



The Impact of the Communicative Behaviour in Social Media on the University Brand Image

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Purpose: Communicative behaviour as a state of relationship which influences bilateral feelings, needs, and thoughts for more unambiguous and open communication (Ivanov & Werner, 2010) can affect the brand image. Correspondingly, communication from the side of the universities toward students through social media has a significant role.

Facebook is a powerful communicational channel. It effectively and efficiently took control of the business sector, advertising sector, and, furthermore, educational realm. As a result, it has an enduring influence on how people communicate, and as time passes, it becomes an essential part of their lives.

The article presents the behaviours of Georgian higher educational institutions on social media, especially on Facebook, and the attitude of the existing or potential students towards the communicative behaviour of HEIs. The findings show what kind of influence communication on Facebook has on customer perception and, correspondingly, brand image.

Study design/methodology/approach: Considering the sensitivity and nature of the research, two types of studies were selected. Observing the behaviour of the universities directly on their Facebook pages was chosen as the leading type of the research since the content, as well as their responsiveness and engagement in further communication, is clearly visible visually. In addition, we have decided to listen to the customers themselves. Because of this reason, focus groups of existing and potential students were selected to talk about their expectations and the reality in terms of communicative behaviour of the universities.

Findings: The results of observation and focus group research showed the lack and lapses of communicative behaviour of Georgian universities on social media, specifically on Facebook. The most crucial ones were the following: delays in distributing valuable information, content not so significant and exciting for students, indirect answers to student queries, or ignoring it altogether.

Originality/value: Branding has become crucial for universities for different reasons, considering the globalizing landscape. Not only to attract potential students but also to retain the existing ones and be exceptional, they have to follow modern trends. As one of the most significant for branding, communication, direct or indirect, deserves more attention. The value of the current research is showing the expectations of the existing and potential customers and presents the gaps between "what is done" and "what should be done."

Introduction

The rapid growth of the number of internet users shifted the world thoroughly. And now, the digital world promises a better and easier life. Digital literacy and the digital mind keep society more connected to the modern world. As long as consumers have become "internet users" and the society - "network society," every sector needs to be adaptable to digitalization. Additionally, businesses and the public sector try to be consistent with these changes and transform their offline services into online ones.

In the cases of the universities, brand loyalty can be measured through word-of-mouth promotion of the institution among prospective or existing students. Besides, their attitude

apparent on social media has a meaningful impact on brand image. Consumer loyalty can be caused by performance-related or imagery-related factors (Erdogmus & Ergun, 2016).

Communication through Facebook requires specific skills to establish relationships with potential and existing customers and engage and retain communication with them. These actions should be carefully directed to maintain the university's brand image and not damage it.

The number of active social media users increases year by year. According to statista.com, in January 2021, Facebook was in the first place with 2.700 million active users in the most popular social networks globally. And Facebook Messenger stood fourth with 1300 million (Tankovska, 2021).

The quantity of internet users dramatically increases year by year. Correspondingly, the number of active social media users rises. According to statista.com, active internet users in January 2021 were 4.66 billion, and active social media users were 4.2 billion (Johnson, 2021).

The current article aims to investigate the behaviour of Georgian universities and students on Facebook, as it is one of the most popular social media in Georgia. With the help of observing how universities, on the one hand, and the customers, on the other hand, behave on social media, the article shows what kind of influence the attitudes have on brand image.

The article contributes to the Georgia education field with in-depth analysis and research on communicative behaviour. Accordingly, the objectives of the article are the following:

- To identify the communicative behaviours of Georgian universities on Facebook;
- To determine whether communicative behaviour on Facebook influences a brand image in customer perception or not;
- To identify Georgian universities' communicative behaviour through Facebook with existing as well as potential students;
- To determine if miscommunication through social networks decreases enrolment.

Literature Review

Communicative behaviour and its context in social media

Higher education has had a significant influence on society for centuries. It has also been part of nation branding and an indicator of raising consciousness (Sataoen, 2015). University branding manifests its different nature and characteristics directed to student satisfaction (Bennet & Ali-Choudhury, 2009). The Students' voice is one of the main determinants of university success. Considering this factor causes increased motivation and engagement of students in the university's future activities (Balaji, Roy, & Sadeque, 2016).

As the world develops, communication becomes easier and faster; however, it also places humankind in a more complex situation as it demands radical steps (Krotz, Pravdová, & Hulajová, 2017). According to Blohm et al., "communication is much more than spoken and written language" (Blohm, Cassens, & Wegener, 2020). Brand attitude is more potent than brand equity (Schivinski & Dąbrowski, 2013). Any kind of branding activity can become part of brand communication and accordingly affect a strong image (Wijaya, 2013).

Communication can be conducted differently and across different environments; however, communicative behaviour on social platforms attracts attention considering the nature of the digital world. According to Rowe, in case the communicative behaviour can be uncivil in various circumstances, it is less likely to be so on Facebook "because other users in their social network are automatically notified of their activity via the "newsfeed" function" (Rowe, 2014).

The state of communication depends on the communicator and the listener or the party to whom the communication is directed.

Significance of content marketing strategy on social media

Nowadays digital world requires digital wisdom. Staying relevant and visible in the digital transformation era demands digital literacy. Being digitally literate means having the ability to live, study and work through digital technologies.

“With roughly 2.91 billion monthly active users as of the fourth quarter of 2021, Facebook is the biggest social network worldwide” (Statista Research Department, 2022). Accordingly, B2B and B2C processes are thoughtfully reconstructed. Correspondingly the paper covers observation only on Facebook. Social media, significantly Facebook, has revolutionized communication between customers and businesses. Nowadays, content is king! According to Baltes, content marketing is a fundamental tool and the future of digital marketing. "The main role played by content marketing is to inform and educate audiences to develop a privileged relationship with them and to determine brand loyalty." (Baltes, 2015)

"Content marketing is a strategic approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly-defined audience — and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action." (Content Marketing Institute, n.d.)

Content marketing, in contrast with traditional marketing, simplified the buying process. "Content marketing taps into the first two stages of the buying process by raising awareness of solutions and educating consumers about a product they may have never considered before” (Steimle, 2014).

Research methods and findings

Methods

Considering the sensitivity and nature of the research, two types of studies were selected. Observing the behaviour of the universities directly on their Facebook pages was regarded as one of the best ways for the research. The content, responsiveness, and engagement in further communication are visually visible. Observation is an effective way for the researcher in terms of monitoring behaviours in the natural environment (Baker, 2006). Passive observation, such as examining the manner of persons or the companies in their native course, rather than expected (Haavelmo, 1944), provides the possibility of more or less objective assumptions. However, the focus group method was also employed to eliminate subjectivity and consider the customers' perspectives. A Focus group study is especially efficient when the focus of the research is to investigate the feelings and attitudes of the society towards the specific topic (Freitas, Oliveira, Jenkins, & Popjoy, 1998). Besides, the customers could find the impact of communicative behaviour on social media on the brand image.

Data collection

To observe the communicative behaviour of Georgian universities, their Facebook pages were inspected in detail. 4 private and 4 public universities from Tbilisi and Kutaisi were the subject of observation. The universities were selected according to their popularity and students' interest. The participants of the Focus Groups also mentioned all of the universities observed. The observation was conducted throughout 7 months and covered the following activities: enrollments after the Unified National Examinations (announcements regarding necessary documents or offers); registration; implementation of a semester, which should be calm in terms

of curricular activities, however busy with attractive and extracurricular ones; end of the semester; mobility announcements.

Mini focus groups with 4 to 6 people were selected for the research. For more credibility, we tried to cover existing and potential students to identify better customer attitudes towards communicative behaviour of the universities on Facebook. 2 groups of university students and 2 groups of high school students represented different universities and schools and interests. To protect the anonymity of the universities, they were coded and mentioned in the text accordingly.

Results

Observation

4 private and 4 public universities were selected for the observation. Their behaviors were observed for 7 months under different conditions. Most of them seemed more active when trying to reach students during enrolment. However, the negative side was that their communicative behaviour provided an impression of doing their duties, which meant sharing information and not giving feedback afterward. There were met non-responded questions and annoyed comments from interested students. Besides, response content was found to be different. Although there were universities with more attractive pages, others had problems with visuals, frequency, and significance of content. Only one university out of 4 public ones had more or less functional pages, while private ones looked better.

University 1 – Appeared to be attractive and active. They post different content daily, sometimes twice a day, or even more. Written content marketing is informative, such as new programmes, exchange programmes, mobility days, open days for high school students, students' achievement stories, activities, etc. Besides, visual content marketing is also used with attractive photos and videos. The focal point goes to stunning images and videos of their environment. As for the problems, there is significantly poor interaction between universities and students. On the one hand, there is no corresponding involvement in their posts; on the other hand, questions are, in most cases, left without responses.

University 2 shares the posts 3-4 times a week. Shares distinguished video series where students individually talk about their experiences. The project seems to be popular with high school students, and the university uses it to keep the audience engaged, which is a positive point. These posts have many likes and approximately 200-300 comments. Information about events and activities are shared, and visual is attractive. University replies to students' queries publicly, though some comments are left without attention.

University 3 - unclear posting frequency, sometimes 4 times a day, sometimes 1-2 times a week. They use visual and written content marketing. While observing posts, it is understandable that University runs ads on social media, but not frequently. Fewer likes and comments from students or high school students can consider the university's content marketing strategy less student-oriented. Problem detected - no response on comments, not frequent events and extracurricular activities.

University 4- Confusing posting frequency, sometimes 4 times a day and sometimes 3 times a week. Content marketing strategy contains vacancy announcements, students' achievements; news about university programmes; information about charity programmes for students and high school students. Engagement shows that the university runs ads, but not sufficiently frequently. However, queries are responded publicly, and some comments are left behind the attention. The unclear written content was identified that caused misunderstanding among students toward university but was left behind the administration's attention.

University 5 - Systematic posting frequency. Content marketing strategy follows one concrete direction that includes: news about university programs, attractive informative posters about systematic online meetings, and webinars. Less information about students' achievements. Detected almost no engagement on posts from the students' side. Students are engaged in more informative posts on funding or specific language learning programs. The university replies to such posts thoroughly, but not all comments are responded to. The problem detected was too much concentration on the particular programme direction, while others are behind the attention.

University 6 - only administrative information is available. No student-oriented content. Accessible information on the university's lectures, contracts, and lecturers participating in conferences abroad. There is almost no information about programmes, open days, mobility, student achievements, etc. No creative and attractive images are used for more engagement. No interaction with students. Comments show that students are thoroughly ignored.

University 7 - posting frequency is unclear. More than that, content marketing strategy is complicated. University shares posts from entirely different fields and activities than the one it serves and educates. No student engagement on posts. Minimal information about programs. Neither visual nor content is attractive. No information about extracurricular activities.

University 8 is a public university that must have a creative and attractive Facebook page considering the field it serves. Observing their Facebook page, we faced a dramatically vast number of problems. The Facebook page is almost non-responsive.

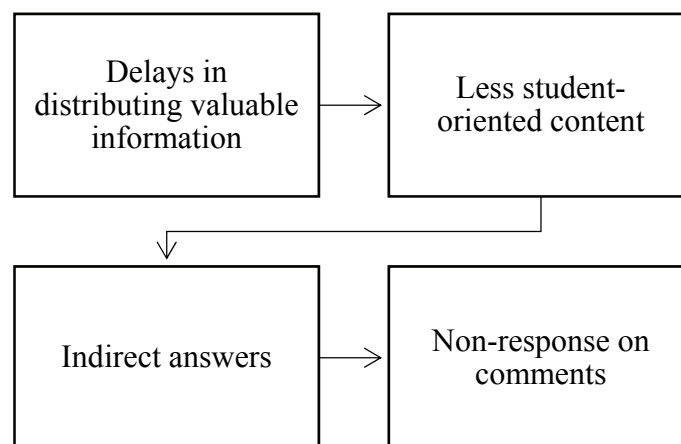


Figure 1. Communicative behaviour lapses of Georgian universities

As Visualized in Figure 1, the most crucial mistakes from the side of the universities in communicative behaviour toward existing as well as potential students on Facebook were the following: delays in distributing valuable information, content not so much significant and exciting for students, indirect answers to student queries or ignoring at all.

Focus group

Groups were gathered to discuss several things. We asked them several questions, and they were expected to discuss the questions. All the groups appeared to be very interested in the topic and actively involved in the discussion. The subjects for the discussion were the following: Do they check Facebook pages of Georgian universities (would they be their own, the universities they are interested in, etc.) or not; Do they like communication of Georgian

universities on Facebook or not; Does communicative behaviour of universities influence on their brand image or not.

All the participants mentioned that they observe universities on social media. Therefore, existing students were more familiar with the cases of their universities. In contrast, in most cases, high school students mentioned that they had followed several universities on Facebook to observe their content that would help them in decision-making. Most respondents indicated that content and correspondence communication are not satisfactory. Existing students complained that, in most cases, social media pages of the universities are directed at the potential students, and they feel neglected. All of the students, were they existing or future, mentioned that student stories, extracurricular activities, and visually attractive works are the ones they expect from the university communication through Facebook. Among the problems were mentioned: ignoring questions under the posts, not providing the correct information, delays in distributing valuable information to the customer, and inappropriate content (in this case, high school students mentioned communication regarding discounts from the universities). Most participants agreed that social media communication is part of the brand image. Several high school students even stated that Facebook pages either helped them in decision-making or made them change decisions considering their content and communication.

Focus group 1 (6 University students):

The students represented 1 public and 3 private universities in Georgia. Most of the students mentioned that the content of the universities on Facebook is not very attractive. In their opinion, this is miscommunication. They do consider that communication would it be direct or indirect, with the student should be more attractive and wise. When asked what information they come across on Facebook, they all remembered Open Days, which is no longer interesting for the existing student. Although the student representing University 1 pointed out that direct communication is effective internally, receiving information from Facebook is not so important. University 2 was described by the representative as the distinguished one on the market because Facebook content, as well as direct communication, was considered highly effective. In the meantime, the students of University 3 seemed to be very dissatisfied with any kind of communication. They mentioned that direct information is so restricted that they expect to collect it at least from Facebook. In response to the question of what would be the most appealing for the students, they all answered that stories about the exchange students, students' success stories, students' works, extracurricular activities, such as sports events, informal meetings, and talks, etc. Also, the students from University 3 and University 5 mentioned that involving existing students in content creation and publishing their works by them would increase interest in the long run. Among the problems were mentioned the cases when someone asks the question as a comment under the Facebook post and the answer is given privately or not responded to at all. Students complained that the Facebook pages of the universities are more oriented toward high school students, i.e., potential students. Some of them, e.g., representatives of University 3, mentioned that the content is not eye-catching, even though sometimes universities are active, which means the content is not selected correctly. They stated that when the university has, e.g., art directions or teaches copywriting and its Facebook page is not attractive negatively impacts branding. One of the students recalled that when she/he was a high school student and was interested in the specific programme, she/he called the programme coordinator to inquire; the answer was that they did not have a syllabus.

Focus group 2 (5 university students)

The students represented 1 private and 2 public universities. All participants mentioned that being active in social media is vital for universities. They consider that students are part of the university image, which is why stories about their achievements and activities should be shared

on Facebook. Representatives of University 4 mentioned that their university was precisely oriented toward students. The Facebook page is proof of that because photos and videos with textual student stories are visible on the page. Student life is also very interesting for other students or potential students, according to them. The students noticed that the social media pages of some Georgian universities sometimes upload new posts only once a month, which either means they do not organize events or do not communicate about them via Facebook pages. One of the students mentioned that most of the universities in Georgia are so involved in doing PR that students are neglected; they do not provide various activities. Participants also remarked that very often, universities are so reserved that the existing students do not know who their dean is. Also, when interested persons ask meaningful questions in the comments under Facebook posts, they do not get answers. The participants stated that social media pages are part of university branding; however, they are not the primary indicator. Though they also pointed out that when they follow their universities on Facebook, they consciously or unconsciously find the effectiveness of content significant.

Focus Group 3 (5 High school students)

The students mentioned that when the time came to choose the university, they liked almost all the Georgian universities on Facebook to watch their activities and offers. Some of them pointed out that private universities often accentuate infrastructure, while public ones seem to be oriented on programmes. Even though they think that most universities are active in social media and share different kinds of information, there still arise questions and the information provided is not satisfactory. One of the students had an experience with one of the universities when she/he tried to ask whether they had a specific programme, but unfortunately received an indirect answer when they advised reading the information in the handbook. The negative context of the advertisement was mentioned to be the offer of the discount in case the university is the first choice of the student because not price but the environment would it be teaching or physical is more important. The case when a student leaves a comment with a specific inquiry under the Facebook post, and it is responded privately is annoying for students because the information should be accessible to everyone. The worst thing is when questions are ignored. Miscommunication is sometimes discouraging for students, and even if they are eager to choose a specific university, they may change their minds. In the case of using wisely, students considered that Facebook could be the platform helping in decision-making. One of the students even mentioned that this platform helped change the chosen path and select another university. If the university organizes extracurricular activities, students feel they are cared for. Sometimes it happens that the audience reaches the information about the event after the event is already over.

Focus group (4 high school students):

Participants indicated that most often, they do not receive sponsored posts from the universities and like and check the pages themselves. One of the students had an experience when s/he tried communication to inquire about the time of the event and received a wrong answer. As high school students are interested in Open Days, they expect the information to be spread via social media; however, they have noticed that sometimes the universities have information on web pages only and not on Facebook. Feedback regarding the events is slow, or occasionally dedicated persons are not responsive. They pointed out that the prestigious and popular universities sometimes do not bother to care about existing or potential students, which is wrong according to them. The students perceive proper and effective communication in social media as an indicator that universities care about their contingent. The universities' negative sides were mentioned as a lack of activities and attractive information. In terms of branding, they considered that as part of the image, Facebook pages help potential students in decision-making.

Discussion and Conclusion

As shown from the research, poor communication on Facebook negatively influences customers. In students' cases, it causes annoyance, while in potential students' it might be more damaging to brand image since they might refuse the university. This finding coincides with the results by Schivinski et al. (2013), who found out that the more customer is involved and considered in content creation more notable the brand is.

Since the development of mass media and social media, human behaviour has become different (Krotz, Pravdová, & Hulajová, 2017), as human communication through social media requires different skills and techniques rather than direct communication. According to the research participants, communication is one of the significant elements of branding influences on the image, which is also apparent in the results of Wijaya (2013). Communication through social networks can be meaningful as consciously or unconsciously, students and potential students expect engaging and informative content on Facebook.

One of the crucial mistakes of universities' content marketing strategy is eliminating targeting groups' interests. Universities need to conduct expanded research, where the target group should be students and high school students, to determine content marketing relevant to their interests. The crucial problem identified during the research was "non-response on comments," Less student-oriented content established negative attitudes in high school students toward universities.

The research is limited to the universities - 8 out of authorised 58 in the country and regions. The representatives of other regions of the country, towns, and villages might have slightly different expectations and attitudes.

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