

SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF ROMANIAN UNIVERSITIES. A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM PAGES

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Abstract. Higher education institutions rely on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or websites to interact with multiple stakeholders, including prospective and current students, alumni, teaching staff, or politicians. Moreover, evidence suggests that prospective candidates frequently turn to social media in order to find more information about universities and student lifestyles (Peruta & Shields, 2017). Recent studies have focused on analyzing the online communication strategies of universities, monitoring categories of published content, the format of posts (text, video, photo, link), or engagement indicators (likes, comments, shares). Consequently, the paper explores Romanian higher education institutions' social media communication strategy. The method used was content analysis on the official social media pages of Facebook and Instagram for a sample of 30 universities (from 50 public universities). The results show that, although there are differences in the mix of communication channels and content, there are common features such as specific categories of postings more frequently used or preferences for postings format. The study highlights the characteristics of the online communication strategies of Romanian universities, discussing successful practices and identifying possible implications for engaging with target stakeholders.

Keywords: communication strategy; social media content; social media platforms; university

Introduction

Universities worldwide find themselves under immense pressure to keep up with new practices for attracting candidates. Many prospective students are interested in continuing to study across the border, which compels universities to focus on communicating with national and international candidates (Bélanger et al., 2014). Consequently, the competition for candidates' attention is growing and higher education institutions must do their best to draw as many qualified candidates as possible.

However, charming prospective students may prove to be a very difficult task in the online environment. Users are overwhelmed by the amount of information available, and the lack of proper promotional strategies may lead to low engagement rates and oversaturation (Peruta & Shields, 2017).

More and more prospective students turn to online channels to find information about the universities they are interested in. Details about the admissions process, available scholarships, and course offerings are what users look for when browsing online (Irfan et al., 2018). Evidence also suggests that accessing statistical data, such as university ranking, is one of the essential steps in candidates' decision to apply to a certain university (Uncles, 2018). Additionally, future students are also concerned about adjusting to university life, which explains why they are interested in learning more about campus activities and social life (Peruta & Shields, 2017). Not finding relevant information online might be a deal breaker for some candidates. They sometimes remove universities from their prospective list if they have a bad experience with their respective institutions' websites (Alexa et al., 2012).

Apart from recruiting students, many other underlying motives exist for including online platforms in universities' marketing strategies. Social media channels and websites are also used to disseminate information among current students and build a sense of community among alumni (Lund, 2019). Another goal of higher education institutions is bringing financial and material support, which can also be attained through creating university brand recognition (Lund, 2019; Williams & Omar, 2014). Thus, it becomes obvious that communication efforts must be directed toward different stakeholders. Students, alumni, potential donors, politicians, employees, business leaders, or journalists are among the groups universities target (McAllister & Taylor, 2007).

Although higher education institutions rely on offline and online promotional practices, paying special attention to communication on online platforms may bring extra rewards. With online becoming the preferred method of communication for younger generations, modern universities have to be capable of identifying the needs and interests of their audience and creating content accordingly (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017; Bélanger et al., 2014; Bonilla Quijada et al., 2021; Nyangau & Bado, 2012). But simply posting on social media is not enough to reach their goals. Instead, institutions must pin down effective practices and have dedicated specialists to build a marketing plan (Lund, 2019). Moreover, there isn't a "one size fits all" strategy, as effective practices may vary between universities (Bonilla Quijada et al., 2021). Hence, more research is needed to identify successful methods regarding the online communication of universities.

Literature review

Since the growing popularity of social networking sites (SNS), communication specialists have started differentiating between *outbound* and *inbound marketing*. Outbound marketing refers to traditional practices, which in the case of universities means participating in college fairs or disseminating promotional materials on paper (Rekhter, 2012). This kind of practice used to be the main method of communication for attracting candidates (Bélanger et al., 2014). On the other hand, inbound marketing includes using SNSs for communication purposes (Rekhter, 2012). For universities, SNSs and websites are useful channels for interacting with stakeholders. Generally,

websites have the main advantage of including a great amount of information regarding the institution, while social media platforms allow networking through different types of content (photos, videos, links, text) (Alexa et al., 2012; Peruta & Shields, 2017).

Although traditional marketing practices haven't been cast aside, communication efforts nowadays focus mostly on promotional activities in the online environment due to the advantages of using such platforms. One of the most important benefits of online marketing is the reduced promotion cost. With fewer financial investments needed compared to traditional practices, online marketing can help disseminate information to wider audiences nationally and internationally (Alexa et al., 2012; Assimakopoulos et al., 2017; Rekhter, 2012). Additionally, SNS platforms such as SNSs allow trackability (e.g. identifying prospective students' interests) and facilitate interactivity (Khan, 2013; Nyangau & Bado, 2012; Rekhter, 2012).

Previous research has highlighted the role of online platforms in helping new students adjust to university life (DeAndrea et al., 2012; Yu et al., 2010). DeAndrea and his colleagues (2012) analyzed how first-year students use the social media platform developed by a university in the United States. Their research has shown that the platform has facilitated connections between students, contributing to creating an online community in which the members helped each other. Interestingly, the main reason for using the platform was not related to obtaining academic success (DeAndrea et al., 2012). Similarly, Peruta and Shields (2017) highlighted the fact that new students manifest special interest in aspects related to networking and social life. Previously, another research (Yu et al., 2010) emphasized the importance of Facebook in establishing relationships among university students, consequently helping with their adjustment to the new context and contributing to their commitment regarding the university.

As far as SNSs are concerned, online practices have been studied in relation to engagement (Bonilla Quijada et al., 2021; Fährnich et al., 2020; Lund, 2019; Peruta & Shields, 2017). Social media engagement is usually measured through user interactions with content, such as *clicking*, *liking*, *sharing*, or *commenting*. Along with the number of followers, these metrics are used to assess the success of a social media page (Bonilla Quijada et al., 2021). Specialists draw attention to the effort associated with these actions, emphasizing that *liking* implies the least amount of effort, as it requires only one click (Peruta & Shields, 2017).

Recent studies have identified online practices are significantly correlated with high engagement rates. For example, an investigation among the top five universities in the world (Bonilla Quijada et al., 2021) has shown that elements appealing to emotions have been more successful on Instagram. More specifically, publishing photos or videos with the university or the city resulted in better engagement rates (Bonilla Quijada et al., 2021). A slightly different approach was taken on by other studies in the past years (Fährnich et al., 2020; Lund, 2019; Peruta & Shields, 2017), focusing their research on post frequency, the difference between posting on workdays and at weekends or content format. Users seem to appreciate visual content more, as this type of post has recorded greater fan engagement rates than text-only content (Fährnich et al., 2020). Surprisingly, video posts seem to negatively affect the number of likes and comments, but contribute to an increase in the number of shares (Fährnich et al., 2020). A high posting frequency has been shown to reduce engagement metrics, one of the possible

explanations being the oversaturation of social media feeds (Lund, 2019; Peruta & Shields, 2017). Regarding posting time, evidence suggests that weekend publishing leads to more successful content than workdays (Fährnich et al., 2020). Moreover, the evening seems to be the ideal time for universities to publish their posts on Facebook (Fährnich et al., 2020).

The marketing departments' efforts within higher education institutions should not be limited to posting on websites and social media profiles. Instead, recent research (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017) suggests that improving universities' marketing strategies can also rely on managing online groups. Assimakopoulos and his colleagues (2017) have highlighted the importance of the activities in which universities engage within Facebook groups, having identified five factors that may play a role in students' perception of educational offers: 1) administrators' contribution, 2) members' contribution, 3) group usage, 4) information seeking and 5) members' interests and engagement. Interestingly, the most important factor was the *administrators' contribution*, which refers to group administrators' ability to provide information to members and engage in activities such as posting or file sharing (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017). Evidence such as this highlights the importance for universities to use most of (or all) the options available on online platforms. With the fast development of digital tools, those in charge of university marketing must stay updated with technological advancements to maintain their relevance in the online environment and still be competitive.

Considering all this, it is necessary to explore how higher education institutions communicate online. Research has clearly emphasized the fact that the success of an online strategy may vary between universities, as each institution needs to identify the interests of its prospective students and tailor its content accordingly (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017; Bélanger et al., 2014; Bonilla Quijada et al., 2021; Nyangau & Bado, 2012). In addition, statistics show that social media usage preferences differ across countries or regions (DataReportal, 2022), prompting us to wonder if cultural factors may play a role in engagement rates. Thus, in order to help Romanian universities build effective online communication strategies, there is a need for more research regarding existing practices and their level of success.

The research objectives are: (1) to explore the mix of online communication channels chosen by the Romanian universities; (2) to identify specific social media content strategies of Romanian universities on Facebook and Instagram; (3) to find the most used content categories and format types on their social media accounts.

Methodology

For the purposes of this research, a quantitative method was chosen. The content analysis applied to universities' Facebook and Instagram pages provided a perspective on their social media communication strategies and online practices. The content analysis scheme was developed for the Facebook and Instagram official accounts of 30 Romanian universities, representing the analysis unit as a first step in the research. For the Facebook accounts, the following aspects were analyzed: the presence of links to other official online channels of the universities (website, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, YouTube), engagement indicators (number of followers, likes and check-ins), the About section and the presence of contact information (email, program, and address),

description of cover page which is typically used for promotion purposes (information about the future academic event, presence of logo, of building pictures or collages, academic staff or promotional messages), frequency of posting in the past 3 months (May, June and July, the former generally used for promoting admission details). For analyzing the content of the posts from the Facebook pages, the research instrument was developed based on the technique used by Peruta & Shields (2018), and the final content categories were as it follows: promotion, admin and staff, athletics, campus events, student achievements, university spirit, news related, research/scholarly/creative, alumni, programming, admissions, academic events, performances and exhibits, student organizations, development, entertainment, guests from the professional industry. Each post belongs to one category, so they do not overlap in content. The format included the following options: text-only, video, photo/image/photo collage, share from other pages/accounts, link posts, text+video, text and photo, text and share, and text and links. The collected data included the posts from 3 months: May, June, and July 2022. A total of 3,572 posts were analyzed from the official Facebook accounts of 30 Romanian universities with various profiles (comprehensive, technical, medical, agronomy, arts and sports, and others). The universities were selected alphabetically, the first 30 publicly listed universities in Romania.

For Instagram, the following data were collected from the official accounts of the same universities included in the initial sample: number following, number of followers, number of posts, presence of contact information (email, website, program, hashtag), frequency of posting, profile picture (logo, general photo, students, other), presence of highlights and whether they are organized in categories. As far as the content that was posted on Instagram in the same time interval is concerned (May, June, and July), the same content categories analyzed on Facebook were used, whereas the format included the following: single photo, carousel (more photos/videos in the same post), video, and reels. A total of 926 Instagram posts were collected from 22 university accounts, as not all the universities owned an official Instagram account. All the data (pages and posts) was analyzed in August 2022 by 3 coders trained to code according to the research requirements.

Results and discussion

In order to explore the topic of this research, we conducted an analysis regarding the online accounts owned by the universities included in our study. Facebook was the most popular channel, with only one university (the University of Architecture and Urbanism Bucharest) not having an online presence on this platform. YouTube and Instagram were also widely used among universities, with 25, respectively 23 having an account on these networks (Figure 1). However, not all universities had an active Instagram page at the time of the research, which is an interesting fact when discussing the importance of online communication among higher education institutions. Additionally, more than half of the universities in the sample (17 of them) had a LinkedIn account, while Twitter and TikTok were not included in the online communication efforts of most of the institutions analyzed (11 of them had a Twitter account, while only 5 chose to set up a TikTok page).

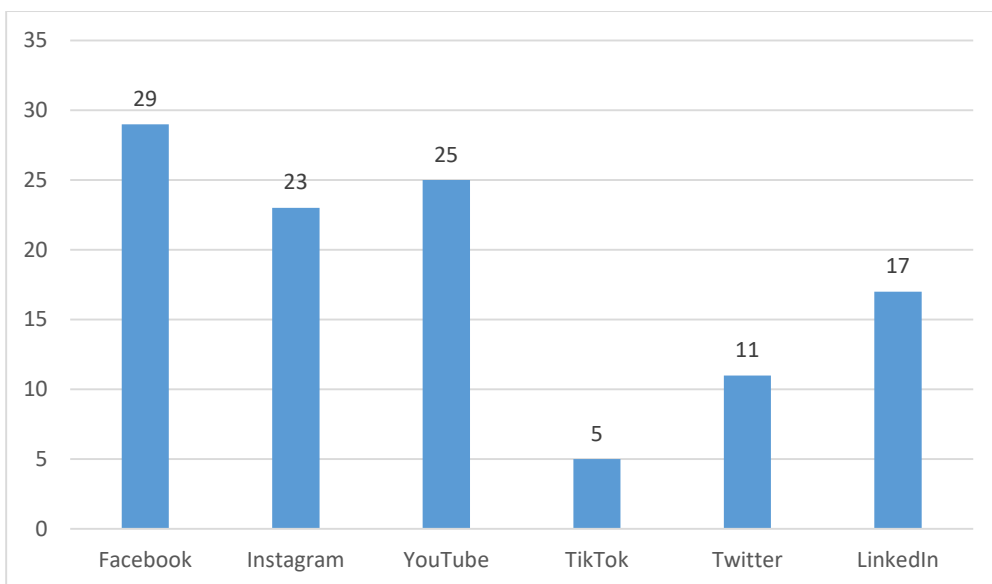


Figure 1. Number of universities communicating on different online platforms (out of 30)

Results of content analysis on Facebook. The analysis of the Facebook pages was focused on two main aspects. First of all, we wanted to investigate the extent to which universities could set up a proper account and personalize it in such a way that it included links to their accounts on other online channels, contact information, and cover pictures. All twenty-nine pages included links to universities' websites, while only ten considered including a link to their Instagram account. Few universities were also able to provide a link to their YouTube (6 universities), TikTok (2 universities), or Twitter (one university) accounts. Regarding the availability of contact information, the address was the only element included in all of the analyzed pages. Contact email addresses were also frequently mentioned, with only one university (Technical University of Cluj-Napoca) not including such information in their account. Furthermore, almost two-thirds of the universities (19 of them) chose to provide details about their opening hours.

With cover pictures being one of the first elements observable when visiting a Facebook account, occupying a significant amount of space on the page, we chose to analyze them based on the content universities wanted to depict. Most of the images analyzed (9 cover pictures) included promotional campaign messages, while the least preferred option was using pictures that included academic staff (only 2 of them chose it). The other 18 universities were split between cover images that included photo collages of the buildings (6 universities), future academic events (4 universities), logos/slogans (3 universities) or other types of content (5 universities).

On Facebook, users are able to see the number of page likes, followers, or check-ins. Regarding the number of followers, two universities distanced themselves from the others, gathering over 100.000 followers on their page: the University of Bucharest (104.396 followers) and the University of Iași (100.401 followers). Moreover, these universities were also top-ranked when it came to the number of page likes, with the

University of Bucharest also having more than 100.000-page likes (101.427 likes), while the University of Iași is placed just below this level (98.855 likes). Notably, both of them are comprehensive universities. Other than this, there were no obvious similarities or differences between the different university profiles.

During the three-month period included in the present analysis, a great number of universities (19 of them) posted daily, with one or more posts per day. Other five universities also recorded a high frequency of posting, making sure to create content every two days on average, while the remaining five opted to post only twice a week. The most active accounts in the research time frame were those owned by the University of Art and Design (UAD) Cluj-Napoca (346 posts) and the Polytechnical University of Bucharest (343 posts), followed by The National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA) Bucharest (234 posts) and the University of Theatrical and Filming Art (UNATC) Bucharest (213 posts). (Figure 2)

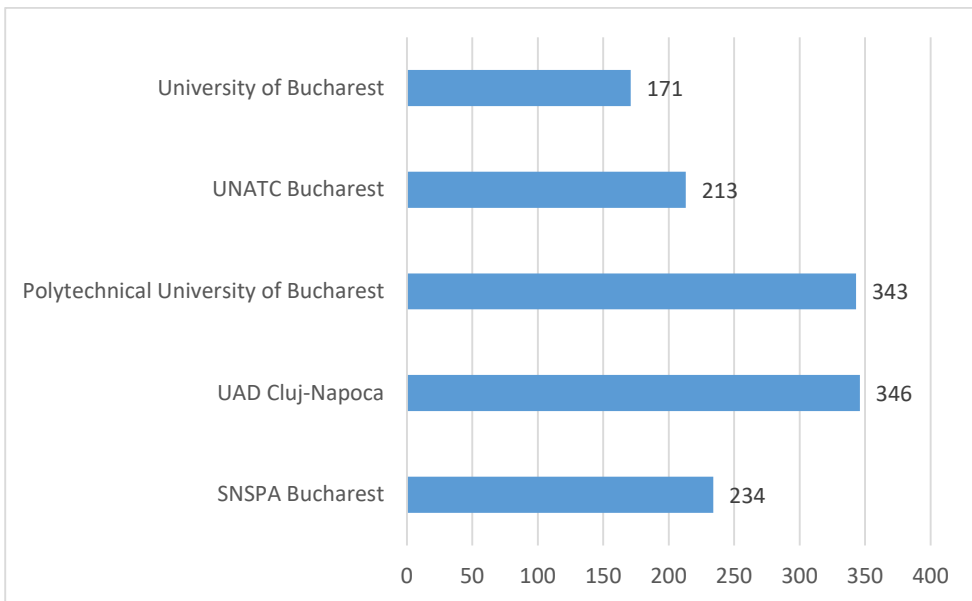


Figure 2. Number of posts for the five universities posting the most frequently on Facebook

Moving on to the analysis of the content posted, we discovered that the most frequent categories of postings (calculated using the average proportion of each category) were: „Promotion” (13.98% on average), „Academic events” (12.37% on average), „Admissions” (11.7% on average), „News” (11.04% on average) and „Campus events” (10.4% on average) (Figure 3). Other categories used moderately were „Performances and exhibits”, „Students’ achievements” and „Research”.

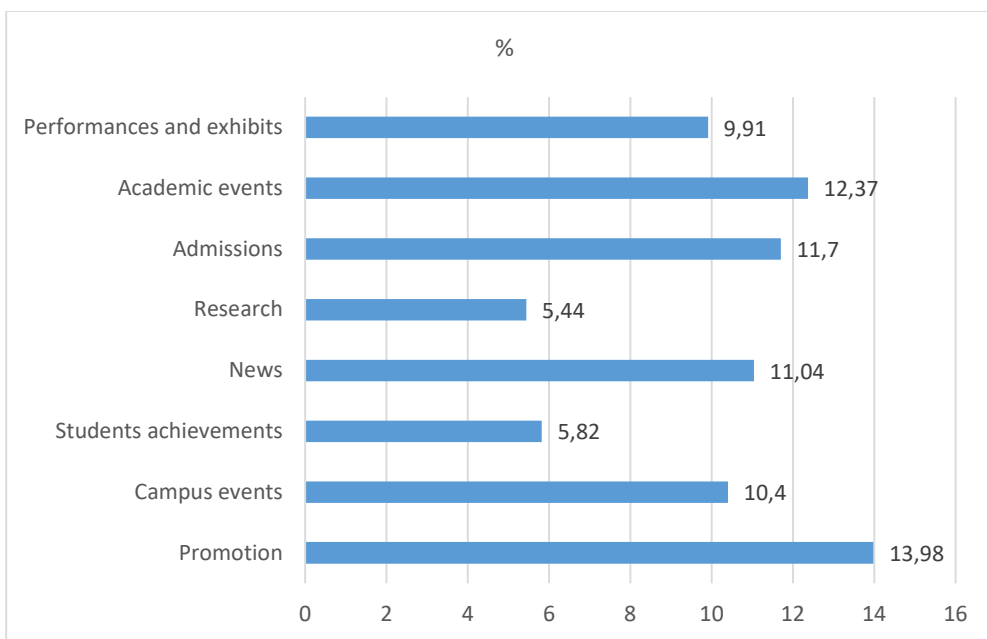


Figure 3. The most used categories of postings (average) on the Facebook pages of universities

Among the least popular categories among the universities included in this study was the one related to “Student organizations”, with only three universities covering this aspect, but to a considerably small degree. In general, universities used different content categories in their communication efforts, ensuring not to dedicate an overwhelming number of posts to only one type. The only exception here is the Technical University of Iași, having more than half of their posts (69.70%) in the “Promotion” category.

The posts’ format was also considered when analyzing Facebook pages. It was obvious that universities preferred to publish posts that included both text and visual aid (photo/video) or a link/share from other sources. The combination of text and photo was preferred by twenty-one universities, which chose this format for more than half of their posts. For example, the University of Arad opted for this type of format for 93.75% of their posts, while the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Craiova had 87.50% of posts included in the “text + photo” category. Interestingly, although twelve universities decided to publish text-only posts, they did this to a very small extent, with most of them (10 universities) choosing this format for less than 3% of their posts.

Results of content analysis on Instagram. Only twenty of the thirty universities included in our research posted on Instagram between May 1st and July 31st 2022. Notably, some of the other ten universities did not even have an Instagram account or had an account but no posts at all. Therefore, the following data was obtained based on the analysis of universities that had an active account at the time of this research.

The first step was to analyze basic information, usually required when setting up an account, such as a profile picture or description. Regarding the profile picture, as expected, most universities opted for elements specific to their visual identity, with 90%

of accounts (18 accounts) using the university logo. As far as the description is concerned, we investigated whether contact information was available in the profile, such as website, email, or schedule. The link to the website represented the main information included, with nineteen universities having their address available in the account bio. However, only eight universities mentioned an email address in their profile, while none of the accounts investigated had a schedule available for users.

Considering the account customization options available on Instagram, we examined whether universities included any hashtag in their account description, the possibility to see the highlights section, or whether these highlights were organized in categories. The analysis has shown that only four universities decided to mention a hashtag in their profile, while highlights were more often observed among the accounts under analysis. More than half of the universities (65%) had a highlights section, but only nine took advantage of the possibility of differentiating between multiple categories of stories.

On Instagram, the community created around an account can be analyzed, and the platform gives access to information about the number of followers and following or the total number of posts since the creation of the account. While most of the universities included in our research had a total number of followers between 1.000 and 9.999, we noticed four institutions placed outside this interval. The lowest-ranked universities regarding the number of Instagram followers were the University of Arad (669 followers) and Sports University of Bucharest (229 followers). Only two universities managed to attract more than 10.000 followers to their accounts – the University of Bucharest (107.000 followers) and the University of Craiova (60.500 followers). Apart from the exceptionally big difference between these two universities and the others, it is important to note that both top-ranked institutions are comprehensive universities. Other than this, there were no obvious similarities or differences between the different university profiles.

Although the frequency of posting was lower on Instagram in comparison with Facebook, more than half of the universities (11 accounts) posted either daily or every two days. The highest number of posts in the analyzed time frame was 125 posts, published by the University of Theatrical and Filming Art (UNATC) Bucharest. Subsequently, among the highest-ranked profiles by the number of posts were: The Polytechnical University of Bucharest (98 posts), the University of Galați (88 posts), and the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine (USAMV) Cluj-Napoca (87 posts). (Figure 4)

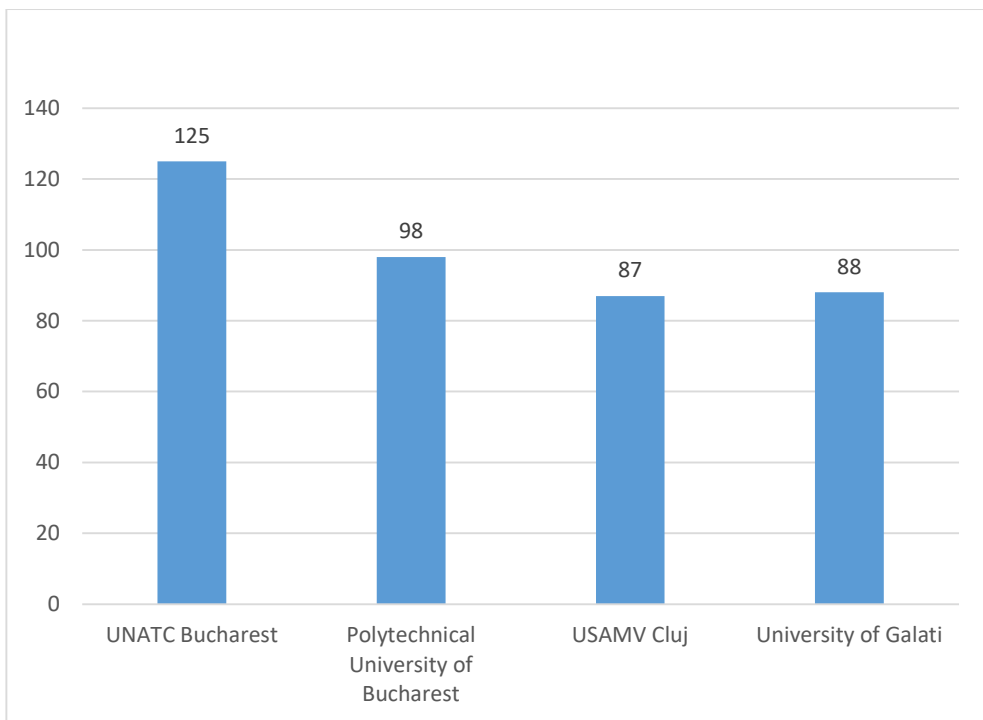


Figure 4. Number of posts for the five universities posting the most frequently on Instagram

Furthermore, we explored the types of content posted and the preferred formats on each Instagram page. Most of the content categories in the analysis grid were represented among the total number of posts. Interestingly, similar to the Facebook findings, the “Student organizations” type of content was the least represented, the only category with no posts at all. Moreover, regarding the posts related to “Guests from the professional industry”, only one university opted for this type of content, respectively the University of Theatrical and Filming Art (UNATC) Bucharest, which published only four such posts (3.20%), from a total of 125. While analyzing content categories, posts that included information about admissions emerged among the preferences of universities, with three of them allocating an overwhelming number of posts, over 50%, to this type: National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA) Bucharest (56.82%), University of Arad (66.67%) and University of Craiova (75%). Other categories of postings used frequently were „Promotion”, „Research” and „Campus events” (Figure 5).

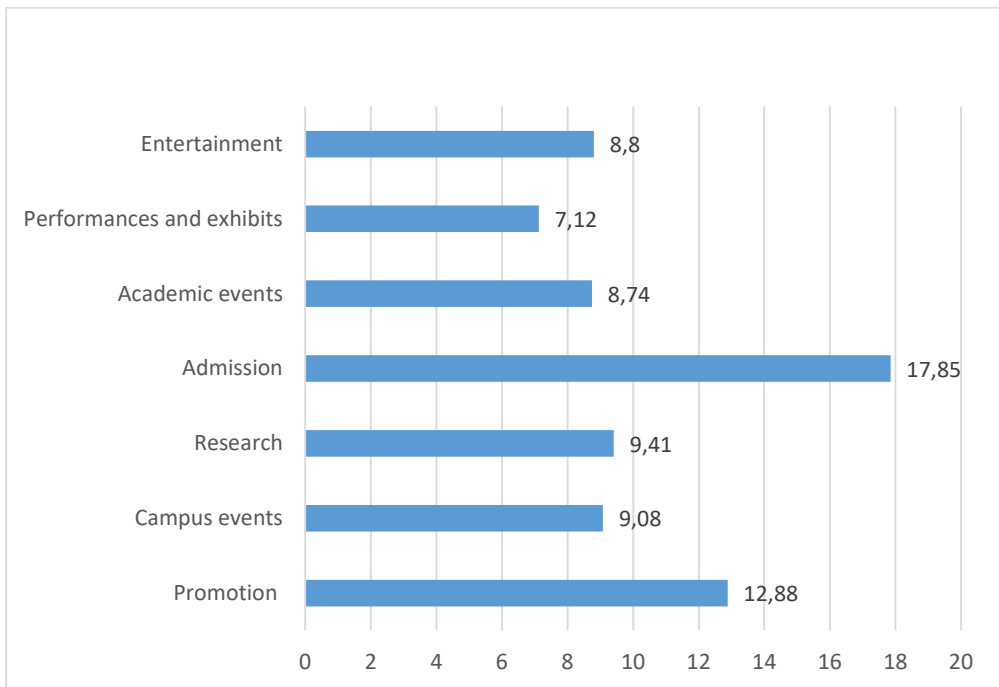


Figure 5. The most used categories of postings (average) on the Instagram pages of universities

Turning our attention to the post formats available on Instagram, data obtained from this research shows that videos, reels, and guides are among the least favorite types. Single photo posts and carousel posts were referred to a large extent, with most universities choosing to include images in their online communication strategy on Instagram. Moreover, results have shown little to no variety in some cases, with three universities deciding to post only single photos (the University of Braşov, Sports University of Bucharest, University of Art and Design Cluj-Napoca) and other two having more than 90% of their posts as single photos (the University of Galaţi and SNSPA Bucharest).

Conclusions

Among the online communication channels used by universities, Facebook was the most preferred (29 universities out of 30) followed by Youtube (27 universities out of 30) and Instagram (25 out of 30). Only slightly more than half of the universities in the sample used also LinkedIn, only one-third used Twitter, and only a few used TikTok.

Regarding the content strategies on Facebook, the frequency of posting was high: nineteen of the thirty universities in the sample posted daily, while five were posting three times a week, and only the remaining five posted only once a week. Among the possible formats, the format which combined text and photos was the most preferred by the universities in the sample, with twenty-one of them choosing this format for more than half of the postings. These findings show that for Romanian universities is important to maintain the conversation with the key public, while choosing the easiest and most traditional format for Facebook. The most used categories of postings were:

„Promotion” and „Academic events”. The preferences for specific categories of postings show that the most prominent partner of dialogue, among all the stakeholders, were the students or the prospective students, together with the internal academic community. Thus, the internal public seem to be more present in the social media communication of the universities, leaving out dialogue and interaction with other categories of stakeholders, such as the graduates or the local community.

The results of the Instagram content analysis align with the content analysis of the Facebook pages. Although the number of posts is lower in comparison with Facebook, the categories of postings preferred are almost the same, and the most accessible format (single photo or carousel) was widely used, conducting to similar conclusions about the main characteristics of online communication and the relative importance of stakeholders.

Finally, based on these findings, the suggestion that could be made to communication coordinators of universities would be to diversify the interaction and conversation with several categories of stakeholders (alumni, experts from the professional field, or other members of the academic community). This change of strategy would be useful because the external stakeholders may bring also benefits such as trust or visibility, strengthening the reputation of the university.

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