

# WHAT DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES: PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION?

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years the competition between higher educational institutions in recruiting international students has significantly increased. The universities and polytechnics are working on establishing their reputation, increasing trust and attracting more prospective students. Due to this reason, higher educational institutions have to improve and develop their marketing strategies. Digital marketing is identified as one of the most powerful tools in promoting educational services (Camilleri, 2020; Dhote, et al., 2015; Fierro, et al., 2017; Kusumawati, 2019; Sawlani & Susilo, 2020; Shields & Peruta, 2018; Zhu, 2019). Considering the global educational marketing situation and the increased demand for international education, this research will address the following question: What digital marketing strategies can be used for promoting international higher education?

The following definition digital marketing is understood as an interactive tool used on media platforms to reach potential customers is used in this research (Kannan, 2017; Stephen & Lamberton, 2016). The proposed question covers the subject of digital marketing in the context of higher education with a focus on international students. In the context of this research, the definition of higher education by Cambridge Dictionary (2021) is used. It is defined as education provided by a college or a university where subjects are studied at an advanced level. The objectives of this research were: to firstly, determine the role of digital marketing in higher education, and secondly, to identify digital marketing tools used for promoting international higher education.

The research conducted by Mishina (2021) identified that promoting online language education via social media platforms to be an effective digital marketing tool in higher education. A more detailed analysis of several social networks which could be used as a marketing tool will be presented.

The reviewed literature focuses on digital marketing frameworks, specific social media platforms, and how they can be most effectively used. Most of the chosen articles describe digital marketing tools which are used by universities and polytechnics in the European and English-speaking countries, which host most international universities (Times Higher Education, 2021).

A literature review process was used to firstly, identify and analyse the role of digital marketing in higher education, and secondly, review platform-based marketing strategies in higher education with a detailed analysis of social networks.

**Keywords:** digital marketing, social media, higher education, international students, international education.

## **ANALYSIS OF LITERATURE**

### **Literature Review Process**

To address the question posed, journal articles were selected for analysis by using keywords including "digital marketing", "social media", "higher education", "international students", and "international education". Search engine "Google Scholar" and academic databases "Taylor & Francis Online", "ProQuest", "Scholarly Needs", "Emerald Insight" were used to search for relevant literature. The articles were chosen by applying the search criteria - the year of publication "starting from 2010 to 2021 (Current)". Twenty-five articles were selected based on their potential relationship to address the three predetermined sub-questions as provided below.

The selected literature was analysed based on the following questions: What is the role of digital marketing in education? How can social networks be used as a marketing tool in higher education? and What are the best social media platforms for developing a marketing strategy for higher education?

## **EVALUATION OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Digital Marketing in Higher Education**

Contemporary research indicates that students' choice for higher educational institutions is influenced by digital media (Camilleri, 2020; Kumar, et al., 2017; Kusumawati, 2019; Sawlani & Susilo, 2020). This is because it allows for evaluation and comparison of the necessary information about the educational institutions, the programs of study, and student life, in a particular educational organisation (Dhote, et al., 2015). Most higher education institutions find it essential to apply digital marketing strategies to reach potential students (Kannan, 2017). Higher educational institutions around the world can establish brand awareness and market their educational services on a local and international level using digital marketing (Sawlani & Susilo, 2020). There is a wide variety of digital marketing tactics which can be used for increasing loyalty, sales, engagement, and trust of current and potential students, for example, website design, search engine optimization, and mobile connected Apps (Kannan, 2017).

There were different approaches observed in the literature to develop a marketing strategy. For example, the 4S model by Tucker & Au (2019) is focused on "solution, sacrifice, situation, and social media" (p. 176). Tabrissova (2018) introduced the situation, objectives, strategy, tactics, action and control (SOSTAC) planning model for developing a digital marketing strategy pointing to a deeper understanding of social media, influencing, and search engine marketing concepts.

For the research design, the platform-based framework by Fierro et al. (2017) was used. According to this framework, digital marketing strategies should be based on three elements: Social Networks, Mobile Marketing, Customer Relationship Management (CRM). Based on this framework, a more detailed analysis of the use of social networks, the adoption of Mobile Marketing, and CRM will be introduced in the following section.

### **Social Networks in Higher Education**

Islam et al. (2018) point at brand awareness as an element fostering brand loyalty. Social networks are found to be the most essential tool in establishing brands for educational institutions (Ram et al., 2017). Sjögren & Trautmann (2019) indicate social media, specifically Facebook, as the main resource used by a significant number of students when deciding on which educational institution to attend. Besides the typical information about subjects, potential students often search for information about university social life, the sense of activities, and the sense of community they might experience (Sjögren & Trautmann, 2019). Considering this fact, universities and polytechnics must include such information into their social media strategies. Shields & Peruta (2018) highlight the advantages of using social media in marketing higher

education and describe the challenges and problems; costless posting of communications compared to printed brochures, high level of accessibility by social network users, the ability of tracking and measurement of how effective the posts and campaigns are, and offering analytic tools. Time-consuming content creation, constant management of social networks pages, finding the most suitable context for each platform, constantly changing algorithms in reaching the posts were identified as the challenges (Shields & Peruta, 2018).

Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok were found to be the world's largest social networks (Datareportal, 2021). Several studies were dedicated to examining how Facebook can be used as a marketing tool for interacting with prospective students (Peruta & Shields, 2018; Rekhter & Hossler, 2020). The research by Assimakopoulos et al. (2017) identifies patterns of how undergraduate students interact with the Facebook groups of the University of Novi Sad of the Republic of Serbia and the Technological Educational Institute of Western Macedonia, Greece. Based on the research the following five factors were determined: 1. the group administrators being more active (posting, sharing), 2. group members' activities, 3. interaction with the content shared by administrators, 4. more frequent visits for searching for the new information, and 5. adopting Facebook groups to the individual needs of students (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017). University and polytechnic marketers could consider these factors when planning to recruit strategies to increase the interaction of the potential students with their Facebook groups.

A different approach is used by Peruta & Shields (2017), which was focused on the type and frequency of content that educational institutions post on their Facebook pages. The findings of Peruta & Shields's (2017) research demonstrate the difference between engagement on posts depending on the type of the educational institution, media type, and posting frequency. For example,

"Liberal arts colleges [Polytechnic] receive more proportional engagement than public and private universities, despite posting less frequently" (Peruta & Shields, 2017, p. 140). With regards to media types, private universities post photographs more regularly, whereas liberal arts colleges [Polytechnic] mostly rely on links to external sites (Peruta & Shields, 2017). Thus, universities that post less frequently and include photographs, receive higher overall engagement.

The findings by Bonilla Quijada et al. (2021) who examined Instagram pages of the five highest-rated universities according to Academic Ranking of World Universities (ShanghaiRanking Consultancy, 2019), suggest posting engaging content which appeals to emotions as it has a greater impact on engagement and reduces posts containing advertisements that generate less engagement.

According to Shields & Peruta (2018) prospective students tend to use more image-driven social media, for example, Instagram and Snapchat, compared to Facebook, "which is seen as passé by traditionally aged college students" (p. 71). However, both Facebook and Instagram help determine the atmosphere on campuses and activities that students engage in. It was found that being non-active on social media for a year the educational institution might be considered irrelevant and not unique, resulting in a negative impact on the number of recruited students (Shields & Peruta, 2019).

Most of the reviewed studies identify the right quality and frequency of content posting as the best strategies for increasing engagement. However, the importance of considering the geo-location of the prospective students when planning a social media marketing strategy is not frequently mentioned (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017; Bonilla Quijada et al., 2021). Zhu (2019, p. 174) stated that "China is now the world's biggest source of foreign students" in the market of higher education. For example, in 2018 China contributed to one-third of the international students in the United Kingdom (Zhu, 2019). Although, such popular social media platforms like YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are not accessible in China due to the censorship policy (Zhu, 2019). For this reason, it is recommended using social networking platforms like Sina Weibo and WeChat, which are popular with Chinese prospective students living both in mainland China and other countries to establish a brand and increase trust (Adi & Hobby, n.d.; Teng, et al.,

2015). Zhu (2019) investigated how Sina Weibo and WeChat could be adopted by the western universities in their social media strategies for recruiting Chinese students. According to Zhu's (2019) findings, WeChat is three times more popular than Sina Weibo and might reach more potential students, although Sina Weibo is easier in posting photographic content and exchanging messages and less complicated in editing articles than WeChat.

Camillery (2020) recommends using the local language of the prospective students and considering their socio-cultural norms, beliefs, and expectations when marketing educational services.

Thus, the use of social networks increases brand awareness of educational institutions among potential students. Social media like Facebook and Instagram are found to be the most popular among students and can be used as marketing tools to interact with prospective students and demonstrate university and polytechnic students' social life, for example, by intensifying the activities on the social networks profiles. The type and frequency of content posting should be planned depending on the type of the educational institution. The image-based platform Instagram is more frequently used by current prospective students, according to the latest research, compared to Facebook, which is more preferred by older students. Geo-location of potential students, accessibility of Instagram and Facebook in targeted regions, and the use of local social networks are important factors to be considered when marketing international education. By creating and managing profiles on Sina Weibo and WeChat (Chinese social networks) universities and polytechnics can increase their chances of reaching more prospective students, as China has become the largest source of international students.

### **Mobile Marketing and Customer Relationship Management**

Mobile devices play a significant role when students search for the information and make decisions on a study choice (Zinn & Johansson, 2015). For this reason, the need for the adoption of new mobile marketing strategies has increased among higher educational institutions (Wong et al. 2020). This means that higher education providers can reach more potential students by being more relevant to a mobile generation (McCabe & Weaver, 2019). Zinn & Johansson (2015) presented the refined conceptual model with a framework for developing a coherent and integrated mobile recruitment strategy. The model includes five categories of students (prospects, inquirers, applicants, admits, enrolled), and provides a detailed description of ten mobile marketing tools which can be used based on the category of students (Zinn & Johansson, 2015) and includes the following tools; Mobile-optimized Website, Mobile Search Marketing, Mobile Advertising, Mobile Social Media Marketing, SMS & Mobile Instant Messaging, Mobile Email Marketing, Quick Response (QR) Codes, Near-field Communication (NFC), Location-based Marketing, and Mobile Analytics. This research (Zinn & Johansson, 2015) does not differentiate between domestic and international students, however, it is believed that all mentioned mobile marketing tools can potentially be used when planning international marketing strategies.

Some practical suggestions are offered by Wong et al. (2020) to consider when designing a mobile marketing strategy; creating content for social media by current students, involving student ambassadors, using mobile applications contribute to engagement level as well as help in establishing a stronger brand.

Another additional tool that can be used for promoting higher education is CRM (Hrnjic, 2016). Hrnjic (2016) states that higher education institutions have been facing economic pressures and shortages of capital. Having transformed from teacher-oriented to student-oriented approaches, higher education institutions are required to increase the level of customer satisfaction to attract and retain students (Hrnjic, 2016). Hrnjic (2016) addressed the question of whether the implementation of CRM helps higher education institutions to achieve economic objectives and increase the customer satisfaction level. In the educational sector CRM is focused on the automation and improvement of the institutional processes associated with the students' support and service, marketing, recruitment, and management, and is viewed as a combination of business strategies and technologies, implementation of which helps to reduce costs, and increase

revenue (Khanna, 2019). Beheshti & Bagheri (2010) presented a CRM framework that can be applied for designing and supporting marketing strategies to manage relationships with international students. The research (Beheshti & Bagheri, 2010) is based on the data from Swedish universities, however, it can be applied to any university which targets international students in its marketing campaigns. The CRM framework by Beheshti & Bagheri (2010) consists of such elements as people, channels, Information Communication and Technology (ICT)-based tools, required processes, and technologies. According to the findings (Beheshti & Bagheri, 2010) it is recommended to establish market segmentation for successful implementation of the framework. Three criteria to consider in marketing to international students were identified: 1. nationality (targeting Chinese and Indian students); 2. qualification of students (attracting the most qualified and talented students); 3. partner universities (collaboration and improvement of partnership with specific universities around the globe).

To conclude, the integration of Mobile Marketing and CRM into marketing strategies by an educational institution allows it to be more relevant to the prospective students and complements existing marketing strategies with the tools able to target more specific audiences. The refined model (Zinn & Johansson, 2015) for mobile marketing includes five categories of students and ten mobile marketing tools and the CRM framework consists of five elements.

## **LIMITATIONS AND GAPS**

In describing the use of social media in recruiting international students, this research does not completely explain how the same social media platforms should be considered depending on different geographical locations, and the cultural background of students (Kusumawati, 2019; Zhu, 2019). Also, the reviewed research papers mostly specify how beneficial the use of social media is in planning marketing strategies is (Dhote et al., 2015; Fierro et al., 2017; Kumar et al., 2017). However, any concerns or mistakes in using social media are not mentioned.

There was no study identified within the literature reviewed on the differentiation of digital marketing tools that require a financial contribution and can be used for free, and on the budget planning of digital marketing campaigns in higher education. Also, the findings within this research do not show how effective paid digital marketing tools are in recruiting international students.

## **CONCLUSION**

Recruiting international students has become one of the main marketing purposes for higher education institutions around the globe due to high competition between them and a growing demand for international education. Digital marketing is considered to be the most effective way to target prospective international students. Such digital marketing tools as Social Networks, Mobile Marketing, CRM can be used for this purpose. Having profiles on social networks, such as Facebook and Instagram, more careful management of their accounts, considering posting frequency according to the institution type, engaging picture-based media, reducing the number of posts containing advertisements altogether help to increase the engagement, school brand awareness, and reputation, and assist in reaching a greater number of potential students. Considering the geo-location of the prospective students is also significant. Chinese students have become the most frequent customers of international higher education. It is suggested universities and polytechnics adopt Sina Weibo and WeChat (Chinese social media platforms) when developing marketing strategies that target international students.

Adoption of mobile marketing strategies is essential in recruiting domestic and international students as mobile devices are widely used in searching the information about universities and polytechnics and educational programs. Depending on the recruitment stage different mobile marketing tools can be used, for example, Mobile-optimized Website, Mobile Search Marketing, Mobile Advertising. Higher educational institutions have implemented CRM, which helps plan marketing strategies and manage relationships with

prospective international students. A specific framework for using CRM was suggested based on five elements, such as people, channels, ICT-based tools, required processes, and technologies.

The analysed literature partially answers the research question of what digital marketing strategies can be used for promoting international higher education. It covers various tools and frameworks of digital marketing which can be applied in international higher education. Hypothetically different combinations of described tools or specific tools could be used by higher education institutions, however, they should be tested.

Further recommendations for research could be to conduct a broader investigation into the Chinese social media platforms and cultural specifics of marketing higher education programmes to prospective Chinese students, and the development of a more detailed digital marketing strategy or a framework for universities and polytechnics based on the findings.

In the course of Covid-19 pandemic the demand for online higher education has increased. Due to this reason higher education institutions can consider offering free online courses as a marketing tool to encourage new potential students to enrol. Also, developing a CRM system for a specific market could be considered to contribute to further research into digital marketing strategies for promoting international higher education.

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