The Influence of Social Media on the Choice of a University

Agnieszka Tomaszewicz[1], Urszula Chrąchol Barczyk[2]

Abstract:

Purpose: The aim of the article is to show that social media are an important channel of communication between universities and their candidates and may influence their perception of the university and their choice of studies.

Design/Methodology/Approch: When communicating with a university on social media, you should bear in mind that the content posted there concerns various topics and reaches different groups of recipients. The research hypothesis was defined as follows: Building university communication in social media creates an opportunity to interest candidates in various messages, not only regarding the university recruitment process itself. The following research methods were used in the study: content analysis of documents and materials, own research conducted among first-year and second-cycle students in 2022-2024.

Findings: Without an appropriate social media strategy, as well as tracking trends, content, and the popularity of individual media, it will not be possible to attract the attention of university candidates. Only the synchronization of all these elements makes it possible to run university social media in an attractive way.

Practical implications: The activities presented in the article may serve as guidance for other universities.

Originality value: The article has practical applications. The study results can be used by other universities that treat social media as an important channel of communication with various audiences, including as a place to promote the university's educational offer.

Keywords: Social media, universities, promotion of university recruitment.

JEL classification: M30, M39.

Paper Type: Research work.

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[1]*Ph.D., University lecturer, University of Szczecin, Institute of Spatial Management and Socio-Economic Geography, Szczecin, Poland, ORCID: 0000-0001-6111-1159
e-mail: agnieszka.tomaszewicz@usz.edu.pl;*
[2]*Ph.D., Faculty of Economics, Finance and Management, University of Szczecin, Poland, ORCID: 0000-0002-6583-3236, e-mail: urszula.chrachol-barczyk@usz.edu.pl;*

1. Introduction

Social media marketing is a dynamically developing form of internet marketing. Social media marketing is a concept and form of internet marketing based on the use of social media as communication platforms with the market for the purpose of promoting commercial processes or events aimed at attracting potential online customers, thereby increasing the effectiveness of actions undertaken to achieve the company's objectives. (Mazurek-Łopacińska K. Sobocińska M. 2022)

Social media have largely supplanted traditional media and, depending on the industry, often become the main channel of communication between companies, institutions, and their target audiences. Social media currently play a key role in communicating with various audience groups, both in the educational sector and in other areas. Their dynamic development, interactivity, and ability to deliver real-time content make them an indispensable tool for building relationships, disseminating information, and shaping the image of organizations.

Social media can be defined as online networks that enable interaction between users. (Keles, McCrae, and Grealish, 2019) In recent years, social media have taken on new, additional functions that can serve as support for higher education institutions, particularly in the area of increasing their visibility and recognition. As the analysis of the subject literature indicates, the presence in social media can influence (Chałupczak, 2024):

- Activities related to promotion in traditional media, taking into account competitors' actions;
- Increasing recognition in both the local and national environment;
- Enhancing the credibility of the organization in the case of positive feedback;
- Increasing opportunities for non-profit organizations due to the low costs of promotion and reach-building.

Social media are a complex communication tool. Numerous factors influence well-managed social media, meaning profiles that are highly popular due to user reactions, achieved reach, and the number of followers. First, it is crucial to identify the target audience for social media activities. Depending on the target group, content, graphic materials, and trends should be tailored accordingly.

Consumer interaction on social media is cost-effective (per customer) or can even serve as a completely free marketing tool (Pokul *et al.,* 2018). However, it is important to remember that social media operates on algorithms, and many studies show that these algorithms are designed to minimize organic reach. This means that it is currently very challenging to reach followers with content for free.

Consequently, many entities are shifting part of their marketing budgets to social media, as these platforms allow for highly effective targeting of specific audience segments based on characteristics such as age, location, or other demographic factors.

Higher education institutions have several target audiences for their communications. However, when analyzing prospective students, we focus on Generation Z. According to the study "Content Consumption of Generation Z" prepared by the research agency WiseRabbit, social media are a key source of information for Generation Z. As many as 93% of respondents aged 15-25 identified YouTube as their primary source of knowledge about the world.

This is followed by Facebook (90%), Instagram (82%), and TikTok (74%). (Erling, 2022) While Generation Z extensively uses social media, they often struggle with verifying the accuracy of the content published there. Over half of the respondents (56%) trust sources they have been using for a long time, while slightly fewer (43%) consider channels with high popularity to be credible (JD, 2022).

Social media are a crucial factor in how Generation Z interacts with the world. For universities, it is essential to maintain a presence on the social media platforms preferred by Generation Z, but the content shared there must resonate with the values of this generation, including authenticity and engagement.

A review of the literature reveals that there is limited research analyzing the importance of social media in the decision-making process regarding higher education choices. Higher education marketing is a field that continues to expand, evolve and adapt. Higher education marketing specialists are still unsure as to exactly how social media marketing influences 18-year-old high school students' college selection decisions. Therefore, HEIs must understand new students' life experiences to market to them effectively. To sell to higher education consumers successfully, institutions must first understand their demands (Šola and Zia, 2021).

2. Review of Research Findings on Social Media in Higher Education

The significance of social media as a marketing tool for higher education institutions is growing. Research indicates that, in the context of increasing competition among universities in Indonesia, maintaining a positive institutional image has become critical to attracting potential students. Specifically, social media marketing positively influences university selection decisions. Various aspects of social media marketing, such as entertainment, interactivity, trends, personalization, and electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM), have been identified as significant factors impacting students' choice of institution. (Kharisma and Haryono, 2023)

Studies conducted on Chinese undergraduate students studying abroad reveal that social media is widely utilized during the information search and evaluation stages

of the university decision-making process. However, social media plays a relatively minor role in the final decision to choose a university compared to other sources such as family and teachers. The research highlights a lack of studies in the existing literature on the effects of cultural context, social class, and the increasing involvement of educational entities in shaping students' university choices (Chen, 2024).

Another researcher explored the factors that attract students to visit higher education institutions' social media platforms. The most highly rated activities included informational content related to recruitment (scoring an average of 4.15 on a 5-point Likert scale) and posts showcasing current events related to campus life (3.81). Other engaging content included updates on special events (3.71) and the publication of photos and videos featuring the university, students, and staff (3.62). However, students rated the sharing of university-specific apps the lowest among the options provided, with an average score of 2.94 (Stachowiak-Krzyżan, 2019).

In a study conducted at Oxford Business College in the U.K. among 170 students, researchers examined how social media, particularly Facebook, influences students' choices regarding higher education programs. The findings confirmed that social media significantly affects university selection. The most popular social media platform was Facebook, followed by Instagram. In terms of influence, Facebook appeared to have a greater impact than other platforms. Additionally, it became evident that Facebook was widely used as a marketing tool by most higher education institutions (Šola and Zia, 2021).

In 2022 and 2023, research was conducted among students at Guilin University of Electronic Technology. Social media has become a key factor influencing the college choice decision-making of undergraduates majoring in Big Data Management and Application in China. Students tend to obtain school information through social media platforms and use this information as an important reference in their decision-making process. Higher education institutions should strengthen their social media information dissemination, providing accurate, timely, and attractive information.

It is also necessary to ensure effective management of social media platforms, maintain a positive reputation for the school on social media, and increase the interest and trust of prospective students. Simultaneously, educational decision-makers should consider incorporating social media analysis into their recruitment strategies to better attract new student enrollment.

This study provides a new perspective for understanding higher education choice behavior in the digital age, particularly by revealing the importance of social media in the educational decision-making process (Dong and Lazaro, 2024).

Data collected from 83 Spanish universities in 2021 through correlation analysis revealed that the number of students is closely linked to the number of followers and interactions, although to varying degrees. Quantitative correlational studies were conducted to examine the number of students and ranking positions as university indicators, as well as the number of followers, posts, and interactions (likes, comments, and shares) per week and per post on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube.

A university's ranking position showed a particularly significant correlation with its number of followers on almost all platforms. Furthermore, the higher the university's rank, the greater the number of interactions per post it received on Facebook and Twitter. It was also found that universities with more followers had more interactions (likes, comments, and shares) with their posts. Lastly, the study concluded that the number of posts was positively associated with weekly interactions but not with interactions per post (Pérez-Bonaventura and Rodríguez-Llorente, 2023).

Next study examines the influence of social media on university reputation and enrolment, specifically focusing on private universities in the Klang Valley. The primary objective of this research was to explore the relationship between a university's online presence and students' enrolment decisions. Preliminary findings indicated a positive correlation between an institution's social media presence and both its perceived reputation and enrolment rates. The study highlights the significance of effective social media strategies for private universities, emphasizing the need for institutions to leverage digital platforms to enhance their reputation and attract potential students.(Ghani, Nawi, and Husain, 2023).

The presented research findings show, on the one hand, that in many countries, researchers are studying the relationship between social media and prospective students' choice of a specific university, as well as how strategies implemented on social media translate into student recruitment outcomes. However, there is no conclusive evidence that social media activities directly influence the choice of a university.

3. The Importance of Social Media for Prospective Students Based on Own Research

The University of Szczecin conducts annual surveys among first-year students during orientation days at the beginning of each academic year. These surveys inquire, among other things, about how students learned about the University of Szczecin. The study includes all first-year students in both undergraduate and graduate programs. Participation in the survey is voluntary, yet each year over 500 students take part.

For first-year undergraduate students, the majority are individuals who recently completed high school and are entering higher education for the first time. A smaller group consists of individuals who are either pursuing a different field of study, switching programs, or beginning studies after a gap following high school graduation. First-year graduate students represent a smaller proportion of respondents, primarily those who previously studied at the University of Szczecin, along with students from other universities.

Respondents can choose from a variety of answers, including: a visit from a university representative to their high school, attendance at education fairs, information found on social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram), university websites or dedicated admissions pages, outdoor advertising (billboards, posters, digital screens), advertisements on trams or buses, recommendations from high school teachers or counselors, personal visits to the university, word-of-mouth from friends and family, radio advertisements, or the university's informational materials.

Over the past three years (with surveys conducted in October 2024, 2023, and 2022), social media has never ranked as the primary source of information. In each of the surveyed years, it consistently ranked as the third most frequently chosen option. The percentage distribution across the years is shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**. *Awareness of the University of Szczecin via Social Media*
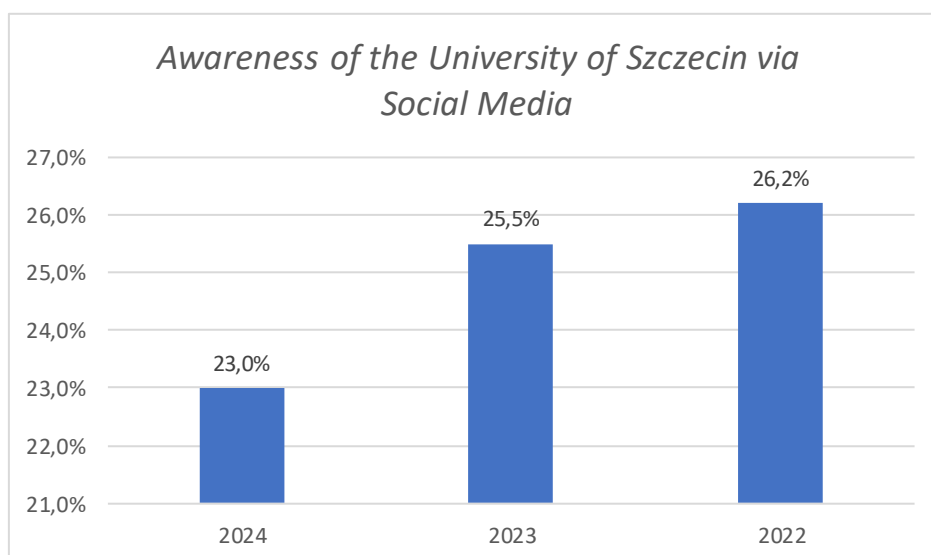
Source: Own study.

In the same study, respondents were also asked where information about the University of Szczecin should be available. In 2024, social media ranked second among the most frequently mentioned answers, while in 2023 and 2022, it held the

first position. A detailed breakdown of the social media category is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. *In which Social Media should information about the University of Szczecin be published?*

In which Social Media should information about the University of Szczecin be published
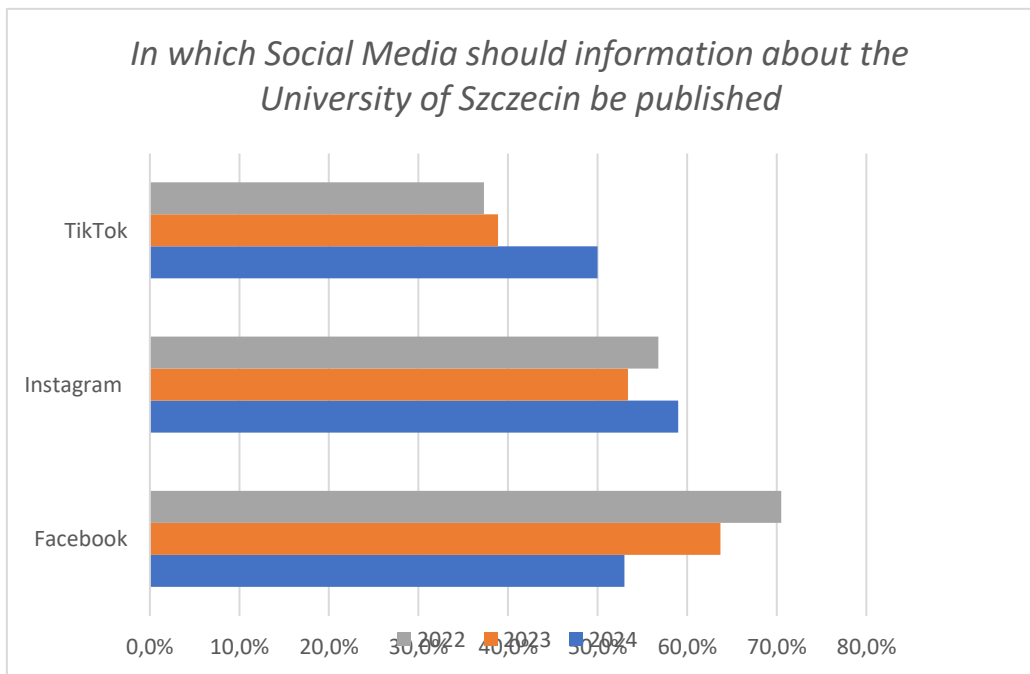
Source: Own study.

The results of these two questions are contradictory. On the one hand, the findings indicate a declining importance of social media as a platform influencing university choice. On the other hand, the same surveyed group identifies social media as a key channel where information about studies should be published. The relevance of individual social media platforms is also shifting. Facebook's popularity is declining, while Instagram and TikTok are gaining traction.

Analyzing these changes is important as it highlights which social media platforms prospective students are using. If universities manage accounts and conduct activities across multiple social media platforms, having this knowledge allows for the development of strategies tailored to specific platforms.

4. Conclusions

Social media is a versatile communication tool that enables effective and engaging relationship-building with target audiences. Its importance in communication stems from its capabilities for personalization, interactivity, global reach, and its potential to shape brand perception and influence audience decisions. Organizations that effectively utilize social media gain a competitive advantage in a dynamically changing communication environment.

Based on the analyzed literature, it can be concluded that there is a relationship between students' choice of university and the university's presence on social media. Social media can influence students' decisions when selecting a university; however, it is neither the sole nor the most important source of information, and thus not the primary reason behind the decision to choose a particular institution.

Social media platforms play a key role in delivering information that prospective students use to make informed decisions about which university to attend. Students often rely on social media to gain insights into university life, academic offerings, and campus culture.

Effective social media strategies help build university brand equity and enhance its reputation. This, in turn, positively impacts students' perceptions and increases the likelihood of them choosing that institution.

It is also important to recognize that different social media platforms have varying levels of influence. Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube are particularly effective at reaching and engaging prospective students. Universities that actively utilize these platforms tend to attract more students.

The type of content published and the level of engagement (likes, comments, shares) on social media posts are significant factors. Universities that post engaging, relevant, and timely content achieve higher interaction rates, which correlate with increased interest from prospective students.

Universities should develop social media strategies that include regular, engaging posts and active interaction with followers. They should also leverage popular platforms and ensure the credibility of shared information to effectively attract potential students.

Social media play a significant role in shaping students' choices. Effective use of social media platforms can greatly enhance a university's attractiveness, reputation, and ultimately its enrollment rates. Universities should prioritize their social media strategies to remain competitive and attract prospective students. Based on the analysis of the above considerations, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The importance of social media as marketing tools for universities is increasing.
2. Universities are increasingly leveraging social media to build their brand, raise awareness, and encourage students to choose their educational offerings.
3. Content personalization and interactivity are key. Elements such as personalization (e.g., tailoring content to interests), interactivity (engaging posts), and entertainment in social media content significantly influence students' decisions.
4. Recommendations from other users on social media (opinions, comments, reviews) carry significant weight in the decision-making process, often surpassing the influence of official content published by universities themselves. It is also important to consider insights about Generation Z and their approach to recommendations.
5. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WeChat, Zhihu, YouTube, Snapchat, TikTok, and others play a critical role in delivering information and shaping a university's image. Their popularity varies depending on the region and target audience.
6. Social media marketing builds "brand pride"—a sense of pride associated with choosing a particular university. A strong brand identity positively influences students' decisions.
7. Social media facilitate the process of searching for and evaluating information. Students use social media to gather information about universities and assess their reputation. Social media play an important role in the decision-making process, particularly during the data collection and analysis stages. Beyond recruitment information and program descriptions, visitors to social media platforms can also learn about campus life, academic achievements, conferences, the successes of faculty and students, and other aspects of university life.
8. High social media activity correlates with better outcomes. Studies indicate that universities that post more frequently and have a larger following achieve higher engagement rates (more likes, comments, and shares) and enjoy greater interest from prospective students.
9. Cultural differences influence the effectiveness of social media. The role of social media in students' decisions varies depending on cultural context. In China, for example, while social media are important, family and teacher opinions still play a crucial role.
10. Changing student preferences regarding platforms. Although universities often focus on platforms like Facebook or Twitter, research shows that students increasingly prefer Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube as their primary sources of information about universities. Universities must stay attuned to emerging social media trends. This does not mean that universities should create accounts on every new platform, but they must understand that any new platform will require a distinct strategy. Content should be strategically distributed across different social media platforms.

11. The need for professional management and social media strategies. Effective management of social media profiles (e.g., publishing attractive and relevant content, monitoring feedback, and responding quickly) is crucial for building a positive university image and attracting more candidates. This often requires establishing a dedicated social media team within the university or outsourcing these activities to external agencies or advertising firms.

In conclusion, social media are becoming an increasingly important tool for universities aiming to reach modern, digitally advanced generations of prospective or current students. Equally, the importance of content targeted at current students should not be underestimated, as numerous studies show that their opinions are one of the key factors influencing prospective students' choice of university.

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