

# Attributes of Effective Online Promotion Strategies: Case Study of European Universities



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**Abstract** Living in the age of technology, universities are in need of keeping up with the development of the means of communication and the way new generations of students use these means. The purpose of the research was to identify the online promotion strategies used by the best European universities that provide master programs in communication based on a top made by Times Higher Education, in order to create an online promotion and communication procedure for Transilvania University of Brasov and other universities. Firstly, we analyzed the way the first 20 European universities with master programs in communication, according to a top made by The Times Higher Education, promote themselves online. Secondly, in order to be able to make a comparison and break down rules of good practice we analyzed the online promotion of 5 universities that occupy lower positions in the top. The universities were analyzed based on an adapted content grid with 29 criteria, including: contact information, real time assistance, social media instruments, information about: study programs, campus, employees, admission. Our results showed that the best European universities offering masters programs in communication, use various integrated online promotion and communication strategies and utilize combinations of tools that match their profile. Therefore, while there are similarities between the strategies used by the best European universities and the European universities with lower positions in the top, strategies of the best ranked universities and their promotion and communication methods can be adapted and used by other universities in order to improve their procedure of online promotion and communication.

**Keywords** Online promotion · European universities · Official websites

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# 1 Introduction

Nowadays, due to the rapid development of technology and implicitly the means of communication, Higher Education Institutions must find ways to meet the expectations and desires of new generations of students. In this regard, online promotion has become an essential tool for all organizations, institutions and companies. Considering the aspects mentioned above, the aim of our research was to identify the online promotion strategies of the best—ranked European universities, according to a top made by The times Higher Education in order to establish and improve the procedure of online promotion for Transilvania University of Brasov, Romania. The development of online communication has had and still has a significant impact on society. Creating an online presence in the contemporary era, is more than a way of promoting the values and principles of a brand, but it is a way of communicating and interacting with consumers at national and international level. The concept of promotion represents the transmission of information by the seller, to potential customers, in order to influence their attitude and the way they behave [1].

The main online promotion channels that universities use in order to interact with students and prospective students are websites and social networks. The website of a company or institution, also called corporate website, is designed to receive feedback from customers, to maintain favorable relationships with them [2]. Related to a website, there are certain factors that can determine its performance. A site must have a first page easy to understand, the transition from one page to another must be made easy and fast, the pages should not be overloaded, the letters used and their size should facilitate the reading of the text and sound and colors must match the identity of the brand [3]. Furthermore, the importance of a website is also highlighted by the fact that, in the online environment, people mostly rely on the information they find on a website, in order to assess the quality of the products or services offered [4]. Another online promotion channel that is used more and more among universities is represented by social media networks. Social media networks represent web based services that allow people to (a) build a public semi-public profiles, (b) to have access to a list of other users they can contact (c) view and include in their list of connections, the connections that other users make [5].

Hence, the way universities use online communication channels such as websites or social networks in order to communicate with their students and prospective students became a subject of interest for many researchers. A study [6] that focused on the website communication of Canadian universities about sustainable actions and programs, showed that universities adopted an integrated online communication when sending information about their sustainability policy and actions. Thus, the study showed that on their websites, 59% of them made reference to their Facebook accounts dedicated to posting information about sustainable actions, 50% percent of them made reference to their Twitter pages, and also 73.4% percent of them offered information about opportunities to volunteer in the universities' sustainability programs or plans. Another study on online communication of universities, revealed that 63% of websites analyzed contained links to social media pages of universities',

that many of them did not have updated contents, and that public universities had the most professional online communication, compared to private universities [7]. While analyzing the marketing communication mix of Czech universities and their faculties, a study [8] revealed that when asked where they found most of the information related to their studies, 28,4% of students stated that they found it on the website. In addition, the researchers concluded that online promotion and communication with the help of an official website, or university rankings are essential elements for universities and their efficient marketing communication plans.

Even more, other researchers studied, with the help of certain tools, the overall performance of the websites of universities in Punjab, India, finding that from twelve universities analyzed only 4 scored maximum points when it comes to their performance [9]. A similar study on the website performance of Islamic Azad University Branches, that was made according to multiple criteria among which were: navigation, authority, accuracy, accessibility, interaction and functionality, showed that the websites analyzed were well designed, and that they better complied with the navigation and coverage criteria, then with interaction [10]. It can be inferred that the websites were easy to navigate, that they covered and offered a wide range of information, but they lacked interaction with the users.

Furthermore, while studying the experiences of students with university websites, researchers stated that on a website, a university should present very clearly the contact information, that special attention should be given to the design of the website, to the position of each category of information and that the websites should include concise information about the history of the institution, and its activities [11]. Other researchers focused on students' intentions to use websites, and found that the website plays an essential role in the process of deciding which university they will enroll at, students included in the study stating that they firstly visited and analyzed the website before going on campus for more information [12]. Therefore, as shown by a previous study, it is important for an institution to constantly carry out brand management action in order to make sure that the identity it created and its promotion is in line with the brand as it is experienced by employees as well as with the image that the public has about the brand [13]. The purpose of our research was to identify the online promotion strategies used by the best European universities that provide master programs in communication, in order to create an online promotion and communication procedure for Transilvania University of Brasov, Romania.

## **2 Material and Methods**

### ***2.1 Objectives and Hypotheses***

The objectives of the research include: identifying universities that use promotion strategies based on social media networks and identifying elements of online promotion that require improvements. Research hypotheses present expectations regarding

the fact that European universities with master programs in communication: (1) promote online both their activity and study programs, using both the official website and social media platforms, (2) that they register a greater promotion activity during the admission period, (3) that they offer the possibility of applying to a program even before obtaining the degree from the Bachelor's examination, (4) that they offer real time assistance on their web-sites, and (5) that they offer information about career possibilities, campus and other options of accommodation. In doing so, we expect to find out that the best ranked universities use an integrated online promotion by providing information both on their websites and their social media platforms, that they have more online activity during the admission period, and that they allow prospective students to chat with representatives on their websites in order to receive assistance.

## ***2.2 Methods and Instruments***

The method used in order to carry out the research was content analysis, while having as an instrument an adapted content analysis grid, which has been previously used by two other researchers in analyzing the activity on Facebook of ten museums [14]. Adapting the grid proposed by the researchers mentioned above, to the topic of the research, we created a content grid, with 29 criteria that allowed us to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the online communication of universities. The criteria included in the grid referred to: contact information, real time assistance, video testimonials, news and announcements, research projects, social media instruments, promotional video, information about: study programs, campus, off campus accommodation, employees, admission, career options, taxes, competitions, open days, city lifestyle, ways to equate grades, internships, slogan, international mobility.

The universities included in our research were chosen from the World University ranking 2020, made by Times Higher Education. In this regard, we chose the first 20 universities from the ranking made by Times Higher Education, in order to see how the best rated universities managed to promote themselves online. Next, we chose 5 universities which occupied lower positions in the ranking, in order to make a comparison between their promotion strategies and the promotion strategies of the first 20 universities. Furthermore, our focus was on Transilvania University of Brasov, because it was a university which offered master programs in communication, but it was not present in the ranking. By looking at the way universities included in the ranking promote themselves online, we believed we could improve the online promotion of Transilvania University of Brasov, so that the university would communicate better information about its specificity and its activity.

Within the research, a total number of 25 universities were analyzed. The first best 20 European universities with master programs in communication: London School of Economics and Political Sciences (LSE-PS), Kings College London (Kings college) KU Leuven (KU Leuv.), University of Manchester (Univ.Man.), Wageningen University Research (Wageningen), University of Amsterdam (Amst.Univ.), Erasmus

University Rotterdam (Erasm.Univ.), Utrecht University (Utrech.Univ.), University of Gronigen (Gronigen), University of Warwick (Warw.Univ.), University of Glasgow (Univ.Glas.), Lund University (Lund.Univ.), University of Helsinki (Univ.Hels.), Free university of Berlin (Univ.Ber.), University of Sheffield (Univ.Sheff.), University of Durham (Univ.Durh.), University of Birmingham (Univ. Birm.), University of Copenhagen (Univ.Cop.), University of Oslo (Univ.Oslo.), University of Aarhus (Univ.Aarhus). Then, we analyzed another 5 universities with lower positions in the top: Tomas Bata University in Zlin (Th.Bata Univ.), Sofia University (Sofia.Univ), Vilnius University (Vilnius.Univ), Pablo de Olavide University (Pablo de Olavide Univ.), University of Seville (Univ.Seville), as well as Transilvania University of Brasov (Unitbv) ([https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2020/world-ranking#!/length/-1/sort\\_by/rank/sort\\_order/asc/cols/stats](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2020/world-ranking#!/length/-1/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats)) [15].

### 3 Results

Taking into consideration the analysis of the first 20 European universities that offer masters programs in communication, from the top made by The Times Higher education, firstly we identified the fact that the universities combine communication in their master programs, with other domains such as: politics, strategy, culture, education, which confirms the fifth hypothesis of the research. Another result showed that the universities used an online integrated communication strategy. For example, Durham University promotes on its website, its Instagram page, and University of Amsterdam referred on its website to its WhatsApp account. (<https://www.uva.nl/en?cb>) [16].

Thus, the research illustrated that all 20 universities:

- Offer contact information on their online platforms
- Offer information about study programs, admission process, necessary documents, campus and taxes, research projects, international mobility opportunities, news and announcements, and city lifestyle on their website
- Integrate social media tools into their online promotion strategy
- Describe their research projects on their website and Facebook page

Furthermore, the results showed that from the best ranked 20 universities with master programs in communication, the university which fulfilled the most categories was London School of Economics and Political Sciences (25), it being followed by University of Amsterdam, Erasmus University Rotterdam and Utrecht University (24) and the university with the least fulfilled categories was University of Durham (21).

Considering the analysis of the universities with lower positions in the top, similar to the first 20 universities, the 5 universities that occupy lower positions in the same top, offer contact information, use social media tools, offer information about campus, employees, admission, international mobility, lifestyle, research projects, taxes and none of them provides information about ways of equating grades. Unlike the 20 universities, none of the 5 universities offer information about off campus

accommodation, provide real time assistance on their website or in-formation about open days.

## 4 Discussion

The results of our research revealed that European universities with master programs in Communication have an online integrated communication, and that they offer online multiple types of information. In this regard, the universities analyzed use multiple online platforms to promote themselves, they register a greater promotion activity during the admission period, and they also have a winter session of admission which shows that students from other countries, can register to the programs before taking their Bachelor's degree. Thus, the results confirmed our initial expectations. Next, in the case of real time assistance, the fourth hypothesis was only partially confirmed because only 9 of the 20 universities analyzed offer real time assistance on their website. The fifth hypothesis was also only partially confirmed because not all the 20 universities analyzed offered information about off campus accommodation.

In line with the studies [6, 7] our research also shows that the universities analysed, make reference on their websites to the pages of their social networks such as Facebook or Twitter, and thus, they use an integrated online communication. Even more, similarly to a study [10] whose findings revealed that websites analyzed were well designed but they better complied with the navigation criteria than with the criteria of interaction, our research also shows that the websites of the European universities analyzed cover a wide range of information, but often lacked interaction with the user due to the fact that some universities do not offer real time assistance on their websites. Moreover, in light of the previously mentioned aspects, considering the results of our research, and drawing upon the findings of the study [12], regarding the major role of websites in developing an efficient online promotion and an efficient online communication with the public, we argue that for a university, effective online communication on its website is essential and necessary in order to maintain a favorable relationship with students and prospective students.

Following the research conducted on 25 of the best European universities offering master programs in communication in 2019, we identified different online promotion strategies and tools used by them to ensure their success in the online environment. Transilvania University of Brasov was also analyzed, and the research showed that there are some aspects that can be improved in its online promotion. Thus, the university does not offer information about open days, off campus accommodation, real time assistance, video testimonials, ways of equating grades, lifestyle in Brasov, and it does not have a Twitter page. Using as frame of reference the relevant elements that the universities analyzed have chosen to promote, we propose, with the aim of improving its online promotion, an online procedure for Transilvania University of Brasov, in the shape of recommendations and practical suggestions. In this regard, it is recommended for Transilvania University of Brasov to:

- Offer real time assistance on its website, in order to facilitate the collaboration with students and prospective students
- Offer information about open days or a virtual tour of the university
- Offer information about accommodation alternatives, in order to support students that did not receive accommodation on campus
- Integrate video testimonials from students and former students on their website. The role of testimonials is to increase the trust people have in the activity and specificity of the university
- Create a Twitter page in order to increase its visibility among international students
- Present information about lifestyle in Brasov: costs, entertainment, in order to familiarize the students with the environment they will live in.

## 5 Conclusion

The paper aimed at identifying the online promotion strategies used by the best European universities that provide master programs in communication, in order to create an online promotion and communication procedure for Transilvania University of Brasov. The research revealed that universities which occupy higher positions in the top use integrated online promotion strategies, that they have a more consolidated promotion and communication strategy than universities with lower positions in the top. In other words, while there were similarities between the two groups analyzed, the universities with lower positions do not offer on their websites as much information and support as the best ranked universities. In this context, it can be inferred that higher positions in the ranking can also be related to effective communication and promotion. According to the research it can be affirmed that prestigious universities understand the necessity of online promotion and communication nowadays, and through the information they provide, through the way they send messages, they increase student's interest, they provide answers to their questions and try to create a connection with them by ensuring them that the decision they are about to make is the right one. Even more, the universities analyzed understand the essential role of websites in maintaining favorable relationships with students and in improving the quality of the learning process, for they use their official websites not only for informing students, but also for providing knowledge, by sharing news, information about events organized, about certain research projects conducted and their results.

Furthermore, although the ranking from which the universities were chosen does not measure directly dimensions and indicators related to communication, we argue that there is a connection between the rank of a university and its communication strategies. Hence, effective communication can help universities acquire students, maintain favorable relationships with them, promote the research projects developed, and can indirectly help them become better in terms of numbers of students, research, international outlook and implicitly can help them gain higher positions in the top.

Therefore, the analysis conducted allowed us to extract some guidelines regarding how Transilvania University of Brasov should promote itself online in order to maintain a favorable relationship with students and prospective students. Thus, considering the fact that the strategies used by the best ranked universities have brought them, so far, success among students, the guidelines we extracted from them could be further used for improving the online promotion and communication of other universities. Hence, based on the promotion and communication strategies used by other universities, Transilvania University of Brasov could even update its policies regarding the online promotion of the institution and of the educational offer. Furthermore, considering the promotion strategies of Transilvania University of Brasov, the university could also adopt strategies through which it could promote the university brand.

Considering the limitations of our research, they refer to the number of universities analyzed, to the fact that we included in the research only universities with master programs in communication and we focused only on websites, and to the fact that we did not gather information from students or prospective students. In this regard, a future research could be extended to other issues and aspects such as the way universities communicate on social networks, it could analyze a larger number of universities without focusing specifically on the domain of communication, and it could also focus on gathering information from students, regarding the way they interact with the university through such platforms. Covid-19 also may have influenced their promotion. Therefore, further research could focus on the comparison with this study. Furthermore, when analyzing the online communication of universities, other factors such as internal control or transparency are also important, and thus, a future research could also take into account this factors when analyzing the communication process universities.

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