

Dissemination strategies of European universities

- Summary of the PhD THESIS -

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Summary

PART I

List of figures	
List of tables	
Introduction	11
1. Communication Sciences and Public Relations	21
1.1 Communication sciences. Definition and history	21
1.2 Public relations. Definition and history	28
1.3 Conclusions	35
2. Online branding	36
2.1 Branding. Definition	36
2.1.1 University branding	39
2.1.2 Elements of visual identity for universities	51
2.2 Social networks. Definition	58
2.2.1 Types of social networks	63
2.2.2 Facebook	70
2.2.2.1 Company`s promotion on Facebook	76
2.2.2.2 Universities`s promotion on Facebook	80
2.3 Conclusions	88

PART II

1 Research methodology	91
2 Analysis of the questionnaires, phase I of research	96
2.1 The questionnaire as research technique	96
2.2 Research design	97
2.2.1 Building the survey	98
2.2.2 Building the sample	100
2.3 Results presentation	101
2.3.1 Analysis of the results by gender, age, nationality and faculty	101
2.3.2 Presenting the validation of the H ₁ hypothesis results, namely that the awareness of the exchange offers is not very high	103
2.3.3 Presenting the results of the H ₂ hypothesis validation, namely that student preferences for certain sources of information and types of information are influenced by age or sex of the student	106

2.3.4	Presenting the validation of the H ₃ hypothesis results, namely that student preferences is different for certain sources of information and types of information if they have benefited from scholarships abroad then students that had not a mobility;	117
2.3.5	Presenting the results of the analysis made to the questions that were not included in the paper hypothesis	119
2.4	Research findings, phase I of research	125
3	Analysis of Facebook pages, phase II of research	129
3.1	Specifics of the analysis by observation	129
3.2	The research design	130
3.3	Presentation of data and hypotheses, phase II of research	132
3.3.1	Universities promotion on Facebook in Austria	132
3.3.2	Universities promotion on Facebook in Belgium	133
3.3.3	Universities promotion on Facebook in Bulgaria	133
3.3.4	Universities promotion on Facebook in Ciprus	135
3.3.5	Universities promotion on Facebook in Croatia	135
3.3.6	Universities promotion on Facebook in Danemark	136
3.3.7	Universities promotion on Facebook in Estonia	137
3.3.8	Universities promotion on Facebook in Finland	138
3.3.9	Universities promotion on Facebook in France	138
3.3.10	Universities promotion on Facebook in Germany	139
3.3.11	Universities promotion on Facebook in Greece	140
3.3.12	Universities promotion on Facebook in Ireland	141
3.3.13	Universities promotion on Facebook in Iceland	141
3.3.14	Universities promotion on Facebook in Italy	142
3.3.15	Universities promotion on Facebook in Latvia	143
3.3.16	Universities promotion on Facebook in Liechtenstein	144
3.3.17	Universities promotion on Facebook in Lithuania	144
3.3.18	Universities promotion on Facebook in Luxembourg	145
3.3.19	Universities promotion on Facebook in Macedonia	146
3.3.20	Universities promotion on Facebook in Great Britain	146
3.3.21	Universities promotion on Facebook in Malta	147

3.3.22	Universities promotion on Facebook in Norway	148
3.3.23	Universities promotion on Facebook in Netherland	148
3.3.24	Universities promotion on Facebook in Poland	149
3.3.25	Universities promotion on Facebook in Portugal	150
3.3.26	Universities promotion on Facebook in Czech Republic	151
3.3.27	Universities promotion on Facebook in Romania	152
3.3.28	Universities promotion on Facebook in Slovakia	153
3.3.29	Universities promotion on Facebook in Slovenia	154
3.3.30	Universities promotion on Facebook in Spain	154
3.3.31	Universities promotion on Facebook in Sweeden	155
3.3.32	Universities promotion on Facebook in Turkey	156
3.3.33	Universities promotion on Facebook in Hungary	157
3.4	Results presentation	158
3.4.1	Presenting the results, verifying the H ₄ hypothesis , European universities are promoted on Facebook in a ratio greater than 50 %	158
3.4.2	Presenting the results , verifying the H ₅ hypothesis , the universities have begun this promotion of Facebook following a certain tendency period	160
3.5	Research findings, phase II of research	162
4	Analysis of interviews, phase III of research	164
4.1	The interview as a research technique	164
4.2	Research design	165
4.3	Results presentation	167
4.3.1	Presentation of results and verify the hypothesis H ₆ , namely that there is a difference between the answers given by respondents accordingly to their university and country of origin	170
4.3.1	Presentation of results and verify the hypothesis H ₇ , namely that promotion via social network is preferred by respondents to other forms of dissemination	175
4.4	Research findings, phase III of research	180
	Final conclusions	184
	Limits of the paper and further research perspectives	189

Bibliography		190
Annexes		206
Annex 1	Questionnaire	206
Annex 2	Frequency response analysis	209
Annex 3	descriptive analysis	216
Annex 4	University list	218
Annex 5	Crosstab analysis 1	230
Annex 6	Crosstab analysis 2	235
Annex 7	Structured interview	238

Keywords: university, dissemination strategies, online branding, social networking, facebook

Questions, objectives and hypotheses

The existence literature offers many references about how universities are making the promotional campaigns, which are focusing on: the impact that social networks have in the academic life, university branding, relationship between the institution and students a competitive market, internationalization strategy, the effects of using social media, etc.

Although there are studies that attempt to answer some questions about how social networks affects academic life, they are limited in terms of social media analysis as a mean of dissemination for the activities.

This paper aims to conduct a study to examine the degree in which the students are satisfied by the promotion methods, how the universities are answering to it and how the employees perceive the institutions of this type that use this type dissemination.

The three dimensions mentioned above were addressed from a practical perspective through research undertaken and from a conceptual standpoint, trying to define and understand the theoretical elements that underpin promotion strategies such as communication sciences, public relation and online branding.

Our paper aims to answer three questions in three different stages of research, taking into account the size and proposed elements for review:

Q₁, how the dissemination activities carried out by Babeş-Bolyai University is in line with the preference of students for certain sources and types of information?

Q₂, universities in Europe achieve promotion on the Facebook social network?

Q₃, university employees who were part of the study group considers the method of promotion on the social network as being effective?

Starting from the three research questions that we presented we have established the objectives and research hypothesis as follows:

- in the first phase of research, *Q₁, how the dissemination activities carried out by Babeş-Bolyai University are in line with the preference of students for certain sources information and certain types of information?*, we had the following objectives (O) and research hypothesis (H):

O₁, establishing which are the respondents' preferences for different sources of information establishing;

H₁, awareness of the exchange offers is not very high;

H₂, student preferences for certain sources of information and types of information are influenced by the student age or sex;

H₃, that student preferences is different for certain sources of information and types of information if they have benefited from scholarships abroad then students that had not a mobility;

- in the second phase of research, *Q₂, universities in Europe achieve promotion on the Facebook social network?*, we had the following objectives (O) and research hypothesis (H):

O₂, establishing the quantity of universities that are promoting themselves through social networking;

H₄, European universities are promoted on Facebook in a ratio greater than 50 %

O₃, determining the period during which universities have began their promotion through Facebook;

H₅, there is a certain period when universities began promoting on Facebook;

- in the third phase of research, *Q₃, university employees who were part of the study group considers the method of promotion on the social network effective?* we had the following objectives (O) and research hypothesis (H):

O₄, analyze the promotion channels that the universities prefer;

H₆, there is a difference between the answers given by respondents accordingly to their university and country of origin;

O5, analyzing respondents' perception on the importance of using Facebook pages as a promoting mean among students;

H7, *promotion through social network is preferred by respondents to other forms of dissemination;*

This paper proposes a new and challenging research topic for both academic community in the field of public relations, but also for those preparing campaigns to promote universities in different environments, through the fact that it analyses on three different levels the way that the dissemination activities are done, how the students want to be informed and how employees perceive the use of social networks, particularly Facebook network.

The geographic coverage of the research results provides an added value to this this paper taking into account that includes data from 33 European countries.

Through the results obtained in the three stages of the research, we try to propose the inclusion in visual identity of universities textbooks, of some principles regarding the use of social media accounts at different levels: university, departments, and teachers.

Impactul utilizării acestor mijloace de comunicare este mult mai mare, fiecare activitate online fiind foarte vizibilă, reprezentând atât instituția cât și sursa de finanțare în cadrul proiectelor europene.

The impact of using these means of communication is much higher, as each online activity is being highly visible, and represents both the institution and the source of funding for European projects.

Paper structure

This paper addresses the results of research and theoretical concepts which are the base of this research through a number of six chapters organized into two parts.

In the first part we presented the theoretical concepts which form the base to the research activity in the second phase, through the following chapters and subchapters: 1. **communication sciences**

and public relations (1.1 Communication sciences. Definition and history; 1.2 Public relations. Definition and history; 1.3 Conclusion) and 2. Online branding (2.1 Branding. Definition; 2.2 Social networks. Definition; 2.3 Conclusion)

In this chapter we have tried to define the theoretically concepts: communication sciences, public relations, branding and social networking.

Presentation of the research was performed in the second part of the thesis **1. Research methodology, 2. Analysis of the questionnaires, phase I of research** (2.1 The questionnaire as a research technique; 2.2 Research design; 2.3 Results presentation; 2.4 Conclusions, stage I of research); **3. Facebook page analysis, phase II research** (3.1 Specifics analysis by observation; 3.2 Research design; 3.3 Presentation of data and hypotheses of the II phase of research.; 3.4 Results presentation; 3.5 Conclusions, stage II of research), **4. Analysis of interviews, phase III research** (4.1 The interview as a research technique; 4.2 Research design; 4.3 Results presentation; 4.4 Conclusions, stage III of research); **Conclusions; Limits of work and research perspectives; Annexes.**

The questions, goals and assumptions set in this research, they were distributed in three steps in order to validate or invalidate them.

In the first stage of the research we focused on achieving a sociological survey that had the following hypotheses focused on: **H₁**, awareness of the exchange offers is not very high; **H₂**, student preferences for certain sources and types of information are influenced by age or sex of the student; **H₃**, that student preferences is different for certain sources of information and types of information if they have benefited from scholarships abroad then students that had not a mobility.

At this stage of research we made a sociological survey having as target group the Babeş-Bolyai students in order to find out the what kind information channels they use and the degree of their satisfaction.

The literature highlights the fact that online media development generates new trends on the communication channels preferred by students, especially the emergence of social networking.

The questionnaire was constructed from a set of questions focusing on validating or invalidating of the research hypotheses mentioned above, having a total of 37 questions. Grid included closed and open questions, enabling students to formulate answers as accurate as possible.

Sociological survey research analyze the answers to 10 questions in the questionnaire having as objective the analysis of the information method used by the students, but also the identification data of the respondents to realize different statistic correlations.

In the second stage of the research we focused on achieving a sociological survey that had the focus on the following hypotheses: **H₄**, European universities are promoted on Facebook in a ratio greater than 50 % and **H₅**, there is a certain period when universities began promoting on Facebook.

We will address in this stage of research from empirically point of view about the promotion degree of European universities on Facebook. This approach is based on the results obtained in the first stage of research, whose data revealed that students of Babeş-Bolyai University want to be informed via Facebook. At this stage of the research there were analyzed a total of 2,638 universities from 33 European countries.

We tried to investigate the research techniques using observation as methodology on social pages of universities selected for the study to find out frequency in which they are used by the universities.

In the third stage of the research we focused on achieving a sociological survey that was focused on the following hypotheses focused on: **H₆**, there is a difference between the answers given by respondents accordingly by university and country of origin and **H₇** promotion through social network is preferred by respondents to other forms of dissemination. At this stage of research involved a total of 54 respondents from 54 universities from 29 European countries.

Conclusion

Our work started from the idea that the evolution of technical infrastructure has an impact in terms of information channels preferred by students and teachers, having as purpose to complete the literature by allowing an overview at European level.

The results obtained in the frame of this paper allows us to draw the following conclusions connected with three stage of research:

Phase I, of research

The first phase of research started from the question: **Q₁** *how the dissemination activities carried out by Babeş-Bolyai University is in line with the preference of students for certain sources and types of information?*

We consider important to mention the verification of the following hypothesis: **H₁**, awareness of the exchange offers is not very high and **H₂**, student preferences for certain sources of information and types of information are influenced by age or sex of the student;

In the research we find out that hypothesis, **H₃**, student preferences for certain sources of information and types of information are different if they have benefited from scholarships abroad to students who do not have mobility, was not confirmed.

A comparative analysis between awareness of scholarships and student gender, level of study, faculty of origin revealed that there are differences in terms of how they inform themselves.

We found out that the male students are less informed than female students and that those in master's or doctoral degree are in the same situation in comparison with the ones of bachelor.

The study showed that male students use Facebook channel to a greater extent as an information source, although the largest share of students aged 19-24 years prefer to use cyberspace as a source of information, regardless their gender.

Dissemination through traditional methods such as flyers, bulletin boards at faculty or presentations within the faculty have a much lower impact among students under 25 years than originally expected, but it can be seen that respondents older than 26 years preferred the classical methods of information.

The results obtained in this phase of research have revealed that there are differences between how promotion channels are used between different levels of study and faculty of origin.

In the same analysis it was observed that there are differences in the intensity of informing their students between faculties, such as where faculties: Physical Education and Sport, Mathematics and Computer Science, Psychology and Educational Sciences, Chemistry and Chemical Engineering.

In conclusion we can mention that the results obtained underline that the channels of communication used varies by gender, age, level of study, the faculty of origin but are not influenced by prior participation in a scholarship abroad. Student's dissemination strategy should include communication channels that are consistent with the ones used by the students.

Phase II, of research

In the second phase of research we started from the question: **Q₂** *universities in Europe achieve promotion on the Facebook social network?*.

The study in this research phase, using structured observation method, aimed at analyzing the extent to which European universities use Facebook pages for promotion.

The study included an analysis of the degree in which the universities that are beneficiaries of EU funds in the field of Education are using Facebook for promotion. The study included a number of 2,638 universities from 33 European countries benefiting from European funds.

We should mention two hypotheses that have been issued and verified: **H₄**, European universities are promoted on Facebook in a ratio greater than 50 % and **H₅**, there is a certain period when universities began promoting on Facebook.

At this stage of research we found that 53.26 % of the 2,638 universities promote themselves on social network and there is a certain tendency of the period within which universities have decided open their social network accounts.

Phase III, of research

In the third stage of research we proposed to realize a sociological survey in which we investigate through interviews with universities` representatives of the perceptions regarding dissemination activities, especially those on the social network Facebook.

The results obtained in the first and second phase of research, completed the by the literature in the field have shown that the emergence of social network Facebook has generated its transformation into a channel of communication preferred by students and it`s increasingly usage in the academic.

Conducting interviews aimed in phase III of research to find answers to the question: ***Q3.** university employees who were part of the study group considers the method of promotion on the social network as being effective?*

It is necessary to mention the two research hypothesis that were defined: **H6**, there is a difference between the answers given by respondents accordingly to their university and country of origin and **H7** promotion through social network is preferred by respondents to other forms of dissemination. At this stage of research involved a total of 54 respondents from 54 universities from 29 European countries.

H6 hypothesis was not validated given that most respondents, 99.99 % had the opinion that the dissemination through social network has certain characteristics that make it more efficient, being an accepted method of promotion at university level taking into consideration the benefits and low costs.

University representatives have confirmed in proportion of 94.44 % that their institutions are using the social network Facebook to promote online, and a percentage of 92.59 % that this method is addressed also to students.

The results obtained revealed that representatives of European universities consider the social network Facebook useful for online promotion, being defined as efficient, fast, visible, direct, easy to use , etc.

The main motivation behind expanding social network on Facebook in higher education is that it has the popularity among students, which is the main target group of the higher education institutions.

Promotion methods that were mentioned more by respondents are those done via the Internet: website, email, newsletter, blog, website, social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) YouTube. Only a few responses have incorporated other promotional options such as leaflets, brochures, TV, newspapers, etc.

A summary of the results shows that there is a tendency to use social networks, especially Facebook as a source of information. This phenomenon is based on the massive use of the network by students and teachers.

Students are seeking a way for information which are accessible on the social networks, given the time they spend by them in this virtual space. The teachers want to attract a larger number of students in an increasingly competitive educational market.

In the end of the paper we approached the fact that the impact which social networks have on the academic life, is demanding a new approach on the type of external communication that exist by passing from the hierarchic one to networking.

In conclusion of the paper we proposed ourselves to draw attentions on the necessity of a new analyze regarding the external communication of the academic environment by pointing out that the existence of the social accounts and the activity that it is done through it at academic level, are associated with the institution itself, regardless if we are taking about at university level, faculties, departments or teachers.

We propose to include in visual identity textbooks of the universities some principles regarding communication on social networks of the departments but also academic staff regarding their activity on this virtual space.