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**USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE
ADMISSION CAMPAIGNS OF PUBLIC
UNIVERSITIES. INTERVIEWS WITH
SIX MARKETING SPECIALISTS FROM
ROMANIAN UNIVERSITIES**

*Original
Research*

Keywords

*Social Media;
Public Universities;
Romania;
Interviews;*

JEL Classification

X00

Abstract

This article aims at finding out how marketing communication is used through social networks in the admission process of public universities in Romania, trying to identify how universities can use social networks more effectively to attract more candidates for admission. In order to do so, there were conducted interviews with specialists - marketing directors of six public universities in Romania: three comprehensive universities: "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi, University of Bucharest, West University of Timisoara and three specialized universities: "Grigore T. Popa" University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Iași, "Ion Ionescu de la Brad" University of Life Sciences of Iași and the Polytechnic University of Timișoara. The study is the first of its kind and lays the foundation for future quantitative research.

INTRODUCTION

Marketing communication in public universities is not a common topic of exploration in Romania. If solid theoretical perspectives have been formulated in both foreign and domestic literature on marketing activity and marketing communication, the public sector has not received the same attention from theorists. Therefore, the study of the role that social networks play in the admission campaigns in six of the biggest public universities in Romania brings an element of novelty in the literature, this study being the first of its kind.

The main objective was to find out how social networks are used in the admission process in public universities in Romania, in an attempt to identify how universities can use social networks more effectively in order to attract more candidates. To this end, there were conducted interviews with specialists - heads of marketing departments of six public universities from Romania: three comprehensive universities: "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi, University of Bucharest, West University of Timisoara and three specialized universities: "Grigore T. Popa" University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Iași, "Ion Ionescu de la Brad" University of Life Sciences of Iași and the Polytechnic University of Timișoara.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section presents the theoretical concepts on the research method; section two presents the methodology; the third section explores the findings; section four concludes, outlines the limitations and provides an outlook for future research.

THEORETICAL CONCEPTS ON THE RESEARCH METHOD

How to conduct an interview - theoretical considerations

Research methods in social science research are an essential part of any research project, as they determine its success, validity and reliability (Kvale, 2003). This type of research aims to explore and describe the quality and nature of the way people behave, experiment and understand. What is more, in addition to relating people's actions to their beliefs, Brown (2005) adds that one of the great strengths of qualitative research is the potential for creating hypotheses. As Dörnyei (2007) noted, qualitative data are most often collected by researchers through interviews and questionnaires. However, interviews - compared to questionnaires - are more powerful in obtaining narrative data that allow researchers to investigate people's opinions (Kvale, 2003). Similarly, Cohen, Manion and Morison (2007) add that interviewing

is "a valuable method for exploring concepts and meanings in a natural setting".

In the field of social science research, the usefulness of interviews has long been recognized. Because qualitative researchers tend to provide detailed descriptions of individuals and events in their natural environment, interviewing was "usually" considered a key factor in research (Ho, 2006). Similarly, Gubrium and Holstein (2002) point out that such events are often not directly "observable"; and talking to people can be one of the most effective ways to reach and explore such constructs. Specifically, because the interviews are interactive, interviewers can ask for complete and clear answers and develop emerging topics. Therefore, the interview is expected to broaden the field of understanding of the investigated phenomena, as it is a more naturalistic and less structured data collection tool.

Studies have shown that four types of interviews are commonly used in the social sciences. The first is the structured interview, the key feature of which is to organize mostly around a set of predetermined direct questions that require immediate answers, mostly of the "yes" or "no" type. Thus, in such an interview, the interviewer and the interviewees would have very little freedom (Berg, 2007). Consequently, it can be argued that this type of interview is similar to the "self-administered" quantitative questionnaire, both in form and in the basic assumptions (Berg, 2007).

The second type of interview is the open (unstructured) interview. Gubrium & Holstein (2002) point out that, unlike the structured interview, this type of interview is an open situation that offers greater flexibility and freedom to both parties (i.e. interviewers and interviewees) in terms of planning, implementation and organizing the content and questions of the interview. Therefore, the interviewer could more easily follow the interesting developments during the discussion and let the interviewee develop various aspects that he / she considers relevant (Dörnyei, 2007).

The third is the semi-structured interview, which is a more flexible version of the structured interview because it allows for in-depth discussion, giving the interviewer the opportunity to test and extend the interviewee's answers (Willig, 2001). When conducting such interviews, researchers recommend the use of a basic checklist (Berg, 2007) that would help cover all relevant areas (i.e. research questions). The advantage of such a checklist, as Berg believes, is that it allows for in-depth surveys, allowing the interviewer to keep the interview within the parameters set by the purpose of the study (ibidem, p. 39).

Fourth, focus group, which are, according to Barbour & Schostak (2005), "... an interview

technique in which participants are selected, representing an intentional, though not necessarily representative, sample of a specific population, this group being focused on a certain topic". Although focus groups may be suitable for investigating complex behavior, it can sometimes be time consuming and difficult to manage (Hermanowicz, 2002).

How to conduct an interview – empirical aspects

According to Dörnyei (2007), a "good" interview has two key features: "(a) it flows naturally and (b) it is rich in details" (p. 140). To achieve this, it is therefore necessary for researchers to remember that they are there to "listen", not just to speak (ibidem). In addition, researchers should not only be neutral, but at the same time should always look for the differentiating element (Richards, 2005). In doing so, the interviewer should establish an appropriate atmosphere in which the interviewees feel more at ease and speak freely.

Overwhelming some researchers, qualitative interviews tend to generate large amounts of data (Neuman, 2007). As Dörnyei (2007) points out, a one-hour interview can take about five and about 40 pages to transcribe. However, for starters, the analysis can be done by coding. Two stages of coding have been widely discussed in social science research: a) generating significant data units; and b) the classification and ordering of these units. Consequently, such a process is expected to deliberately reduce the amount of data collected. Creswell (2009) notes that the analysis process should also be reflective i.e. include the researcher's experience with interviews. Given that there is no fixed method of analyzing interview data in the literature, researchers should be careful, as it affects not only the quality of an interview, but also the validity and reliability of the entire research.

The nature of the report is decided by the nature of the interview. For example, a structured interview, which can produce numerical data, can be briefly reported in tables and graphs, while an open interview that generates complex concepts can take up much more space. Holliday (2007) suggests several elements of an interview report: an introduction that includes the main topics and contents, an outline of the methodology and methods (from design to interviews, transcription and analysis), results (analysis, interpretation and verification of data) and a final discussion. However, reporting should not only include what has been said, but should include discussion and justification of the information and answers given (Neuman, 2007). Moreover, some of the respondents' answers can be cited because they offer "remarkable and invaluable interpretations" (Bechhofer and Paterson, 2000).

Critical evaluation of the method

According to Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (2006) interviews offer researchers the opportunity to discover information that is probably not accessible using techniques such as questionnaires and observations. Moreover, they add that interviews are not just a tool for collecting data, but rather a natural way of interacting that can take place in various situations. In addition, Dörnyei (2007) argues that with the presence of the interviewer, mutual understanding can be ensured, as the interviewer can reformulate or simplify the questions that were not understood by the interviewees. As a result, more appropriate answers will be obtained, followed by more accurate data. In addition, these data can be recorded and reviewed several times by the researcher (when necessary) to help make an accurate interview report (Berg, 2007).

Obviously, these advantages have made interviews an increasingly attractive method of data collection. However, like any other research tool, interviews can present disadvantages. Hermanowicz (2002) notes that "while interviewing is one of the most important, revealing, and enjoyable methods you can use in research, it is deceptively difficult." In addition, Potter and Hepburn (2005) add that researchers should remember that what people say in an interview will indeed be shaped, to some extent, by the questions they are asked, by social conventions of what they think the interviewer would approve or disapprove of. As a result, respondents may respond only to what they are prepared to disclose. Kvale (2003) argues that interviews not accompanied by another method of research are insufficient to study social life. Undoubtedly, large amounts of data are obtained during interviews, which is why it is important for interviewers to highlight the relevant information they obtain from the interview. In addition, interviews have also been categorized as time-consuming in terms of data collection and analysis, as they need to be transcribed, coded, and possibly translated (Brown, 2005).

At the same time, Berg (2007) and Ho (2006) argue that, although the interview is an important way to obtain information about the interviewee's perceptions, it can be supplemented with other methods by providing detailed information about the participants' values and opinions. For example, using observation would allow researchers to investigate both participants' external behavior and internal beliefs. Thus, the use of more data collection tools would help obtaining richer data and validate research results.

Ethical considerations

When it comes to the relationship with participants, research projects should strictly adhere to ethical considerations. According to Cohen et al. (2007),

as interviews are considered an intrusion into respondents' privacy in terms of time allotted and the level of sensitivity of the questions asked, a high standard of ethical considerations should be maintained. Therefore, ethical issues should be considered at all stages of the interview process. Participants should give their informed consent before participating in the interview: a key step that researchers should follow throughout the research project. However, an ethical challenge for researchers would be the openness and intimacy of the interview situation, as it could lead respondents to reveal information they may later regret and there is a risk that the interaction will become a quasi-therapeutic relationship for which most researchers may not have been trained. Therefore, in order to protect the rights of participants and to avoid difficult situations, researchers should be sure that the data collected will be used as agreed between the two parties. Participants should also be told that their participation in the interview is entirely voluntary and that they may leave at any time.

THE METHODOLOGY

This study tries to find out how social networks are used in the admission campaigns in public universities in Romania, in an attempt to identify how universities can use social networks more effectively to attract candidates. To this end, there were conducted interviews with specialists – heads of marketing departments in six public universities in Romania. This study is rather based on behavioral tendencies, given that the communication environment is flexible and versatile, subject to frequent changes and having a degree of assessment of veracity. Due to its qualitative exploratory positioning, the in-depth interview is appropriate for the present study, as the interviewers can ask for complete and clear answers.

The interviews took place over three weeks, using Zoom application. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed, the average duration of an interview being 40 minutes.

The analysis focused on the following key concepts:

- marketing communication channels used by the universities (online and offline);
- type of content published on social networks and engagement;
- marketing strategy in the admission campaigns;
- the evolution of marketing strategy in the admission campaign;
- marketing communication channels and vehicles used in the last admission campaign (online and offline);

- key messages used in the last admission campaign;
- the importance of social networks in admission campaigns.

FINDINGS

Marketing channels used by the universities (online and offline)

A first category is represented by the university publications: presentation brochures and flyers, presentation films, promotional materials. The next category is represented by public relations: events, press conferences, press releases, University Open Days, etc.). All universities organize and participate in events to present and promote the educational offer, national and international fairs. Before the pandemic, an important component of promotion was the presentation of the educational offer in high schools to teachers and students (often called Caravan), an essential means of interaction with future students. Because of to the pandemic, the universities made efforts to transform the Caravan into online events, with virtual sessions to present the educational offer. In addition, universities also use outdoor advertising, with digital or static billboards, banners etc.

Regarding the online marketing communication channels, all respondents mentioned the institution's website, faculty websites, newsletter, website dedicated to candidates for admission and social networks: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube. Although none of the universities have an account on the Tik Tok, some of the respondents mentioned that they intend to create accounts on this network as well, because students use it frequently.

Facebook represents the main social network used by universities, both for external and internal communication. Instagram is starting to be used more and more, as a result of the young audience who has moved from Facebook to Instagram. The YouTube channel and the LinkedIn page are mainly used as a support for the other social networks.

It should be noted that the universities included in this study have made substantial efforts to adapt to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic and have found online solutions to carry out their promotion and communication with potential candidates. For example, the Polytechnic University of Timisoara has created a virtual university fair to present the university, a correspondent of the Open Days, so that students can discover - at least virtually - the university.

Type of content posted on social media and engagement

When it comes to content, respondents said that "almost anything" is published on Facebook. Usually, the content falls into several categories: informational messages - which have an immediate effect, promotional messages – for dedicated campaigns, such as the admission campaigns. Most of the time, the posts on social networks are a mix of image and text. According to West University of Timisoara, single-photo posts that present either some aspects of student life, an emotion or a particular viral situation adapted to a university event receive the best engagement.

Also, respondents said that, in general, visual content is the most popular, and especially photos, followed by videos. Short films work well, especially in this pandemic period, the "behind-the-scenes" footages from labs, classrooms etc., are very well received by students. Also, the virtual conferences in which speakers from various fields were invited were widely accessed. At the same time, it was mentioned that the engagement varies, depending on the day and the time of the posts.

Marketing strategy in the admission campaigns

Although the marketing strategy is established every year, it should be noted that in the last two years, due to the pandemic, the marketing strategy has had to be rethought and adapted quickly to external conditions. The admission was usually preceded by a marketing campaign. Before the pandemic, the university "caravans" were widely used, in which groups of professors and volunteer students acted as a kind of "ambassadors" of the university and visited in particular the high schools in the recruitment pool and presented the university. All channels were used, from the press to social media, emails, as well as various printed materials that were sent to high schools. Near the Baccalaureate exam, the focus was placed on social media communication.

If before the pandemic the emphasis was placed on face-to-face events, especially events to promote the educational offer and the admission offer (caravans, fairs), situation has changed radically in the last two years. With the pandemic, universities were forced to move their communication efforts online, trying to find new solutions. As a result, universities created virtual fairs, online open days, online registration etc., in an attempt to bring as much support to students as possible.

The evolution of marketing strategy in the admission campaign

The pandemic has forced universities to rethink their communication strategy and find replacements for offline promotion tools in the online environment and identify new online solutions to create interactions with and meet

potential candidates, such as virtual fairs, caravans online. "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași states that in the last two years almost all marketing campaigns for admission have been carried out online. At the same time, the change had effects on the institutions' websites, which had to be rethought strategically, in order to be more welcoming and accessible. Communication on Facebook - the main social network - has been intensified, both nationally and internationally (especially for the University of Bucharest and the University of Medicine in Iasi). The main communication channel among emerging audiences, as the general public, candidates, parents was online, mainly Facebook and Instagram. When it comes to the admission process for the international students, the University of Medicine of Iași specified that the communication was done in proportion of 80 percent through Facebook.

What is more, the recent years brought a change in the consumption of social media, more and more teenagers and high school students giving up Facebook in the detriment of Instagram and Tik Tok. Consequently, universities are trying to create more content on Instagram and are analyzing the opportunity to communicate on Tik Tok, which is attracting an increasing number of young users.

Marketing communication channels and vehicles used in the last admission campaign (online and offline)

The admission website is an extremely important information component in the admission campaigns. It has been updated and improved to cover as much of the information as needed to target audiences. For example, the University of Bucharest has added an admission brochure section, a student facilities section with information about all the benefits they have for admission, and a mentoring section where faculty and volunteer students can answer questions at questions for potential candidates, as well as an online admission prescription section. Of course, the admissions site contains links to all the major faculty websites. Another tool used by universities was the newsletter, with news about admission, which was sent to student associations and volunteer subscribers, as well as to participants in various educational fairs.

Because the offline caravan was no longer an option, Polytechnic University of Timișoara held a virtual educational fair of the faculties in which potential students could get acquainted with their field of study, entitled Eduexpo, while "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi and the University of Bucharest transformed the Caravan into online presentation sessions and discussions with students from areas of interest.

In terms of social media, universities used the social networks they had at their disposal and created integrated campaigns to take over and link content on all channels (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn). The University of Bucharest had a structured campaign, with infographics for each faculty as well as general information about admission, about the number of places or ways of admission, which were placed in an optimal calendar for Facebook. At the same time, they used series of short videos of 10-15 seconds dedicated to each faculty and general information about admission, with the main student benefits and attractions, as well as an admission calendar for each faculty.

Key messages used in last admission campaign

There is a difference in strategy and content in terms of posts during the year and those during the admission campaign. Usually, during the year the communication involve scientific events, conferences, scientific achievements, events that take place in the university. At the beginning of the academic year, the focus is placed on information for first year students. During admission, the communication focuses on presenting the faculties and opportunities for students.

During the last admission campaign, the strategy of the Polytechnic University of Timisoara was to place the student at the center of communication, so the main message was "The future belongs to you, you are the Polytechnic of the new century". This was the central message, together with the presentation of the institution and the opportunities the students have. Additionally, an important message was used: the students admitted now will be the first generation in the first century of existence of the Polytechnic University of Timisoara and the university tried to promote it to differentiate itself from the competition and attract students.

The University of Bucharest has chosen messages that briefly express the identity of each faculty. At a central level, messages related to excellence, quality and the importance of education were used.

At the West University of Timisoara in the last two years, the strategy involved using a message that places students at its center and their development. "The central message was "Become your best!", both a visual and a textual message that tries to convey that you have the desire to become your best option and that at UVT you will find all the necessary resources for that.

At UAIC, the central message was "Discover the first University of Romania", which relied on capitalizing on the university's tradition and prestige gained in over 160 years of existence, with a combination of written messages, images but also short videos.

The importance of social networks in admission campaigns

Universities consider that the presence on the social networks of higher education institutions is very important and that a quality content, which reflects the activity in the institutions, is essential. However, although students claim that they receive the information on the universities on social networks and find them useful, the decision to apply to a university is not mainly determined by that university's social media communication, and the influence of the family, friends and colleagues is still very important. On the other hand, Polytechnic University of Timisoara stated that, although some students have chosen their university since the 11th or 12th grade and use social networks only to follow the activity of the institution, many students are undecided and here marketing can make a difference. The reports provided by the social network Facebook on the rate of engagement and interaction with posts, it was observed that, since last autumn, the rate of engagement and interaction has increased exponentially and has been maintained throughout academic year, as a result of the intensification of online communication.

Experts believe that social media have been playing a key role for some time and will continue to do so, because they are a very important part of students' lives. The University of Bucharest reminds that it is essential not only to be present on social networks, but also to adapt to the style and the way of users to think, a way of thinking that is digitally native. Polytechnic University of Timisoara stated that it intends to start the future admission campaign much earlier than in previous years, because the online environment is and will be the most important in conducting the admission campaign.

For the future admission campaigns, universities plan on developing a marketing communication strategy that will focus mainly on the online channels, as well as integrating Tik Tok, because it is increasingly used by potential candidates.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

In recent years, the main concern of Romanian universities has been to attract enough students to ensure the survival of academic programs and faculties. In this context, marketing and, implicitly, communication through social networks have proven to be opportunities that universities can take advantage of in order to increase the number of students. Public institutions can benefit if they include a well-defined strategy for the use of social networks in their mission of solving problems and achieving results, so as to attract as many students as possible. Thus, with the help of social networks,

the universities can be transformed from traditional institutions, with a weak contact with the public into modern institutions, with a strong contact with co-interested groups.

This research aimed to investigate the role of marketing communication in the admission campaigns of public universities in Romania, in an attempt to find out how universities can use social networks more effectively to attract more candidates. This study is the first to gather the opinions of the heads of marketing departments from six of the most important public universities in Romania, which is an essential starting point for future research.

The interviews highlighted the fact that, in recent years, the online environment has gained increasing importance in the media and, as a result, has been used to a greater extent. If ten years ago the universities did not have to make as much communication effort to inform students and potential students about the opportunities offered by each university, in recent years universities have had to fight much harder for the attention of pupils and students and have tried to find the best ways to reach them and pass the information on to them.

Certainly, the communication in the last two years has undergone a radical change as a result of the pandemic context, with universities having to quickly find new ways to reach their target audiences that have become inaccessible. The impossibility of organizing face-to-face events and meetings meant moving most of the activities online and intensifying communication efforts on social networks, as well as identifying new communication opportunities - holding fairs and virtual caravans, for example.

As for the role of social networks, university representatives consider that the presence on social networks of higher education institutions is very important in the admission campaign, especially in the current external context. However, social networks alone do not yet have the power to change the decision of the candidates, acting mainly as a means of information and not persuasion, and the decision to attend a particular university is still determined mainly by family, friends, colleagues or professors.

The study also has some limitations. This research is only a preliminary one, with the main purpose of helping outline the hypotheses that will lay the foundations of a future quantitative research on the role of online marketing communication in the admission process. Using a research method in addition to the interview will increase the relevance of the research results and give it a higher degree of objectivity. Also, although the study includes both general and niche universities, the sample analyses only universities from major university centers of Romania and further research could aim at a

comparative analysis of communication strategies in the country's smaller cities.

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