

minib 13

marketing of scientific
and research organizations
no. 3(13)/2014



research
for future

eISSN 2353-8414
pISSN 2353-8503

september 2014



**UNIVERSITIES IN SOCIAL MEDIA
— RECIPIENTS' EXPECTATIONS
AND THE PUBLISHED CONTENTS**



Open Access

UNIVERSITIES IN SOCIAL MEDIA — RECIPIENTS' EXPECTATIONS AND THE PUBLISHED CONTENTS

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DOI: 10.14611/minib.13.03.2014.05



Summary

Research¹ carried out by the author in 2013, which covered all 59 public universities listed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education showed that Polish public universities are more and more eagerly resorting to social media as a channel for communication with the environment of students and they are currently active in social media and especially on Facebook, where 81% (48 units²) have their official profiles. Also other research projects show that the activities of a university in social media influences the image of the university especially among students — according to them student candidates admit that the presence of universities in social media and information published on their official Facebook profiles and the manner of interaction with users had an impact on their final decision on the choice of a university³.

At the same time it is possible to notice a research gap in the area of expectations of main target group for messages of universities published in social media, that is, students, with regard to the form and content of these messages from universities. It is also possible to notice a clear lack of qualitative analyses of activities taken up by Polish universities in social media.

For this reason the author has decided to continue the above-mentioned research in order to learn more about the described phenomenon, that is, the presence of universities on social media platforms. The author has defined the following detailed goals for the research: identification of the expectations of students (who in Poland are the main recipient of universities' messages in social media) and employees with regard to the presence of the university in social media; identification of student's preferred methods of communication with the university; Learning about the students' assessment of the activities of universities conducted in social media; Qualitative analysis of contents published by universities in social media.

The research was conducted in two stages — in the first stage interviews with students, doctoral students, student candidates and university employees were conducted. In the second stage social media profiles — 48 Facebook profiles of Polish universities and top 20 profiles of foreign universities in the ranking of popularity of universities' activities in social media, according to Top 100 social media colleges and universities 2013⁴ ranking.

Keywords: social media, universities in social media

Introduction

The research conducted by the author in 2013, which covered all 59 public universities listed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, showed that Polish public universities are more and more eagerly using social media as the channel for communication with the environment of students and are actively present in social media, especially on Facebook, where 81% (that is 48) of Polish universities⁵ have their profiles. Thus, it is possible to assume that for a university to have a profile on at least one social media platform is already something normal. Moreover, most of these universities get heavily involved in running their profiles and publish contents at least once a day (over a half publish contents many times a day). They also manage to achieve fan involvement rates at levels many times higher than the average for company profiles. Nevertheless, universities still manage to convince only a small percentage of their current students and graduates to just “like” their Facebook pages⁶.

Also other researches shows that the activities of universities in social media influence the image of universities especially among students — according to them student candidates admit that the presence of universities in social media and information published on their official Facebook profiles and the manner of interaction with users had an impact on the final decision on their choice of university⁷. Rankings assessing the activity of universities in social media are already being prepared⁸. Thus, it is possible to presume that the presence of universities in social media is not a temporary fashion, but that universities will stay in social media for good.

Research problem

At the same time, it is possible to notice a research gap in the area of expectations of the main target group for universities' messages published in social media, that is, the students, with regard to form and content of universities' messages, as well as clear lack of qualitative analyses of activities taken up by Polish universities in social media.

For this reason the author decided to continue its research, mentioned above, in order to learn more about the described phenomenon — the presence of universities on social media platforms. In course of the research the following detailed goals were achieved:

1. Identification of the expectations of students (in Poland students are the main recipients of universities' messages in social media) and employees with regard to the area of presence of universities in social media;
2. Identification of students' preferred methods of communication with universities;
3. Learning about the students' assessment of universities' activities in social media;
4. Conducting qualitative analysis of contents published by universities in social media.

Methodology of research

As the activity of Polish universities in social media constitutes a comparably new area of study, the author has decided to adopt an exploratory approach take advantage of triangulation in order to boost the credibility and accuracy of achieved results by applying two qualitative methods of data collection in form of direct interviews and the method of participant observation.

Direct interviews with 8 students from 5 public universities, with 3 doctoral students and 7 student candidates (final grade students from high schools in Toruń) 3 graduates and 3 academic employees were conducted between November and January 2013. Interviews were structured in character and were conducted according to an earlier prepared questionnaire. The number of respondents taking part in the interview was limited to 23 persons, as after 20th interview the conclusion was made that further interviews weren't yielding new data and that the respondents' answers were recurring. However, it is necessary to remark here that due to the limited size of the surveyed sample, conclusions from this research shouldn't be generalized to cover the whole population and the results should be verified with further quantitative research. On request of the respondents the list of universities they represent and their personal data haven't been published.

Moreover, in the second stage of the research the method of participant observation has been used. The method makes it possible to understand the character of activity and rules governing given Internet communities thanks to the authors' observation from the inside. The observation covered 48 Facebook profiles of Polish public universities (which as verified in the above-mentioned research⁹ have their profiles on Facebook) and top 20 most popular profiles of foreign universities, according to Top 100 social media colleges and universities 2013¹⁰, the list of all universities subject of observation is included in attachments 1 and 2 to this article.

The observation covered the activity of universities on their official Facebook profiles from a period of one year — from February 2013 to February 2014 and was hidden in character — the entities subject to observation were unaware that they were monitored. Moreover, the research was conducted ex post, which means that universities' activities couldn't have been modified by the research itself. This substantially raises the objectivity of the research.

Results of research

Expectations of selected stakeholders of universities with regard to their activity in social media

All respondents “like” the profile of at least one Polish university. Contrary to what it seems, students don't expect the university to be present in all possible communication channels of social media character — for most of them the presence on Facebook is enough. Additionally, what the respondents recognized as an advantage is when a university has its YouTube channel. Some also point to the fact that as a serious institution university should have its profile on platforms recognized as professional, such as LinkedIn. Respondents point out that they don't regard it as necessary to see their university everywhere where they themselves are *“I use various social media platforms, but even if the university had its account on Pinterest, I wouldn't be following it on the platform; Facebook is enough and now almost every student has an account on Facebook, if he's not there, he's probably not present in any other social network, so what would be the point for a university to waste its efforts on multiplying the same content just in order to be present on 10 platforms , however, as a university is a serious institution, it should have a profile on Goldenline, after all Facebook is “not really serious”*.

Most respondents only comment on or like posts published in social media by university fanpage administrator or just follow posts published on the fanpage. One of the respondents points out that the fact that *“I don't “like” or comment on posts of University X on Facebook doesn't mean I don't actually like them. I can't imagine a situation in which my university doesn't have an account on Facebook. Nowadays it is necessary. Moreover, this gives me access to information that I'm too lazy to look for on the university's website — this would be a waste of time. I think that a Facebook profile really brings us closed to the university and what takes place at the university”*. Other respondents point out that they don't “like”, or comment on

contents published on university's page, as they don't feel that the university is trying to build relations with them and bridge the gap between administration of university and others.

At the same time respondents who are fans of a university don't feel that the university gets them involved in relations with itself to a sufficient degree. One of graduates highlights yet another problem: *"I 'liked' the profile of my university out of sentiment, but it's a pity that the university is not trying in any way to get us (graduates) involved on the fanpage and I'm not the only graduate there, looking around my friends — after all, it wouldn't be that hard to build relations with us on Facebook, or even get us involved and use us in some activities associated with promotion, encouraging student candidates to choose our university..."*.

Students also point out that for a long time they were unaware that their university has a Facebook page, as the link to the Facebook page was located in an invisible place on the university's website (and they visit mainly Internet websites of their faculties) and they learned about the profile from their friends.

Students, and especially student candidates would like to learn something more about the lecturers working at the university — what practical experience they have and what research project they are working on, what they are specialized in. They also expect information (preferably in form of photos, or videos) concerning the form of lectures and workshops at the university they want to study at. Aspiring and current students would also like to learn authentic opinions of students about the university, as well as the statements made by graduates in order to learn about their life after graduating from various areas of study and learn from their experiences. They also say that they would be interested in profiles of students presenting presenting eg. reports on participation in apprenticeships, foreign trips or work in student organizations.

What the respondents would find interesting are free fragments of latest publications, recordings of lectures given by employees of the university and other universities, including foreign universities. Some also point out that they would be more willing to watch university's Internet tv, if links to recordings were located on Facebook.

The respondents would also like to see job offers on their universities' Facebook profiles, as well as offers of apprenticeship and participation in various projects carried out by universities together with business — some of them complain that such initiatives are not being sufficiently promoted. Respondents point out that similarly as in case of

companies, also universities should start cooperation with students-ambassadors, who will also post information on university profile or by means of application/blog, which would make it possible to present the events from the life of university in a way accessible for the target group.

Respondents also expect that lectures themselves will become the faces of university and will actively participate in creation of messages on Facebook.

Some suggest that university's profile could constitute a kind of virtual dean's office and students emphasize that submitting inquiries through an application on Facebook, or by means of the "send" option on the portal would be much more convenient for them than calling the dean's office or sending inquiries by e-mail.

One of the respondents also highlighted the fact that the number of his university's channels of communication with students is growing — website, newsletter, online magazine, Facebook profile — and at the same time the quality of published contents is deteriorating and in each of the channels information already posted in other places is replicated. Moreover, respondents dislike the fact that universities publish information from student houses, which is not directly associated with university's activity, for example in form of funny memes¹¹.

Most of the respondents point to the monotonous character of contents on university Fanpage: *"I have an impression that the person running our profile (university profile) doesn't really know what to do with it and has exploited all ideas, which makes the published contents monotonous"*.

Several respondents admit that they post their remarks about the about universities where they are studying in social media and that their remarks include also negative comments and complaints (which they post anonymously, not on Facebook, but eg. on Internet fora, or other portals¹²). *"On the one hand I realize that posting negative comments about my Alma Mater may be regarded by some people as a bad thing, but I think that students and especially people only making decision on starting studies and facing the challenge of choosing a university deserve to know the truth. At the same time, if a lecturer is not sufficiently preparing for his lectures, even though he is a professor appreciated by his colleagues, why shouldn't people learn the fact that he doesn't have any didactic skills. If we don't criticize our universities online, nothing will change as remarks made in university's corridors don't reach the decision-makers and the opinions from evaluation questionnaires aren't being read and the approach to these questionnaires goes like that: "what does some student has to say, anyway". Perhaps it will be those voices on the Internet, which reach the broader public, that will improve the life of*

students". Most of the negative comments concern lecturers — the quality of teaching, programmes of studies, bureaucracy, lack of connection between taught theories and business practice, but also events organized at faculties, including scientific conferences. Respondents who admit that they post on the Internet comments about their universities points out that they more often post negative than positive remarks, but as they emphasize, it doesn't mean that their general view of their university is negative.

One of the respondents also recalled that when he posted a negative remark on Facebook page of his university, the post wasn't addressed by the university's administrator and no answer was given to the question included in the post. Moreover, the comment was removed very soon after it had been posted.

All but one respondent think that universities should be present in social media, especially on Facebook.

Respondents also expect that universities (just as companies present in social media) to provide them with value by eg. giving advice on how to survive on a typical student's budget, decorate a room in a student house without spending too much money, or how to quickly prepare a healthy meal containing vitamins and minerals necessary for studying. They also expect universities to give advice, or post temporary and permanent job offers, apprenticeship offers, information about free trainings organized also outside the university. They suggest that it would be nice to read posts on university blog written by the dean, or provost and other employees of the university and they would like these posts to be less official in character than usual announcements made by the university administration.

One of new students says: *"at the beginning I often happened to lose my way in the campus, or I had a problem with finding the right room (as workshops take place in a few different buildings), so I think that what new students would find very useful is a mobile application in form of a virtual walk around the university"*.

The surveyed respondents from the group of doctoral students and university employees point out that on the university's Facebook profile information which is significant from their point of view — like news about the latest publications of employees and doctoral students, conferences held at particular faculties and other events of scientific characters — doesn't appear at all. At the same time, according to them, too much attention is paid to events for students such as student festivals, graduation ceremonies. Anyway, if such information is published on university's profile, it happens too late, according to the respondents. The

information is often published a few days before an event, when nobody has a chance to apply for active participation. Respondents from the group of employees and doctoral students, would also like to see information about events associated with science and research taking place at other universities and in research and scientific units, as well as information about research projects conducted in other departments, which as they say would help them establish contacts with experts from various areas, enabling them to conduct interdisciplinary research projects in the future.

What is interesting is that information associated with scientific and research activity also attracts the interest of surveyed students (especially those taking up second level studies).

According to the author, the main obstacle for the implementation of many of the changes in strategies of communication with students proposed by the respondents is the lack of appropriate communication channels within the organization and the culture of sharing knowledge.

Qualitative analysis of contents published by Polish universities in social media

Polish public universities publish on their Facebook profiles mainly information about non-scientific events for students such as eg. reports on student festivals, they also present photoreports on events such as inauguration of academic year, graduation ceremony, university holiday. They also try to inform about the achievements of their students and scientists, as well as about both sports and scientific competitions that their students, or scientists have won. They also provide updates on events taking place at universities or invitations to special lectures and additional workshops, in which students can participate, and encourage participation in charitable events organized by units and student organizations associated with university. They also present information about student recruitment.

Table 1. Strong and weak sides of Polish universities' activity in social media

Frequently made mistakes	Suggestions
Not getting graduates involved;	Publishing the profiles of successful graduates, their recommendation for their universities;
Universities are not taking into consideration the expectations of various target groups, they are focusing mainly on current students and student candidates in their messages;	Expanding the spectrum of published information to content associated with science and research;
Using the same forms of communication — not attempting to distinguish oneself from others; universities,	Emphasizing the mission of the university and what makes it different from other building feeling of pride in membership in a given academic community
Lack of official guidelines concerning conduct in case of emergence of an image crisis in social media;	Particular units forming a university should work out and publish guidelines for creating and managing universities' profiles in social media; Defining targets and main recipients of messages conveyed through social media; Working out procedures of conduct for crisis situations in social media.
Low percentage of "likes" of official university profiles in social media, compared to the number of students;	Improving the visibility of the link to university's profile in social media. Putting the link also on websites of particular faculties; Getting users involved;
Lack of interaction with users;	Answering comments posted by users; Responding also to negative comments; Not removing negative comments;
Failure to monitor the Internet;	Reacting to positive and negative comments concerning a university appearing on the Internet, eg. on various message boards; Presence in Internet communities;

Source: own materials.

What can be seen on profiles of Polish universities much less frequently are presentations of successful graduates, information about the activity and initiatives taken up by student organizations, or information about lectures given by visiting scholars taking place at universities. Even less frequently universities publish information

about job and apprenticeship offers, educational materials or about city life events and about the events taking place in the local community.

The following table illustrates the mistakes associated with activity in social media most frequently made by universities and the improvements proposed by the author.

To sum it up, main improvements of universities' activities in social media should focus on delivering value to the target groups of universities' communication and on getting these target groups involved in relations with universities by encouraging users to interact with them online.

Qualitative analysis of the activity of foreign universities in social media

At the same time, looking at foreign universities' profiles in social media, it is possible to notice that they pay a lot of attention to promoting their students' initiatives and achievements in sports.

They publish free courses and trainings available online, recordings of lectures given by their lecturers. They also post their job offers, including work on various kinds of projects. It is also possible to conclude that they promote activities associated with research to a greater extent than Polish universities. They publish information about their academic employees' research projects and doctoral students — both projects which have already been carried, projects which have only been started and projects in progress. Foreign universities also post links to research projects from other parts of the world and news from the world associated in some way with science.

Universities also take up activities aimed at providing a more detailed image of employees and the characteristics of universities' activity by presenting the profiles of employees (both scientific employees and the employees dealing with sports, or organization of various kinds of events), as well as students carrying out interesting initiatives and projects.

In their activities taken up in social media they try to show that a university is an inherent part of local community. For this reason they not only present information about charitable events or encourage to participate in such events, but they also publish reports on such events and reports on the achievements in their work. They also inform about other pro-social actions and activity associated with support for local community. Information about received subsidies and the goals these subsidies are used for.

They strive to build pride in membership in a university by highlighting the look of the campus in various seasons of the year, the beauty of surrounding nature and presenting university's rich history. They share stories associated with their sustainable development. They present summaries of achievements from the last year — number of published articles, registered patents, organized conferences, graduates, level of satisfaction among students, etc.

Universities emphasize that students can count on many opportunities for development, by publishing reports on trips, apprenticeships, volunteer work, students' studies abroad.

Universities also publish information not directly associated with universities themselves, but which is useful from the point of view of students such as motivational images and quotes, advice on stress management, strategies for job interviews. Advice on achieving success, learning, achieving goals. Students' advice for students, "case study on eg. conflict management".

Universities even conduct questionnaires in order to learn the opinions of their fans on the way their social media profiles are run and how well these profiles serve the needs of users. They publish interviews with lecturers and scientists, as well as other university employees (they announce who they plan to interview and students are asked to submit questions they want to be answered by the interviewed person, later a video with answers is recorded), interesting bits of information from the world of science, "students' recommendations concerning the university", they even publish goals that students and professors want to achieve in the following academic or calendar year.

Moreover, it is possible to notice that people who "like" university profiles are not just students, but also their parents, sponsors, graduates, who graduated even up to a dozen or a few dozen years ago, which doesn't happen in case of Polish universities.

What is clearly visible in case of foreign universities and at the same time absent when you look into social media profiles of Polish institutions, is that they are building pride in being a part of a university and the conviction that completing studies at a particular university is a road to success.

However, what is noteworthy is the fact that both Polish and foreign universities don't take advantage of many possibilities provided by Facebook eg. milestones, to present themselves and their achievements in a comprehensible way.

Directions of further research

According to the author, what is interesting is the potential future continuation of research in two directions — expanding both the subject of research — to private

universities, in order to identify potential differences in utilization of social media as a tool for communication with students, as well as their potential for attracting new students, raising university's recognizability and as a tool for promotion. Moreover, it would be advisable to explore the utilization of social media in contacts with other stakeholders and as a communication tool supporting the process of teaching.

It is also necessary to remember that social media and changes taking place in social media are a very dynamic phenomenon, which means that data collected in course of the research quickly becomes outdated.

Summary

The strategy of presence of a university in social media should constitute an integral part of marketing strategy in traditional media and these two kinds of communication channels should be mutually complementary. In their communication universities should focus on what distinguishes them, what they are proud of and what makes them special. Students expect universities to publish more content associated with science, research and business practice, including information about the possibility of taking part in apprenticeship programmes and about job offers. They also expect access to lectures, as well as didactic and educational materials. They would also like the university profile to be a source of information about initiatives carried out at particular faculties, activities of student organizations, reports on student exchange programmes, graduates' careers, as well as information concerning opportunities for development offered by various areas of study. Students expect that thanks to social media communication with the university will be more efficient and that the university and dean's office will become more accessible for students. Despite all these proposed improvements, students are generally satisfied with how their universities run their profiles in social media.

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Attachment 1

Foreign universities covered by the research (arranged according to their position in the Top 100 Social Media Colleges ranking)¹³:

1. Harvard University
2. Stanford University
3. Johns Hopkins University
4. Yale University
5. Duke University
6. Princeton University
7. Full Sail University
8. University of Oregon
9. Ohio State University
10. Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College
11. Columbia University in the City of New York
12. University of Kentucky
13. United States Military Academy
14. University of Florida
15. University of Washington-Seattle Campus
16. Baylor University
17. Spelman College
18. The University of Texas at Austin
19. Georgetown University
20. Brown University

Attachment 2

Index of Polish public universities covered by the research¹⁴

Universities

- University of Warsaw
- University of Białystok
- University of Gdańsk
- Adam Mickiewicz University
- Jagiellonian University in Kraków
- University of Łódź
- Maria Curie-Skłodowska University
- Nicolaus Copernicus University
- Opole University
- Szczecin University
- University of Silesia in Katowice
- University of Rzeszów
- University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn
- University of Wrocław
- Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw
- University of Zielona Góra
- Kazimierz Wielki University
- Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce

Universities of technology:

- West Pomeranian Universal of Technology Szczecin
- Warsaw University of Technology
- Białystok University of Technology
- University of Bielsko-Biala
- Czestochowa University of Technology
- Gdańsk University of Technology
- Silesian University of Technology (Gliwice)
- Kielce University of Technology
- Koszalin University of Technology
- Tadeusz Kościuszko Cracow University of Technology
- AGH University of Science and Technology
- Lublin University of Technology
- Lodz University of Technology
- Opole University of Technology
- Poznań University of Technology
- Kazimierz Pulaski University of Technology and Humanities in Radom
- Rzeszow University of Technology
- Wrocław University of Technology

Universities of economics:

- University of Economics in Katowice
- Cracow University of Economics
- Poznań University of Economics
- Warsaw School of Economics
- Wrocław University of Economics

Pedagogical universities:

- Maria Grzegorzewska Academy of Special Education (Warsaw)
- Jan Długosz University in Czestochowa
- Pedagogical University of Cracow
- Pomeranian University in Słupsk
- Siedlce University of Natural Sciences and Humanities

Universities of agriculture/natural sciences:

- Warsaw University of Life Sciences — SGGW
- University of Technology and Life Sciences in Bydgoszcz
- University of Agriculture in Krakow
- University of Life Sciences in Lublin
- Poznań University of Life Sciences
- Wrocław University of Environmental and Life Sciences

Universities of physical education:

- Gdansk University of Physical Education and Sport
- The Jerzy Kukuczka Academy of Physical Education in Katowice
- The University of Physical Education in Krakow
- the Eugeniusz Piasecki University School of Physical Education in Poznan
- Józef Piłsudski University of Physical Education in Warsaw
- University School of Physical Education in Wrocław

Theological universities:

- Christian Academy of Theology in Warsaw

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