

# Terminology Management for Social Media Communication During Covid 19 Pandemic: A Case Study with a Portuguese Higher Education Institution

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**Abstract:** The process of attracting new students is a constant challenge for Portuguese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). It is challenging because it implies the definition of a communication strategy that uses both traditional and digital tactics to promote the institution and its educational offer. Considering the constraints resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, HEIs had to change their strategies and, in a short period, create digital communication mechanisms to facilitate new students' access to relevant information about the institution. This paper intends thus to determine and evaluate which are the predominant factors in seeking information about a degree in business sciences, specifically regarding the Porto Accounting and Business School in Portugal. To do that, we will consider the various factors that tend to influence the decision-making process of choosing a higher education degree, namely: the institutional website, social networks (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube), other contact mechanisms (live chat, e-mail, text messages, ZOOM videoconference) and alumni testimonials. This study will also consider the role of terminology and positive language to obtain a successful communication strategy for social media. The analysis of these factors, combined with research developed with a focus group of high school students' graduates to assess their online preferences, will allow the presentation of a digital communication proposal whose purpose is to attract and retain new students. This proposal will consider the role of a strategic terminology management approach to capture students' attention when responding to their social media preferences. This paper results from the perception that being aware of the students' online preferences and communication skills and needs is essential to enhance the quality of the digital communication that HEIs promote in social media channels, especially in a time frame as specific and multifaceted as the one that we are currently experiencing.

**Keywords:** social media, terminology, digital communication, HEI, covid-19, information

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## 1. Introduction

At the end of 2019, a new Corona Virus (SARS-CoV-2) was the reason for the surge of the highly contagious disease COVID-19. It started spreading worldwide and led to a pandemic situation that implied and still implies changes to the way we used to live.

Due to the high chances of contamination, many countries were initially forced to limit face-to-face contacts in several contexts, and education was one of the main affected sectors. That led to massive school closures around the world in the regular school system and in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). In fact, around 188 countries have implemented country-wide school closures (The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, 2020).

Thus, serious constraints started to be felt that affected HEIs activities, including those related to communication. This affected many situations regarding current students' communication and communication with potential new students who were applying to Higher Education Institutions in late August of 2020.

These constraints emerged as a problem, mainly because they could limit HEIs ability to attract new students, which is always challenging. Face-to-face contacts in professional contexts were limited due to the absence of a significant number of employees at the Porto Accounting and Business School (ISCAP) and in all other HEIs and secondary schools. Even though teleworking was in place, the truth is that face-to-face services were highly impaired in this context.

So, the consequences of these limitations were enormous due to the reduction of the communication channels and moments used to contact the institution. The volume of e-mails started to grow exponentially, the phones had constant calls and the inability to respond to all the requests was clear. However, at the same time, communication needed to exist, due to the constant changes that had to be implemented and that caused many doubts to existing students of the institution and to the new students who were now applying for higher education in general and for ISCAP in particular.

As a result, it became paramount to explore other communication strategies that would contribute to the existence of a clear and more effective communication in such a difficult and demanding environment. In this context, social media communication gained a new strength and emerged as one of the channels that could support this effort, along with a clear consideration for controlled language and terminology.

## **2. Objectives and Research Questions**

This study was projected with the objective of answering the following research questions:

- Did Social Media Communication suffer changes during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- Was the digital communication strategy implemented by the Porto Accounting and Business School (ISCAP) successful during the pandemic?
- Was the management of terminology important for communicating in social media?

## **3. Background Context**

### **3.1 ISCAP and Higher Education in Portugal during COVID 19 Pandemic**

As mentioned previously, at the end of 2019, the world started to experience a situation that would soon result in a pandemic leading to massive school closures worldwide. In the majority of the countries, this situation implied an urgent need to implement alternatives that would allow students to take distance classes while preventing them from being at school.

In Portugal, the government defined that the face-to-face model would switch to a full e-learning methodology in the middle of the school year of 2019/2020, a directive that included all levels of the educational system. At the beginning of the school year of 20/21, both the Minister of Science, Technology and Higher Education, Manuel Heitor, and DGES - Direção Geral do Ensino Superior (Directorate-General for Higher Education) sent a set of recommendations to HEIs to ensure that both classes and assessments would return to a face-to-face model. However, it was paramount to comply with all the imposed public health and safety rules.

Considering that ISCAP has a high number of students (4800), some other measures were implemented internally to reduce the disease's proliferation. Consequently, a dispatch called "*Plano Excecional e Temporário de Funcionamento do ISCAP e da Atividade Letiva para 2020/2021*" (Exceptional and Temporary Operating Plan for ISCAP and Teaching Activity for 2020/2021) was issued by the Presidency of ISCAP clarifying when and which students would be allowed to attend face-to-face classes at ISCAP, and which students should attend classes online. The division of these students was based on their identification number, being then divided into odd and even number students. This led to a massive reduction in the number of students at ISCAP, allowing the risks to be lower.

This context promoted digital communication, not only via learning management systems like Moodle but also with social media platforms that had a decisive role in supporting and reinforcing the established communication process and strategies.

### **3.2 Social Media Communication for HEIs**

As Alexa et al. (2012) state, "For a very long period of time, universities were institutions that offered education to those who could meet their prescribed entry criteria and were operating in a supply-side market, which meant that their marketing efforts were limited to a few actions, and the communication efforts were unidirectional.", but today, that is not the case, and institutions need to place themselves in the online world, fostering a more interactive communication policy to reach existing and potential students, while maintaining other traditional communication channels.

To have an effective communication strategy, it is paramount to have an online presence. Thus, social media and social networks and the workflows, environments and concepts associated to them became even more present, enhanced by the new and serious communication constraints felt. COVID-19 was a game-changer for HEI's.

It became fundamental to know how to explore these communication channels to establish a more direct communication with the different audiences and convey important information regarding the institution's everyday life. The objective was to create and sustain a more direct relation to contribute to a more engaged audience and a more involved community.

Furthermore, social media and social networks also have an important role in customer service strategy, allowing clients/users to, in some cases, obtain faster feedback than the one they would have through other traditional channels.

Consequently, it was essential to reinforce the role of the existing website and to develop and feed in a more systematic and dynamic way profiles/accounts in the most popular social networks, like Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp and Instagram ("Most used social media 2021", n.d.). These are vital to the communication strategy of any Institution or company, given that almost half of the world's population is present in social networks ("Number of social media users 2025", n.d.).

### *3.2.1 The Use of Terminology in Social Media Communication for HEI*

Social media provide a robust environment to get information out to the world, not only to those who follow you but also to those that come across your institutional profile for any given reason. Due to that, it tends to be an environment prone to interact with users that may have similar interests.

However, as stated by Sahlgren and Karlgren, "social media constitute a semantically volatile domain, and if we intend to operate textually in such an environment, we need to employ a methodology that can re-align its semantic model according to observed language use" (2009). This is especially important because in an environment flooding with enormous amounts of information, getting your message across may be complicated. Hence, the communication strategy that has to be put in place needs to be concentrated in two particular aspects: design and message. On the one hand, the design, which need to be appealing and allow a clear understanding of the information that institutions want to convey. On the other hand, the message needs to be precise and effective, and the use of adequate terminology contributes to it.

As stated by Bowker, "Terminology is concerned with the naming of concepts in specialized domains of knowledge." (2009). In this particular case, the domain is related to higher education-related subjects, so specific terms as courses, degrees, applications, enrolments, attendances regime, among others, tend to fit in this domain.

Sahlgren and Karlgren (2009) reveal that "most of the communication in social media is in textual form, and while social media authors adhere to most rules of text production, the low level of editorial oversight, the perceived informality of the media, and the comparatively high degree of interactivity create a new communicative situation". This *new communicative situation* that needs to be addressed if institutions want their message to get across clearly, and the proper use of terminology appears as a relevant tool to support this process.

Therefore, it is vital to have appropriate terminology management to achieve good communication results. To do that, it is necessary to bear in mind aspects of the message and use appropriate terms and invest in the institutions' discoverability with the use of hashtags. Hashtags are single words or word compositions that searchers use to enter engines and look for specific information domains. They are also called "search queries".

The use of the proper hashtags may contribute to changing "the approach from a one-to-one correspondence between a concept and a term to a one-to-many correspondence" (Densmer, 2020).

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Case Study and Data Collection Strategies**

This case study was implemented at ISCAP during the beginning of the school year of 2020-2021. ISCAP has around 4800 students, 60 administrative staff members and 230 teachers. The number of potential students is far more, and, along with the current students, they compose the primary target audience that ISCAP intends to reach.

According to Yin, a case study "is an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the "case") in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be evident" (2018). Furthermore, the author also states that a case study copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points" (Yin, 2018).

We used the case study approach for this research to analyse the strategies used by ISCAP regarding social media communication. It would be difficult to assess a significant number of different HEIs and their strategies and results, so the decision was to concentrate this study in a particular context. Furthermore, we also opted for this research method because “case studies can penetrate situations in ways that are not always susceptible to numerical analysis” (Cohen *et al.*, 2007).

ISCAP has five official communication channels besides the telephone - website, YouTube and e-mail - and three social network profiles (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube) which revealed to be essential during the pandemic.

For this case study, and because we intended to better understand the possible communication strategies that could be used with success, we relied on a focus group of students (12<sup>th</sup>-grade students) that were on the verge of looking for an HEI to apply.

#### *4.1.1 Focus group: Understanding your audience*

As Robert Yin states, based on some previous studies, a “focus group procedure calls for you to recruit and convene a small group of persons. You would then moderate a discussion about some aspect of your case study, deliberately trying to surface the views of each person in the group” (Yin, 2018).

The discussion that is enabled is similar to an interview, but with a more flexible approach, like a conversation, where the focal point is on the interaction within the group who discusses a specific topic of interest with the guidance of the interviewer. Thus, “Focus groups are contrived settings, bringing together a specifically chosen sector of the population to discuss a particular given theme or topic, where the interaction with the group leads to data and outcomes” (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). In sum, a focus group reflects the convergence between a meeting and a conversation (Agar and MacDonald, 1995).

A focus group is an important research strategy to collect qualitative data as it allows us to understand more clearly the potential audience that we are facing in our study and the potential problems that may occur with the institution’s strategy and preferable solutions to overcome them.

As previously mentioned, our focus group was composed of secondary and professional education students (eighteen students) who were attending professional courses in Management, Marketing, Communication and Public Relations (courses that allow equivalence to the Portuguese 12<sup>th</sup> grade).

The objective of this focus group was primarily to understand how students seek information about higher education courses, the importance of social media to facilitate the process of deciding which HEI would better suit their professional aspirations, as well as analyzing their perception regarding the message and the content developed by the HEI. All the selected students intend to pursue higher education studies. However, most of them were experiencing some indecisions regarding which HEI to choose.

## **5. Analysis of the Results**

The interaction with the focus group went for about an hour, and it was centred on three main topics:

- Search processes for degrees’ information
- Available information on the institutional website
- Preferred social networks

The conversation was recorded with the students’ consent and was transcribed for further analysis. Regarding the purpose and the dimension of this paper, it will not be possible to share, in total, all the information produced but only the central and most relevant topics for the study.

Concerning the first topic, we were able to understand that these students, during their search process for a higher education degree, tend to look for general information about the areas of studies and existing degrees through the institutional website of the Directorate General for Higher Education (DGES). After identifying the higher education institutions and the degrees they are interested in, students look for more detailed information about the degrees, as formal presentations, objectives, possible career opportunities and the minimum access grade of the previous year (in Portugal, students finish high school with a grade that is ranked in a 20 points

scale, and their average grade is what will allow them to access higher education) on the official websites of those particular institutions. Later, after consulting information on institutional websites, they begin following the HEIs on their social media.

Alternatively, when they intend to search for a degree or explore a particular area of activity, they perform google organic searches, using specific keywords related to the name of the degree, the area of activity and/or job opportunities related to a specific area.

Regarding the second topic and the contents available on the institutional website of the HEIs, particularly ISCAP, the participants of this study considered that the presentation of the degrees was comprehensive. The layouts are appealing, and all the information is easy to access.

They were also questioned if the content provided by ISCAP had quality and whether it was sufficient to support their decision-making process. All the participants considered that, at an initial stage, the contents presented allowed them to have a general idea about the degree, the objectives and the professional opportunities. However, in a second moment, the participants pointed out that some other aspects were lacking, namely:

- Testimonials from enrolled students who are attending the degree (their perspective about the degree, the contents that were taught and the teachers);
- Testimonials from former students, sharing their own success stories and professions;
- Detailed information about the contents of the curricular units;
- Videos from professionals in the field of activity of the degree;

Despite considering the importance of having a considerable amount of information that would help them in their decision-making process, the students were also clear about the need of making that information appealing. Very long texts were discouraged and stated as uninspiring to students, and concise texts and specific terminology were preferred.

After searching for information on the DGES website and on the institutional website, they tend to follow the HEI on their social media, and the most used by the participants in this study are Instagram and Twitter. Facebook, despite being the most used social media, is only used by these participants sporadically and only to keep in touch with older family members.

Concerning their preferred time of use, the participants demonstrated that they are much more active on social media at night, when they wake up or during commute. They have classes during the day, the night period tends to be the most adequate to browse.

When asked about the type of content they prefer to view on social networks, they indicated:

- Instagram – Mostly Instastories, not paying a lot of attention to their feed;
- Twitter – Generally, they enjoy all the produced content because brands and users are more prone to express honest opinions and thoughts on Twitter. Furthermore, messages are short and immediate.
- Facebook – They only tend to view content produced by family and friends;
- YouTube – They are willing to see videos, but their duration is a concern.

Due to the focus group results with potential students, we felt that we could introduce some of their ideas in our communication strategy that needed to be updated, especially due to all the communication constraints that were in place. This led to the implementation of a digital communication strategy, supported by proper terminology management, that will be described in the following topic.

## **6. Digital Communication Strategy and Terminology Management**

Having a digital communication strategy implies, as already mentioned, an online presence. This is fundamental because “A large part of today’s students orientation process takes place online, so schools should try to invest in this online orientation and make it as accessible and easy as possible (de Boer, 2020).

The main goal of this digital communication strategy is to attract new students and make our degrees even more known while increasing the institution's notoriety.

Thus, considering the collected data from the Focus Group, we focused our attention on our website and our social media profiles, mainly Instagram.

The institutional website was used to promote interaction with broader target audiences (students, career counsellors, teachers and parents), using simple and accessible language, with short texts for more pleasant and efficient reading. The intent was to disseminate information regarding the presentation of the degree, the degree plan, career opportunities, access conditions and other relevant information as established partnerships, for example. Furthermore, there are contacts available for the degree directors on each course page, so students can contact them and obtain more detailed and updated information about the course. The website also had a clear structure and easy navigation.

ISCAP opted for Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Twitter regarding the social media platforms. Facebook, Instagram and Twitter were the platforms selected as they are the most used social media platforms in Portugal, according to a study done by Marktest and carried out in 2021, but which has already been done in previous years with similar results (Grupo Marktest, 2021). The students used in the focus group ended up confirming these options. LinkedIn and YouTube were also added because they could reach other types of audiences that could also be interesting for ISCAP.

ISCAP has had these profiles for a few years now. Still, the Communication and Public Relations Office (CPRO) of the institution started to use them on a more systematic basis since the beginning of the pandemic because they were an accessible and dynamic vehicle for disseminating important information among existing students and potential ones. Despite having profiles in all of these social networks, Instagram (@iscap.pporto) became a priority due to the focus group results. According to the study, Twitter would also be necessary, but we could not manage it due to time constraints.

All the developed contents, as well as the timing for sharing them, must respond daily to the challenge of making online content that is helpful (Scott, 2015). Bearing that in mind and the students' suggestions, from April 2021 onwards, ISCAP launched a digital communication campaign focused on the website and social media platforms. ISCAP's digital communication strategy can be divided into four stages:

**Table 1:** Digital Communication Strategy

Stages	Description	Contents
Stage 1 Website  "testimonies"	Association of "ambassadors" to each one of the courses. "Ambassadors" were finalist students who could share some of their experiences. The testimonies of the ambassadors were available on a specific area of the website, according to each of the bachelor courses (eight). These testimonies were highlighted on the website through a banner with specific terms that could draw some attention (e.g. Ambassadors; testimonies; sharing experience, etc.). It was also disseminated through social media, as it will be possible to observe in stage 3.	The ambassadors' testimonies covered the following contents: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Reason for entering the course;</li> <li>▪ Differentiation of the professional profile;</li> <li>▪ Areas of knowledge taught in the course;</li> <li>▪ Advice and tips for the new student;</li> <li>▪ Experiences and learning.</li> </ul>
Stage 2 Website  "Opinion Articles"	Develop an opinion article created with opinions from students, course directors and companies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Course description;</li> <li>▪ Characteristics and essential skills acquired or necessary to develop a professional activity in a specific area.</li> </ul>
Stage 3 Social Media  (Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn)	Creation of a post on Facebook and Instagram posts, along with eight 8 Instastories (one per course and a broader Instastory with information regarding all the courses). It was also developed a LinkedIn post for each one of the courses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Identification of the ambassador for each course and their contact;</li> <li>▪ Motivational quotes are taken from the testimonies;</li> <li>▪ Hashtags association, related with the course, area of activity and the school.</li> </ul>
Stage 4 Social media  (Instagram, Facebook)	Creation of instastories intended to raise awareness about administrative procedures and other important information directed to ISCAP's first-year students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Tips;</li> <li>▪ Brief description of the procedures;</li> <li>▪ Frequently asked questions (FAQ)</li> </ul>

Along the previous activities, and over the course of the school year, ISCAP has also developed various activities that complement its online communication strategy. Several activities were developed with secondary and vocational schools, establishing partnerships with vocational guidance offices, promoting direct contact with teachers and students, and organizing various joint activities online (organization and participation in digital events through Zoom or Microsoft Teams and promoting online vocational guidance fairs, also through Zoom).

So, what we can describe as a student-oriented terminology was collected and structured to support uniformity and constancy in the different communication environments, was became a key factor throughout the four intervention phases, which were divided into website actions and social media actions. Using a terminological approach to support the communication strategy in the different environments led us to identifying a set of terms that became core to the content of the messages that were being conveyed and, for this very reason, maintained the attention to the followers. In addition, each publication or instastory had a set of specific hashtags intended to direct the search to ISCAP information.

Below is an example of the information contained in an instastory to illustrate the message's conciseness and the use of key terms. It is an instastory intended to draw attention to a testimony of one of the ambassadors for the Accounting and Administration course. It was translated to English for the purposes of this paper).

**Table 2:** English translation of an instastory

Instastory
Bachelor Degree in Accounting and Administration
Get to know Margarida Lopes on ISCAP's website Link in Bio.
#ISCAP #azulevermelho #pporto #cienciasempresariais #contabilidade #orgulhoemseriscap @iscap.pporto

The hashtags are fundamental for search purposes, and below there is a description of all the hashtags used and what they mean.

**Table 3:** Hashtags description

Hashtags	Translation	Description
#ISCAP	#ISCAP	The name of our institution
#azulevermelho	#blueandred	ISCAP official colours
#pporto	#pporto	Abbreviation of Porto Polytechnic Institute, to whom ISCAP belongs
#cienciasempresariais	#cienciasempresariais	It means "business sciences", one of the core areas of the course
#contabilidade	#contabilidade	It means "accounting", one of the core areas of the course
#orgulhoemseriscap	#orgulhoemseriscap	It means "proud to be ISCAP", as ISCAP's slogan.

With current students, the communication mechanisms are more established, and communication problems tend to be scarcer. Still, the proper use of terminology also showed good results since students started to reduce contact with certain services, especially the Students' Academic Office, due to more accessible access to information (Stage 4).

All the Instagram posts and stories had a common title, with a single term, that alerted new information - "infoISCAP". This term was created to raise awareness about the new information being released, and they were also numbered as "infoISCAP1", "infoISCAP2", for example. Furthermore, there was a hashtag created with the same term "#infoiscap" to enable a quick search for this type of content.

To better illustrate the terminology management in place, we will share an example of an instastory (InfoISCAP3) regarding the information on how to request a diploma.



**Figure 1:** ISCAP Instastory (InfoISCAP3)

To better understand the content of the instastory, the following table provides a translation for the purposes of this paper.

**Table 4:** English Translation of the instastory “InfoISCAP3”

English Translation
#InfoISCAP 3
DIPLOMA
Access the following menus on DOMUS: <Certificates / Diplomas> <Obtain diploma>
Use Internet Explorer or disable pop-ups in other browsers (Chrome, Firefox, etc.).

As it is possible to see from this example, similar to many others, the message is conveyed through very specific terms without resorting to complex sentences. Instructions are clear and simple, combined with clear and specific terms.

There were several other stories with specific titles, similar to the following examples: Student Card; Working Students; Official E-mail; etc. The CPRO created dozens of posts and instastories during the COVID19 pandemic.

To finalize, and in addition to the information posted on social media and the website, it was also established a flow of Instagram messages (direct messages), which also contributed, to a great extent, to the reduction of e-mails and phone calls made to some of ISCAP services.

## 7. Conclusions

Communication using digital media changed and evolved considerably during the pandemic and the lockdown period, as it proved to be a fundamental vehicle for disseminating information. In contrast, other traditional forms of communication were conditioned.

With the insights provided by the focus group regarding their search process for courses’ information, the available information on the institutional website, and their preferred social networks, ISCAP was able to design



a digital communication strategy that was essentially concentrated in the website and on Instagram, since these were the preferred means to obtain information according to the students' focus group.

The implemented strategy has four stages with special regard to terminology in all of them. We can conclude that the strategy was successful, not only with potential students but also with the existing ones. That is clear since new students were able, during the lockdown period, to maintain the same level of interest and adhesion to ISCAP, filling all available vacancies for the school year of 2021-2022. In the case of current students, we managed to reduce the number of contacts to services through information posts on social media that were able to clarify many doubts on several administrative processes (how to obtain the diploma, how to obtain the student card, among many other topics).

Overall, the terminology management strategy in place was concentrated in keywords/terms, used preferably individually, that were able to indicate the content of the message. Focus group students had previously been alerted to the importance of short messages, and the use of controlled language helped to implement that suggestion.

To sum up, we believe that the digital campaign implemented, along with proper terminology management, was successful, helping ISCAP achieve the goal of attracting new students and engaging the current ones, despite the exceptional situation that we are living in.

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