

The Use of Social Networking by Higher Education Institutions in Spain: A Comparative Analysis Employing the Facebook Assessment Index (FAI)

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to analyse the use Spanish universities are making of the main social network today: Facebook. The research adapts to the Higher Education Institutions context an evaluation index denominated FAI that has been used in other areas. It applies the index to all of Spain's universities, making comparisons between them and the best universities in the world. The results show that Spanish universities' indices are far from the values obtained by the best international universities, and that the country's private universities have better results than the public ones. It is an intention of the work to contribute to the tools the marketing managers of higher education institutions might use in how they relate to social networks and to the opportunities and threats these pose.

KEYWORDS

Facebook, Facebook Assessment Index, Higher Education, SNS, Social Networks, Spain, Spanish Universities, Universities

INTRODUCTION

Since the creation of Facebook in 2004, there has been a continuous growth in the use of social networks in both the private and the professional spheres. Today, together with private profiles, there coexist the profiles or pages of businesses, public institutions, and non-profit organizations of all kinds. Naturally, the education sector has not been immune to this social phenomenon. The presence of primary and secondary schools, universities, and teachers is common on the major social networks like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube.

Social networks have various applications in the Higher Education Institutions (HEI) world. They can be used in teaching, in research and knowledge transfer, and in the university's management. In the first case, social networking has found applications primarily in the contexts of informal learning and entertainment. "However there is a growing interest in its use in formal education in face-to-face, distance, and blended modes" (Anderson, 2009). Some experts believe social networking in general and Facebook in particular to be "a vital tool for teaching and learning in the 21st century and for

making education more social” (The Education Foundation, 2013), especially if one understands learning to be a “typically interactive, student centred, collaborative, and on demand” process.

According to Roblyer et al. (2010), “the social and interactive nature of SNSs presents the intriguing possibility that by enhancing social interactions with and among students through the use of an SNS such as Facebook, teachers can increase the overall quality of engagement in a given instructional setting, and thus create a more effective learning environment.”

The use of Facebook and other social networks in HEI teaching raises such questions as: What is the acceptance of their use by teachers and students? How should they be used? How do they differ from other tools such as forums and e-learning platform chats? What should the teacher’s role be? How can the participants’ privacy be ensured? What are their effects on cognitive and affective learning? Although still few and inconclusive, there have been some studies which report the experiences of teaching in this line, and which discuss some of these questions (Madge et al., 2009; Ophus & Abbitt, 2009; Roblyer et al.; 2010; Espuny et al., 2011; Wo et al., 2012; Irwin et al., 2012; Veletsianos & Kimmons; 2013; Jong et al., 2014).

With regard to its influence on learning, early research showed that SNS use during courses had positive impacts on student motivation, classroom climate, and student-faculty relationships (McCarthy, 2010; Panckhurst & Marsh, 2011; Wang et al., 2012).

Social networks are also beginning to have a significant presence in the context of university research. Research is a social activity, and the emergence of new specialized social networks such as ResearchGate, Methodspace, and Academia is allowing university researchers not only to communicate their research and findings more rapidly, broadly, and effectively than ever before, but also to build and exploit personal networks in order to establish collaborations and further their careers. According to Rebiun (2010), social networks and other so-called “Web 2.0” tools allow researchers to share:

- The investigation itself. The Web provides the necessary resources for researchers to share their work, whether it is in an initial phase or under critical review;
- The resources useful for the research, such as references, objects of learning, links, information, and documents;
- The research results, mainly through blogs, open access journals, and open archives or repositories.

Not enough research has yet been carried out on the acceptance and use of such social networks for researchers. A study by Research Information Network (2010) of over 1 300 researchers finds that “there is little evidence at present to suggest that web 2.0 will prompt in the short or medium term the kinds of radical changes in scholarly communications advocated by the open research community”, and “it seems most likely, therefore, that web 2.0 services will continue to evolve as supplements to – not replacements for – established channels of communication between researchers”.

The focus of the present study was on the third use of social networks in the area of higher education – its use as a university marketing tool. The objective was to analyse the use that Spanish universities are making of social networks (in particular, Facebook) to improve their ability to interact with current and prospective students. The main contribution of our paper to the existing literature is the use of a new method of analysis that allows us to compare university Facebook use, analysing the possibilities that social networks, specifically Facebook, offer for the development of a university’s marketing strategy. The results of these comparisons allow us to establish elements for the improvement of key aspects of this network such as the popularity of the page, its content, and the capacity for interaction with its users. To the best of our knowledge this is the first time a study of this nature establish differences between public and private universities in a European country.

In the following section, we shall analyse the information provided by some previous studies, which looked at the use of social networks as marketing tools in higher education institutions. Then we shall present the method used to analyse universities’ Facebook pages, making use of the so-called Facebook Assessment Index (FAI). Finally, we shall present the results of the analysis, and finish the

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