

The Impact of Hybrid Marketing Strategies on Student Recruitment

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Abstract

This paper analyses the effectiveness of educational marketing strategies in the actual context, marked by accelerated digitalization and increased competition to attract candidates in higher education. The main objective of the research was to evaluate the impact of traditional communication channels compared to digital ones on gathering information about the educational offer by students. The methodology used consisted of a case study carried out at the Faculty of Technological Engineering and Industrial Management, the data collection tool being a questionnaire applied through the Google Forms platform to a sample of 168 students in the first and second years. The results of the research indicate a necessary complementarity between promotion environments: while recommendations are the main source for generating interest, the website remains the critical source for validating technical information. The analysis also reveals a paradox of digitalization: although constantly exposed to the online environment, candidates use social networks to a small extent to access official information on university admission. The conclusions of the study provide practical recommendations for optimizing the promotion mix, in order to increase the visibility and attractiveness of the educational offer of the faculty.

Keywords

marketing strategy; social media; online promotion; student recruitment

1. Introduction

In the current socio-economic context, marked by a visible demographic contraction [1, 2, 3] and increased mobility of young people, higher education institutions face unprecedented competition to attract and retain quality students. The promotion of the educational offer is no longer just an administrative option but has become a strategic necessity of university management. A faculty is no longer just a provider of knowledge, but a complex ecosystem that must effectively communicate its added value in an increasingly globalized education market.

The transition to University 4.0 [4, 5] requires a rethinking of the way information reaches potential candidates. If in previous decades the prestige of an institution was mainly transmitted through traditional channels or direct recommendations, today we are witnessing a hybrid paradigm of communication. The future student, a digital native, begins his search online, through search engines, social networks and official websites, but often bases his final decision on human, authentic interactions, carried out during visits to high schools or open doors type events organized by universities. The efficiency of this recruitment process critically depends on the ability of faculties to maintain a balance between digital visibility (speed, accessibility, visual content) and physical promotion (counselling, practical demonstrations, networking). In this sense, the analysis of the sources of information preferred by students in the early years of study becomes an essential diagnostic tool. Understanding the candidate's informational path, from the first eye contact on a social network to analysing the syllabus on the faculty website, allows the optimization of marketing resources and personalizing educational messages to meet the needs and expectations of the current generation.

This paper aims to explore this dynamic, evaluating through quantitative methods how the promotion mix influences the students' decision-making process, thus providing a substantiated support for improving institutional communication strategies.

Recent academic concerns have crystallized into a numerous researches that have investigated the valences of university marketing, analysing its impact on institutional prestige and the student recruitment process. For example, paper [6] examines how universities in developing countries manage to attract students, balancing two major strategies: digital marketing and traditional marketing. The

research focuses on the process of fighting for market share in an increasingly competitive educational sector, where students have become refined consumers. The conclusions of the study are: social media and websites are the main sources of information for students due to interactivity; traditional promotional methods (such as direct recommendations or historical reputation) often provide the sense of security and legitimacy needed for a long-term investment; the most successful institutions are those that integrate both forms, using digital for reach and traditional for trust. The study from [7] investigates the relationship between digital marketing tools and two key outcomes: awareness and departmental choice. This paper places particular emphasis on how the marketing funnel [8, 9, 10] turns a simple internet user into a student enrolled in a particular department. In the context of the university environment, this method explains the psychological and decision-making path of the candidate. The analysed digital marketing channels are: social media, the website of a department / faculty, and aids and the final conclusion is that the faculty brand is often more important than the university brand for a potential student. Calsina et al. [11] also approaches the marketing funnel method to assess how digital marketing strategies (social media, Search Engine Optimization - SEO, paid advertising) have directly influenced the positioning of Peruvian universities in a highly competitive and saturated educational market. The main conclusions of the study revealed that universities that did not invest in SEO positioning strategies and authentic video content lost significant market share; the success in positioning came from the ability of universities to segment messages according to the geographical regions of Peru and the specific interests of the candidates; reviews and success stories of graduates posted on professional networks like LinkedIn were decisive for positioning universities. Dumitriu et al. [12] explores how rigorous management of digital marketing strategies (not just internet posting) can increase brand awareness. The authors emphasize that success does not come from the use of all platforms, but from the coherence of the message on the chosen channels: the website stands at the core, the digital business card that must exude professionalism; social media is used to humanize the university brand and create an emotional connection; SEO is essential for the university to appear first in student online searches. In the same direction, Miele et al. [13] investigates the implementation of digital marketing strategies as a form of educational innovation, looking at how they streamline the process of attracting and recruiting new students in the geographical and social context of a specific region in Ecuador. The main findings in this study were: digital marketing is a sustainable solution for universities with limited budgets, offering a greater impact than classic advertising and well-managed digital strategies have led to a visible increase in the number of registrations and a better knowledge of educational offers among the community. The authors of the paper [14] explore how universities in Saudi Arabia are adapting their communication strategies to attract young people in a unique cultural and technological context marked by an extremely high internet penetration rate. The purpose of the paper is to develop a digital marketing capability maturity model (CMM) as a guiding framework in support of increasing international student recruitment to the public universities. The key conclusions of the study refer to: digital marketing is clearly outpacing traditional methods in Saudi Arabia due to the country's young and digitized demographics; the recruitment decision is closely related to how the university manages its online reputation and interaction with users; universities need to invest in mobile marketing strategies, as the vast majority of the research and enrolment process takes place from a smartphone. Bularca et al. [15] is focused on identifying the online promotion strategies used by the best European universities, as a guideline for developing an online promotion and communication procedure for Transilvania University of Brasov and other universities. The authors have analysed two groups of universities: universities having higher positions in international ranking are basing their communication strategies on more developed online strategies, while universities having lower positions in international ranking are not so present in online environment. Fiț [16] analyses the internationalization strategies of higher education institutions in Romania, in a context in which attracting foreign students has become an economic and prestigious necessity. The developed research investigates the promotion mechanisms used by Romanian universities to make their educational offer known on the global market and to compete with traditional study destinations in the Western Europe. Balasescu & Balasescu [17] studies how universities in Romania can build a competitive advantage in an ever-changing educational market, using the triad: identity, image and promotion. The study

proposes a strategic framework for the effective positioning of Romanian universities, emphasizing that success does not come only from the quality of education, but from the way it is perceived by the target audience (students, parents, employers). Paper [18] analyses the theoretical and practical foundations of educational marketing, treating universities as service providers in a globalized and highly competitive market. The research explores how higher education institutions can adopt service-specific marketing strategies to meet the dynamic needs of customers (students) and society. Belostecinic & Jomir [19] examines the strategic role of digital tools in transforming the way universities are perceived and attracting new candidates, focusing on the way in which online marketing directly influences two main essential components: attractiveness of the institution, measured by its capacity to attract and retain students and its image, expressed through its reputation in online environment. Paper [20] provides a practical and comparative perspective on how different marketing tactics influence enrolment in a specific context: that of satellite campuses, which are branches of larger universities. The authors compare the direct effectiveness of traditional marketing methods (visits to high schools, billboards, brochures) versus digital marketing methods (social media, email marketing, Google Ads) in the process of recruiting students. Krasteva & Potebnya [21] analyse the visibility of higher education institutions through personalized communication and is based on a research methodology that includes a comprehensive review of current marketing techniques, case studies of successful campaigns, and interviews with marketing professionals within the academic sector.

2. Research Regarding the Development of a Marketing Strategy

The research presented within this paper refers to a case study carried out within the Faculty of Technological Engineering and Industrial Management, Transilvania University of Brasov, based on marketing research for determining the sources of information of high school students and the effectiveness of the marketing strategy of the faculty for the period 2024-2026. The purpose of this research is to determine the main directions for developing a hybrid marketing strategy that has a positive impact upon the student recruitment process.

2.1. Method

The market research was conducted by a survey, based on a questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The structured questionnaire was developed by the authors and consisted of a set of 11 questions: eight questions were based on nominal scale, two questions were ordinally scaled, and one question was an open question, inviting respondents to express their opinions on the changes they would make in relation to the promotion activity of the educational offer of the faculty if they were in the position of the marketing coordinator of the faculty.

The research was based on the following hypotheses:

- H₁: The distribution of frequencies regarding the source of information for candidates is not uniform, there are communication channels with a significantly greater impact on the recruitment process;
- H₂: There is at least one social media platform that exhibits a significantly different frequency of use from the rest, indicating a specific preference of the target audience;
- H₃: The level of usefulness perceived by users for the information on the platform is high (above the neutral level);
- H₄: There is at least one type of content that influenced faculty choice significantly more than the others;
- H₅: Most users (over 50%) have interacted with our pages through messages or comments;
- H₆: Exposure to visual and informative content on the faculty's online channels contributes significantly to the formation of a positive perception of compatibility between the candidate and the institution, the median score of the agreement being significantly above the neutral level.

2.2. Representative Sample

The size (n) of the representative sample was determined in accordance with Slovin formula [22, 23]

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N \cdot e^2} = 181 \text{ students} \quad (1)$$

where: N represents the total population size, and e^2 is the square of maximum admitted error.

The total population size is represented by students in first and second years of study from the study programmes coordinated by the Faculty of Technological Engineering and Industrial Management. The structure of the representative sample is given in Figure 1 in respect with the high school graduated profile of the student and Table 1 as regards the county where the student comes from. As can be seen in Figure 1, most of the students of the faculty have graduated from technical profile followed by natural sciences profile. From the 181 students included in the representative sample, 13 did not give their consent for processing and publishing the results of this research. In accordance with this, the final sample was 168 students.

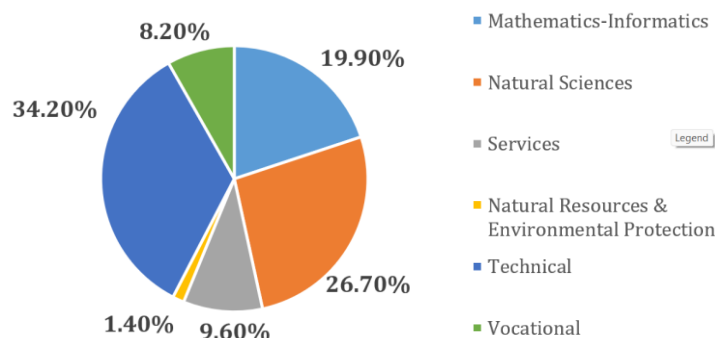


Fig. 1. Structure of the sample from student profile perspective

Table 1. Structure of the sample from county where the student comes from

County	Percent	County	Percent
Brasov	39.7%	Galati	2.1%
Prahova	12.3%	Harghita	1.4%
Bacau	11%	Chisinau	2.1%
Covasna	6.2%	Vrancea	1.4%
Neamt	5.5%	Braila	1.4%
Buzau	3.4%	Dambovita	1.4%
Sibiu	2.1%	Other	10%

3. Results for Hypotheses Testing

Data processing and analysis was made by means of SPSS software package, applying univariate analysis to obtain basic results that stands at the basis of developing a hybrid marketing strategy for the analysed faculty. Testing the hypotheses was made through certain statistical tests, recommended by the specialized literature [24 ÷ 26].

Table 2. Results of testing hypothesis H₁

Information source	Percent	Observed	Expected	p-value
Recommendations	42.2%	71	28	0.000
Faculty web site	38.4%	65		
Social media	6.2%	10		
Visits in high schools	6.2%	10		
Visits of pre-students at the faculty	3.4%	6		
Other sources	3.6%	6		
Total	100%	168		

The results for testing hypotheses H₁ (Table 2), H₂ (Table 3), H₄ (Table 5), and H₅ (Table 6), were obtained by the means of Chi-square statistical test (the variables are nominal) and the results for testing hypotheses H₃ (Table 4) and H₆ (Table 7) were obtained by the means of Wilcoxon statistical test (the variables are ordinal).

Table 3. Results of testing hypothesis H₂

Social media channel	Percent	Observed	Expected	p-value
Facebook	29.3%	49	33.6	0.000
TikTok	16.3%	27		
Instagram	13.3%	23		
YouTube	1.4%	2		
None of the social media platform	39.5%	67		
Total	100%	168		

Table 4. Results of testing hypothesis H₃

Score for utility of the information	Percent	Observed	Median	p-value
Scores of 1 and 2	6.9%	7	4	0.000
Score of 3	33.6%	34		
Scores of 4 and 5	59.5%	60		
Total	100%	101		

Table 5. Results of testing hypothesis H₄

Type of post	Percent	Observed	Expected	p-value
Student life during spare time	12.9%	13	25.25	0.000
Student life within faculty	22.9%	23		
Details about subjects and didactic activities	57.1%	58		
Testimonials from graduates	7.1%	7		
Total	100%	101		

Table 6. Results of testing hypothesis H₅

Time of response in case of interaction	Percent	Observed	Expected	p-value
No interaction	71.4%	72	25.25	0.000
Very quickly (a few hours)	17%	17		
Acceptable (24-48 hours)	10.2%	10		
Very late or not at all	1.4%	2		
Total	100%	101		

Table 7. Results of testing hypothesis H₆

Score for agreement	Percent	Observed	Median	p-value
Scores of 1 and 2	17.3%	25	3	0.000
Score of 3	36.1%	52		
Scores of 4 and 5	46.6%	67		
Total	100%	144		

4. Discussions

The results presented in (Table 2) indicates the acceptance of hypothesis H₁, the distribution of sources of information of candidates are not uniform. The results indicate a statistically significant discrepancy between the observed and expected frequencies, the calculated significance level (p-value) being well below the standard level of 0.05. There is a clear dominance of recommendations (42.2%) and the faculty website (38.4%). These sources accumulate over 80% of the candidates' options, considerably exceeding the expected value of 28 units per category. Sources such as social media (6.2%) and visits to high schools (6.2%) recorded values much lower than the theoretical uniform distribution.

The results from (Table 3) show a p-value of 0.000, in this way the test confirms that preferences for social media platforms are not equally distributed. Hypothesis H₂ is rejected, because the most important figure in the table is not a social network, but the none category (39.5%). Among those students who still use social media, there is a clear hierarchy that confirms the hypothesis. With 49

observations, Facebook is the only platform that significantly exceeds the expected value (33.6). It remains the dominant social channel for this sample. Although TikTok (16.3%) and Instagram (13.3%) are generally popular, they underperform the expected statistical average. YouTube (1.4%) is almost non-existent in the information process of this group (only two students).

The results from Table 4 indicates a p-value well below the standard level. Since the observed median is 4, it is above the neutral level (3), directly confirming the hypothesis that the perceived utility of the information on the platform is high. Neutrality zone (33.6%): 34 students consider utility as average. Overwhelming majority (59.5%) of the respondents gave scores of 4 and 5 (high and very high utility); 33.6% of students consider utility to be average; only seven students gave scores of 1 and 2 (low utility).

p-value from Table 5 indicates the acceptance of hypothesis H₄. More than half of the subjects (57.1%) indicated the details about subjects and teaching activities as the main influencing factor, a value that considerably exceeds the statistical equilibrium value ($E = 25.25$). In contrast, content focused on social life in leisure time (12.9%) or graduate testimonials (7.1%) recorded frequencies well below expectations.

The results from Table 6 highlight that hypothesis H₅ is rejected, data showing that 71.4% of students ticked the No interaction category.

The data from Table 7 indicate that hypothesis H₆ is only partially confirmed, since the median of the scores obtained is 3, which places the central response at the neutral level, not above it, as anticipated. Although the largest group is represented by those who have a positive perception (46.6%), the significant segment of neutral respondents (36.1%) maintained the median at the reference value.

5. Conclusions

The present research provided a detailed insight into students' information and decision-making mechanisms, as regards choosing the right faculty, partially validating the digital communication model, but also highlighting its limitations, developing an informational profile of the candidate.

While results obtained within the present paper confirm the institutional website as the main vector of information, thus validating the trends identified in the literature, there is a significant discrepancy in the use of social networks, which registers a much lower share among our candidates compared to the data reported in similar studies from other universities.

The results indicate a hybrid information model, where recommendations (42.2%) and the official website (38.4%) remain the central pillars. Although we live in a digital age, the impact of social media channels is surprisingly low, with almost 40% of respondents stating that they do not use these platforms for academic information. This suggests that the recruitment process relies heavily on the existing image capital (word-of-mouth) and on the institution's own information capacity through official platforms. Although social media platforms are active promotion channels, their current impact in attracting candidates is marginal compared to the first two categories. When social networks intervene, Facebook remains the only platform with above-average statistical relevance, to the detriment of new visual channels such as TikTok or Instagram.

A major finding of the study is the high pragmatism of the target audience. Candidates are specifically looking for a direct utility, the information on the online and social media platforms is perceived as very useful (Median = 4). As regards the academic content, over 57% of students were influenced by the details of teaching activities, largely ignoring aspects related to entertainment or student free time.

It was observed a passive interaction of students with social media platforms. Although most of the representative sample (71.4%) do not interact directly with pages (through messages/comments), they consume the content in a silent but effective way.

A critical aspect identified is the fact that, although the information is useful and correctly delivered, it fails to generate a strong sense of belonging. The neutral median (3) in terms of the perception of compatibility suggests that the current communication strategy is informative, but not necessarily persuasive. The institution manages to educate the potential candidate about the offer, but still has to work on the storytelling chapter to transform an informed candidate into one who feels emotionally connected to the values of the faculty.

The results of the research substantiate a series of strategic directions necessary to optimize the

recruitment and institutional communication process, in order to develop an efficient hybrid marketing strategy for the faculty. Considering the identified disparities between the usefulness of the information and the perception of compatibility, the following measures are proposed:

- Focusing communication on the pragmatic-didactic dimension: given that more than half of respondents prioritize curricular details to the detriment of recreational aspects, a reconfiguration of the hierarchy of digital content is recommended. The content marketing strategy must migrate from general presentations to micro-curricula like infographics and short videos detailing the specific skills acquired in each discipline, the evaluation methods and the practical applicability of the laboratories.
- Strengthening the web-Centric digital ecosystem: since the faculty's website remains the primary official source, social media platforms (especially Facebook) should be used strictly as redirect vectors (gateways). It is recommended to implement an inbound marketing strategy, where social platforms serve as points of attention, while the website offers the complete informational experience, validated by the high score of perceived usefulness.
- Boosting and formalizing trust capital (word-of-mouth): the major share of recommendations indicates the need for implementing brand ambassador programs for the analysed faculty. This might be done through digitalization of testimonials in the form of case studies focused on the career path of graduates, to increase the current low relevance. Another marketing action might be creating active recommendation mechanisms, where current students are involved in open day's events or hybrid mentoring sessions for candidates.
- Migration from information to institutional fit: the neutral median (3) obtained for the perception of compatibility signals a barrier in the conversion of the informed candidate into a registered candidate. To overcome this threshold, communication must include elements of emotional branding. It is recommended to use interactive tools on the website such as career simulators, aptitude tests related to the educational offer that personalize the user's journey and facilitate their identification with the values and academic culture of the institution.
- Adapting to silent consumer behaviour: the high rate of direct non-interaction should not be interpreted as a failure of communication, but as a specific passive consumption behaviour. The strategic recommendation aims to optimize the self-information resources like extensive FAQ sections, downloadable brochures, guided virtual tours, giving the candidate the opportunity to go through the entire decision-making process without having to initiate interpersonal communication, for which the sample showed a clear reluctance.

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