

Helpful or not? A Review about the Role of Social Media in Higher Education Admission Campaigns.

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Abstract

Communication through the social networks in the educational field has been and continues to be a rather under-researched topic. This study is a synthesis of literature which aims at shedding some light at how higher education institutions use social media during the admission campaigns. Findings shows that strategy regarding the content posted on social is very important and without interesting and captivating content, the presence on social networks is not useful for an institution. Public institutions should understand the market dynamics and technology evolution and try to find and apply new, more effective communication tools.

Key words: higher education, Romania, social media, literature review

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1. Introduction

According to researchers Lovari and Giglietto (2012), universities use social networks for two interdependent purposes: to promote the university and create a sense of community for current graduates and students and to disseminate information (such as news about campus activities or job). Both goals are frequently fulfilled through the digital communication activities of the Romanian institutions, because the aim is to involve the students in the university life and to create an impact on the target audience. By promoting the activities carried out, the higher education institutions create a sense of belonging to the university community among the pursuers. Social media offer universities a valuable opportunity to improve the relationship with potential students by facilitating dialogue and their integration into university culture, but also by creating a sense of community. Higher education institutions have the opportunity to post interactive content to give potential students the chance to interact with the university brand. Online social networking platforms offer a variety of engagement and productivity benefits from employee brainstorming, enhanced collaboration, and knowledge transfer. Therefore, these favorable technologies can have an effect on student satisfaction levels, while creating a positive image for the university.

2. Theoretical background

The progress of marketing communication in higher education, from traditional marketing materials to the implementation of social media on various platforms, as well as connections between institutions and students in today's world with technological knowledge, can generate quantitative but also qualitative benefits. The quantitative potential of the number of potential students that can be addressed through messages sent through social networks is growing, and attracting those students who are really interested in studies is also a goal that can be achieved through social media.

In addition to building a connection with users, brands need to foster a sense of belonging through interaction and involvement, where involvement can take the form of content that fits certain user groups (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012), e.g. future students. Foulger (2014) explains that successful higher education institutions use social media as a traditional marketing funnel. Therefore, a university brand must take into account when analyzing the SMM strategy the level of involvement

(interaction) and external content (links to websites) related to the interest of the target audience (followers). External content, ie links to university websites that can provide more details, is an equally important element to consider when discussing the SMM strategy. Social networks provide higher education institutions with an opportunity to promptly provide useful information about the admissions process that can positively influence the perceptions of potential students. However, the information posted on social media is not always very detailed, in order to preserve the informal nature of the platforms used. Therefore, the possibility to make references in the text of the posts to the official website of the universities is an advantageous functionality that must be taken into account.

Detailed analysis of potential target audience or audience is vital to the social media communication process. As I mentioned when analyzing the importance of the recipients, segmenting the target audience is a stage that can make a difference then in the planning process of the promotion strategy during the period of university admissions. Who is the main audience of university social networks? Constantinides (2012) shows that higher education institutions address especially those who will financially support the university by enrolling in courses, purchasing university equipment and support through donations, ie potential and current students, but also the alumni community. and former students). Yang and Lee (2018) also point out that if a person attends a university on Facebook, it will increase the likelihood that the person will complete the courses at that university, or offer donations to the institution. This suggests that university marketing on Facebook is indeed successful, but little is known about the factors that influence the effectiveness of this type of marketing.

Another reason that demonstrates the effectiveness of social media is that they offer a unique opportunity to customize messages according to the language needs and preferences of the target audience. Thus, international students can translate the information available on various digital platforms to find out about the admission process, but also about the schedule and study offers. Given the current context of budget cuts and growing competition, resource management in recruiting international students is becoming even more important. While some institutions support the use of intermediaries to promote educational offerings, more credible and cost-effective connections with potential students can be created through social networks.

A useful tool for recruiting through digital technologies is to use online videos to help potential students understand campus life and clarify their concerns about the options available to their preferences. Such videos provide students with an extremely compelling communication channel, given that many students cannot visit the campus before making a decision. The emergence of social networks in the online environment is a major impact factor in the analysis of the future of higher education, and adapting to this change is essential in achieving recruitment goals.

Social networks are cost-effective and efficient, but building a community and measuring digital results can be a challenge, especially for universities that do not have a marketing department. Also, the use of social media may conflict with the established norms and traditions of higher education institutions related to the informal style of communication. Online social networks are a new communication channel for universities, with the advantage of distributing well-targeted messages (Moogan, 2011). The key to effective use of social media is to create a two-way communication that seeks engagement, rather than simply being an additional channel for broadcasting or advertising (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012). If social networks are used in the process of promoting university admissions, it is necessary for specialists responsible to know both the content of social networks and their operation (Rekhter, 2012). With the development of competition between universities, institutions feel the pressure to be creative and memorable on social networks. According to Reuben (2008), almost half of all official university social media accounts are managed by one or more people in the marketing / communications / public relations office. Other official accounts are managed either by the admissions committee of each university, or by graduate offices, or even by specialized agencies in the field of web development (Reuben, 2008). Some universities also have a second account managed by their admissions office (Thornton, 2017).

3. Research methodology

This paper is a literature review on how higher education institutions use social media during the admission campaigns. Research indicates that to determine if there is a link between social media communication of educational institutions and the attraction of potential students for admission, it is important to analyze the types of posts distributed on social networks and understand the role that the level of involvement and commitment has in the success of university marketing communication.

4. Findings

4.1. How do universities engage students through social media?

One measure often used to measure the success of an initiative is through user involvement (Peruta & Shields, 2017). Involvement in social networks has been defined in various ways, including the fact that a visitor to the social platform performs certain actions beyond viewing or reading, for example, by appreciating, sharing, commenting, or other available forms of interaction (Paine, 2011). On the other hand, Sashi (2012) is of the opinion that involvement can be defined by interactions that "extend the role of customers by including them in the process of adding value as co-creators of value" (Sashi, 2012, p. 259). However, researchers agree that involvement in a social media setting is most often a behavioral manifestation of a deep commitment or loyalty to a brand (Bowden, 2009; Van Doorn et al., 2010). In the communication of higher education institutions, the involvement of the target audience is intended to manifest their commitment to the posts and activities distributed on the official website of the university.

The findings show that a single post on social media is not enough to persuade the target audience; rather, involvement and commitment (through feedback and comments) is needed to see substantial change. Stvilia and Gibradze (2017) found that the type of content distributed in a post on social networks (e.g., information about academic support for studies, events, etc.) can affect the level of involvement and, consequently, the effectiveness of the information in the post. to make a conative change among social network users (for example, sign up for an event or share a post).

Several theorists have shown the important value that the degree of engagement on social networks has in the process of communicating information and academic ideas among potential and current students, but also among students (Stewart & Walker, 2018; Stvilia & Gibradze, 2017). Much of this research focuses on how academic libraries use digital social networks to attract students to the library and engage them in the activities of librarians. However, the same strategies can be used in the activities of attracting candidates for admission. Communication through social media can meet the marketing objectives targeted in the marketing strategy.

Student engagement is an important concept when it comes to social media. To increase the engagement, social media communication specialists use various tools. For example, a popular type of posting on social networks is that of campus events (Taecharungroj, 2017). These may include campus photos, news about a new project, new grants, or policies. There are also frequent posts about extracurricular activities, whether they are sports events, activities carried out by associations supported by the university or personal development courses. Romanian universities ensure that social media posts promote interactive activities in order to attract as many potential students as possible. In addition to interactive posts, educational institutions promote both potential jobs available and activities that can support students in the post-graduate employment process.

Cialdini's (2014) principles can be used as a starting point for creating university marketing strategies on social networks. He stipulated that there are six principles of persuasion, if used correctly, not only stimulate the conversions in online marketing, but can also have a positive effect on the admission campaigns. The principles are the following: consistency, reciprocity, social proof, authority, sympathy and rarity.

Reciprocity. This principle involves invoking a sense of duty among the target audience. In the case of higher education institutions, the principle of reciprocity can be used in creating qualitative messages that highlight exclusive benefits or information. By providing quality content, universities can influence online users to join their community (ig, they can follow the Facebook page) to receive equally useful information later or even create a behavioral effect among followers. Also, if the

messages communicated through social networks are built on the principle of reciprocity, the rate of commitment and involvement will increase through favorable responses from the community created. From model lessons to present the educational offer, to tutorials to facilitate the enrollment process, public institutions could provide students in the final years with various materials to induce the feeling of debt.

Consistency. This principle is met in online marketing through those free samples or interactive materials that involve the target audience who, once they have deposited sufficient resources (energy, emotional, etc.), will be much more willing to make available personal data (such as would be phone numbers or email addresses that can later be used in direct marketing) or buy something. In the case of higher education institutions, this principle can be used in social media communication to determine the commitment and consistency of potential students. The e-mail addresses or telephone numbers the potential students will provide as a result of these campaigns are very valuable for universities.

Social proof. For universities, this principle can be used to create persuasive messages that demonstrate the social power of existing communities within the university. For example, by mentioning the large number of current students or alumni who have chosen to attend university, a public institution can determine a cognitive effect among potential students who can be convinced of the notoriety of the university. These messages work especially among potential students interested in social status and the opinions of those around them.

Authority. In general, people have the tendency to follow the advice of those with authority and expertise in a particular field. This is why social media marketing based on influencers is a good example of sales practices. For higher education institutions, arguments based on expertise or authority are very useful to create a positive image of the university brand. For example, a professor may well represent the interests of a university on social media platforms. Also, alumni who have come to hold an important position in the field they have studied can be points of reference in the promotion strategy of educational institutions.

Sympathy. People tend to have more confidence in the brands they identify with. Through the similarity offered, brands seem to be more attractive, and by providing enough details about the brand's history and the team behind it, a higher education institution can attract more potential students.

Rarity. Offers posted on social networks which are only valid for a limited period of time or that they are highly desirable. Department stores use this principle when promoting Black Friday offers. For universities, presenting the limited number of places available for a particular faculty or the deadline by which potential students can enroll for university courses is a useful approach in the admissions process.

These principles can be used both in messages transmitted through social networks and in messages communicated in the traditional way (through radio, TV or unconventional advertisements). Using the principles of persuasion described by Cialdini are useful in creating impact messages. Along with an attractive visual, university communication specialists can influence the number of students at admission and can successfully meet the proposed marketing objectives. In addition, messages that follow the principles of persuasion have a higher degree of involvement from online users.

Habibi et al. (2014) argue that user involvement means strengthening the relationship between the organization and the "customer". Involvement can be quantified (to a sufficient extent) in social networks such as Facebook through feedback (appreciation), comments and sharing. According to the authors, there are two approaches that can identify the independent factors that could create a greater commitment: qualitative methodologies, such as analyzing the content of posts and associating the types of posts (those about campus activities, those about graduates, those about sports) with the level of commitment; and quantitative methodologies, such as quantitative analysis of university social networks (number of followers on Facebook, number of students who appreciate the posts). While the former is useful for content developers, the latter can test the significance of relationships and predict involvement based on university attributes. No method has been used in detail in social media marketing research, so more research is needed in this area, and especially in higher education marketing.

Some studies have indicated that the ways in which individuals react to posts on social networks (their behavior) may vary depending on geographical factors or other factors (Taecharungroj, 2017). In other words, the psychological response of viewing and reaction to a post may be influenced by sociological and political factors (geographical location; university prominence). The findings of these studies are supported by research into the search and use of information, which demonstrates that the type of information sought, how it is searched and how it is used can be influenced by contextual factors depending on each user (Johnson, 2003; Wilson, 1999). At present, there is insufficient evidence to provide a clear indication in any direction of the effect of geography and other factors on interaction with social networks.

4.2. Using social media in admission campaigns - lessons from the corporate environment applied in higher education

Employee engagement through social media is essential for organizations that want to be successful and universities have begun to consider the benefits of using social media to maintain a beneficial relationship with current and potential students. The individuals involved are described as more attentive, emotionally connected, integrated, focused on their organizational performance (MacLeod & Brady, 2008), being willing to put more effort into their tasks. The employee involved will usually demonstrate initiative, proactively looking for opportunities to contribute to organizational activities, will be willing to share information with colleagues and will try harder to meet customer needs. Similarly, students with a high degree of involvement / commitment may share educational information more easily and may have a greater impact in admissions campaigns.

Following the corporate model, some universities use students with attractive social media accounts to be "brand ambassadors," offering potential students different perspectives on student life (Davis, 2016). In college communication, student blog posts are used to increase engagement with the target audience, as well as YouTube videos. Southwest Wisconsin Technical College (SWTC) has improved its recruitment efforts through social networking with six student ambassadors. The SWTC found that most potential students preferred to learn about college and student life directly from a current student rather than a member of the university staff. These student ambassadors provided potential students with a variety of information distributed in an informal manner, which further attracted the target audience. Thus, sharing content that promotes a sense of friendship also generates a sense of belonging to the community created among current students and can be a viable tactic for younger students.

Despite the widespread adoption of social networks by students, there are key challenges for the effective recruitment process. First of all, the popularity of social networks has divided the public on several platforms. Potential students regularly check more than Facebook. They use Pinterest, Vine, Snapchat, among many others. For the staff in charge of the marketing campaign since admission, this means more time spent attracting a less captive audience. Second, college recruiters often struggle to calculate a reliable return on investment (ROI) for their socialization efforts. For many higher education institutions, when analyzing social media statistics, they pay attention to the number of friends, followers, comments and likes. Unfortunately, these numbers express a superficial connection with the target audience and it is likely that a small number of very involved followers will generate more sign-ups than a large group who visit only once and never return.

Although there are many benefits to using social media, such as communication transparency and user-generated content, there are considerations to consider when setting your university communication strategy, including responsiveness, confidentiality and control. Although transparency is an advantage of social networks, it can quickly become a disadvantage if organizations try to hide things from public control (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012). Social networks are designed for user-generated content, which can cause problems if students or staff make public complaints (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012). Complaints on social networks can have a negative impact on a university's brand if not treated properly (Leng, 2012).

In addition, despite the widespread adoption of social networks by potential students, these present two key challenges for the effective recruitment process. First of all, the popularity of social networks has divided the public on several platforms. For the staff in charge of the marketing campaign since admission, this means more time spent attracting a less captive audience.

However, social networks have the ability to build or destroy trust, both at the university level and in the corporate environment. Nine out of ten students expect a response on social media in 24 hours, according to TargetX (2020). This means that it is important for universities to constantly monitor their social networking accounts. Leng (2012) said that when the level of responsiveness on social networks is low, it can lead to a lower level of trust and therefore to a lower level of participation from members. Due to the power of social media, privacy and control over content remain concerns (Rekhter, 2012; Reuben, 2008). Research suggests that universities create social media-focused policies and new organizational structures of marketing departments to ensure that social media is monitored and kept up to date (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012).

A recent study (TargetX, 2017) showed the importance of distinguishing between the social media platforms that students are active and the ones they use to find information about the universities they want to enroll in. The most important platforms used by potential students when analyzing study options are Instagram, YouTube, Facebook and Snapchat (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2019; TargetX, 2017; TargetX, 2020). Twitter and Pinterest are the least used platforms during the process of choosing the study institution. In recent years, students have preferred Instagram over other platforms, with 51% of students reporting that they followed university Instagram feeds when making a decision on where to apply (TargetX, 2020).

Potential students use social networks to find and connect with other students, older or from the same generation. Students use digital platforms to find colleagues with similar interests, in the same courses or in the same country. Other uses include searching for roommates, searching for colleagues attending some events, and obtaining information about college courses (Leng, 2012). While social media can help students learn more about other potential students, they have also used them to make quick judgments about others. Some students use social networks to find information about their future roommates before moving in together.

In a recent study by TargetX, only 32% of students responded that they did not or would not use social media as a resource to decide which faculty to enroll in (TargetX, 2020). Some students who reported not using social media or other internet-based resources while searching college said that their choices were limited by themselves or their families, so they did not search for information about other institutions. (Burdett, 2013). Therefore, in university marketing strategies, communication specialists should not ignore the role that external factors play in the decision-making process regarding the university chosen for the study. Thus, the messages promoted through social networks must also be adapted to parents, teachers or relatives who consult digital platforms for more information and who then influence potential students in choosing their study options.

Although not all students use social media as a resource when choosing a faculty, there are still many who use it and find value in the information distributed online. Rather, students use social media to gather information and form impressions about the potential university (TargetX, 2020). Other ways in which students use social networks include following updates from the admissions office regarding the formal registration process, but also getting in touch online with professors and / or non-teaching staff (Burdett, 2013). Interactions with admissions staff on social media have proven to be extremely important for over 60% of students (TargetX, 2020). The most frequently asked questions that universities receive on social networks are about admission requirements, application deadlines, acceptance decisions, and tuition fees (Leng, 2012).

5. Conclusions

Therefore, the use of social networks in university admissions campaigns plays an important role and can determine the success of the communication strategy. The choice of university is an area of interest for communication specialists. Studies confirm that there are a variety of individual characteristics of students and external influences that can determine the choice of faculty by potential students, and the emergence of social networks has added another potentially influential factor in choosing the university. This analysis of the literature confirms that social networks are used by enough potential students in the process of documenting the university they will attend, as well as in the admissions process itself.

All in all, the strategy regarding the content posted on social networks has the ability to influence the success of university marketing communication. Without interesting and captivating content, the presence on social networks is not useful for an institution. Thus, decisions about the type, tone, format and style of content, as well as the time and frequency of posting need to be planned ahead and adjusted according to the different strategies of universities. The type, tone, format and style of the content should depend on what is appropriate, taking into consideration the platforms used to share the content and the voice that an institution wants to embrace on its online social networks. All things considered, public universities can find ways to promote their educational offer, to communicate with its their communities and convey a coherent and consistent image, if they are willing to implement new marketing tools and strategies.

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