Analysis of Social Networks as a Marketing Tool in Universities in the UAE Context

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ABSTRACT

In this article the authors explored social networks as a marketing tool for higher education institutions in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). They studied Facebook and Twitter (now X) profiles of 14 universities and analyzed their presence, activity, and engagement over 2 months. Their objective was to discover the best strategies, and the key factors influencing social media success and student enrollment of universities. Results revealed significant variability, with few universities excelling across all metrics on both platforms, while many focus mainly on one site. The study identified leading universities and ways to improve social media outcomes. Correlational analysis shows possible ways for universities to enhance their success on social media by finding positive relationships between publications and engagement, followers and engagement, and publications and student enrollment in both social media. The correlational analysis also links higher university rankings based on academic success with better Twitter performance. Finally, the multiple regression models developed explain the student's enrollment based on the independent variables studied.

KEYWORDS

Marketing, Digital Marketing, Social Media, Social Networks, Higher Education Institutions, Universities

INTRODUCTION

The development and digitization of the information age in which we find ourselves are forcing universities to make significant changes at the management level to adapt to the new changes (Sedziuviene & Vveinhardt, 2009). In an increasingly competitive environment, higher education institutions recognize the growing importance of digital marketing as a tool to attract and retain students (Gibbs, 2002).

This competition between universities, as well as the increase in supply in the field of higher education, has led universities to modify their management and marketing strategies (Doña Toledo & Luque Martínez, 2017). In addition, the rise of the Internet and Web 2.0 has shifted universities' marketing strategies from the use of traditional media to the use of digital media (Fagerstrøm &

Ghinea, 2013). Furthermore, there has been an increasing interest in social media use as a marketing tool because strategic social media marketing activities improve engagement, brand experience, and loyalty, all of which are critical for institutions' marketing efforts (Khan, 2022). One sector in particular that could benefit from these emerging social media marketing activities is education, especially higher education institutions. Given the saturation and high competence of universities market using marketing to attract students is necessary for their future viability. For this reason, social networks can help a lot for their capacity to amplify peer recommendations that significantly impact decision-making processes for prospective customers (Siddiqui et al., 2021). Research has proven that social networking sites act as a valuable e-marketing tool, connecting institutions with prospective customers through shared interests and targeted communication (Yang et al., 2008), so it makes sense that universities use social media to attract potential undergraduate students and keep current students informed and engaged of the various university activities.

Universities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are also in a very competitive environment, and they must strive to develop more effective digital marketing and social media strategies to attract new students. In this study, we aim to explore the social media use, the most effective strategies, and the key factors influencing social media success and student enrollment of higher education institutions in the UAE. Thus, we explore the following questions:

· What are the social media behaviors and patterns universities exhibit on Facebook and Twitter, and which strategies get the best results in terms of engagement and presence?
· How are the social media variables of universities (number of followers, posts, and engagement) correlated between them on platforms like Facebook and Twitter?
· What is the relationship between universities' social media performance and their position in university rankings of academic success?
· How do social media activities influence student enrollment at universities?
· Can student enrollment be explained or predicted using social media variables such as followers, posts, engagement, and university rankings?

For this purpose, we focus on the university use of Facebook and Twitter social media as marketing tools. This area has not received much study in the Middle Eastern region; therefore, the findings of our study will be of great value.

OBJECTIVES

In this study we intended to conduct an analysis of the use and engagement of Facebook and Twitter (now known as X) social networks of top universities in the UAE. We studied the digital presence, the social media activities, and the user engagement of universities over a period of 2 months and also their university rankings and student enrollments. The purpose was to understand the use of social media from universities, discover what strategies are more effective and have better outcomes, and to find which variables are the most impactful in achieving better social media results and better student enrollments. We divided the study into three main parts, and each part has different goals that are explained below.

Analysis of Social Media Variables

Our first objective was to understand the social media behaviors and patterns that universities have in Facebook and Twitter and highlight the best ones that other universities can emulate. For this reason, we examined their social networks presence, the number of followers, the number of publications, and the user's engagement.

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