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Facebook and Public Relations in Higher Education. A Case Study of Selected Faculties from the Czech Republic and Slovakia

Abstract

Nowadays It is essential for universities and faculties to interact on-line with their potential applicants, current students as well as other stakeholders. In recent years, social media such as Facebook has provided higher education institutions with new means of communication with their target groups. The purpose of this study is to explore the use of the most popular social network Facebook by selected faculties in the Czech Republic and Slovakia and to provide a set of practical benchmarks on successful communication with public. To answer presented research questions, a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design was used. Firstly, a focus group investigation was put forward to clarify what communication channels are generally used by applicants and students when searching and sharing information about faculties. Secondly, a quantitative data analysis, based on data mining using tools such as Power BI and Netvizz, was presented. Data for year 2017 obtained from sixteen Facebook profiles of selected faculties were used. The findings provide evidence on the use of Facebook by an institution – customer communication by the faculties. Furthermore, they reveal that different message features generated different customer behaviour. The study contributes to a better understanding of marketing-related activities on social media in higher education.

Keywords: Facebook; higher education; online engagement; post content.

Introduction

Social media has become an important platform in various aspects of our lives. Nowadays, it encompasses social networking, entertainment, marketing as well as newsfeed updates (Warner-Soderholm et al., 2018). Social media allows to use audio-video platforms, such as videos and photos that have a greater effect on users than a simple textual content (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2017). It is thus no surprise that social networks such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram represent one of the most common forms of socio-cultural interactions in particular for young people. The youth uses these networks to maintain contact not only with

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friends and family but also with organizations and brands. Age is an important factor determining differences in the use of the internet. Among younger users aged 16 to 24 years in the EU popular online activities entail participating in social networks (90 % in 2017), watching videos from commercial or sharing services such as YouTube and listening to music (Eurostat, 2018). In 2017, the share of internet users who were active on social network was 65 % in all EU member states with 72 % in Slovakia and 57 % in the Czech Republic (percentage of people aged 16-74 who had used the internet during the last 3 months, 2017).

A growing number of companies establish and maintain their interactive online presence via social networking sites. Companies consistently seek to engage with potential and current customers (Wright & Hinson, 2013, Vandemia, 2017). Social media has been identified as an important vehicle in fostering social connections that maintain and expand existing relationship between organization and customers. Usage of social media by organizations especially is changing public relations as important part of promotional mix (Tajudeen, Jaafar, Ainin, 2018). When page visitors observe relevant posts and responses from an organization in a timely fashion, they register the organization's ability to communicate well with them. Several e-commerce studies found that quick and relevant communication increases perceptions of interactivity and consumer trust (Alalwan et al., 2017; Lee, 2005).

Social media facilitates communication among higher education institutions and their students, staff and graduates and other public (page visitors and followers). At the same time, the increasingly competitive character of the higher education market has led to more profound use of marketing oriented activities, branding and brand management (Rutter, Roper & Lettice, 2016, Voss & Kumar, 2013). Most universities are aware of the need for communication with applicants and current students through social networks. Therefore, understanding the characteristics that influence the interactivity and relationship between an organization and its page visitors and influencers is essential for the organization's ability to respond to public on social networking sites in a desired manner.

This paper develops the existing higher education branding literature by considering the use and impact of social media within the university sector. Specifically, the study examines the use of Facebook by education faculties in the Czech Republic and Slovakia and the impact of that social media communication with public on student engagement.

Social media and marketing

The usage of social media has changed communication activities and public relations of organizations. Communication strategy, continuous monitoring, a responsible and a skilled expert or a team of experts to update the information on the website and create suitable content that provides relevant information to public and quality that users perceive as acceptable are now seen as standard components of the communication mix.

When examining the role of social media and its influence (SM) in the marketing context, four main streams may be identified: brand communities, electronic word of mouth, networking analysis, and product-harm crisis (Gensler et al., 2013). Alalwan et al. (2017) introduced further subgroups as follows: social media (SM) and advertising, SM and electronic word of mouth, SM and customer relationship management, SM and brand, SM and customer behaviour and perception, SM from the organizations' perspective, and adoption of SM. Undisputedly the issue of SM application for marketing purpose has gained notable traction. An

alternative approach has focused on the role of media in general (Tuten and Solomon, 2015). The so called media concept has been adopted in a wide range of different contexts including in higher education. Tuten and Solomon (2015, p. 21) expressed the essence of communication via SM as follows “the utilization of social media technologies, channels, and software is to create, communicate, deliver and exchange offerings that have value for an organization’s stakeholders.” At the same, there are technological, organizational, and environmental factors specific to social media that need to be taken into account. The technological context describes both existing technologies in use and new technologies relevant to the organization. The organizational context refers to the characteristics of the organization in terms of its scope and size. The environmental context characterizes the space where the organization provides their services and meets competitors and clients (c.f. Tajuden, Jaafar, & Ainin, 2018).

Several studies have found a significant positive relationship between perceived interactivity and outcome variables such as attitude and behaviour (Hudson et al., 2016; Vendemia, 2017). Interactive features of social networks that engage mobile and web-based technologies allow participants to create highly interactive platforms where individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content (Ariel & Avidar, 2015).

Universities and their social media interaction with public

Increasing competition between universities and faculties (namely within the same field on national level) heightens the need for institutions to understand, manage, and leverage a strong brand position (Dennis et al., 2016; Rauschnabel et al., 2016; Voss & Kumar, 2013). This includes open communication and close relationship with their students, staff and stakeholders. More universities, including in Central Europe, have started to apply common marketing techniques and activities including brand management and customer relationship. Different communication tools are used by educational institutions to create varying levels of connection between the organization and public. It is also time to use the social media in a targeted way in order to achieve valuable communication of the organization with public.

As universities and their faculties find themselves operating within dynamic competitive and challenging environments, designing a strong marketing strategy becomes a necessary priority for them to achieve their marketing goals. Therefore topics such as brand (Rauschnabel et al., 2016; Rutter, Roper & Lettice, 2016; Palmer, Koenig-Lewis, & Assad, 2016), image (Azoury & El Khoury, 2014; Eger, Egerova, & Pisonova, 2018; Luque-Marinez & Del Barrio Garcia, 2009; Pérez & Torres, 2017), university reputation (Azoury & El Khoury, 2014; Juraskova, Jirikova, & Kocourek, 2015; Sultan & Wong, 2013), in particular focused on recruitment performance (Rauschnabel et al., 2016; Rutter, Roper, & Lettice, 2016), take on increased significance. Nowadays, social media represents a phenomenon which can drastically impact brand’s reputation, image of educational organization and as result also student recruitment (Rutter, Roper, & Lettice, 2016). For example, Luque-Marinez and Del Barrio Garcia (2009) argue that corporate image of an organization is a good predictor of the power of attraction and can influence its internal and external publics.

Very important role in today’s competitive market plays client satisfaction, an antecedent of loyalty (Azoury & El Khoury, 2014). Positive student satisfaction influences namely recruitment performance and loyalty of graduates. Rummel and MacDonald (2016) presented in their research study that influence on students’ sense of belonging to a university entails

not only in-classroom interactions and staff competency (cf. Parusheva, Aleksandrova, & Hadzkolev, 2018), but also service marketing approach which supports student retention as one of important drivers for students' satisfaction.

Sutcliffe, Binder, and Dunbar (2018) have opened discussion about effect of social media marketing and its effect on social satisfaction. On one hand they argue that some authors reported positive affect of increased number of Facebook friends among college students on social satisfaction and on other hand show also contrasting results. After that they expressed consensus from several studies and concluded discussion with assumption that social media more generally is supplement rather than supplant offline social relationships.

With increasing usage of social media by people and especially by young people, more universities are using social media to reach their target groups. The question for higher education institutions is not whether to use social media for communication with the public but rather how to effectively use this tool to reach their marketing goals. Reaching current and prospective clients through social media is considered to be the most promising field of marketing these days (Alalwan et al., 2017; Rutter, Roper, & Lettice, 2016; Smith, 2011).

Brand in higher education

Similarly as in the business sector, also in the field of education, brand management brings sustainable and competitive advantage to universities and faculties. Higher education institutions need to be managed more and more as corporate brands (Khanna, Jacob, & Yadav, 2014).

The topic of brand in education is usually associated with the quality of education and research provided by the particular university or faculty; and the corporate image of this organization. In the literature, a brand image has been defined as perception of quality associated with the brand name (Keller, 1993), in our case, with the name of the university and faculty.

Lowrie (2007) indicated that the service orientation of higher education make branding even more important than for organizations that make physical products. Corporate branding is the most appropriate branding orientation for universities including their faculties. The key task is to build and maintain strong relationships (Voss & Kumar, 2013) with relevant publics (students, staff, stakeholders) and establish differentiation and preference on the level of organization (university and faculty level). As faculties offer similar or identical study programs, teaching subjects or academic degrees, they need to apply marketing activities in order to differentiate their brand and values in the eyes of potential students.

For example, research by Opoku, Hultman, and Saheli-Sangari (2008) was focused on universities, brand personality and communication through official web pages. These authors highlighted the fact that the university's brand name and a corresponding image (reputation) represent a promise of future satisfaction for students in their decision making time. They conclude that universities need to communicate clear and distinct brand personalities online

Social media could enhance a two-way communication between organizations and customers, and accordingly, attach customers to the organizations' brand (Alalwan et al., 2017). Unlike other purchase decisions, a student signing up for a degree is effectively signing up for a lifelong relationship with the university and the faculty, as he or she will always have that university's name linked with his or her own (Rutter, Roper, & Lettice, 2016).

Active communication through social media can positively affect relationships between students and graduates with the university and faculty in terms of their commitment and trust, while consequently affecting brand equity (Dennis et al., 2016).

Brand and user engagement on Facebook

Organizations, including faculties, naturally seek to attract attention from the public. The change in the dynamics of marketing interchange between organizations and users as introduced by social media has placed a focus on the non-transactional customer behaviour.

The social network Facebook is considered as one of the prime platform for faculties to reach their target groups and engaging with them. Facebook is a leading social network actively used by people in these countries and by organizations both in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. At the core of all communication on Facebook is a single post (a message). It represents the unit of every Facebook communication. Each post draws a specific amount of attention from a Facebook page (profile) of an organization. Interactions are important to consumers (also page visitors and followers) and companies (organizations). Successful company-consumer interactions foster customer loyalty, willingness to try new offerings, and resistance to negative information about organization (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).

The term engagement becomes the central construct used to describe the nature of participants' specific interactions (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013). For example, Mollen and Wilson (2010, p. 923) define online engagement as "a cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website". Certain interpretations of this term focus on cognitive and emotional aspects of engagement (Bowden, 2009). Facebook is leading social networks and offers users an opportunity to engage with organizational profile and messages through three different engagement tools such as likes, shares and comments. These three tools – activities represent different forms of social engagement within the SM.

Facebook defines "a like as the easiest way to indicate a user enjoys a post, whereas share redistributes and publishes a post on a user's and their connections' pages, and a comment allows a user to create or add content to another user's posts" (Facebook, 2017; Srivastava et al, 2018). Each mentioned engagement behaviour differs in value and commitment of resources (Kim & Yang, 2017; Srivastava et al, 2018). Giving likes represents a very basic form of engagement. Comments enable people to share their thoughts, ideas, opinion or to show their interest in the post's topic. Zell and Moeller (2018) state that writing comments on Facebook takes more activity and effort than what "clicking like" does. They make a clear difference between "composed communication (comments)" and "one click" communication (likes). Different message features generate different behaviours (Alsufyan & Aloud, 2017): sensory and visual features lead to like; while rational and interactive to comment and sensory, visual, and rational to share. Giving a "like" is thus an affectively driven behaviour while commenting is a cognitively triggered. Sharing is either affective or cognitive or combination of both (Kim & Yang, 2017, p. 441).

Social networks and Facebook have been studied from different perspectives. For example Bowden (2009) focused on concept of satisfaction and understanding of the role of commitment, involvement, and trust in the creation of engaged and loyal customers. Cvijikj and Michahelles (2013) placed a focus on the non-transactional customer behaviour and the level of online customer engagement measured by number of likes, comments and shares. Similarly, Cho, Schweickart, and Haase (2014) analysed organizational messages on Facebook through three different engagement tools: likes, shares and comments. Ji et al (2017) conceptualized two levels of stakeholder engagement online and examined their different effects on corporate reputation. Research conducted by Kim and Yang (2017) examined values of different type of engagement behaviour. Study by Marrino et al (2017) indicated problematic