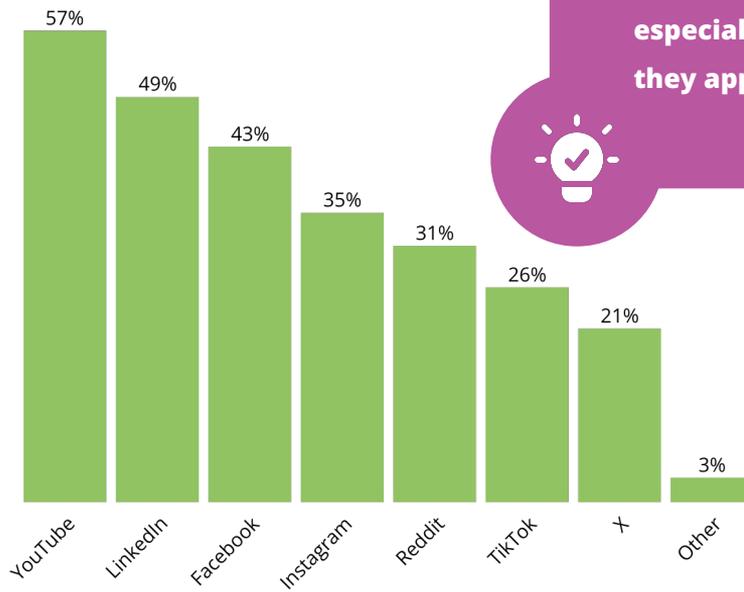
All age groups are most likely to use ChatGPT as the AI search platform to research professional and continuing education programs. Older age groups were more likely than younger age groups to use Gemini and Perplexity.



WHAT SOCIALS DO THEY SEARCH?

Figure 28: Which of the following social media platforms would you use to research professional and continuing education programs? Please select all that apply (n=460)

Among respondents who are likely to use social media platforms to research professional and continuing education, 57% would use YouTube, followed by LinkedIn (49%), Facebook (43%), Instagram (35%), and Reddit (31%).



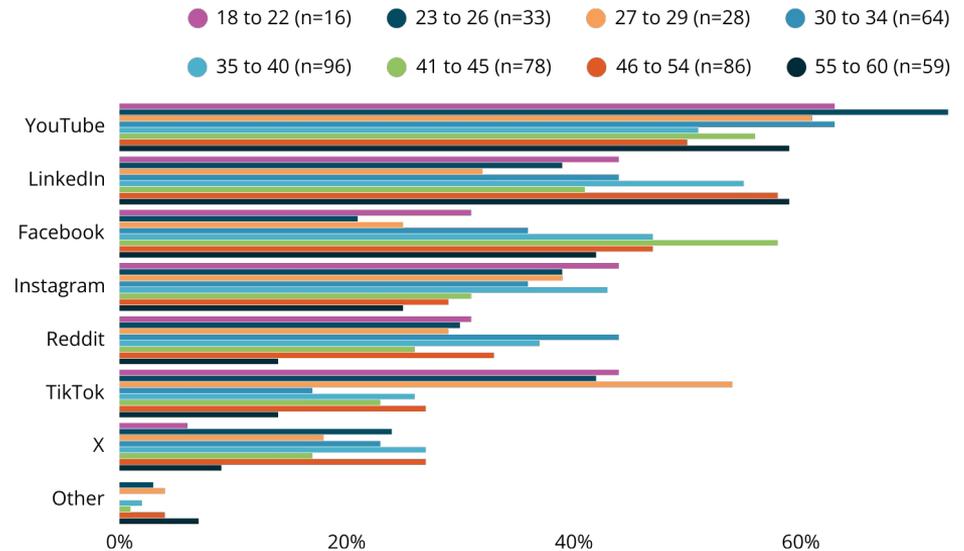
Prospects expect to find you on YouTube — especially before they apply.



WHAT SOCIALS DO THEY SEARCH? BY AGE

Figure 29: Which of the following social media platforms would you use to research professional and continuing education programs? Please select all that apply. By age:

Among social media platforms used to research professional and continuing education programs, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok were more popular among younger age groups, while LinkedIn and Facebook were more popular for older age groups.



WHAT SOCIAL CONTENT IS MOST HELPFUL?

Respondents who are likely to use social media to research professional and continuing education programs were asked what types of content are most helpful. Nearly two-thirds (65%) said program summaries or descriptions, 54% chose career advice related to education choices, and 50% said student testimonials are most helpful.

Program descriptions beat generic branding when most prospects research on social media.



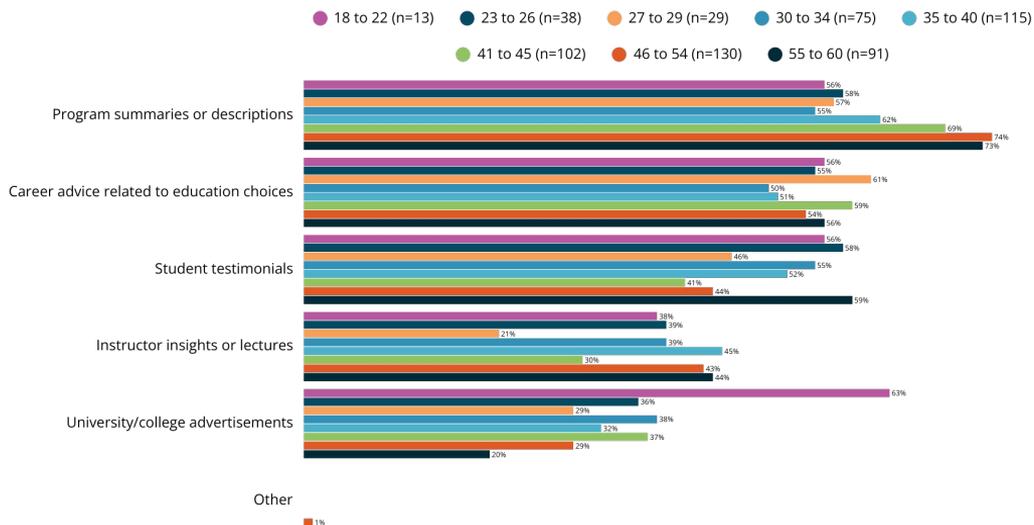
Figure 30: When using social media platforms to research professional and continuing education programs, what types of content are most helpful? Please select no more than three (n=460)



WHAT SOCIAL CONTENT IS MOST HELPFUL? BY AGE

Figure 31: When using social media platforms to research professional and continuing education programs, what types of content are most helpful? Please select no more than three. By age:

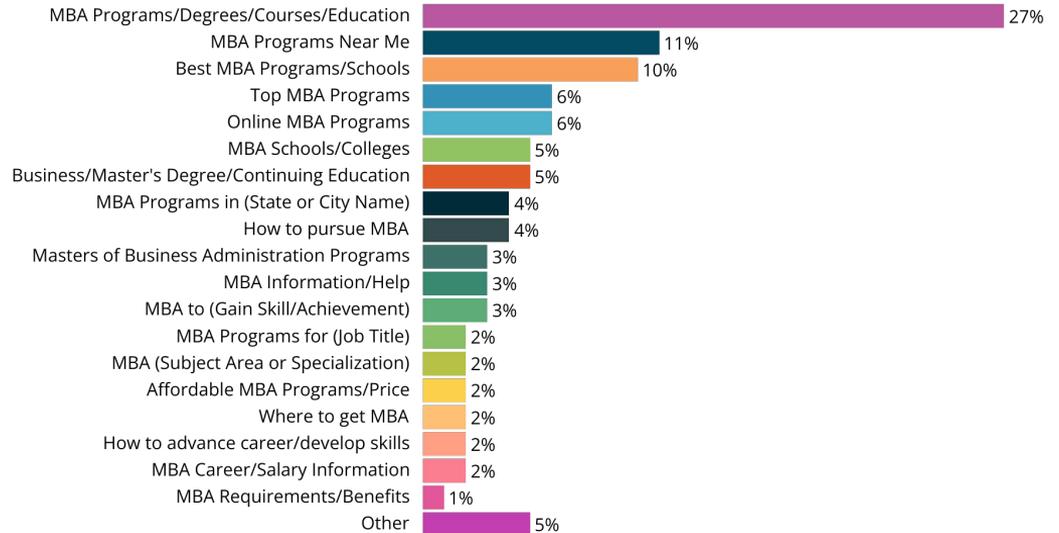
For most age groups, program summaries or descriptions or career advice related to education choices are among the top types of content most helpful when using social media platforms to research professional and continuing education programs. For 18- to 22-year-olds, university/college advertisements are the most helpful content.



WHAT WORDS DO THEY SEARCH ON GOOGLE?

Figure 32: Imagine you are considering pursuing a Master of Business Administration (MBA) to advance your career, change jobs, increase your earning potential, or develop leadership skills. What phrase or question would you type into a traditional search engine platform? (n=704)

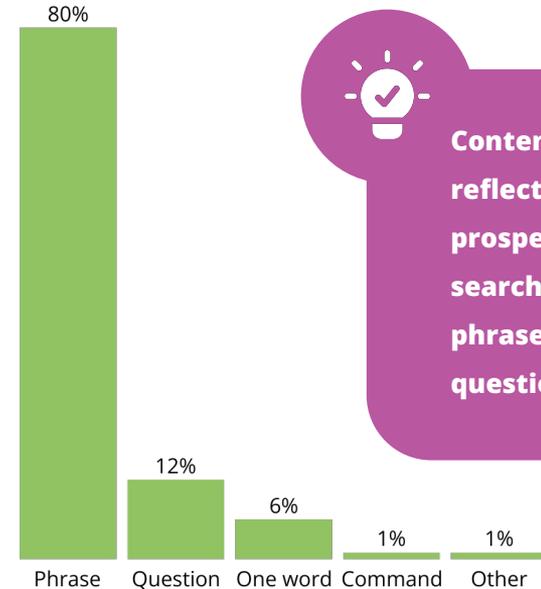
If searching for an MBA through a traditional search engine, 27% of respondents would type in “MBA programs/degrees/courses/education,” 11% would search “MBA programs near me,” and 10% would type “Best MBA programs/schools” into the search engine. Responses mentioned fewer than five times were placed in the “Other” category which included “MBA in one year,” “MBA reviews,” and “MBA hybrid programs,” among others.



WHAT KINDS OF WORDS DO THEY SEARCH ON GOOGLE?

Figure 33: Imagine you are considering pursuing a Master of Business Administration (MBA) to advance your career, change jobs, increase your earning potential, or develop leadership skills. What phrase or question would you type into a traditional search engine platform? (n=704)

Regarding what participants would type into a traditional search engine platform, 80% would type in a phrase, 12% a question, 6% would do a one-word search, and 1% would type in a command.



 Content should reflect the way prospects actually search: with full phrases and questions.

PCE PROGRAM SEARCH BEHAVIOR

WHAT WORDS DO THEY SEARCH ON AI SEARCH ENGINES?

If one were to search for information on MBA programs using an AI search engine, 28% of respondents would type in “MBA programs/degrees/courses/education,” 12% would search “Best MBA programs near me,” and 8% would type “MBA programs near me.” Responses mentioned fewer than five times were placed in the “Other” category which included “MBA programs with high ROI,” “Cycle of business,” and “Great schools for improvement,” among others.

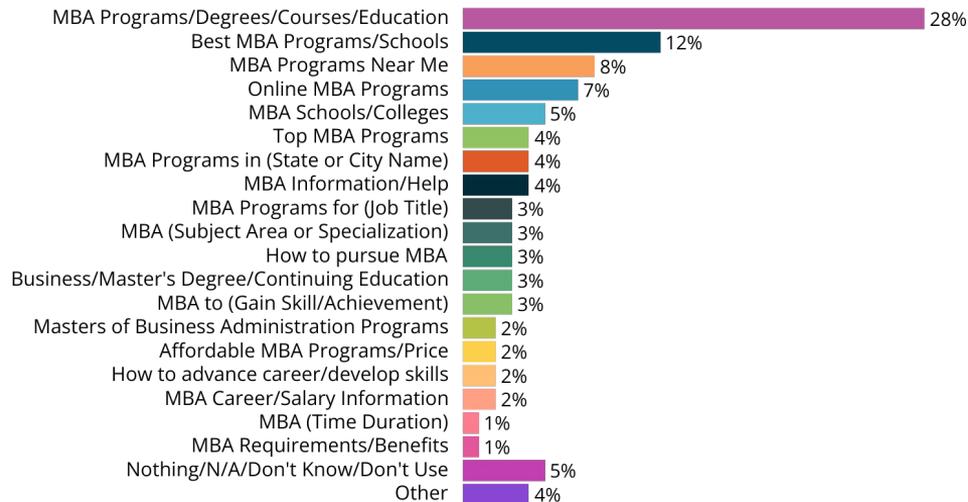
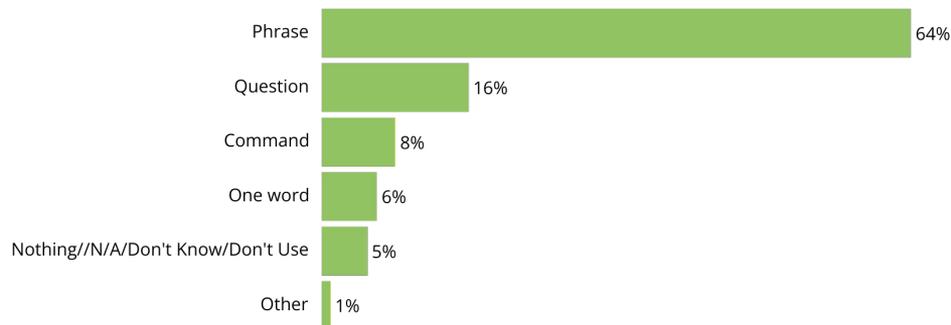


Figure 34: Imagine you are considering pursuing a Master of Business Administration (MBA) to advance your career, change jobs, increase your earning potential, or develop leadership skills. What phrase or question would you type into an AI search engine platform? (n=705)

WHAT KINDS OF WORDS DO THEY SEARCH ON AI SEARCH ENGINES?

Regarding the type of search respondents would conduct on an AI search engine, 64% would type in a phrase, 16% a question, 8% a command, 6% a one-word search, and 5% said nothing/they wouldn't use this platform.

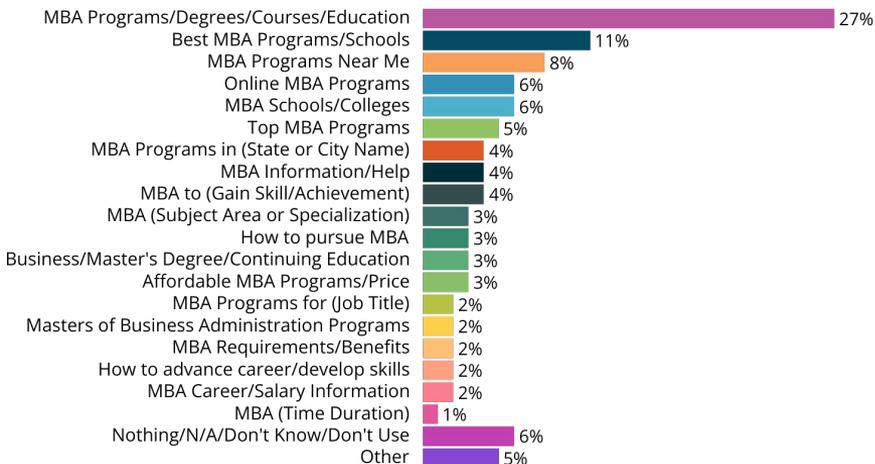
Figure 35: Imagine you are considering pursuing a Master of Business Administration (MBA) to advance your career, change jobs, increase your earning potential, or develop leadership skills. What phrase or question would you type into an AI search engine platform? (n=705)



WHAT WORDS DO THEY SEARCH ON AI CHATBOTS?

Figure 36: Imagine you are considering pursuing a Master of Business Administration (MBA) to advance your career, change jobs, increase your earning potential, or develop leadership skills. What phrase or question would you type into an AI chatbot platform? (n=705)

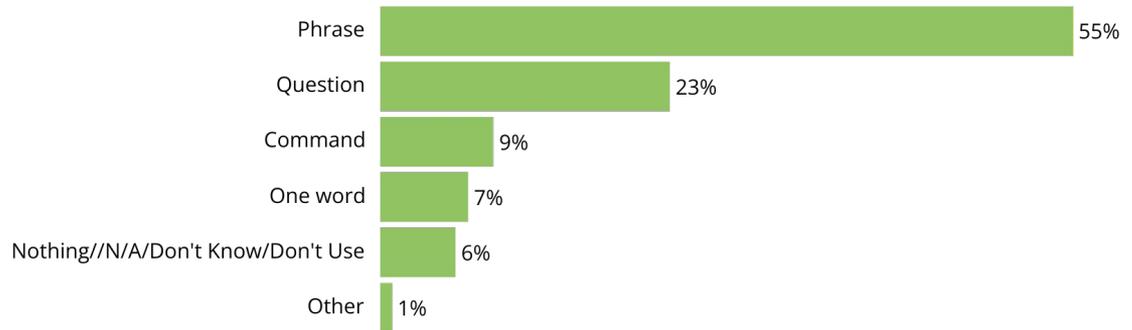
If respondents were to use an AI chatbot to search for information about an MBA program, 27% would type in “MBA programs/degrees/courses/education” into the platform, 11% would use “Best MBA programs/schools,” and 8% would type “MBA programs near me.” Responses mentioned fewer than five times were placed in the “Other” category which included “Advantages of business,” “leadership courses,” and “help me enroll in college,” among others.



WHAT KIND OF WORDS DO THEY SEARCH ON AI CHATBOTS?

When using an AI chatbot, 55% would type a phrase into the platform, 23% would ask a question, 9% would type a command, 7% would do a one-word search, and 6% said nothing/they wouldn't use the platform.

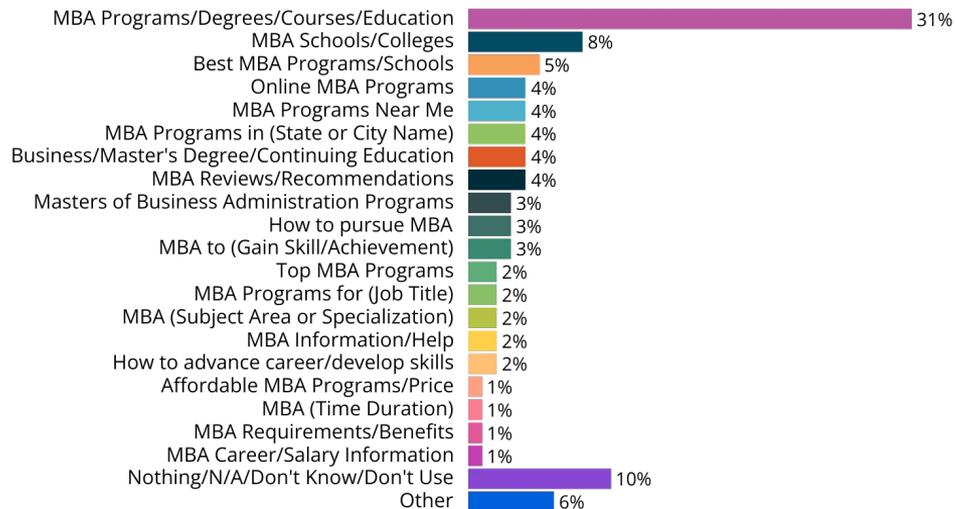
Figure 37: Imagine you are considering pursuing a Master of Business Administration (MBA) to advance your career, change jobs, increase your earning potential, or develop leadership skills. What phrase or question would you type into an AI chatbot platform? (n=705)



WHAT WORDS DO THEY SEARCH ON SOCIAL PLATFORMS?

Figure 38: Imagine you are considering pursuing a Master of Business Administration (MBA) to advance your career, change jobs, increase your earning potential, or develop leadership skills. What phrase or question would you type into a social media platform? (n=705)

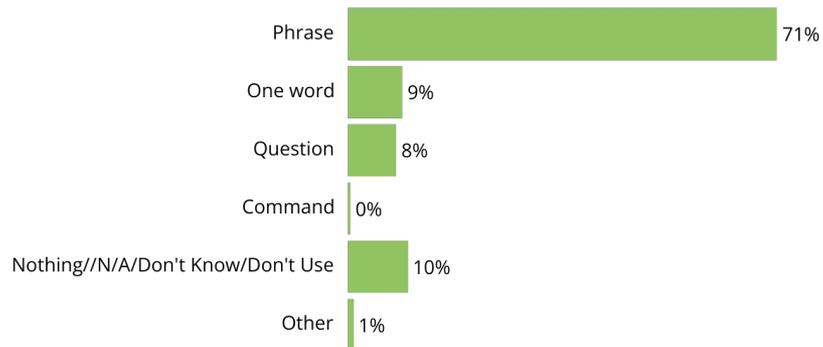
If using a social media platform to research potential MBA programs, 31% of respondents would type in “MBA programs/degrees/ courses/education” into the platform, 8% would do “MBA schools/colleges,” and 5% would type “Best MBA programs/schools.” Responses mentioned fewer than five times were placed in the “Other” category which included “MBA sources,” “New MBA programs,” and “Fun MBA programs,” among others.



WHAT KINDS OF WORDS DO THEY SEARCH ON SOCIAL PLATFORMS?

Figure 39: Imagine you are considering pursuing a Master of Business Administration (MBA) to advance your career, change jobs, increase your earning potential, or develop leadership skills. What phrase or question would you type into a social media platform? (n=705)

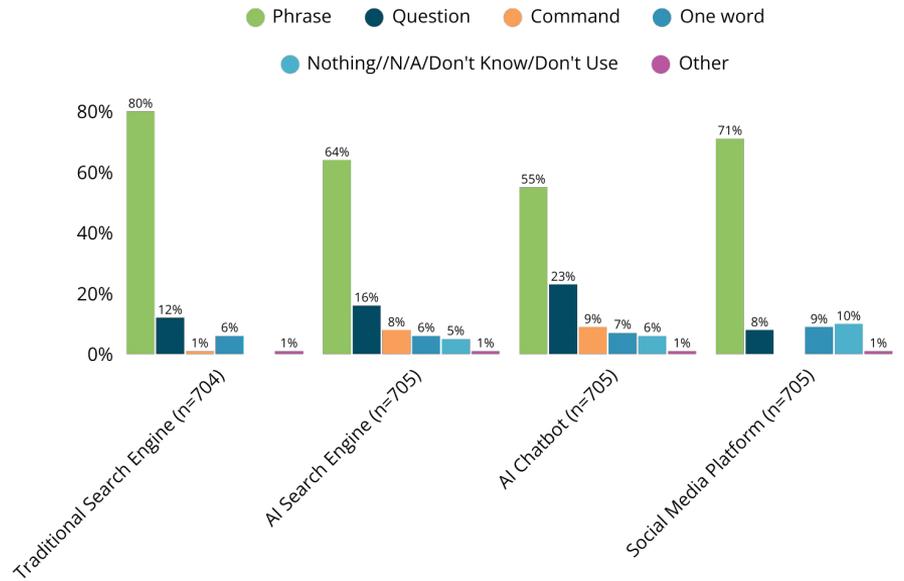
When using social media to research MBA programs, 71% of respondents would type a phrase into the platform, 9% would use a one-word search, and 8% would ask a question. Ten percent of respondents said they would type nothing/they wouldn't use this platform, the highest percentage compared to all other types of search engines.



OVERVIEW OF TYPE OF SEARCH

Figure 40: Imagine you are considering pursuing a Master of Business Administration (MBA) to advance your career, change jobs, increase your earning potential, or develop leadership skills. What phrase or question would you type into each type of platform?

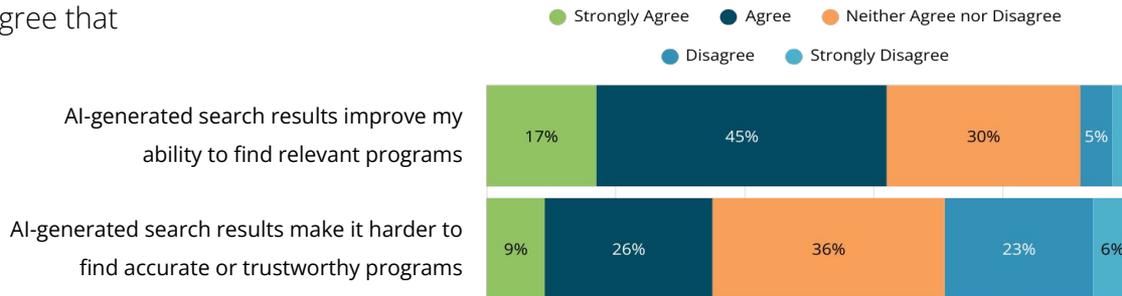
Across all search engine platforms, a phrase was the most common type of search. Respondents were more likely to type a question or command into an AI search engine or chatbot than a traditional search engine or social media platform. Respondents were most likely to use a one-word search on a social media platform, but also most likely to say they wouldn't use a social media platform to research a potential MBA program.



DOES AI HELP THEM FIND PROGRAMS?

Sixty-two percent of respondents strongly agree or agree that AI-generated search results improve their ability to find relevant programs, while 30% neither agree nor disagree, and 8% disagree or strongly disagree. Only 35% strongly agree or agree that AI-generated search results make it harder to find accurate or trustworthy programs, while 36% neither agree nor disagree, and 29% disagree or strongly disagree.

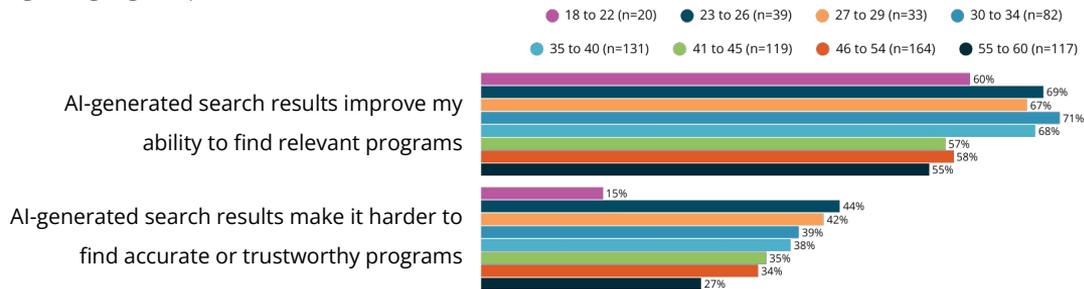
Figure 41: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements as they relate to searching for professional and continuing education programs (n=705)



DOES AI SEARCH HELP THEM FIND PROGRAMS? BY AGE

Respondents of all age groups are more likely to strongly agree or agree that AI-generated search results improve their ability to find relevant programs than they are to strongly agree or agree that it makes it harder to find accurate or trustworthy programs. Younger age groups are more likely to strongly agree or agree that AI-generated search results make it harder to find accurate or trustworthy programs than older age groups.

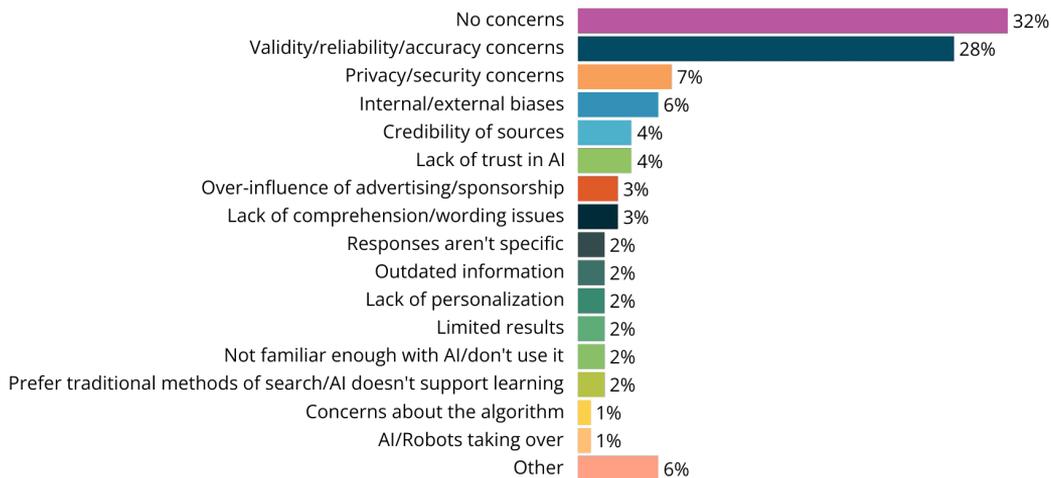
Figure 42: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements as they relate to searching for professional and continuing education programs (% strongly agree or agree) By age:



WHAT CONCERNS DO YOU HAVE ABOUT USING AI?

Figure 43: What concerns, if any, do you have about using AI search tools for researching professional and continuing education programs? (n=705)

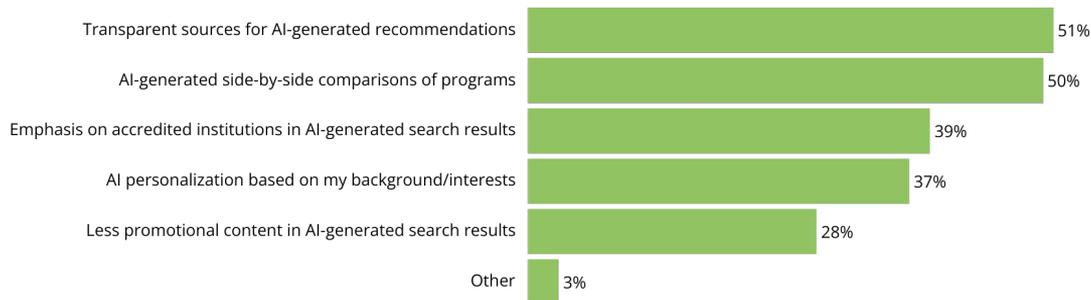
Nearly a third (32%) of respondents have no concerns about using AI search tools for researching professional and continuing education programs, while 28% have concerns around AI's validity/reliability/accuracy, and 7% have privacy/security concerns. Responses mentioned fewer than six times were placed in the "Other" category which included environmental concerns, concerns that AI would suggest nearby programs, and plagiarism concerns.



WHAT FEATURES ARE MOST VALUABLE?

When asked about the most valuable features in AI-generated search results, 51% said transparent sources for AI-generated recommendations, 50% said AI-generated side-by-side comparisons of programs, and 39% cited an emphasis on accredited institutions in AI-generated search results.

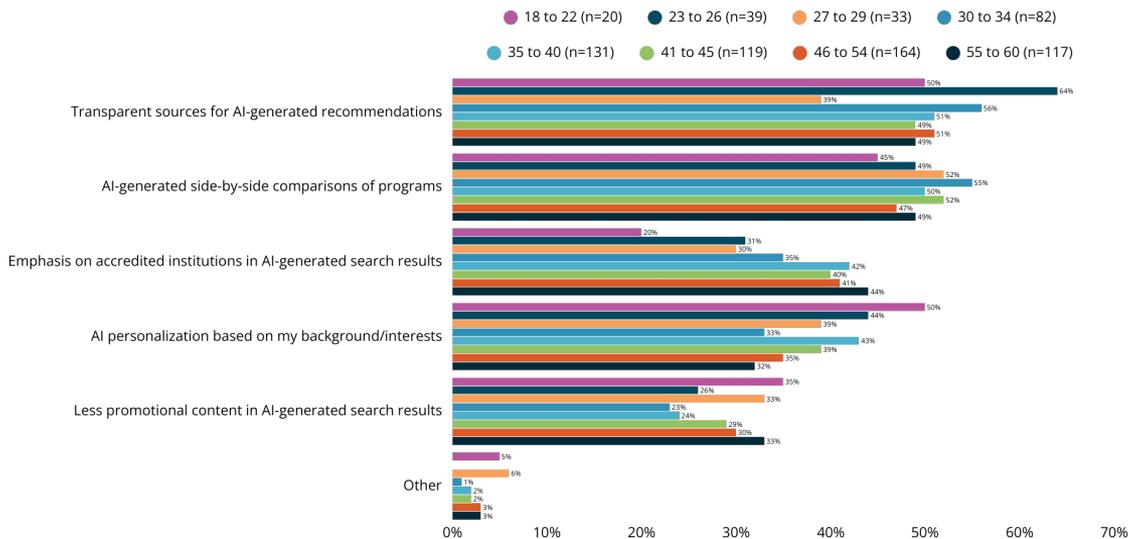
Figure 44: What features would you find most valuable in AI-generated search results when researching professional and continuing education programs? Please select no more than three answer choices (n=705)

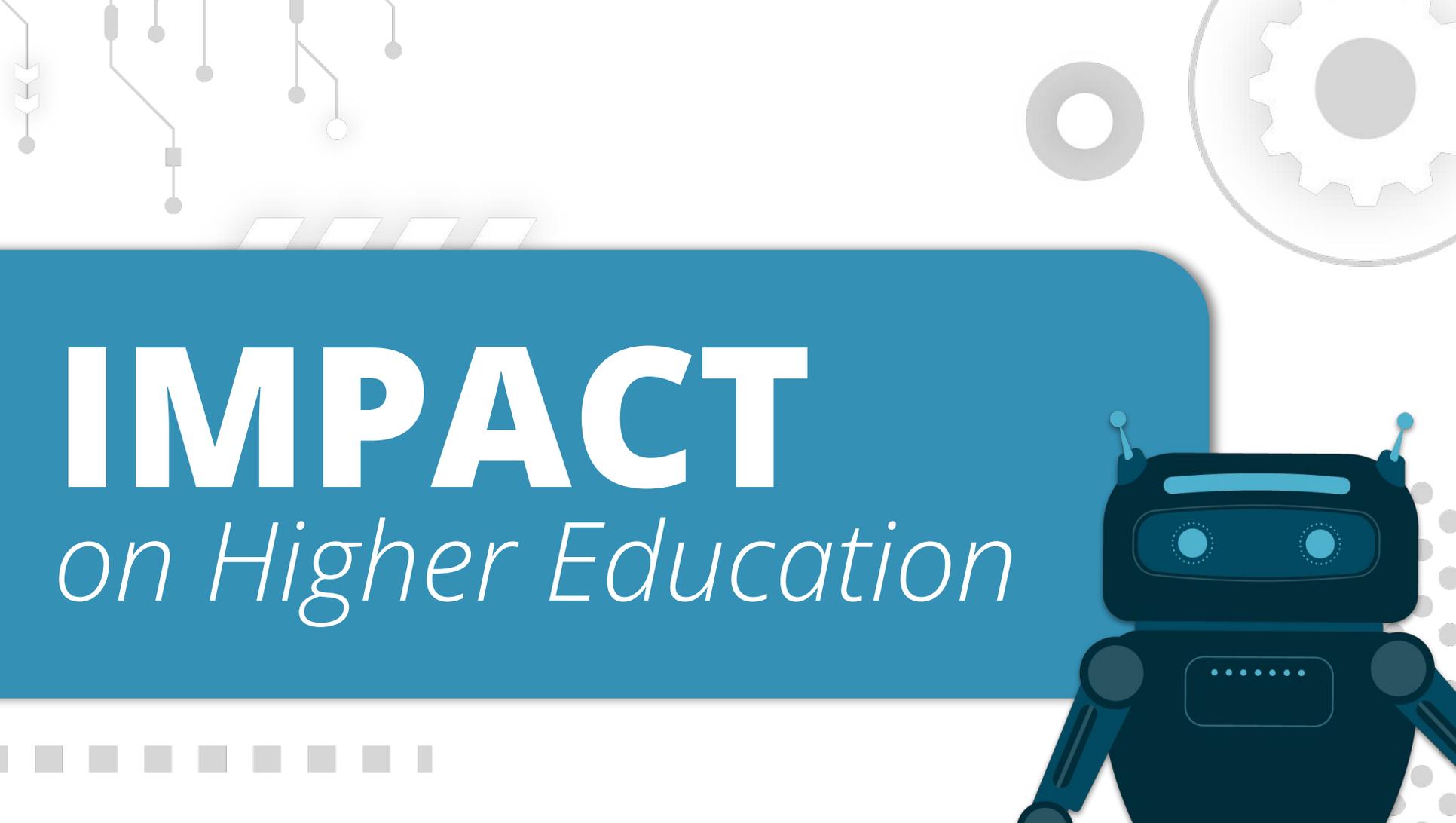


WHAT FEATURES ARE MOST VALUABLE? BY AGE

Figure 45: What features would you find most valuable in AI-generated search results when researching professional and continuing education programs? Please select no more than three answer choices. By age:

All age groups were likely to consider transparent sources for AI-generated recommendations and AI-generated side-by-side comparisons of programs as valuable features when researching professional and continuing education programs. Older age groups were more likely to find emphasis on accredited institutions as a helpful feature, while younger age groups were more likely to favor AI personalization based on their interests.



The background features a white space with various grey icons: circuit lines with nodes in the top left, a gear and a ring in the top right, and a dark blue robot in the bottom right. A large blue banner with rounded corners is positioned across the middle. The text 'IMPACT' is in large, bold, white, sans-serif font, and 'on Higher Education' is in a smaller, white, italicized, sans-serif font below it. At the bottom left, there is a horizontal row of grey squares of varying sizes.

IMPACT

on Higher Education

The findings from this study illustrate that institutions must adopt a strategic and comprehensive digital approach to ensure their programs are visible to prospective professional and continuing education students. AI and other emerging technologies have transformed the information-gathering process. Search has become supercharged, and the number of channels a potential learner can use to identify a program continues to expand while the number of institutions they consider consolidates to a select few.¹⁰

While traditional search engines such as Google and Bing remain the most common tools for researching programs

(84% extremely or very likely to use), AI chatbots like ChatGPT and Gemini (36%) are now outpacing social media platforms (34%). Although the difference

AI-assisted tools now warrant the same level of strategic attention that institutions have given to social media, where units spend an average of \$166,303 annually on advertising.

¹⁰ Engaging the Modern Learner: 2025 Report on the Preferences & Behaviors Shaping Higher Ed, Education Dynamics

between these two emerging channels is relatively small, it signals a clear shift: AI-assisted tools now warrant the same level of strategic attention that institutions have given to social media, where units spend an average of \$166,303 annually on advertising.¹¹ Importantly, AI is not only introducing new search pathways — it is reshaping how traditional ones function.



Without SEO, you don't show up in AI. Without AI, you don't get the enrollment.

Among respondents using traditional search engines, more than three-quarters (79%) read the AI-generated overview

when it appears. Of those users, about half always (11%) or usually (40%) click on the sources cited. Even among those who don't click, 56% say the presence of cited sources makes them more likely to trust the content. Trust, in this context, is not just critical to human

79% read the AI-generated overview when it appears.

¹¹ UPCEA 2024 Marketing Survey Results (Exclusively Available to UPCEA Members)

University and college websites are the most trusted sources among prospects.



decision-making. It also plays a central role in how AI tools assess and prioritize information. Although AI search engine optimization remains rooted in traditional organic search practices, it increasingly depends on credibility indicators such as citations, backlinks, and authoritative references.

This dynamic favors institutional websites, which often perform well in these areas.

These sites have significant value in the eyes of prospects as well. When searching for a professional or continuing education program, university and college websites are the most trusted sources among prospects — 77% rated them as extremely or very

Build Trust That AI
and Students Recognize

→ **GET DIRECTION
WITH THE SEO
WORKBOOK**

trustworthy, compared to 66% for traditional search engines, 33% for AI chatbots, and just 20% for social media. Regardless of the platform used, most prospects rely on multi-word search phrases (e.g., “Best MBA near me”) to guide their exploration.

These findings underscore a crucial shift. Visibility is no longer just about appearing in search rankings — it's about being recognized and trusted across multiple AI-mediated touchpoints. As prospective learners increasingly rely on platforms that summarize, synthesize, and recommend content,

Institutions must ensure that their information is not only accurate and compelling but also optimized for discoverability.

not only accurate and compelling but also optimized for discoverability. The intersection of trust, authority, and visibility demands a data-informed digital strategy that reflects how search behavior is evolving.



respondent

DEMOGRAPHICS



GENDER

Over half (55%) of respondents are female and 45% are male.

Figure 46: What is your gender? (n=705)



The background features several decorative elements: circuit-like lines with nodes in the top left, a gear and a ring in the top right, a blue robot character in the bottom right, and a series of grey squares in the bottom left. A blue banner with a white shadow effect is positioned across the middle of the page.

CONCLUSION

WHAT WE LEARNED



Prospects look at search engines and university websites first, but increasingly use AI and YouTube in their program research.



Appearing in AI overviews and ranking well in organic search strengthens credibility with prospective students and builds institutional trust.



Early adopters who expand strategy to include AI search will gain lasting advantage in enrollment visibility and consideration.

Search Influence is a woman-owned, ROI-focused digital marketing agency that helps institutions drive prospects into and through the recruitment funnel with analytics-backed strategies, including organic and AI SEO and paid digital advertising.

Search Influence experts frequently speak at higher ed and industry conferences, and the agency's work has earned recognition from the US Search Awards, US Agency Awards, and Inc. 5000.



SEARCH INFLUENCE

SEO & DIGITAL MARKETING AGENCY

ABOUT

UPCEA is the leading association for professional, continuing, and online education. For more than 100 years, UPCEA has served most of the leading public and private colleges and universities in North America. Founded in 1915, the association serves its members with innovative

conferences and specialty seminars, research and benchmarking information, professional networking opportunities and timely publications. Based in Washington, D.C., UPCEA also builds greater awareness of the vital link between contemporary learners and public policy issues.



ABOUT



HOW TO CITE THIS RESEARCH

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