

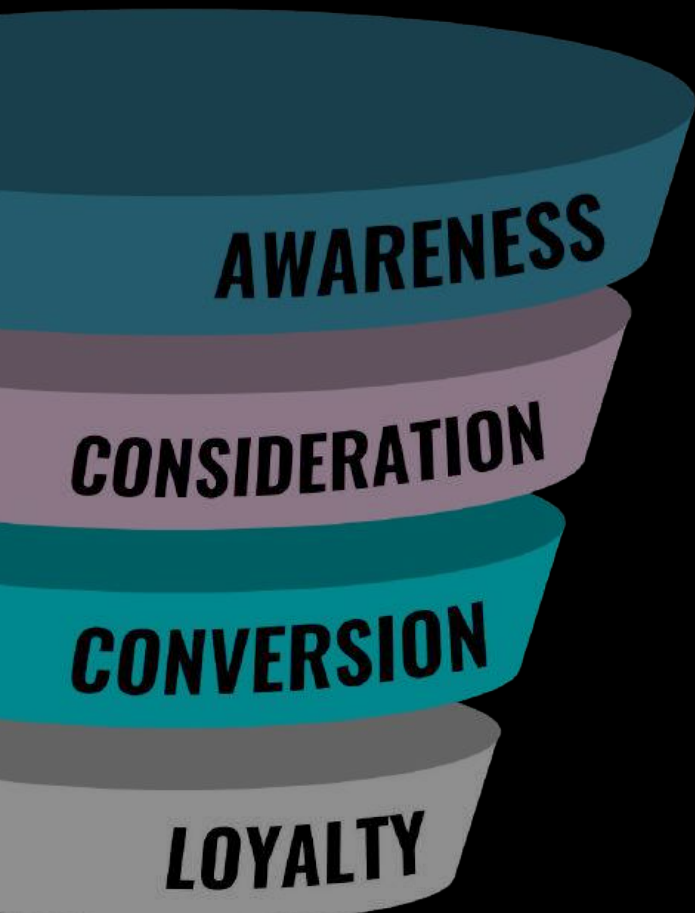
WHAT DO STUDENTS WANT?

PBSA Booking Journey

2025 UK Edition

theEword.

Putting Students in your Spaces



Understanding the ever-evolving preferences and behaviours of Gen Z students is crucial for PBSA providers looking to remain **competitive** and **relevant**. That's why **continuous market research** isn't just best practice—it's a **necessity**.

In our second edition of **What Do Students Want?**, we delve into the intricacies of the PBSA booking journey, offering actionable insights to help PBSA leaders refine your strategies **across the marketing funnel** for the 2025/2026 sales cycle.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

This research was created by surveying **17-21-year-olds** across the UK who are currently living in student accommodation or are **applying** to university to start in September 2025.

Students from our **UK Student Spark Programme** were interviewed face-to-face in November 2024.

- Over **1000 students** were surveyed between 31/10/24 and 05/11/24.
- **53.4%** are students who live in PBSA (or plan to).
- **46.6%** live in university-provided accommodation (or plan to).

Note: Any graphs or data comparing students who live in PBSA versus those in university-provided accommodation will be accompanied by the key 'Uni vs PBSA'.

ABOUT US

theEword.

We're a digital strategy agency that specialises in **property marketing**.

We create high performing **digital acquisition campaigns**, driven by an obsession with **audience research**.

STUDENT
spark.

Student Spark is theEword's **global network** of students.

From **perfecting translations** to revealing **trending Gen Z content**, our unique student network delivers **real-time insights** straight into our PBSA campaigns.



AWARENESS

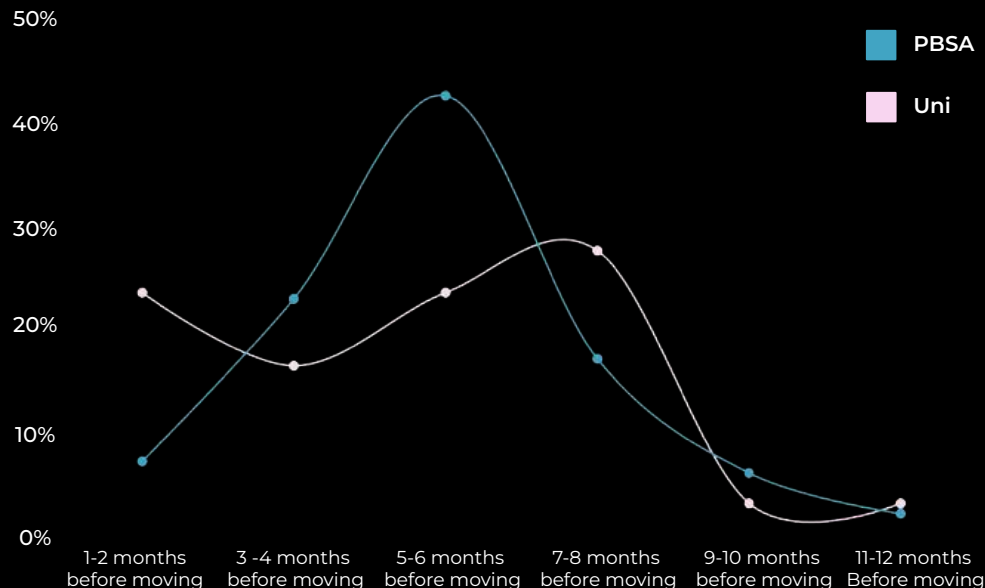
Building brand awareness amongst potential customers is a **pivotal** part of PBSA marketing. In a market saturated with choices, effective brand awareness and differentiation is critical.

- When to start **building** your brand?
- When do students **start to look** for accommodation?
- What **content** is most valuable to them in these early days?
- **Where** are they looking?



WHEN DID YOU FIRST BEGIN RESEARCHING STUDENT ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS?

PBSA VS UNI PROVIDED ACCOMMODATION



43% of PBSA students begin researching accommodation **5-6 months** before moving in. $\frac{1}{4}$ of students start researching even earlier, up to a **year in advance**.

This highlights a key opportunity for PBSA operators to engage students early in the cycle. Maintaining **year-round brand visibility** ensures you stay top-of-mind, making it easier to convert students once their search begins.



AWARENESS

“

***I wish someone could have told me
that when you're researching
student accommodation, you need
to do everything in advance, like
from September or October.***

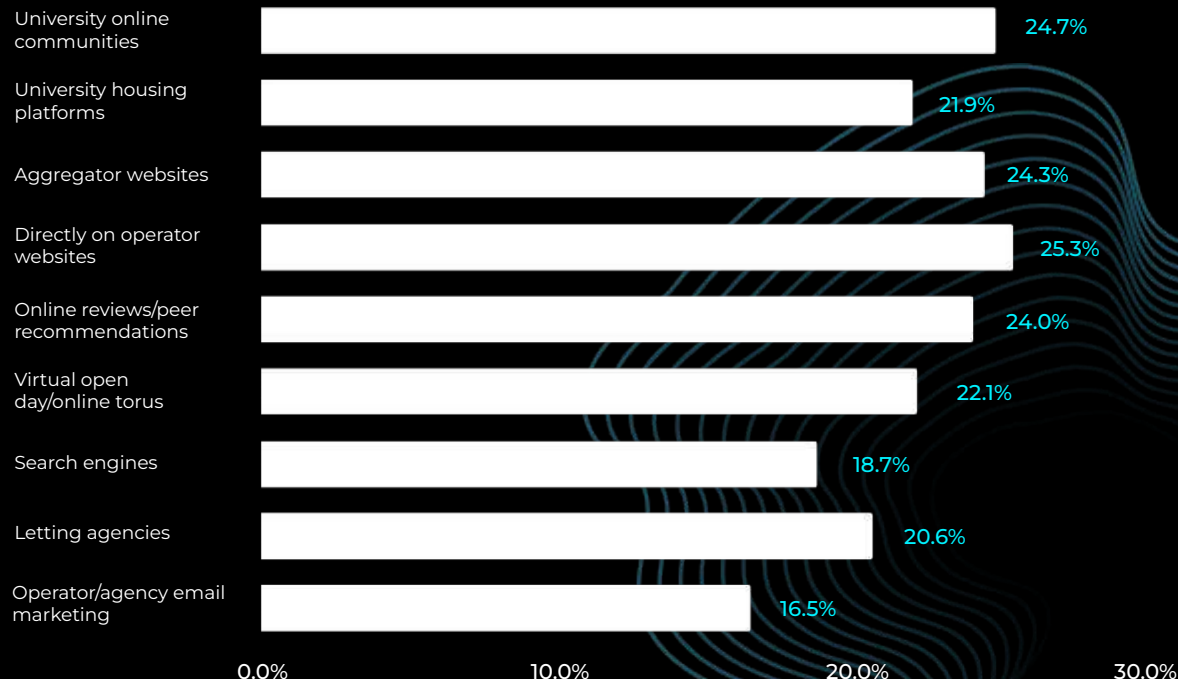
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WHEN RESEARCHING STUDENT ACCOMMODATION ONLINE, WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING SOURCES DID YOU USE OR EXPLORE BEYOND SOCIAL MEDIA? (TICK ALL THAT APPLY)

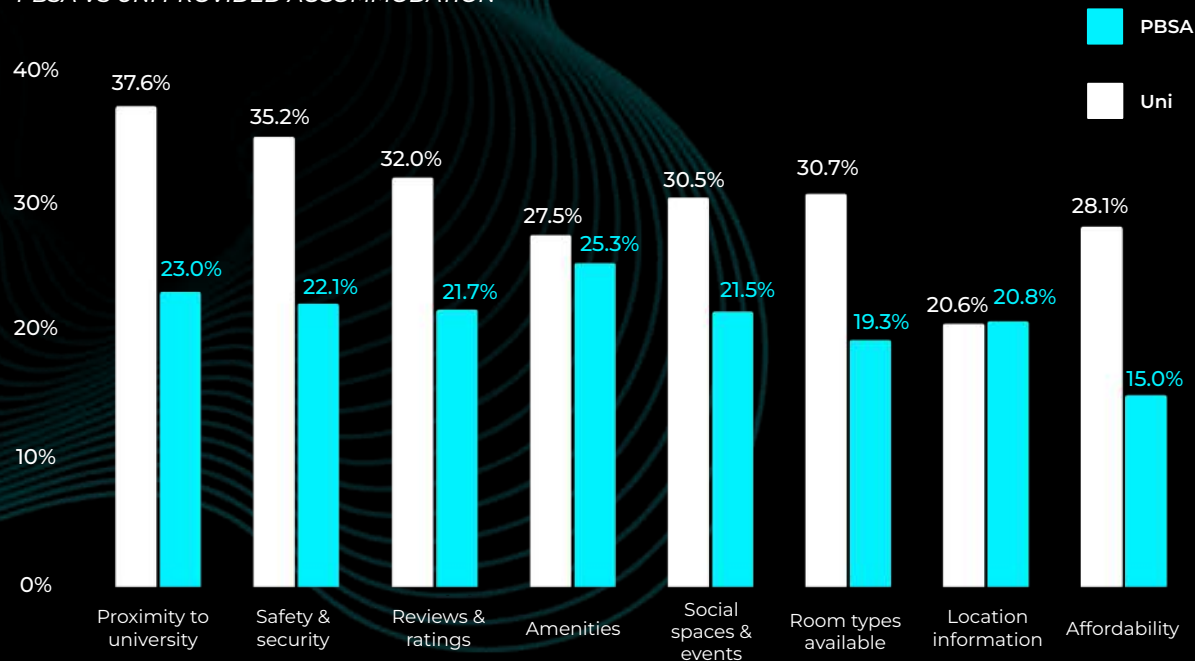
PBSA STUDENTS

25% of PBSA students use university-specific communities (Facebook Groups, Reddit, WhatsApp) and **24% rely on online review platforms** such as StudentCrowd and Trustpilot, highlighting the importance of **peer reviews** and **real-life experiences** during the initial research phase.



WHICH FEATURES WERE OF MOST INTEREST TO YOU WHEN RESEARCHING STUDENT ACCOMMODATION? (SELECT UP TO 3)

PBSA VS UNI PROVIDED ACCOMMODATION



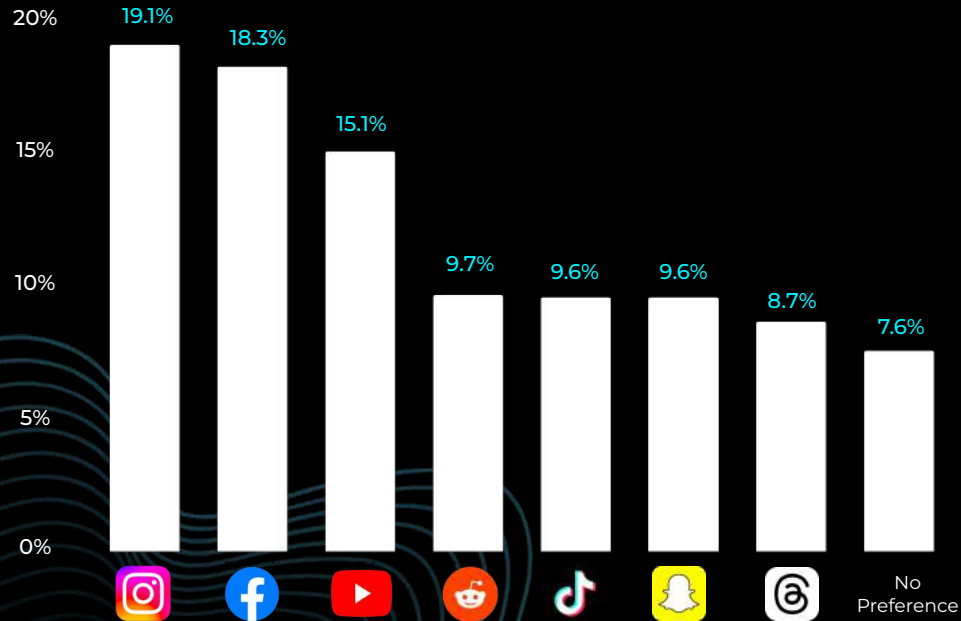
AWARENESS

In the early stages, students in university-provided accommodation are most interested in **proximity to campus, safety** and **reviews**.

As you might expect, students living in PBSA are more interested in building **amenities** and **less concerned** with **affordability**.

WHAT SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORK DO YOU PREFER TO USE?

ALL STUDENTS

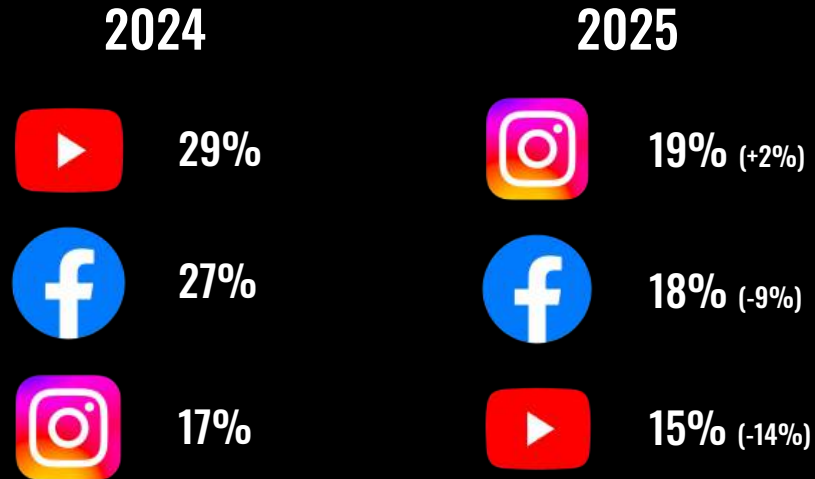


AWARENESS

While **Instagram**, **Facebook** and **YouTube** still dominate the social media landscape, there's a growing preference for platforms which provide **social proof** and specific **peer-to-peer** insights.

SOCIAL MEDIA PREFERENCE YoY: THE TOP THREE

ALL STUDENTS



Similar to our 2024 edition, YouTube, Facebook and Instagram are the social media platforms of choice, however in 2025, **Instagram** has surpassed **YouTube** in popularity, signaling a potential shift towards more engaging, **bite-sized** media consumption.

Meanwhile, **Reddit**, **Snapchat**, **TikTok** and **Threads** have grown in popularity, with **38%** of students now preferring to use these platforms.

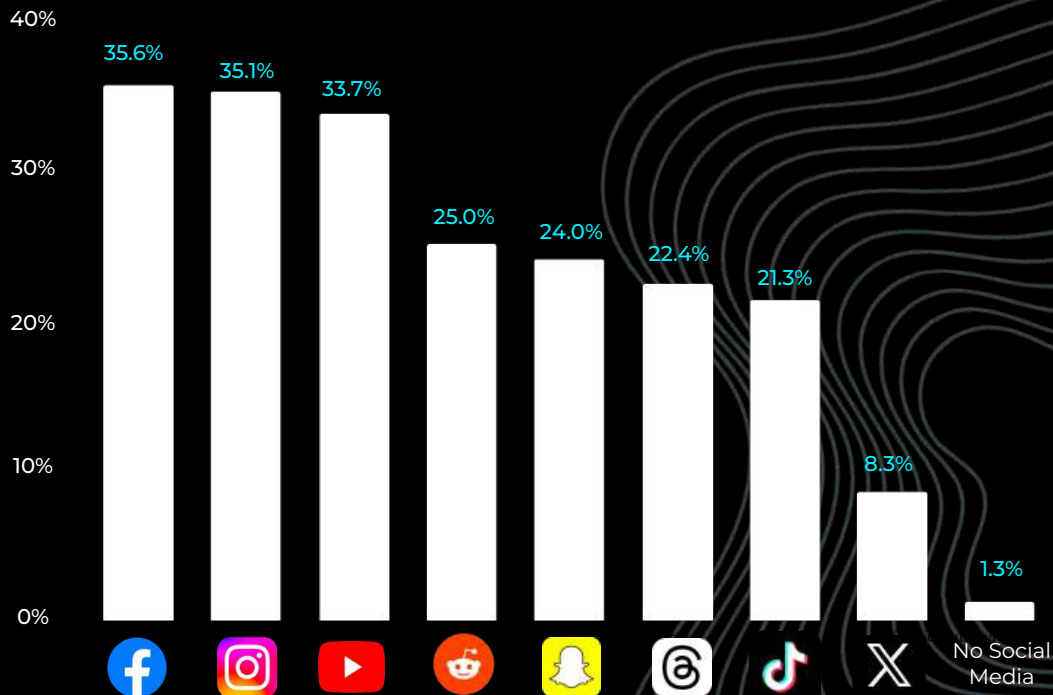


WHAT SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS DID YOU USE TO RESEARCH STUDENT ACCOMMODATION? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)

ALL STUDENTS

Though most students prefer Instagram for general use, Facebook is **marginally more popular** for researching accommodation.

YouTube is a valuable channel in the research phase. With the rise of short-form content through **YouTube Shorts**, the platform should be treated as a **standalone channel**, alongside TikTok and Instagram, rather than just a place for hosting brand videos.



AWARENESS

“

*I looked at **The Student Room** for opinions. It was **more important** to me than the **website**.*

”

“

*I looked for reviews and videos on **TikTok**, **Snapchat** and **Instagram**, then I checked out the **website**.*

”

“

*I started researching accommodation **too late** and I was left with a property that I wasn't 100% keen on.*

”



CONNECT EARLY AND EFFECTIVELY

Highlight Amenities Early

Showcase **amenities** early in the cycle to **justify pricing** and stand out.

Diversify Social Media Channels

Tap into platforms like **Snapchat** to reach students wherever they are active.

Engage In Online Student Communities

By understanding **online conversations**, you can align your **digital touchpoints** to address students' needs early, whether through optimised website content or video formats that answer common queries and **build trust**.

Digital Trust

Build **authentic connections** by demonstrating **value** on students' preferred channels, establishing credibility earlier in the cycle.



AWARENESS



CONSIDERATION

The student accommodation selection process is now more complex and **deliberate**, with a longer digital research journey. Influenced by recommendations from **friends and family**, students actively gather information from **diverse sources**, evaluate multiple options while narrowing choices based on individual preferences and needs.

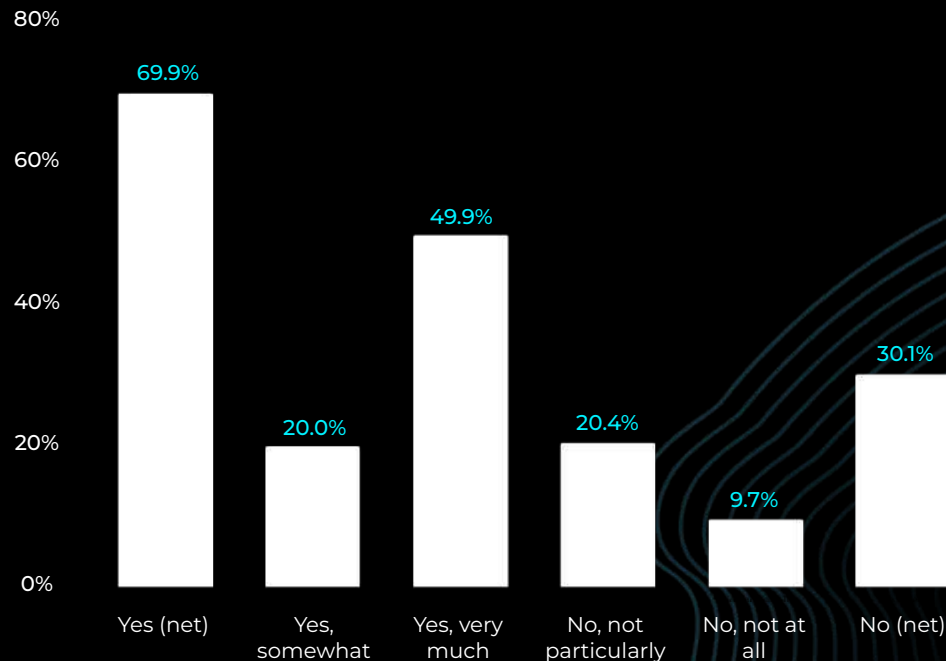
- What are the key considerations that **influence** that decision?
- What type of content **facilitates** the booking process?
- What information is critical in making the **right decision**?



DID YOUR PARENTS INFLUENCE YOUR DECISION ABOUT YOUR STUDENT ACCOMMODATION?

ALL STUDENTS

Parents continue to be a **key part** of the booking journey. It's vital to target these separate audiences **concurrently** and align messaging to their interests at **different times** of the year.



CONSIDERATION

“

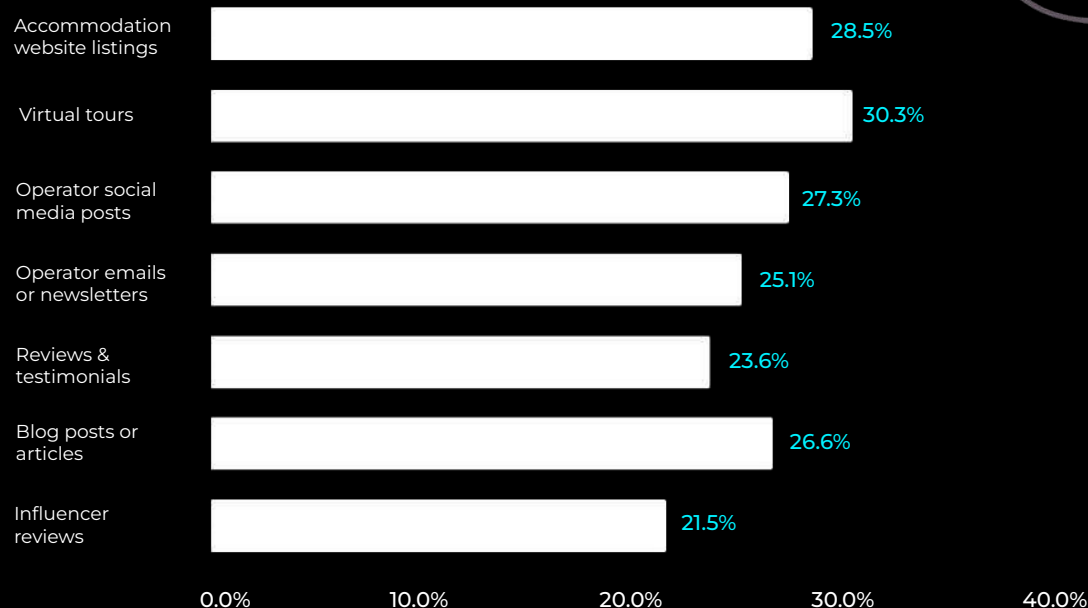
My parents were really involved. Safety, location and proximity to my studies, they reviewed everything with me. They were involved throughout the entire process.

”



WHICH FORMS OF ONLINE CONTENT PLAYED THE BIGGEST ROLE IN YOUR DECISION-MAKING? (SELECT UP TO 3)

PBSA STUDENTS



30% of students living in PBSA reported that **virtual tours** were most important in their decision-making, reflecting the increasing requirement to **showcase** your residence and rooms via this format.

The balanced spread of responses across these options emphasises that students actively engage with **diverse content** types across **multiple digital platforms** when evaluating their choices.

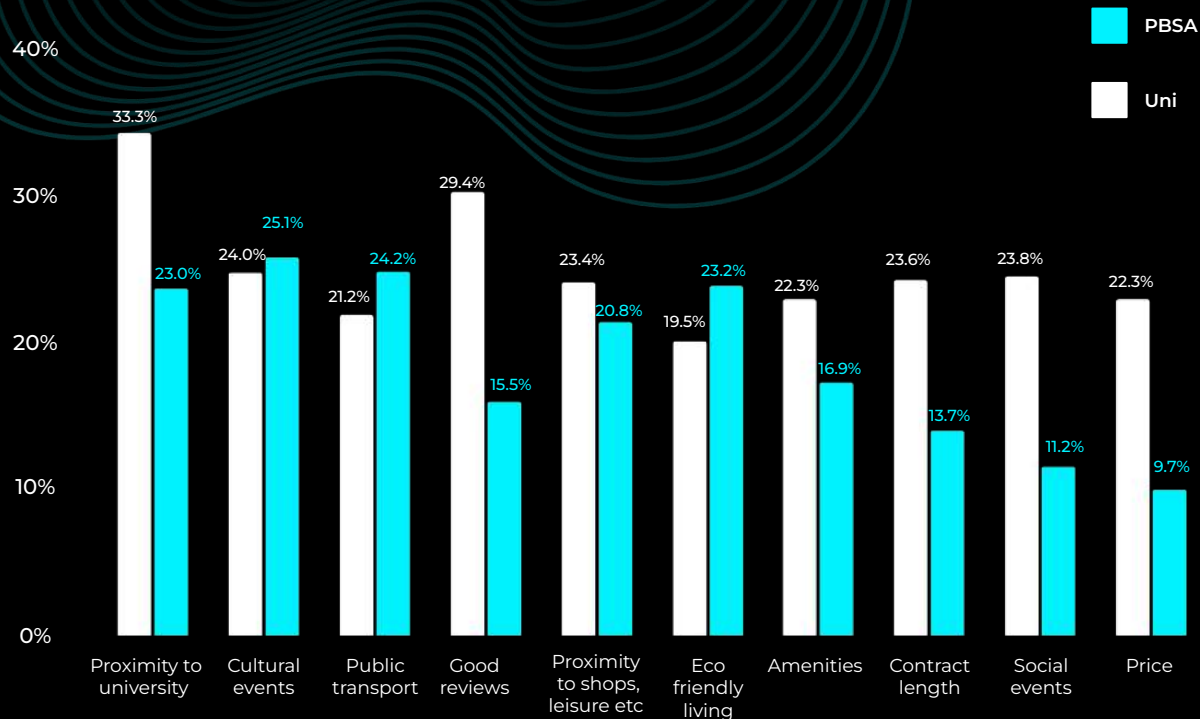


WHAT WERE THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS WHEN CHOOSING YOUR STUDENT ACCOMMODATION? (SELECT UP TO 3)

PBSA VS UNI PROVIDED ACCOMMODATION

25% of PBSA residents highlighted **cultural events** as a key factor during the consideration phase, reflecting the strong **international presence** in PBSA communities. It's not just about claiming these events happen, but **showcasing** them through content.

30% of students living in university-provided accommodation said **good reviews** were important, almost double that of PBSA students, likely due to less sophisticated digital marketing in this space.



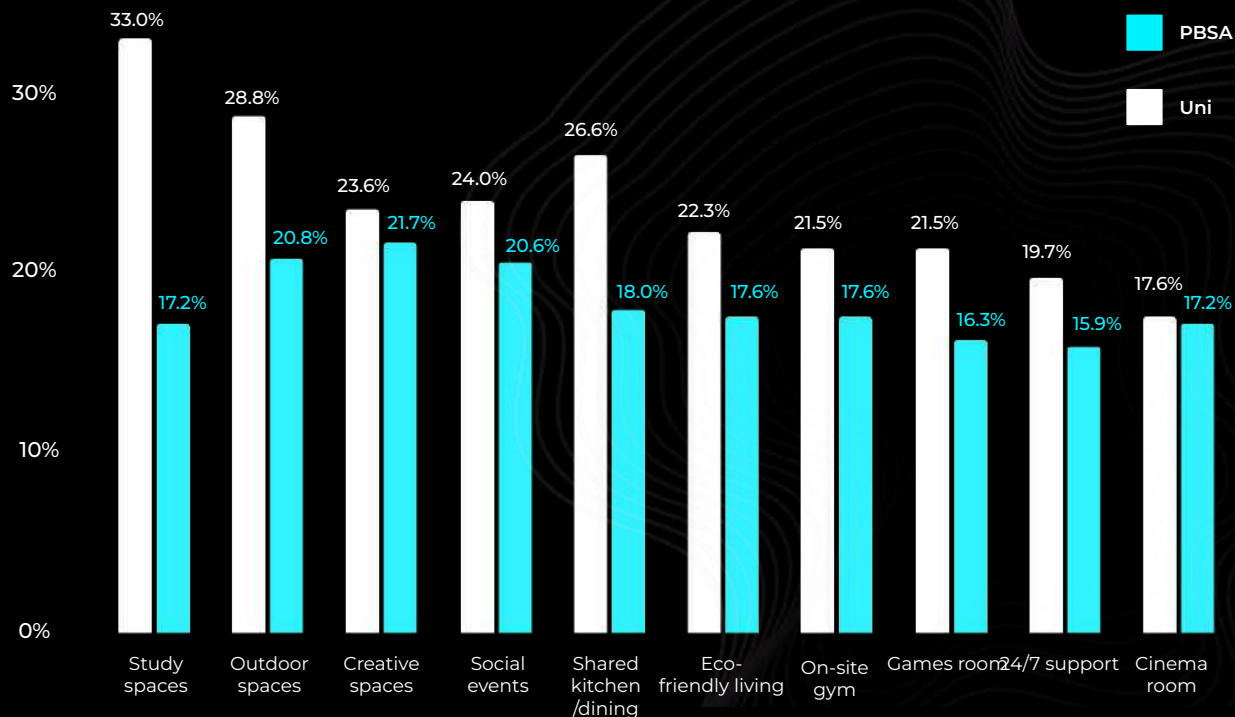
CONSIDERATION

WHICH AMENITIES OR FEATURES WOULD MOST INFLUENCE YOUR DECISION TO CHOOSE A STUDENT ACCOMMODATION? (SELECT UP TO 3)

PBSA VS UNI PROVIDED ACCOMMODATION

At this stage of the booking journey, PBSA students want to see **creative spaces**, **outdoor areas**, and details about **social events**. In contrast, **33%** of university accommodation students prioritise **quiet**, **dedicated study spaces**.

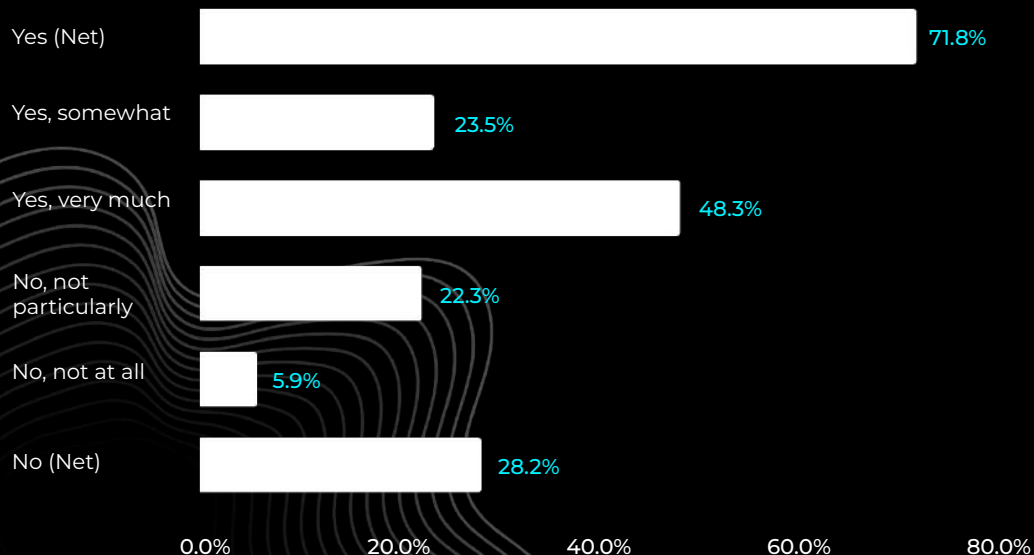
The **shifting priorities** of Gen Z (balancing work and studies with less traditional social activities) are shaping **new expectations** for their living spaces.



CONSIDERATION

DID RECOMMENDATIONS OR REFERRALS FROM CURRENT OR FORMER RESIDENTS INFLUENCE YOUR DECISION TO BOOK?

ALL STUDENTS



CONSIDERATION

Referrals and recommendations influenced the decision of **72%** of students, highlighting how valuable current residents can be as advocates, both for securing **rebookings** and attracting new students.

“

*If I were to do anything **differently** I would
definitely **check the reviews**.*

”

“

*After price, then the second thing is definitely
how **well-maintained** the building is, the
amenities and all the **social spaces**. And then
number three would be **proximity** to campus.*

”



“

*I **compared everything** but I wouldn't pay much attention to Instagram content. If I want **trustworthy reviews**, I go to **Google**, not social media.*

”

“

*Once I have shortlisted my options, maybe when I have two or three, if the **reviews** are **not convincing enough** to make a decision, I would then look on **YouTube**.*

”



CONSIDER YOUR COMMUNICATION

Digital-First Engagement

Prioritising fast, convenient information exchange helps PBSA meet the communication needs of this digital-savvy generation and avoid losing leads.

Targeted Content for Engagement

Operators should engage students and parents with content focusing on international communities, social events, and genuine ESG values.

Support Informed Decision-Making

Provide transparent, meaningful information to help students make confident, well-informed choices about their future living environment.





CONVERSION

Your prospective student has done their homework. They've **compared amenities**, **scrutinised pricing** and **pored over reviews**. Now they've landed on your website and they're ready to book. **Or are they?**

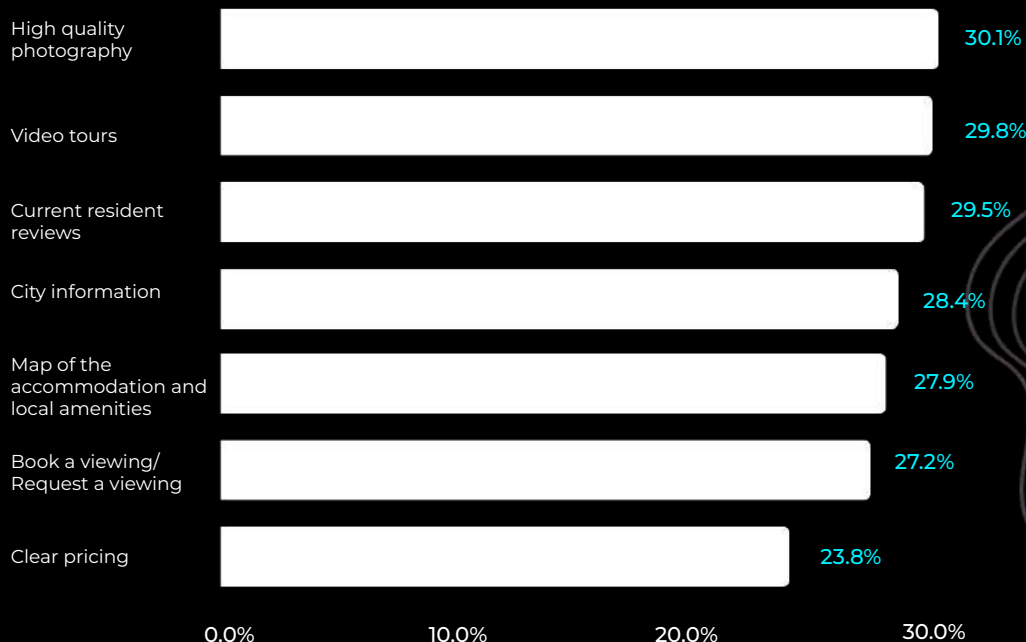
Data from the last sales cycle revealed that transactions happening **60-90 days** after initial website visits **increased** by nearly **600%**, while **revenue** from users visiting the website **12 or more** times grew by **13%**.

- What **information** do students need to see and hear to convert?
- What factors **delay** the decision?
- And what features **facilitate** a booking?



WHAT WEBSITE FEATURES HELPED YOU TO BOOK STUDENT ACCOMMODATION?

ALL STUDENTS



A balanced response shows the need for **comprehensive website features** throughout the user journey.

Photography often wins in the final decision stages, while **video** excels in early research, helping students **visualise** their new living experience, particularly for **international students**.

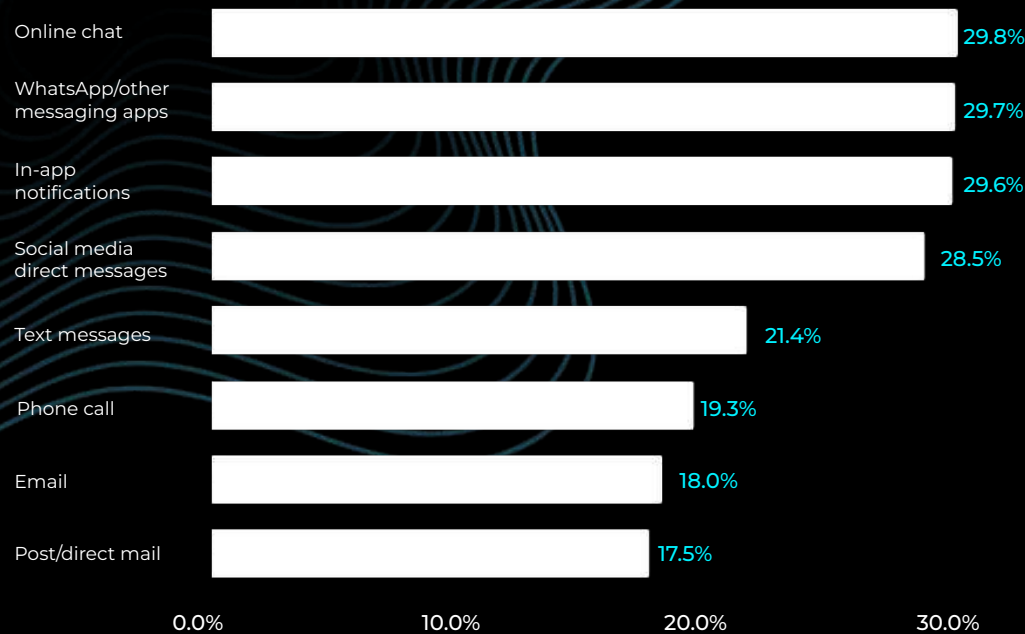
Resident reviews are critical for converting on the website: the **final peer-to-peer communication** in the booking process.



CONVERSION

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING COMMUNICATION METHODS FROM THE OPERATOR WOULD MOST ENCOURAGE YOU TO BOOK? (SELECT UP TO 3)

ALL STUDENTS



Students prefer communication methods that align with their **interactions** with their **social circles**, and, more importantly, when considering other products and services.

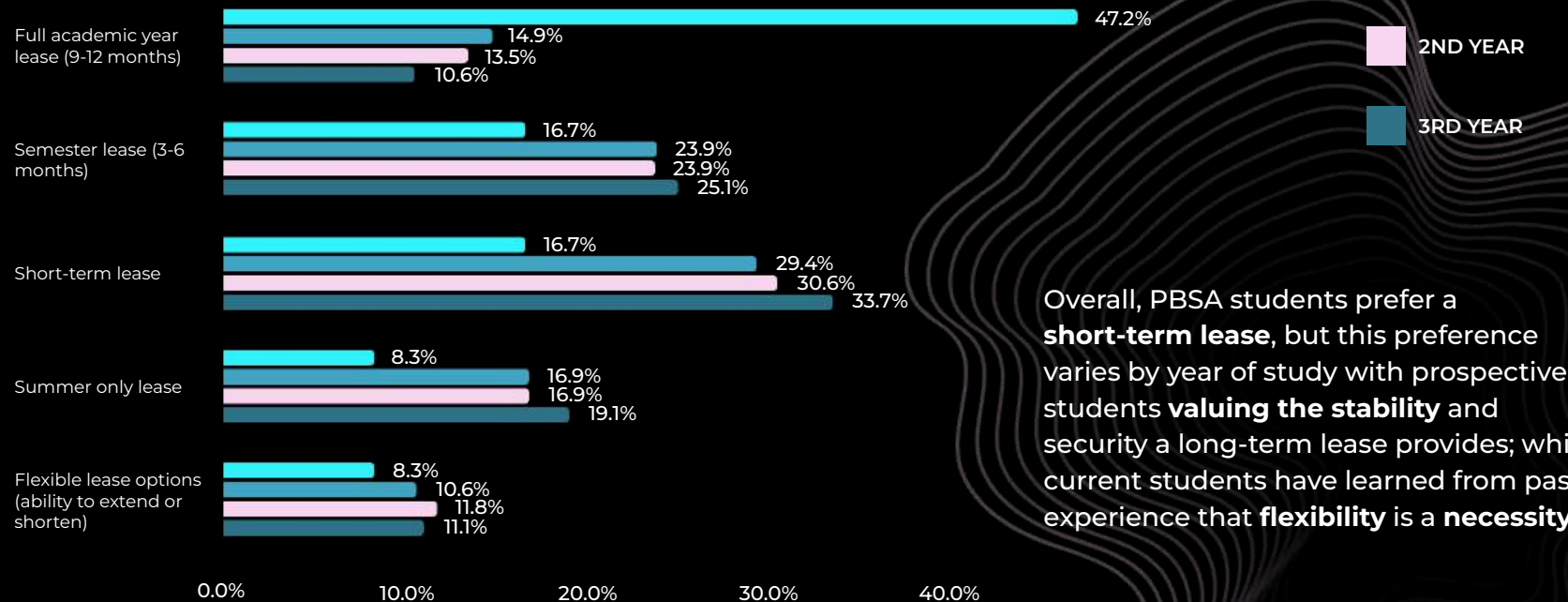
This means using the tools they're most comfortable with, such as **social media platforms** and **messaging apps**.



CONVERSION

WHEN BOOKING STUDENT ACCOMMODATION, WHICH TYPE OF LEASE WOULD YOU BE MOST LIKELY TO SELECT?

PBSA STUDENTS

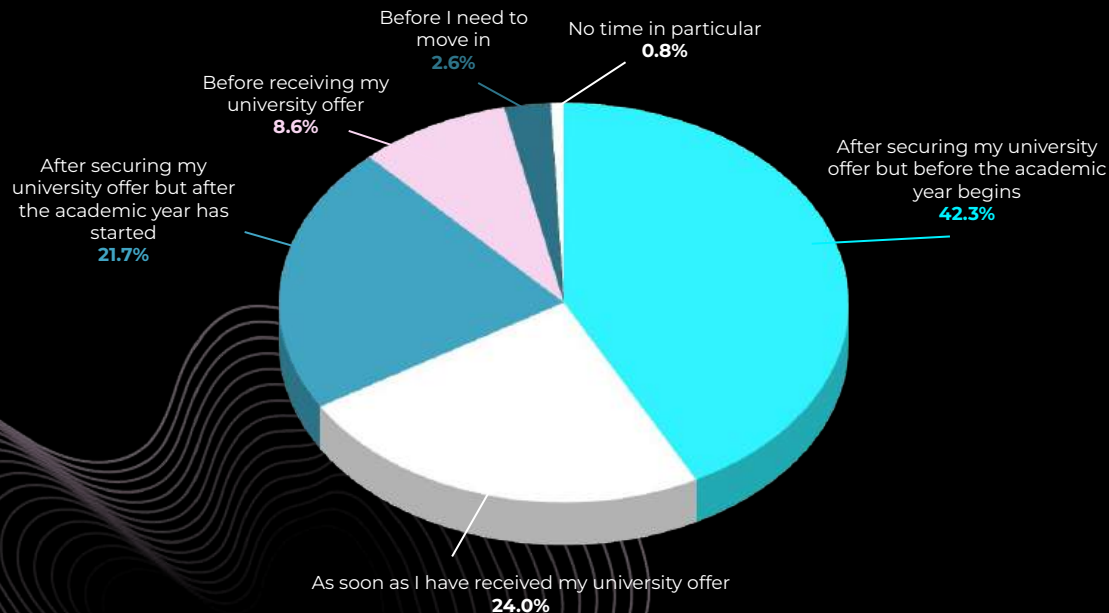


Overall, PBSA students prefer a **short-term lease**, but this preference varies by year of study with prospective students **valuing the stability** and security a long-term lease provides; while current students have learned from past experience that **flexibility** is a **necessity**.



AT WHICH POINT IN YOUR ACADEMIC JOURNEY DID YOU BOOK YOUR STUDENT ACCOMMODATION?

PBSA STUDENTS



¼ of students opting for PBSA book as soon as they **receive their university offer**. Even after the academic year begins, **22%** of PBSA students still secure their accommodation, showing that opportunities for bookings remain open at this late stage.



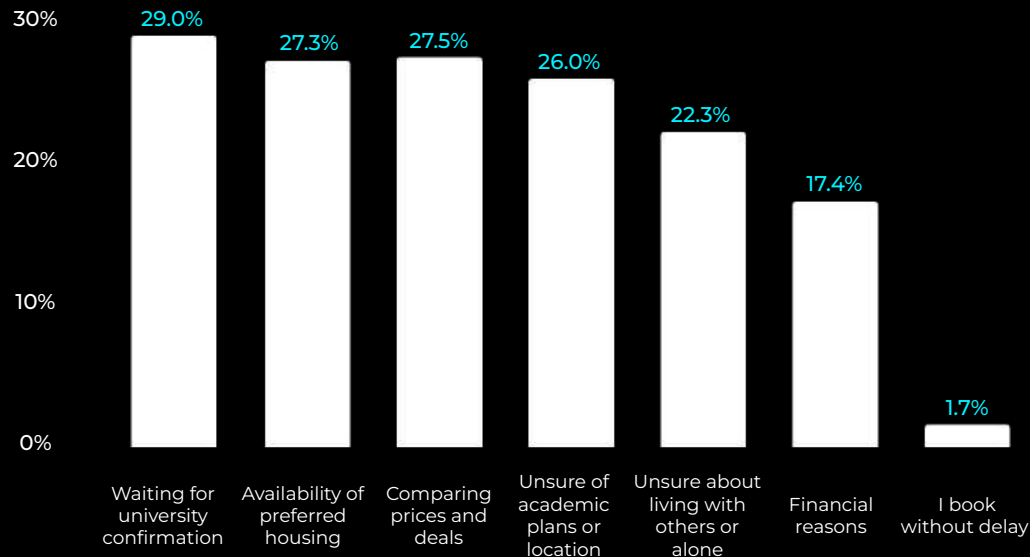
CONVERSION

WHICH FACTORS MOST DELAYED BOOKING YOUR ACCOMMODATION? (SELECT UP TO 3)

PBSA STUDENTS

Apart from waiting for a university offer, students face a challenging search due to a lack of **affordable** student accommodation.

This is reflected in their buying behaviour, involving **extensive price comparisons** and waiting for deals.



CONVERSION

TURN INTEREST INTO ACTION

Delayed Booking

A lack of affordable student housing has led to a prolonged decision-making process, delaying bookings for PBSA.

Driving Conversions

Longer purchasing journeys require conversion strategies that are tailored to deliberate buying behaviour and strategic retargeting campaigns.

Seamless Communication

Booking interactions should take place on the communication tools students use everyday, such as online chat, WhatsApp or in-app notifications.



CONVERSION





“

*I tried to book on the first day bookings opened; I just thought if I do it **quickly** I'll definitely get the ground floor **flat I wanted**.*

”

“

*I wanted to see what the room was going to be like. There was a **360 room tour** that you can use, so I used that quite a lot.*

”



CONVERSION

“

*I contacted an organisation on **Little Red Book**; they help **Chinese students** with booking. They helped me with the whole process and it was a **really good experience**.*

”

“

*I think it was towards the **end of June**, when I decided to do my studies in Manchester. So most of the accommodation was **already fully booked**.*

”



SEAMLESS COMMUNICATION: FROM BOOKING TO MOVE-IN

“

There was a definite **lack** of a **welcoming approach**.

”

“

They kept me **in the loop**, especially through the **app**, because we would have **notifications** from the app about **move-in slots**.

”

“

{X} has their own **app**, which you **download after you book**. It had all the **information** I needed: how to use some of the **amenities** or how to use **equipment** in the kitchen or in **your room**.

”

“

Pretty soon after booking, they added me into a **group chat** of **flatmates**, which was really nice because I could add my new flatmates on **Instagram**.

”

“

It was basically like.. 'This is your moving date and here's how you collect your keys.' There **wasn't that much communication** or **welcome stuff** before moving in.

”





LOYALTY

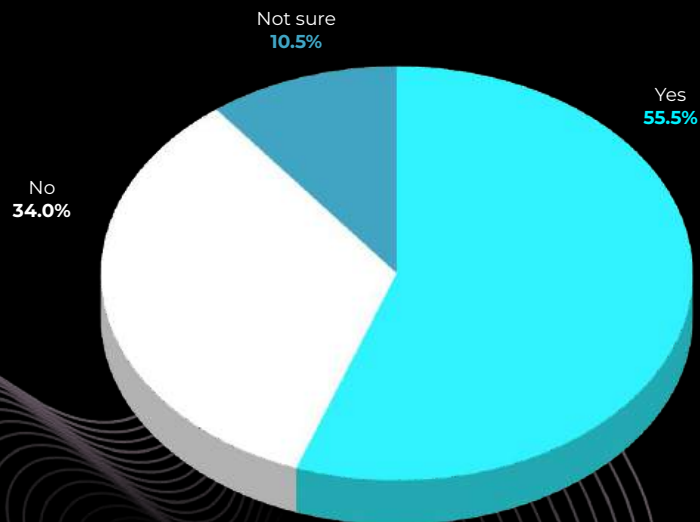
While much attention is given to attracting new students, the final stage of the student journey, **rebooking**, is just as **crucial** but often **overlooked**.

- When should you **engage** residents in rebooking?
- Why do your residents **leave**?



ARE YOU LOOKING TO MOVE TO AN ALTERNATIVE STUDENT ACCOMMODATION AT THE END OF THE SEMESTER (ie DEC 2024)?

PBSA STUDENTS



56% of students currently living in PBSA accommodation plan to move at the end of the first semester.

While we know that **international students** often reserve accommodation for a semester to get familiar with a new city and logistics, this statistic highlights a mismatch between **student expectations** and the **accommodation experience**.



LOYALTY

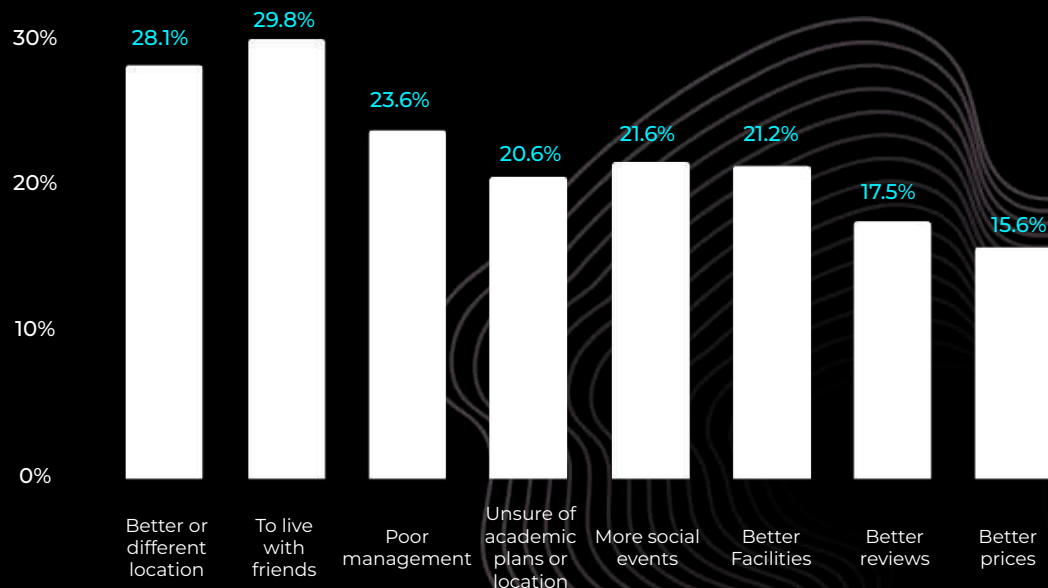
IF YOU ARE LOOKING TO MOVE TO AN ALTERNATIVE STUDENT ACCOMMODATION AT THE END OF THE SEMESTER, WHY? (SELECT UP TO 3)

PBSA STUDENTS

Nearly **30%** of students said they were leaving to **live with friends**. PBSA operators should **target students in competitor buildings** with content that appeals to **social connections**, encouraging group moves and bookings.

28% of students seek a **better location**. If your residence isn't close to campus or the city centre, **highlight your transport links**.

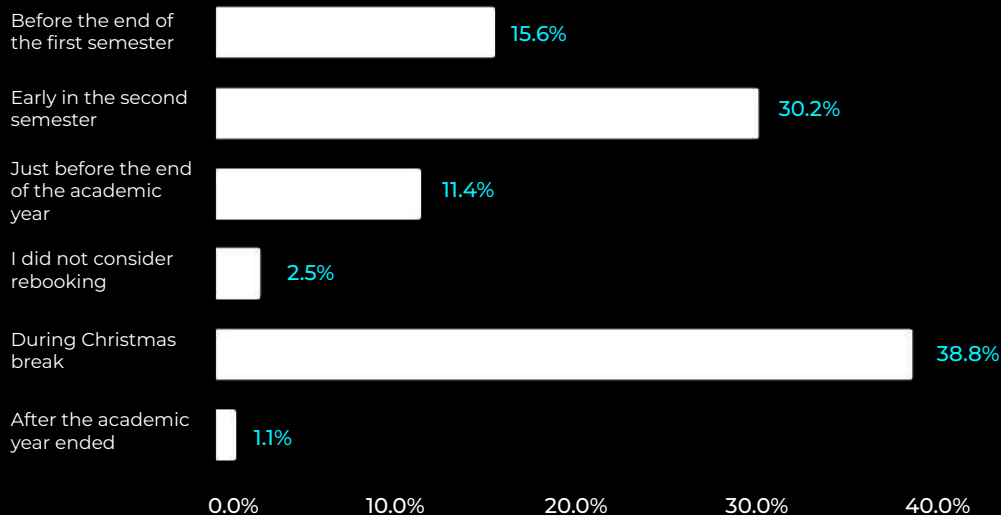
The third biggest reason to leave was due to **poor management**. Several students in our Student Spark programme cited issues like poor cleanliness and old furniture as their reasons to leave.



LOYALTY

WHEN DID YOU FIRST CONSIDER REBOOKING WITH YOUR CURRENT STUDENT ACCOMMODATION FOR THE NEXT ACADEMIC YEAR?

PBSA STUDENTS



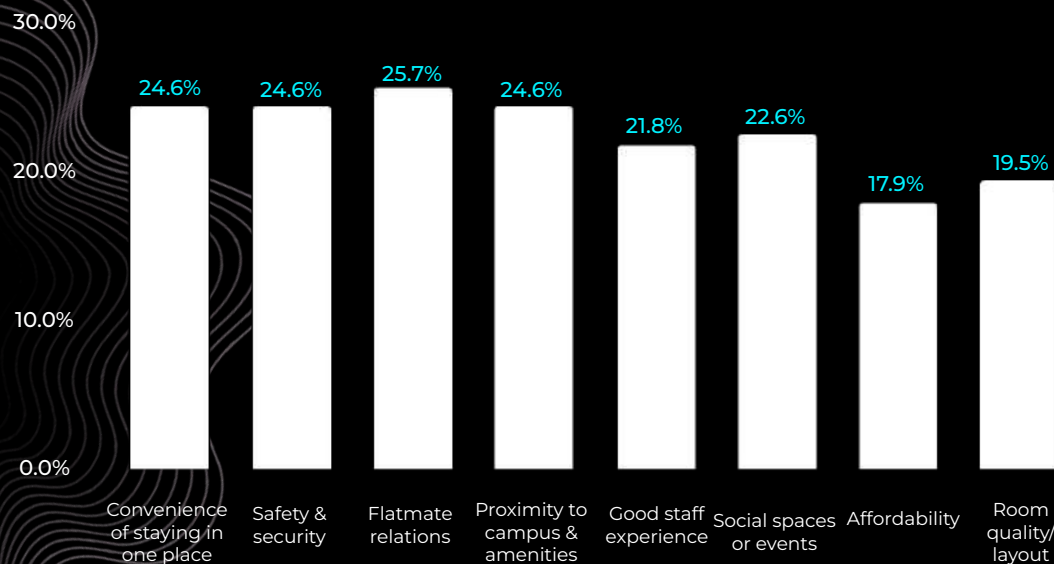
39% of students living in PBSA consider rebooking during the **Christmas break**.

In cities like Birmingham (**53%**) and Sheffield (**44%**)*, rebooking happens even **earlier**, before the end of the first semester, meaning that operators in these areas should engage with residents early, converting potential leads before they view competitors who are targeting them during the rebooking period.



WHAT FACTORS, IF ANY, WOULD MOST INFLUENCE YOUR DECISION TO REBOOK WITH YOUR CURRENT STUDENT ACCOMMODATION? (SELECT UP TO 3)

PBSA STUDENTS



Staying with friends is a priority for many students, and this could be leveraged in messaging through **group booking campaigns** that encourage students to keep the same room together for the next year.

Convenience is another important factor, and operators might consider tying it to cost by highlighting the **savings in time, effort, and moving expenses**.

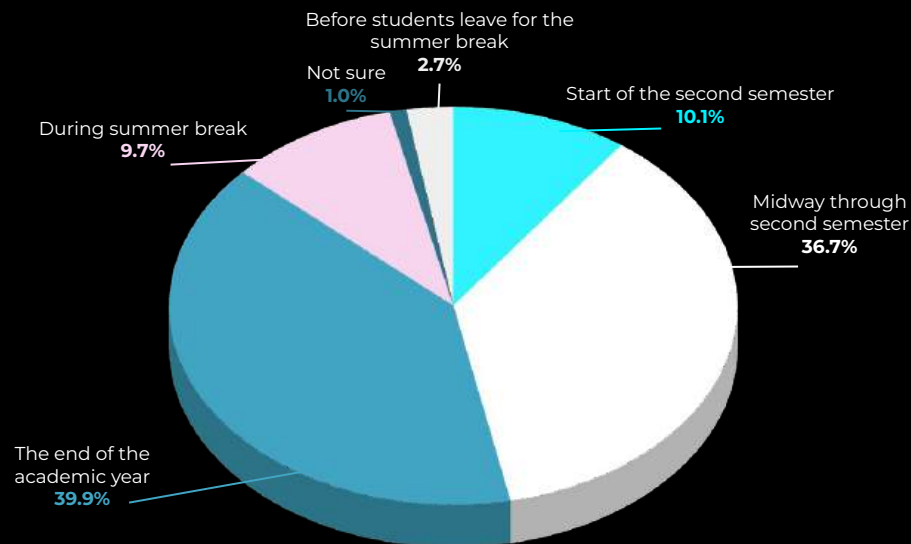
Finally, **security and safety** are a key consideration and can be a quick win for PBSAs by showcasing features that ensure a **safe living environment**.



LOYALTY

WHEN DO YOU THINK IS THE IDEAL TIME FOR STUDENT ACCOMMODATION PROVIDERS TO ASK STUDENTS TO REBOOK FOR THE NEXT ACADEMIC YEAR?

PBSA STUDENTS



Most students begin considering rebooking around Christmas, but when it comes to direct contact, they prefer providers to wait until **mid-way through the second semester** or even later.

This highlights the value of brand engagement campaigns that subtly promote rebooking without being too direct. The goal is to **build a connection** and **encourage the commitment** to rebook long before the ask.



LOYALTY

EARNING LOYALTY

Rebooking campaigns

Rebooking campaigns should nurture **year-round engagement** and **loyalty**. Re-engagement efforts should start early and build on the relationship without (just) asking students to “Book Now” for next year.

Expectations vs Reality

Students leave when their accommodation experience falls short of the marketing promises. **Authentic marketing content** is required to **build trust** and earn **loyalty** from students if you want them to rebook.

Increasing LTV

Acquiring new students is expensive. PBSA needs to focus on providing an accommodation experience that **justifies** the price point, **increases** the lifetime value of the customer and **amplifies** referrals.



LOYALTY



“

*I booked accommodation based on their **virtual tour** showing new, well-maintained flats. However, when I arrived, the actual condition **didn't match** what was **advertised**.*

”





WHAT DO STUDENTS WANT?

THE BOOKING JOURNEY: LONGER, MORE CONSIDERED THAN EVER

Booking student accommodation is not a light decision—it's a **pivotal** one. Students aren't just choosing a place to stay; they're finding a home, often with significant emotional and financial weight. And this decision-making process has only grown more complex as students grapple with **rising living costs**, questions about the **return on investment** in higher education, and for international students the tightening visa restrictions.

Students are doing extensive research, they're going **back and forth** comparing options and waiting for discounts. These trends highlight the importance of a more **patient** digital marketing strategy that accommodates this **elongated** journey. PBSA providers need to engage students **earlier** and over a **longer period of time**.

MAXIMISING TOUCHPOINTS: BALANCING QUALITY AND QUANTITY

It's no longer just about **increasing** the number of **touchpoints** with students; it's about making each interaction **meaningful**. Different stages of the booking journey come with **distinct information needs**, and PBSA providers must ensure they deliver content that addresses these needs **effectively**. Providers should consider:

- **What Information Students Need at Each Stage:** From financial details and amenities to community insights and location perks.
- **Where and How This Information is Delivered:** Choosing the right channels to communicate information effectively, whether through social media, websites, or email.

A diversified digital channel mix is **essential**, but not every channel will drive immediate sales. Some channels build **long-term trust** and **brand familiarity**, influencing student decisions subtly over time. A **holistic** view of your digital presence is necessary, as understanding how each channel interacts with others will **strengthen** your overall strategy.



THE OVERLOOKED STAGE: REBOOKERS

Rebooking should be a core focus of your marketing strategy. **Retaining** current students is more **cost-effective** than attracting new ones and builds loyalty, brand advocates, and long-term revenue. However, digital rebooking strategies often take a backseat to traditional methods like flyers and events. A successful rebooking approach must include **digital touchpoints** that engage students online. By integrating these interactions **early**, you strengthen **brand connection** and **commitment**, making rebooking a **natural choice** rather than a **reactive decision**.

“

*I wish the whole process was
more **clear** and **transparent**,
because when you're new to
the system you **don't know** how
things work.*

”

PLUGGING THE LEADS IN THE DIGITAL JOURNEY

A seamless booking process is **crucial for conversions**. Many PBSA providers face issues like outdated booking systems, poor navigation, and lack of tracking infrastructure, leading to drop-offs. Without proper tracking, it's difficult to identify where students abandon the booking journey. Think of your strategy as a bucket: **leaks** mean **lost opportunities**. Prioritising user experience and implementing **tracking tools** allows you to pinpoint and address these issues, maximising every lead generated.

The student accommodation market is more **competitive** than ever, and the buying journey is increasingly **nuanced**.

Success lies in understanding not just what students want, but how they want to **engage**, and providing them with the **right experience** at the **right time**.

By addressing their needs **holistically**, refining your **digital strategy**, and optimising the **user journey**, PBSA providers can stay ahead in a challenging market.

GET ACCESS TO MORE RESEARCH

At theEword, we specialise in helping PBSA providers navigate these complexities, combining data-driven insights with practical strategies to deliver results.

If you're interested in understanding how the booking journey has changed in specific markets, [Get in Touch.](#)

[Get access](#)