

Using Social Media in Public Universities. A Research on the University of Bucharest, Romania

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Abstract

During the last years, online marketing, especially social media marketing, has received increased attention in marketing for higher education. In this paper, we aim at gaining insight into the largest Romanian University's online communication strategy during the 2019 admission campaign – University of Bucharest. Although there is a growing body of literature on online marketing campaigns in Western democracies, little research exists on using Social Media in an emergent economy like Romania. In order to take a closer look at the University's online communication strategy, we conducted a content analysis on the posts published on the University's Facebook page over the 4 weeks leading up to and during admission period. This study is the first of its kind and it indicates that the University is constantly trying to use dialogue and call to action messages in order to generate user engagement.

Key words: higher education, Romania, social media, content analysis, public universities
J.E.L. classification: M31

1. Introduction

Online marketing, especially social media marketing, has received increased attention in marketing for higher education. Most universities own accounts on at least one social platform. Especially in the Western countries, Facebook and Twitter are very important social platforms used by universities. However, few studies have examined the social media characteristics of marketing for higher education in an emerging democracy as Romania.

Most universities around the world use social media and most of them use Facebook pages to address different audiences (for example, potential students, current students, former students or employees). As fans, users have the opportunity to engage in dialogues with other users or to comment, to like or to share content provided by the university or other users (Nevzat, Amca, Tanova & Amca, 2016; Smith, 2011). We use the term interactivity or engagement to sum up these three activities. At the same time, marketing specialists can integrate content from other social media platforms (eg. YouTube videos) into their posts. Thus, Facebook becomes a centralizing channel of social networks (Kuzma & Wright, 2013; Palmer, 2013; Greenwood, 2012).

This study comes in the context of a paradigm shift which we are witnessing with the very high popularity of social networks. If, until recently, marketing communication was predominantly unidirectional (television, radio or street ads, transmission of press releases, presentation websites etc.), the Internet created the premises of a bi-directional communication, in which the receiver can provide feedback and can even become content creator. Social networks are based on dialogue, bi-directional communication, and the increasing number of users has created a marketing opportunity for organizations, as they can dialogue with the beneficiaries or potential beneficiaries.

The motivation for choosing this research has two components: a professional and a scientific one. The professional one is justified by the activity that I have been carrying out for more than eleven years in the communication team of one of the most important public universities in Romania, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, where I have often faced challenges related to the efficient use of social media communication vehicles to fulfill the marketing objectives of the

institution. As a specialist, it is important to investigate how the main competitor of the University communicates, namely - the University of Bucharest, in order to establish the strategic marketing directions. The scientific motivation lies in the challenge of making a contribution in a field insufficiently explored in the national literature. The work we propose can bring much needed valuable research in this increasingly popular field. Communication through social networks in the educational field has been and continues to be a rather under-researched topic in the local area, which means we need information to shed some light over the phenomenon in question.

Marketing communication in public universities is not a common topic in Romania. The specialized literature on this topic is almost non-existent and, therefore, applying marketing concepts in the public sector in Romania is a challenge. On the other hand, we can see that public organizations and, more precisely universities, are trying to apply their own techniques when it comes to digital marketing. Therefore, studying the way social networks are used by the most important universities in Romania becomes a scientific necessity.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section provides a literature review on Social Media and online communication strategies; section 3 presents the objectives and methodology; in the fourth section we discuss the findings; section 5 concludes, outlines the limitations and gives an outlook for practical implications.

2. Literature review

By consulting the scientific literature we have found that marketing is not a foreign concept for both public and private universities in the United States of America or Western European countries (Klassen, 2002; Jongbloed, 2003; Chapleo et al., 2011). Theoreticians confirm the idea that marketing cannot be applied to the public sector in the same way it serves companies. Public institutions can make use of marketing techniques in a different way, as a result of budget constraints and multiple hierarchical subordination (Gibbs, 2002; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006).

A study by Peruta and Helm (2014) which investigates how higher education institutions in the United States of America use Facebook to build and provide content on social networks concluded that maintaining a presence on social media platforms - namely Facebook - is imperative for student recruitment, retention, visibility and reputation. The results confirmed that the strength of the university Facebook community is positively correlated with individuals who identify with the real community, as well as with increased levels of trust and involvement with the university community as a whole (Nevzat, Amca, Tanova & Amca, 2016).

In recent years, universities have increasingly focused on social networks to build and maintain qualitative relationships with co-interested groups (Colvin, 2011). For example, in a study that investigated social media consumption among the top 100 higher education institutions, 92% reported using social media in collaboration with their official websites as a way to connect with various stakeholders. (Faculty Focus, 2011). In another study, which examined the marketing teams of 69 universities in the UK, 98% of respondents said they invest in social media as part of their marketing strategy (Shaw, 2014). Another study conducted by Melissa Clark, Monica B. Fine and Cara-Lynn Scheuer (2016) on the use of social networks in universities in the United States of America concludes that the way social networks are used affects the quality of university's relationships with its key interest groups - students.

Regarding the research in Romania, we take the example of a study from the Polytechnic University of Timisoara (Holotescu & Grosseck, 2013) that discusses how higher education institutions perceive and use social media, trying to investigate how the members of the academic communities use social media as tools for learning and collaboration. What are the potential benefits, challenges and disadvantages of using social media in universities? Is it necessary for the institutions to be trained in this field? These are two of the questions that this research raises. To answer, the author developed and applied an online survey for researchers from different universities in Romania. The findings revealed an increasing use of social networks among universities, but only a small amount of them have adopted coherent strategies and policies for the pedagogical integration of social networks and the development of the best teaching and learning methods based on these strategies.

Previous work has shown that there are several strategies or tactics that can be used to increase the fan engagement of a page and that certain types of posts lead to greater user engagement. Among them, the most relevant are:

1. Post format / structure

Specifically, studies show that photos receive more likes and comments (Kwok & Yu, 2013) than other types of posts. Facebook users may be more attracted to simpler, more regular messages that contain photos, than those that require a link or involve watching a video. Posts that seem natural receive more likes and comments than posts that seem to be the result of sales strategies or marketing statements (Kwok & Yu, 2013).

2. Frequency

Other recent studies have shown that there are significant links between the frequency of posts and fan engagement. (Peruta & Shields, 2016). Specifically, the larger the number of posts a university publishes in a day, the smaller the number of fans who respond to them, suggesting a saturation point for posts from a single entity.

3. Call to action

Another factor that can influence engagement is the use of call to action. Traditional media marketers such as press, television and radio are constantly developing messages to urge consumers to take action. Lee (2012) found that Facebook posts that contain action calls encourage fans to interact with posts, which increases the audience. Users tend to respond better when they are specifically told how to respond to the message they have read (for example, click, rate, share and comment).

3. Objectives and research methodology

The paper aims at gaining insight into the 2019 online admission campaign, with the purpose of taking a closer look at the online communication strategy. To that end, we conducted a content analysis on the posts published on the University of Bucharest's official Facebook page over the four weeks leading up to and during the admission period. Using both a priori and emergent coding, we studied the posts published during in the online campaign and we identified the patterns used in the University's online speech.

The University of Bucharest (UB) is the largest university in Romania, being present and active on social networks since 2010, when it started to use Facebook. Currently, the online community of UB on Facebook has over 92,000 followers - being the university with the largest Facebook community in Romania - the majority being graduates, students, teachers or potential students.

In the study, we describe the digital campaign using the categories identified in the literature review: post type/structure (Kwok & Yu, 2013), frequency of posts (Peruta & Shields, 2016) and call to action (Lee, 2012). Moreover, we also use emergent coding to analyze the main topic, the key concepts and the affective state of the posts.

We investigate the way Facebook was used in the 2019 summer admission campaign at the University of Bucharest. More specifically, we focus on the types of content that the University of Bucharest publishes on Facebook, the structure/formats used in Facebook posts, as well as the frequency of posts. Also, we are interested in how many of the messages contain a call to action.

Our objectives are:

O1: Identify the structure/formats used in the Facebook posts.

O2: Identify the post frequency.

O3: Identify the posts which contain a call to action.

O4: Identify the main theme of the messages, the key concepts and the tone of message.

Due to the nature of our objectives, in our research we use a qualitative research method: content analysis. Our study is based rather on behavioral tendencies and not on absolute values, considering that the communication field is a flexible and versatile one, subject to frequent changes. Due to its exploratory qualitative positioning, the content analysis proves to be adequate in the present study. Content analysis of messages posted by public universities on official Facebook pages helps us find out if there are certain patterns / types of messages that are used in the online campaign of the University of Bucharest.

The content analysis was conducted for a period of 43 days before admission and during admission period, so the period of analysis was May 27 - July 30, 2019. In total, The University of Bucharest published 82 messages, and for our research we used a sample of 67 messages - 23 of these messages were published during the admission period. For the research only the text of posts was taken into consideration (photos, links, videos were not analyzed).

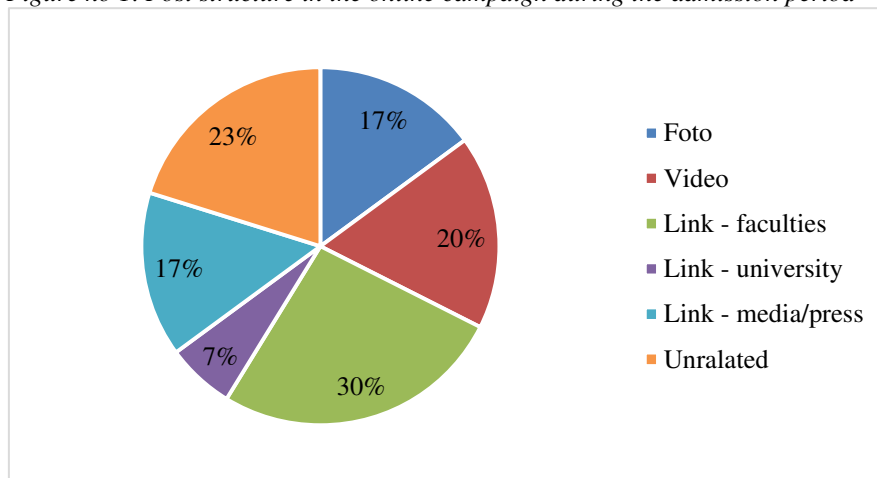
The interpretation process was carried out twice, with a five-day distance, to confirm that the findings remain unchanged. We mention that only few irrelevant differences appeared.

Although content analysis is a method that can generate reliable and repeatable data, communication specialist Sally J. Mc Millan (2013) warns us that online content analysis implies a higher degree of risk in terms of the validity of results, as the internet is an environment that is constantly changing, in a very short time. Therefore, when choosing this method, we must take care to generalize the results with regard to users and non-users of social networks. Studies show that the average age of consumers on social networks is lower than the age of the population, so we cannot conclude on the whole population. At the same time, Internet access is not available to all Romanians, although the number of users is constantly increasing.

4. Findings

Format/structure. During the admission period, most of the posts - 30% are messages that promote the faculties within the university, integrating direct links to their website. An important share (20%) is also occupied by messages that incorporate a video. It is interesting that all the videos are monologues of young people talking about what it means to be a student at the University of Bucharest. The posts also contain links to several articles in the media about the University or links to information on the University's website – www.unibuc.ro.

Figure no 1. Post structure in the online campaign during the admission period



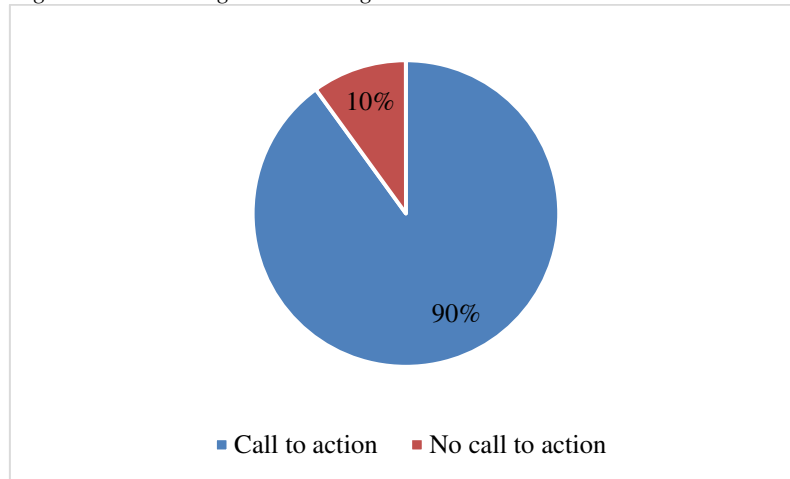
Source: Author's creation

Before starting the admission campaign, the situation is different. Most messages incorporate photos (46%), which is actually an excerpt from the admission booklet, which provides information about the admission process. Videos are also used here, but to a lower extent than during the admission period (18%). The links to the University's faculties are between 3 and 17%.

Frequency of posts. During the admission period, the average number of posts is 1 per day, whereas prior to admission the frequency decreases, with 39 messages published in 43 days.

Call to action. The University of Bucharest has conducted a campaign that tries to engage with the audience, 90% of the messages integrating an incentive and trying to get a response from the online community. The use of call to action, conjunctive verbs and direct addressing is constant in the admission campaign. Moreover, all the messages referring to admission also incorporated a hashtag, a very popular element in online communication among young people, in order to catch their attention. The hashtag #hailaUB (#cometoUB) is used 69 times in 67 messages, and the incentive "let's ...!" appears 75 times.

Figure no 2. Messages containing a call to action



Source: Author's creation

In addition to messages which encourage action, the online campaign also seeks to stimulate interaction with members of the online community by using interrogations. Thus, in 24% of the published messages, students are encouraged to answer questions and provide feedback.

Main theme, key concepts, affective state, tone of message . The central message of the campaign is "Come to the University of Bucharest!" The hashtag #hailaUB (#cometoUB) was used 69 times in 67 messages. The tone of communication is direct, familiar, and sometimes jovial.

The language is accessible, simple; active diathesis and direct addressing are frequently used. The messages are trying to generate a connection with students by integrating elements from young people's style of communication, like emoji and hashtags.

5. Conclusions, limitations and practical implications

Communication on Facebook creates an opportunity for universities to dialogue with people interested in their educational services, to transmit a well-targeted message, to get feedback and engage with their community. The purpose of our research was to investigate the way Facebook was used in the July 2019 admission campaign of the University of Bucharest, the largest university in Romania. Findings indicate that the University of Bucharest has conducted a campaign that tries to engage with the audience and trigger a reaction from the online community, 90% of the messages integrating an incentive in order to trigger a response from the online community. The University's online campaign is constantly trying to use dialogue and call to action message to generate user engagement.

Our study knows some limitations. Thus, we must specify that although we have captured every message published in the 2019 admission campaign and a period of 30 days before it, this sample remains a partial snapshot, the admission campaign being carried out, in fact, throughout the entire academic year. Therefore, it would be advisable to carry out a content analysis that includes all the messages used during a university year. Also, in order to complete the content analysis, the published photos and videos, not just the text related to them, can be taken into consideration in order to obtain a more insightful approach.

When it comes to the practical implications, we cannot deny that marketing and, implicitly, communication through social networks proves to be opportunities that universities can take advantage of in order to increase the number of students. The main goal of marketing communication is to produce results that the target market can appreciate. Public institutions can benefit if they include in their mission, problem-solving and achieving results a well-defined strategy for the use of social networks, so as to attract as many students as possible.

Thus, with the help of social networks, the administration can be transformed from a traditional institution, which has a weak contact with the public into a modern institution, with a strong contact with co-interested groups. At the same time, in Romania, social networks are not properly

used to generate income, as it is already happening in Western countries, therefore, the purpose of our work is to generate the insight needed to align Western theory and practice.

Despite our limitations, the study generates valuable insight into the University of Bucharest's 2019 online admission campaign, that can be used in future research. At the same time, the research carried out brings an element of novelty to the existing literature, which, adapted accordingly, can be developed to carry out wider research.

6. References

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