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# THE IMPORTANCE OF ONLINE COMMUNICATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Empirical  
study based on  
Literature  
review

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## Keywords

Online communication  
Social Networks  
Students  
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## JEL Classification

D83; I23; M31

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## Abstract

*The communication system is highly developed in the academic environment and not only involves the communication between the university and the outside world through exchanges of messages, but also the internal one with the employees and students. Online communication has gained increasingly more territory in the academic environment lately, especially thanks to the usage of e-mails and social networks. Therefore, this paper aims at presenting the main tools of the online communication in higher education as well as their importance of creating interaction among the participants in the education process. The conclusions emphasize that this type of communication significantly favors the teaching-learning process, creates real interaction between students and professors and contributes to the fast dissemination and access of information.*

## Introduction

Communication is the most important part of life as every human activity is based on it. It is a process that consists of transmitting a message from the sender to the recipient, and in the academic environment this is an extremely important component of the academic marketing mix. Logan R., (2012, p. 474) thinks that the current education system needs new teaching-learning strategies which should be attractive to students and hold their attention. Consequently, the Internet has become an extremely important and employed environment in higher education. Given the fact that it strongly impacts on the individuals' social and personal lives, the users deem the internet as indispensable. In the academic environment it is used both in the teaching-learning process and in research. (Stanciu V., Tinca A., 2014, p.741, 750). This paper presents the current stage of knowledge regarding the researched topic and consists of two main parts: the first part – *the importance of online communication in higher education*- reviews the specialized literature by pointing out the importance of online communication in higher education, whereas the second part - *the interaction created by online communication in higher education*- has the purpose of developing a concept model in order to present the interaction created by the communication system among the participants in the education process. In the end, the conclusions of this research are drawn.

### 1. The importance of online communication in higher education

Online communication in higher education has considerably spread lately mainly due to the introduction of the online courses and the development of distance learning. (Ernst J.V., 2006) This occurred especially because students prefer online communication to face-to-face conversation. (Lightfoot J.M., 2006). Robinson S., Stubberud H.A, (2012, p. 109) identified that students' most preferred means of communication are the telephone, the e-mail and Facebook. Due to easy access to Internet, the society has witnessed a true communication revolution, and thus this has become the most used means of communication among students, especially through the social networks, (Stanciu V., Tinca A., 2014, p. 751) which give more freedom in communication than the traditional methods. Communication through social networks is an efficient and cheap method (Eagleman A.N., 2013) which enables continuous contact with the academic stakeholders, mainly by using the smartphones for online communication and sending and receiving text messages. (Robinson S., Stubberud H.A., 2012, p. 105) The

social networks are used in higher education by the academic staff and students alike to disseminate information but also as a basis for their communication. (Falahah, Rosmala D., 2012, p. 156) The smartphones have turned lately into the most used tools by students and are used to communicate via e-mail or social networks. The latter are the preferred method of communication of the youth enrolled in higher education. (Robinson S., Stubberud H.A., 2012, p. 105) Falahah, Rosmala D., (2012, p. 158) identify the functionality of the social networks, and they point out that these allow: an active presence of the parties involved, relating to the others, building a unique reputation, creating and joining different groups, having conversations and debates about various topics, sharing different materials. Unlike e-mails, social networks provide a direct communication channel with the others where individuals can express their own opinions, experiencing thus real-time communication. (Lee, S. 2011, p. 271) These exert a strong impact on the behaviour of the higher education consumer (Naveed N.H., 2012, p. 904) as they make possible the fast dissemination of information and the exchange of it.

Naveed N.H., (2012, p. 906) identified the fact that the use of the social networks greatly influences the consumer's behaviour, the organization's public relations, the consumer's brand commitment and their buying behaviour. Therefore, in the academic environment these enable the active involvement of students in the teaching-learning process, and Oberer B., Erkollar A., (2012, p. 1892) consider that the use of the social networks strongly influences higher education.

In the *Global Trends 2014* Report the means of communication are classified according to their importance based on age-groups. The results are shown by the authors in figure no. 1.

By analyzing the figure we can see that Facebook is the most used among all studied age-groups, the highest percent being 46.5% among the youth aged under 17 years, followed by 41.8% represented by those aged 22-25 years and 40.1% among the youth aged 18-21 years. Rasiah R.R.V., (2014, p. 371) argues that Facebook generates social interaction and that is why it is used by a lot of students in higher education.

### 2. The interaction created by online communication in higher education

There is a wide range of communication tools in higher education, but their importance differs according to the number of users, accessibility, the speed of sending and receiving information and, of course, costs. To begin with, Akyol, Z. and Garrison, D. R. (2011, p. 189) state that "*education is a social process which involves*

*the entire community when sharing personal ideas and that is why it must be socially present"*, I have considered useful to develop a model to express the interaction created by online communication in the academic environment. The social networks and the online communication tools such as the E-mail or YouTube are part of the academic communication and have become very popular in education, especially because the youth who are enrolled on academic courses are familiarized with them and make use of them very often. (Oberer B., Erkollar A., 2012, p. 1888). Their employment in higher education creates real communication platforms which enrich the teaching-learning process, because students can interact through them to share experiences, problems, results, different study materials, comments on various topics or documents, and they can also interact with the teaching staff. (Greenhow, C. 2009). Furthermore, online communication allows monitoring the communication system in the academic environment. (Mora H. M., *et.al.* 2014)

### **Research methodology**

This research paper aims at identifying the interaction created by online communication in the academic environment by developing a concept model which expresses the links created by the education social networks in higher education, and by underlying thus the objectives and hypotheses of this research:

#### Research objectives:

1. Identifying the main online communication tools in the academic environment.
2. Identifying the interaction created by social networks among students.
3. Identifying the interaction created by social networks between students and professors.

#### Research hypotheses

1. The education social networks in the academic environment include the main online communication tools: Facebook, Twitter, E-mail, Youtube, Google+.
2. The online communication tools in the academic environment create interaction among students in the academic communication process.
3. Online communication in higher education creates interaction in the professor-student communication

### **Discussion and results**

The social networks - Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and the online communication tools such as the Email and YouTube – the largest video-sharing site – are highly employed in the academic environment.

In higher education the education social networks are represented by several tools which are massively used by both students and professors such as: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, E-mail, and Google+. These are employed in the teaching-learning process in order to make a real connection between the students and the teaching staff, to quickly transmit information and to keep oneself up-to-date with the university news. Therefore, different researchers in the specialized literature see the above-mentioned online communication tools as being extremely used in the academic environment and capable of creating strong interactions among the participants in the education process. The concept model of this research is shown in figure no. 2.

**Facebook** – Facebook, the most used social network (Oberer B., Erkollar A., 2012, p. 1891; Tess P. A., 2013, p. A61) is perceived as an innovative communication tool in the academic environment which enriches the students' communication experience, increases its relevance and encourages the collaboration between the students and the academic staff. By using Facebook the professors can better involve students in the education process and motivate them. (Rasiah R.R.V., 2014, p. 369) Students use Facebook to keep in touch with the other students but also to share information, pictures and various materials. With its help one can identify student friendships and how social connections are formed in the university campus. (Mayer A., Puller S.L., 2008, p. 330) At the same time, professors can make use of it to understand the social background of their students through online chatting. (Rasiah R.R.V., 2014, p. 370) Although most universities have their own Facebook pages, it is common that many higher education institutions do not agree with the "*Facebook friendships between professors and students*", because there is a lot of private information on these Facebook pages. In spite of this, the authors mention that it is important to clearly distinguish between "*friends*", "*friends of friends*" and "*all*". (Oberer B., Erkollar A., 2012, p. 1891) In the light of these opinions, I think that Facebook establishes strong communication relationships among students but also between students and professors. In addition to this, in order to ensure optimal communication, where mutual respect among participants in the education process exists, Facebook communication should take place on the special groups created in the academic environment and not on the personal pages of the participants.

**Twitter** – Twitter is very often used in higher education as it significantly simplifies the organizational communication by real-time information sharing and by the limited message size, which makes messages short and easy to understand. (Lovejoy, K., Waters, R. B. & Saxton,

G. D. 2012, p. 2). Tess P. A., (2013, p. A61) and Java, A., *et al.* (2007, p. 2) think that Twitter is a microblogging social network which has quickly turned into a means of communication. The organizations can communicate through Twitter by using the symbol “@” and the “retweet” function (Lovejoy, K., Waters, R. B., & Saxton, G. D. 2012, p. 3, 6) in order to re-post the messages of other users. Twitter is used to share daily experiences, personal opinions or comments. Thus the microbloggers have created true online communities which are enjoying world-wide popularity. (Java, A., Finin, T., Song, X., Tseng, B., 2007, p. 2).

Menkhoff T. *et.al.* (2014) argue that Twitter in its capacity of microblogging represents a new form of communication in education which offers professors and students alike the possibility to read short messages (tweets) of a maximum of 140 characters. In the academic environment, Twitter pedagogical messages allow professors to find out what their students’ thoughts, perceptions and feelings are. The authors classified their messages:

- ✓ “Conclusive student comments”
- ✓ “General and positive student comments”
- ✓ “Evaluative student comments”
- ✓ “Critical student comments”
- ✓ “Student questions related to the knowledge process”
- ✓ “Student comments related to knowledge improvement”
- ✓ “Student comments unrelated to the education process”
- ✓ “Comments of students absent because of sickness” (Menkhoff T. *et. al.* 2014, p.3)

In consequence, Twitter is a new way of expressing personal ideas, feelings, opinions, criticism, conclusions, asking questions, making comments, and due to their small size they are very effective in creating user interaction.

**E-mail** – The E-mail is an electronic means of communication which needs internet support. At the beginning it was used as an internal communication system. (Lightfoot J.M., 2006, p. 219) With the development of the internet, the e-mail has gradually become a means of communication present in all aspects of life, replacing thus the traditional communication through letters. “*The E-mail is the preferred method of communication, but the response time must be improved to keep up with the challenges of the social networks*” (Report – Students Online: Global Trends, 2014, p. 21). The e-mail is an important part of the social life in education, and it is a very accessible electronic means of communication. The E-mail reduces the barriers of space and time, allowing professors and students to communicate efficiently regardless of their location, by disseminating information. (Hu C., *et.al.* 2009, p. 623) Unlike the social networks, the

e-mail has a series of **disadvantages**: it can be easily resent to other people, it can be attached to other messages and the transmitted information can be easily saved and stored. In addition to this, many messages sent via e-mail are rather spontaneous. (Lightfoot J.M., 2006, p. 219).

Students’ behaviour towards the e-mail varies according to the changes in the study requirements. It follows that student e-mail communication increases with the increase in study requirements, in other words with the increase in the academic requirements which they have to meet. (Uddin S. *et.al.*, 2014, p.209). Hassini E., (2006, p. 29) see the e-mail as a supplement which supports the teaching process, which allows students and professors to communicate efficiently, which enriches and simplifies therefore the education experience mainly due to the ease of sending feedback. As a result, the e-mail is the most used means of online communication world-wide, a tool which in spite of the unprecedented development of mobile applications and social networks, is continuously evolving given the fact that the number of users is permanently growing. The e-mails include two levels: a personal and a professional one, (Alsmadi I., Alhami I., 2015, p.46). There are also a series of **advantages** linked to the fact that on the one hand it breaks distance barriers and enables students to communicate with the academic staff and among them through fast messages on the other hand. From the professors’ point of view, the e-mail is a very useful communication tool in relation to their students as it facilitates communication and information reaches a large number of students in a short period of time. (Lightfoot J.M., 2006, p. 219) By using this communication tool, the students do not have to physically meet with the academic staff in order to ask questions, request explanations or deliver materials, because this communication tool is very efficient and it creates strong interactions among the participants in the education process.

**YouTube** – YouTube, the most accessed site of video-sharing in the world, can be used as an active learning tool, which allows creating and uploading educational movies. (Logan R., 2012, p. 474; Duffy, P. 2008) Over the last few years many organizations, including universities, have started to massively use YouTube in order to send their own messages and ideas to a pre-set audience. (Clifton A., Mann C., 2011, p. 311) As regards higher education, YouTube supports connecting, informing, inspiring students in the education process (Logan R., 2012, p. 475) and can be used to present topic-related movies to students. At the same time, students can use it to search for information about a certain subject, and due to the fact that the video clips on YouTube are incorporated in many other sites, the teaching-

learning project is deeply influenced. (Szeto E., Cheng A.Y.N., 2014 p. 54)

Gilroy M., (2010) refers to the launching of a YouTube section – **YouTubeEDU** dedicated to academic content, "a platform where each professor may contribute to and everyone could learn from." (Gilroy M., 2010, p. 18) Gilroy M., (2010, p. 18-19) advocates that YouTubeEDU is the result of a voluntary project developed by a group of employees who wanted to find a way to gather and emphasize all educational information which had already existed on YouTube. This had a strong marketing potential as well, providing thus the opportunity to deliver higher education lectures and courses.

**Google+** - Erkollar A., Oberer B., (2013, p. 189) think that Google+ facilitates active interaction among students, but also between the students and the academic staff. It gives the chance to post information for students, pictures, various materials, to hold video-conferences, and the academic staff can use it as a transversal communication tool. (Oberer B., Erkollar A., 2012, p. 189) Erkollar A., Oberer B.J., (2013, p. 185) believe that Google+ has the potential to improve student collaboration, it facilitates the professor-student communication process, but also the successful implementation of distance learning.

Consequently, online communication in the academic environment is facilitated by the usage of these Internet-based tools. They can break the physical barriers among the participants in the higher education process by facilitating the communication and continuous interaction between the students and the academic staff.

### Conclusions:

With the easy and free access to wireless internet in many higher education institutions and with the massive use of computers, tablets and smartphones, online communication has become a priority in the academic environment and a method without which the education process could not be imagined nowadays. The internet represents a daily life priority of the students of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium and thus the youth create their own spaces in this huge system by using e-mails, YouTube and various social networks which they personalize in order to differentiate themselves from the others. As a result, the technological evolution has created an unprecedented interactive system which has changed the daily lifestyle of the social network users.

Online communication in the academic environment has several well-established goals: communicating, sharing pictures, messages, experiences, ideas, misunderstandings, personal opinions, posting/downloading/visualizing information and sending/receiving different documents. These create an active presence of the

ones involved, allow connecting with the other users, building a reputation, joining different online groups as well as discussing and debating different topics, creating a real interaction between participants in the higher education. Given these interactions created between the participants in the higher education process, all the research hypotheses were confirmed.

I consider that the importance of the online communication tools in higher education differs according to the number of users, accessibility and the speed of sending and receiving information. They enrich the teaching-learning process, deeply influence those who are involved in it and create real interactions among them.

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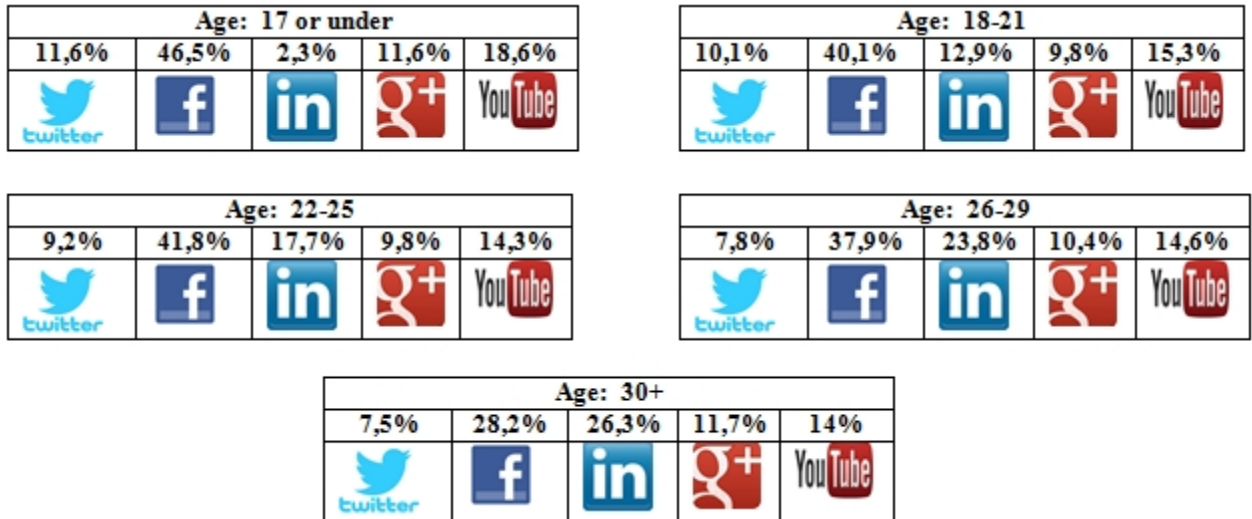
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Appendices

Appendix A

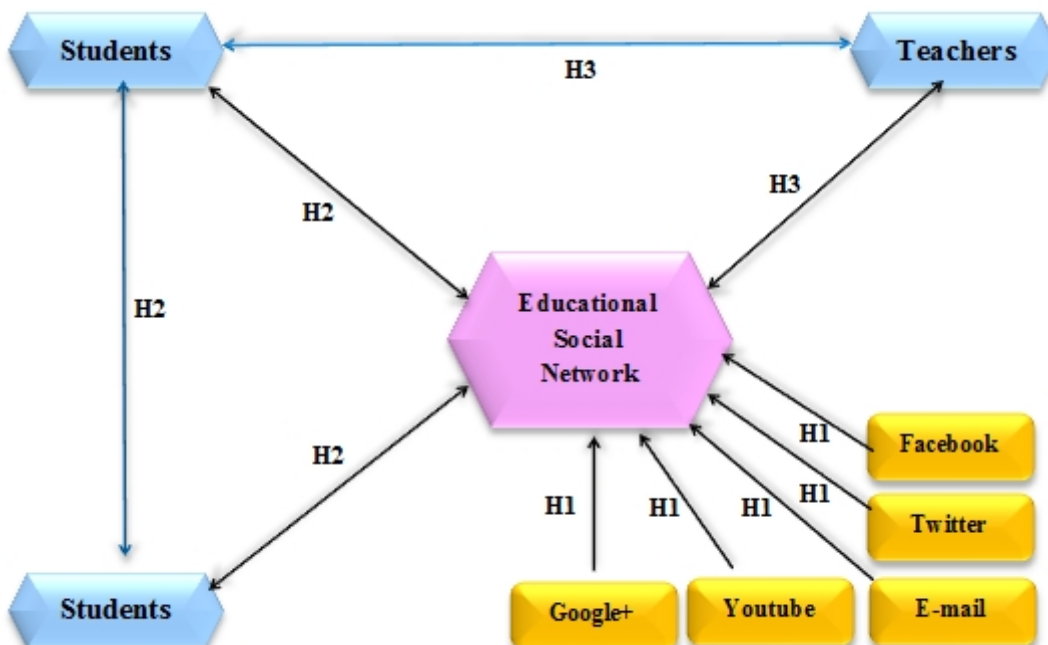
Figure No. 1  
The use of social networks by age



Note. Students online: Global Trends 2014, <http://www.topuniversities.com/blog/using-social-media-marketing-higher-education>

Appendix B

Figure No. 2  
The concept model of the interaction created by online communication in higher education



Note. own research