Original Paper

An Assessment of the University Usage of Social Media Platforms: Case from Lebanon—Theoretical Foundations—Part 1

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Abstract

This paper, part of two, aims to assess how a selection of Lebanese Universities utilizes social media platforms to attract potential student candidates. Social Media is considered a significant recruitment tool universities use to attract high school graduates from the millennium digital generation. Different universities have dealt differently with social media, so capturing recorded activity is essential to assess such efforts and pinpoint gaps to justify student recruitment investments by universities. This study uses a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. A descriptive comparative analysis is carried out based on collected data from the different university social media platforms to help categorize selected universities in their efforts, successes, and gaps. However, this paper, the first part of two, represents the theoretical foundations needed for the study. Paper part two (2) will follow to illustrate the numerical and graphical analysis. Results show a lack of motivation schemes to attract potential candidates and encourage them to interact with such platforms. Moreover, universities lack specialized digital marketing staff to produce the appropriate content and design marketing strategies that are attractive, interactive, and with high response rates to inquiries.

Keywords

Social media platforms, universities, digital marketing, metrics, students, Lebanon

1. Introduction

The fast-growing usage of digital technologies has affected and altered institutional competition capacities, corporate strategic models, marketing techniques, and consumer behavior (Chaudhari & Bhornya, 2022). The spread of digitalization does not exempt educational institutions worldwide and Lebanese higher education institutions are no exception. Moreover, Paladan (2018) posits, "HEIs are challenged to be creative in reaching out and keeping in touch with their stakeholders and target markets that are mostly the young generation" (p. 159). One venue to shorten the distance of communication between HEIs and their potential, current, and alumni students is the popular social media platforms (Kowalik, 2011; Merrill, 2011; Bashir, 2022a, b; Alalawneh, Al-Omar & Alkhatib, 2022; Bashir, Hejase, Danash, et al., 2022).

This research, the first of two, evaluates how a few Lebanese universities use social media to draw in prospective applicants. Universities are thought to use social media as a key recruitment strategy to draw in high school graduates who are characterized as being digitally smart or simply those from Generation Z. According to Seymour (2019), "Gen Zers are the first digital natives, born between 1997 and 2012, into a world of vast technological advances and innovations. They are unlike other generations, who either grew up without or came into adulthood during the rise of social media, smartphones, and instant accessibility of information" (para 1). While different institutions have approached social media in several ways, it is crucial to record activity to evaluate these initiatives and identify any inadequacies to support university investments in student recruitment.

This part one study presents a thorough review of literature about the different concepts and techniques related to social media platforms and their potential use to describe how HEIs are approaching their students in the virtual realm and, at the same time, serve as a firm ground for the consequent part two quantitative analysis. The integrated impact of these two articles helps to close the wide gap and the scarcity of research work done in the context of Lebanon about applications of social media platforms through digital marketing techniques in building rapport along the track of recruiting potential students and measuring the outcomes of such efforts to enhance future steps and improved HEI-Student relationships.

This paper is divided into four sections. Section two illustrates the more detailed part of the literature review while section three provides a summary of the research methodology, and ends with part four the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Media Platforms (SMPs)

Communication, by convention, means "the transfer of information, ideas, and meanings from one person to another, and the prevalence and spread of these ideas among them" (Sari, 2016, pp. 20-21). Communication is a process of social interaction that people use to construct meanings that form mental images in their minds, which they exchange through symbols the individual or group transmits through them (the sender, the senders) some messages to influence the behavior of other individuals or groups (the recipient, the recipients), and change them according to a specific desire. Communication is an intended transfer and exchange of information between influential and affected parties that lead to a change in attitude, behavior, trends, or values (Al-Daylami, 2012, p. 83). As for the communication that takes place through electronic media, it is a new method that resulted from the emergence of a digital environment that allows individuals to communicate via the Internet, exchange experiences and

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information, and for groups to convey their voices and the voices of the issues of their societies to a broader area of the world. Several forms of online communication allow people to create networks, communities, and groups to share information, ideas, messages, and other content (Jones, 2015). Social Media Platforms (SMPs) are defined as "Internet-based services that allow individuals to build a public or semi-public profile within a specific framework, display a list of users participating with each other, select them, and view a contact list and what others have done within the same system" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 213). Also, according to Power and Phillips-Wren (2011), "Social media and Social Media Platforms (SMPs) have emerged because of web 2.0 (participatory web) innovations to enhance human communication and create dynamic and interactive dialogues" (p. 251). These platforms are among the most significant Internet applications. They have created virtual communities that involve patterns of interaction and behavior and have attracted millions of users of different places and ages. They allow users to create their accounts and then link them to an electronic social system with members having the same interests and hobbies. Thomsen Trampedach (2022) reports that "Around 6 billion user accounts and 2 billion active users can be attributed to only 10 Social Media Platforms (SMPs)" (para 1). These sites have dramatically changed how people and communities communicate and engage. SMPs are flexible and interactive so that everyone can access and use them "for free", except for commercial advertising services by the company itself. Applications provide users with a wide range of services, The most important of which is electronic communication in all its forms, text, voice, image, and video, which enable them to interact with others, search for them, transfer files, publish photos and videos, and many other services that suit many different categories of users. Perhaps the most remarkable factors that helped the spread of these platforms are an environment for easy communication within a high range of freedom of expression, reaching the point of violating freedoms, and giving space to all individuals of all categories and forms. In addition to the wide availability and spread of information technology and the Internet, its low cost enables the user to use it significantly (Al-Saadi, 2016, p. 157).

2.2 The Emergence of Social Media Platforms

Although Social Media Platforms (SMPs) seem like a new trend, they originated from the development of the Internet in the 1970s. However, in 1954, the term social networks appeared in circulation by a researcher in the humanities at the University of London, John Barnes (1954), and the emergence of some social electronic means in the seventies of the twentieth century was represented by e-mail to facilitate cooperation and social interaction, and the development of stable human relationships with others, which they were often under pseudonyms. In the mid-1990s, social networks began to appear in their modern form, to the impact of the social nature of human beings and their needs to communicate. Years later, the late 1990s witnessed the emergence of social networking in the form of online communities on the World Wide Web like Theglobe.com, Geocites.com, Tripod.com, Classmate.com, etc. "These websites provided users with facilities like interaction through chat rooms and sharing of personal information and opinions through personal web pages" (Farooque & Kadam, 2018, p. 6). In addition, Drew Hendricks stated that "Six Degrees" was the first social networking site created in 1997 (Hendricks, 2021), enabling individuals to create profiles, connect with other users, and browse their lists. Also, Keith Terrell confirms that the site was the first social networking site launched in the said year and continued until 2001 (Terrell, 2019). However, some researchers (Amel, 2017; Surenderkumar, 2016) have stated that the website "classmate.com" was launched in the U.S.A. in 1995. It was the first social networking site (i.e., before Six Degrees) that divided American society into states, each state

into districts, and every district into schools. Accordingly, Surenderkumar (2016) posits that this site "helps students to establish connections and communication with their classmates where they have previously studied. This website doesn't permit the users to connect with different users, it permits establishing communication only with the users who study in the same college" (p. 4). Until that stage, these sites were not well known in Arab societies except to a very limited extent, especially since Internet services were not spread widely in these countries.

The first blogging site was initiated in 1999. The development and spread of the Internet helped in the emergence of a new generation of many applications (Pallis, Zeinalipour-Yazti & Dikaiakos, 2011) that suit different social segments, so sites such as My Space (founded in 2003) and LinkedIn (founded in 2003), were developed and launched in the early 2000s (see Figure 1). Then a series of other popular websites exploded like Facebook (founded in 2004), YouTube (founded in 2005), Twitter (founded in 2006), and Instagram (founded in 2010). Social media, the applications of the Internet's new generation, are still the subject of intense discussion and wide interest by commercialists.
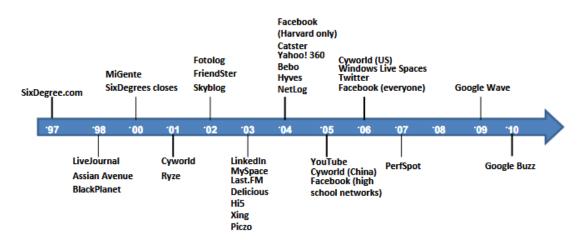
Figure 1. Timeline of Online Social Network Sites

Source: Pallis, G., Zeinalipour-Yazti, D., & Dikaiakos, M. D. (2011).

Press articles, research papers, and scientific journal issues about the subject are increasing. While the movement of these platforms is a relatively "recent" phenomenon, the adoption rate by the public, organizations, companies, institutions, and individuals is very frightening. Alalawneh, Al-Omar, and Alkhatib (2022) posit that SMPs are global. The growth in global commercial spending on these technologies, which has increasingly attracted and continues to attract the attention of business strategists, is expected to increase. It has become part of the marketing strategy for all companies and organizations, including Institutions of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

2.3 About Popular Social Media Platforms

Digital information and communications technology has helped to link communication between peoples of different orientations, bypassing the political and geographical borders and the cultural isolation that some human societies were experiencing. The contemporary world is witnessing major transformations in communication technology, affecting political and economic relations and all types of thinking in different societies. Social media platforms have played, and continue to play, an active role in providing people with a lot of information, attitudes, and trends, thus contributing to shaping

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their awareness and preparing them to be more capable of influencing and acquiring others (Dwivedi, Ismagilova, Hughes, et al., 2021). It facilitates language learning (Chehimi, 2021) and contributes to translating information from and into the Arabic language to facilitate the communication process between young people and remove cultural differences. The revolution of communications and modern technology has provided what is known as virtual politics, which is the increase in the spread of the phenomenon of personal blogs and some other platforms (Li & Bernoff, 2008). However, they are "how a large number of citizens around the world, the majority of whom are university and school students and young people, can express their views and demands and try to obtain their violated or usurped rights" (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). During the past two decades, the number of social networking sites has grown tremendously, and higher education institutions have many options to capitalize on and include in their marketing strategies. Although there are more than 268 famous social networking sites (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_services), some of them are more popular among young students, i.e., at the university level and before, and in Lebanon specifically, such as "Facebook", "Instagram", "YouTube" and others.

Next, this section provides a summary of the most popular SMPs used by universities.

2.3.1 Facebook

Originated in the U.S.A. and considered one of the largest social networking sites and, to some extent, the most used platforms globally, including Lebanon. It was initially launched as an exclusive communication site for Harvard students and expanded to include other (Ivy League) universities. Then, it expanded to include undergraduate and high school students, and after 2006, Facebook became available to anyone over thirteen years old. Facebook has grown rapidly with time and is "already believed to be the most visited site worldwide" (Jones, 2015). Users use this site to connect and keep up with friends, learn more about people in social, study, and work-life, current issues, upload an unlimited number of photos and videos, share links, news, etc. The site consists of basic services, the most important of which are profiles, status updates (24 hours), networks related to demographic information (geographic areas, gender, age, place of study, workplace, etc.), groups, and other applications, Pages, Live Streaming, Facebook Watch TV for videos, as well as Shared Games. The site has recently launched the (reels) technology that it had on the "Instagram" platform, in addition to the (browse) technology for hashtags to facilitate the search for publications that are similar in terms of content according to the different uses of the hashtag, which appears at the bottom of each publication; and the marketplace box (Marketplace) to shop through the platform. In addition to these services, the application of instant messaging by writing or communications via "Facebook Messenger". Also, Masele and Rwehikiza (2021), citing Cheater (2008), contend that "when Facebook launched its fan pages in November of 2007, many universities around the world took the opportunity to create an official page on the site". By January 2008, 420 universities had taken advantage of this new feature (pp. 41-42). These pages had a significant marketing impact, and their owners communicated through direct and targeted messages to the audience (Freeman, 2016). Pages allow displaying the various statistics of the page in the (insights) box, which includes detailed statistics about the followers of the organization's page, their activity on its content, and how to interact with it. It is preferable to create pages for organizations from business accounts rather than personal, and the paid promotion is done through the program dedicated to that (Ad Manager) rather than doing it directly from the page.

Since its inception, Facebook has been rooted in the university environment. It is an excellent environment for colleges and universities to expand the campus into a virtual community, where students can access it in all regions of the country and even globally. The site has a large base of people, 18 to 24 years old, being the main target group for universities. Today, Facebook owns Instagram and WhatsApp, in addition to Facebook Messenger. Shead (2019) reports, "Facebook bought the Instagram platform in 2012 for one billion dollars, and then WhatsApp in 2014 for 19 billion dollars" (para 5).

2.3.2 Instagram

This SMP was founded in the US in 2010. At first, the usage of the app was limited to sharing photos and videos in a square frame, as the founders decided to develop the app in a way that differentiated it from the rest of the social platforms, removing all the features and keeping uploading photos and videos, commenting, and liking (Eudaimonia, 2017). The site grew rapidly, surpassing one million users in just two months. By 2015, it became the number one photography app with 1 billion active users (Jones, 2015). The site has a very active (story) status on-site, which disappears after 24 hours and remains private to the user or saved (highlighted) to others, IGTV, live broadcasts, and reels (launched in 2020), and it has a very high reach. Another new feature was added, i.e., to create short and entertaining videos to share with friends or anyone on the site. The video is prepared on-site; providing services for sound effects, and new creative tools, from several scenes, with a duration of fifteen seconds. Facebook bought the app two years after its launch for $1 billion (Oreskovic & Shih, 2012).

2.3.3 Twitter

Founded in 2006 by American creators. It has a special feature that users' posts are limited to 140 characters. This site became very popular between the years 2013-2015. In 2017, the app doubled the number of characters to 280. Since then, the decision to double the number of characters has not changed the length of the tweets significantly; remaining a place for short thoughts. The site enables users to follow the updates of friends they "follow" by clicking "Follow", sending them Direct Messages (DM), responding publicly to Tweeters if their privacy permits, or simply posting questions or a poll according to their current condition. In November 2020, Twitter launched Fleets to Users globally, a service for posting image content. A character is deleted after 24 hours (similar to the case). In late 2020, in competition with the new Clubhouse app, the site launched a voice chat feature called Spaces, although still in the experimental stage, not all users can create or host public discussions. At the beginning of the year 2021, the application launched the feature of submitting tweets to non-followers of the tweeter and categorizing them according to their content (topics) for further spread. On Thursday, August 25, 2022, "the site integrated podcasts into Twitter as a part of a newly redesigned Spaces Tab" (Twitter Inc., 2022).

Higher education institutions must include Twitter in their marketing strategies because it provides real-time, up-to-date information for immediate access by users, creating a sense of modern connection and community. Its main feature and importance lie in tweeting during live events, especially during the big activities of the university, such as a graduation party, a conference, a national day, or others. It also can target a large and diverse audience and communicate with them in real-time as events unfold, keeping the audience engaged and interested. This platform is especially effective when paired with other marketing strategies and social networking sites. Twitter benefits, among others, include awareness and branding, promoting enterprise content, quick reviews, finding new audiences, and marketing. Malik, Heyman-Schrum & Johri (2019) posit that Twitter provides "affordances for

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strongly connecting and bonding with others and forming a community, supports communication among the participants due to its real-time format and novel features and provides a channel for professional development and networking with peers, professionals, and authorities in their respective fields, with whom they can connect, communicate, share relevant resources, and follow prominent figures" (p. 53).

HEI's marketing team can use Twitter in conjunction with other social media tools, such as student bloggers who also have Twitter accounts where besides updating their blogs, serve as another tool to promote university news on their blogs. Others suggested that the app may be used instead of a live chat service for polarization (Wilburn, 2008). But this is due, first and foremost, to the characteristics of the target audience and the extent of its use for the application, which platform is more preferred, and for which activity the selection is made based on that according to each country or region. Students can be obligated to ask questions on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, and thus, an institution ensures that they are included on its pages.

2.3.4 YouTube

An American site founded in 2005 to share videos with friends. After its launch in 2006, Google Incorporate acquired YouTube (Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, et al., 2011). The site became an opportunity for people (around the world) to connect, share information, and create inspiration and entertainment through video. It became an essential platform for video content creators, advertisers, and marketers. Presently its name varies from a social networking platform to a site affiliated with "Google", or any of its services or sites. However, it is agreed upon that it is the pioneer in online video, the most famous in the world in this field, and the first destination to watch and share original videos. The site allows people to easily upload and share videos online through mobile devices, websites, blogs, and emails.

The first user-generated video was uploaded on April 23, 2005. In six months "YouTube had 100 million video views, and 65,000 clips uploaded daily" (NBC News, 2016). Universities have made videos for more than twenty years as part of their polarizing campaigns. But YouTube has given HEIs a remarkable platform for distributing videos and dividing them to a much wider audience by publishing within specific keywords, regulated lists (playlists), titles for each video, explanation about it, their image (thumbnails), and others. HEIs have reduced some costs, such as copying on CDs (DVDs) and sending by paper mail or others to a limited audience.

The site has launched a section dedicated to academic content, where university employees (administration and professors) could upload educational, marketing, and other content for students and other users. The site enables an interactive view of the campus and student life through the eyes of prospective students giving them and current students a realistic, friendly, and familiar feel to the university atmosphere. If the organization wants to launch an advertising campaign on YouTube, it pays according to specific conditions; if the ad is less than thirty seconds long, it will be charged to click if it has been fully viewed. If it is greater than thirty seconds, the click is only counted if at least this amount of time has been watched. By defining the exact target audience, the university can control a large part of the videos on which it wants to show its advertisement. If an organization wants to earn money from advertising, it must first sign up for Google AdSense, but this step may not be suitable for a "non-profit" university.

2.3.5 Snapchat

An American app founded in 2011. This application has a unique feature that allows users to send photos that disappear after a maximum of ten seconds from the moment of access. In recent years, the site has improved its features and allowed users to chat and share photo and video stories for twenty-four hours. According to Liaison (2022), "Snapchat has over 300 million monthly active users and 100 million daily active users. Of those who use social media, 18% are active on Snapchat and participate in the sharing of 1 million photos and videos every day" (para 1). Although this app is popular among young people, "45% of Snapchat users are aged between 18-24 and a full 77% of college students use Snapchat at least once a day" (Liaison, 2022, para 2). It is believed that it will have a greater impact and potential on users in the future. The application is widely used globally by university students. However, it has not received enough attention in Lebanon so far to include it in the marketing strategy of universities, at least at the current stage.

2.3.6 Clubhouse

An American app was founded in 2020; first for iOS devices and then in May 2021 for Android. The app may only be accessed (so far) through an invitation from an existing member. It allows members to join virtual rooms (live) audio discussions on the topics of their choice, these rooms are either open or private, with a maximum capacity of 5,000 persons, and the opportunity to participate by speaking or just listening, in addition to a place for conversations side script. Unlike other platforms that rely heavily on writing, the Clubhouse platform is based on voice conversations, which makes it feel like an interactive podcast or conference call. It is also an opportunity for broadcasters to host their radio programs online. In-room "hosts" act as moderators of conversations, and those in the room can, by default, raise their hands to turn on their microphones and give them a chance to speak by the hosts. By 2021, the company planned to expand as quickly as possible according to its founders (Ariano, 2021, para 14). Although the application was one year old, it was able to attract a group of the biggest names in the business world, Hollywood, venture capitalists, technology pioneers, and celebrities. The app's guidelines prohibit recording, copying, or sharing conversations without permission. The site has been criticized for privacy issues, and countries like Oman, Jordan, and China have banned its use.

Higher education institutions can seize the opportunity of the application's novelty and uniqueness. HEIs can be pioneers in transferring seminars and dialogue meetings between students, professors, specialists, and guests to the platform. It can spread quickly if HEIs organize regular rooms after establishing one or more special clubs in its name on topics of interest to listeners within the scope of its faculties and specializations, or even contemporary societal issues for discussion and solutions, provided that the rooms are open in terms of privacy to be able to spread and expand.

2.3.7 WhatsApp

An American app was founded in 2009 as "a chat app service for iOS. In August 2010, WhatsApp released an app for Android users" (Dean, 2022, para 1). The app made it easy for people to communicate and share text messages, voice messages, pictures, and video clips. It also allowed live voice and video calls "for free" over the Internet. This feature has led to a great loss in telecom companies in all countries, after making communications available more efficiently, faster, and at a lower cost. One can call acquaintances globally without paying SMS or global calling fees. According to Dean (2022), "It only took 4 years (2014) for the messenger app to hit a milestone of 200 million monthly active users. Thanks to WhatsApp's growing popularity, Facebook acquired WhatsApp in 2014 for $19 billion" (para 2-3). Later, Ceci (2022) reports that "As of 2022, WhatsApp is the most

popular global mobile messenger app worldwide with approximately two billion monthly active users, outranking WeChat at 1.2 billion users, and Facebook Messenger at 988 million global users" (para 1). Higher education institutions have been using the application extensively since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the circulation of university messages and announcements through it is an opportunity for their spread. It also facilitates communication between the administration, faculty members, and students within a defined and formal policy. Camilla (2021) posits, "Research shows that texting students have a higher engagement rate than email and phone calls and can improve matriculation and retention rates, but the majority of colleges have yet to engage with students over SMS" (para 5). Moreover, Camilla, citing a study by Lindsay Page and Ben Castleman, "84% of respondent students said they found text reminders useful in helping them get everything done for college" (para 6, 9).

2.3.8 LinkedIn

An American application founded in 2002. Since 2016, it was owned by Microsoft. It is mostly used for business and employment and to showcase acquired skills, competencies, and certifications, primarily for professional communication between professionals and other professionals, recruiters, and corporations. The application allows users to create profiles and "connect" with each other by default and allows the creation of professional relationships between individuals in the real world. It also allows publishing content in the form of texts, images, videos, or links. Recently the app launched a "Status" feature for its users for twenty-four hours. According to Dixon (2022), "In 2021, there were approximately 774 million global LinkedIn users, and around 49 million of these users had premium accounts. It is estimated that LinkedIn generated around 4.45 billion U.S. dollars in 2021 through premium subscribers" (para 7). Moreover, Iqbal (2022) posits that "LinkedIn generated $11.5 billion revenue in 2021, LinkedIn has 822 million members, and over 57 million businesses and 120,000 schools and universities have LinkedIn accounts" (para 10).

The application helps job seekers publish their resumes to reach employers who publish advertisements for vacant jobs and present them with available jobs with their details. In higher education institutions, the application facilitates graduates to find job opportunities, connects them with specialists from the same fields, develops their abilities, knowledge, and skills, and helps attract distinguished, highly qualified, and experienced professors. Universities can use the site to publish research, scientific news, student graduation projects, academic certificates, etc., and to direct their messages to their designated audience. It is worth noting that "LinkedIn launched University Pages in 2013 as part of its dedicated service for higher education. At launch, the networking site simultaneously lowered the minimum required age for users from 18 to 13, allowing secondary school students to create profiles-making the site an invaluable channel for universities across the world to connect with prospective students" (Parker, 2022; Allen, 2013).

2.3.9 Myspace

An American application was founded in 2003 to allow the building of an interactive community among friends registered in the service. It includes services such as blogging, posting photos, music, videos, mailing groups, profiles of registered members, creating GIFs, and streaming technology, etc. It allows the user to meet friends' friends and share areas and interests. New users can join by logging in using Facebook, Twitter, or email. The site allows users to fully customize their profiles by changing The appearance, background, and appearance of their pages. Reuben (2008) posits that "The application is not only losing with the general population in terms of the number of active users, but it's

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also not popularly used in higher education" (para 6). Similarly, it has not received enough attention in Lebanon so far.

2.3.10 Flickr

An American application was founded in 2004 by Ludicorp and later acquired by SmugMug, Inc. It is a popular way for amateur and professional photographers to post high-resolution photos and videos online. Users upload photos that can be organized into groups. Reuben (2008) contends that "Universities have found Flickr to be a great tool to easily share photos with students, alumni, faculty and staff. The automation of uploading the photos, adding captions and tags, and turning them into organized collections with slideshows without any manual Web coding, is a great timesaver for times trapped Web professionals" (p. 4).

2.3.11 Pinterest

An American app was founded in 2009 as a photo and social media sharing site designed to enable the saving and discovery of information on the Internet using images and, on a smaller scale, GIFs and animated videos, in the form of Pinboards. The application grew quickly. In 2011, Time magazine listed the site among the "50 Best Sites of the Year" (McCracken, 2011). In the same year, the site won the Best New Startup award at the TechCrunch Crunchies Awards (Constine, 2012). The company has increasingly focused on visual search and e-commerce, such as catalog shopping. In March 2021, the site announced "Pinterest Premiere", a video ad product that will appear in people's feeds, targeting their interests and other characteristics. Later, Pinterest "launched Shuffles, a tool for creating interactive collages and mood boards on iOS" (Nielsen, 2022). Nielsen posits that colleges and universities may adopt this new feature because "Shuffles is fully integrated with Pinterest and has everything expected from a social media platform, including a content feed, likes, hashtags, and a search bar. What makes Shuffles different is its interactive collage-making functionality" (para 3).

2.3.12 Blogs

It is a combination of the words "web and logs" and a form of an electronic journal. Many consider it a social media platform due to its characteristics. With its original emergence in the 1990s with the launch of the World Wide Web, blogging has seen steady growth in the past two decades with the introduction of simple blogging platforms such as Blogger, WordPress, and Tumblr that allow users to blog and post daily. Most blogs allow readers to write comments, in response to an article or a post, give their opinion, or share their thoughts with bloggers. A blog can have one or more authors. The contents (entries) of the blog expanded beyond text to include images, videos, and links to other web pages and social media pages.

The Canadian Higher Education Marketing (HEM) Company (2022) asserts the importance for universities to develop an effective content strategy to make all the difference in building brand awareness, strengthen relationships with current and prospective students, and increase their websites' visibility in search engine rankings. Therefore, businesses and organizations worldwide are using blogs to increase user engagement in interactive digital conversations. Blogs have also become essential for universities. HEM Company (2015) asserts, "HEIs are uniquely well-positioned to establish themselves as authorities and thought leaders in their fields of study by producing consistent, well-written, and strategically optimized blogs. Leveraging the faculty, students, and marketing team to create a dynamic blogging strategy, the universities can turn their blogs into the most engaging and vibrant part of their online presence" (para 2).

For the success of this polarization tool, it is assumed that it is full of interests and needs, that distinguished bloggers are chosen to represent a diverse and inclusive group and types of students, and that they, and marketers, have a clear understanding of the purpose of the polarizing role of the blog, which will be reflected in the content they will provide through their publications. Some university presidents worldwide write in blogs despite the "dangerousness" of such a project (Johnson, 2008). In many European and American universities, these applications are used as recruitment tools and educational tools aimed at improving internal communication in the institution. A new platform can be created for prospective students, allowing them to receive information about the study from registered students in an interactive manner, as well as through interactive forums and live chats (Saxion, 2022). However, in general, blogging is not part of the social media mix of the majority of private universities in Lebanon. Universities are missing a golden opportunity like no other.

2.4 The Characteristics of Social Media Platforms

Although the features of social media platforms are well-known and addressable, technology is constantly changing. These apps are constantly developed by the founders and/or owners. Knowing that the field is continuously changing is essential to understanding the use of these platforms by universities, just as it is essential to learn about the different services and features between one platform and another. Organizations try to use social media in a targeted manner (Queensland Government, 2022). These platforms are widely used by private universities in Lebanon, but their use may not be directed or based on clear data and a strategic plan (Bashir, Hejase, Danash, et al., 2022). Most of the major social networks share the same basic characteristics, while they are distinguished from each other by the features imposed by the nature of the platform and its users. The most prominent features available are Profiles, Friends/Followers/Connections, Send a message, Albums, and Videos. Many SMPs also can create groups of the same interests, with certain names and specific goals, a space that is like a mini discussion forum. Some of them also allow creating invitations for activities with time and place (Events), inviting friends, and determining the number of attendees, absentees, and those interested, in addition to other services that are not available on all platforms, such as live streaming, status (story), business page, advertisements, detailed Facebook and LinkedIn functionality, bespoke paid promotion, etc.

2.5 Digital Marketing and Social Media Platforms

Marketing practices in HEIs have been based on perceptions that this "would undermine academic standards of quality and excellence" (Anderson, 2008). Also, Benavides, Tamayo Arias, Arango Serna, et al. (2020) found in their literature review that "Teaching has been the dimension most influenced by technologies intervention, while the least addressed has been the marketing dimension". However, the dynamics governing social networking technologies have impacted HEIs that are worried about their recruitment, engagement, retention, and communication practices in the era of the digital generation. Kusumawati (2019) contends that "Colleges and universities have the challenge of maintaining relevance among students who are increasingly more reliant on technology as a communication source" (p. 2). Consequently, the HEI sector has realized that "without increasing enrollment, they will not continue" (Martin, 2015). On the other hand, marketers are forced to find new ways to reach and communicate with potential customers (Parise & Guinan, 2008). Such a need was satisfied with digital marketing potential. William and Farrell (2011) assert that digital marketing includes "all digital media, including the Internet, mobile channels and interactive channels, to develop communication and exchange with customers" (p. 236).

Bashir, Hejase, Danash, et al. (2022) assert that "digital marketing has become necessary and mandatory, as it connects universities with their students via the Internet, keeping them in line with the current generation that is constantly changing, along with the rapid development of technology" (p. 12). Marketing in HEIs is a necessity to remain competitive capitalizing on "information related to the university's position, availability of budget and educational programs, college qualifications, scholarships on tuition fees, and potential for career growth" (Kalimullina & Dobrotvorskaya, 2016, p. 6039). Also, the dynamic growth in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has enabled digital marketing costing and increased the efficiency of targeting and reaching the sought-after potential community customers, in this case, students and learners. Bashir, Hejase, Danash, et al. (2022) stressed that "digital marketing provides low-cost communication and good return on investment, can reach a wider and more targeted community, and the ability to fully offer services due to the various digital advantages. In addition, it contributes to the ease of distributing information (by the university) and obtaining it by the target audience (mainly by students) faster through social media platforms compared to traditional marketing" (p. 12).

Marketing in private higher education institutions in Lebanon is going through a transitional phase, given the harsh and unstable financial and economic conditions of the country (Rkein et al., 2022a, 2022b), and the fact that students are becoming more selective in choosing a university due to intense competition, high fees, and premiums, and university ecosystem. Besides, universities are highly aware that today's potential students are technologically savvy. Universities ensure the success of their marketing strategy by "mapping the reality" of the societies in which they exist (Frank & Gabler, 2006). Carey (2009) warns that "when controlling over information shifts from organizations to individuals, considerations of new models in universities is required, as evidenced by historical transitions of information-based institutions. As an industry fundamentally concerned with creating and communicating information" (para. 1).

Based on the above, HEI should seriously consider social media platforms in their choices of marketing tools. Marketing via SMPs constitutes an "attractive proposition" (Constantinides & Zinck, 2012, p. 2) due to "its positive marketing outcomes in the business sector and its rates of adoption by the younger generation" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Rutter, Roper & Lettice (2016) assert that a significant weighty existence within SMPs can positively boost student engagement, especially when "universities interact with them through their accounts, respond to their questions and comments instantly, and publish content that meets their needs" (Bashir, Hejase, Danash, et al., 2022, p. 12). These methods "are not only decisive tools for attracting but have proven effective in consolidating the university's brand" (Rutter et al., 2016). Constantinides and Zinck (2012) posit that "Improved communications, customer (student) engagement, and increasing university brand loyalty have been identified as outcomes of this form of marketing" (p. 3).

In addition, studies (Terminalfour, 2019; Hornigold, 2022; Bashir, Hejase, Danash, et al., 2022) assert the need for marketers in these universities to communicate with current, alumni, prospective students, and, equally important, parents and representatives of high schools and institutes, because they are influential sources of information for students. Knowing that these reference groups are the most influential sources of information for students, universities have to carefully personalize their communication strategies to target and reach out to potential student influencers.

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2.6 Alternative Media Dominates the Traditional Media

Das, Gomes, Patidar & Thomas (2022) report that "in October 2021, there were 4.6 billion social media users worldwide, with 13 new users signing up to their first social media accounts every second" (para 6). This viral increase in the number of users of digital networks has led to an escalation of their influence and role in society and an increase in radical transformations and the level of their competition with traditional media in shaping public opinion on political, economic, societal, and other issues (Ardia, Ringel, Smith Ekstrand & Fox, 2020). Social media platforms have been able to highlight current events in the world in a more effective and influential manner than radio, television, and other media. Digital media called alternative media or new media, where social media platforms are its mainstay, with the role of the individual and citizen journalist (Dmitriev & Hejase, 2023) as an actor in its formulation, formation, and spread with the freedom it allows in choosing the topic, editing text and size, ease of broadcasting, low cost, the possibility of ignoring the real source, and the ability to switch from personal protest to opinion mobilization of the public and transcend the boundaries between private and public via groups or pages (Horoub, 2023).

The increase in the number of competitive universities and the development of social media platforms have prompted recognition that a thorough understanding of the factors that influence students' choice of university is essential to guide marketing strategies aimed at attracting them. As a result, several researchers questioned: "the impact of traditional media and their marketing strategies as one-way communications, as it seems that the target audience has lost confidence in this medium" (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008).

Fred Cavazza, a French New Media Consultant, divides the different forms of social media into ten categories: publishing tools, sharing tools, discussion tools, social networks, micro-publishing tools, social aggregation tools, live broadcasting, virtual worlds, and social and multiplayer games (Cavazza, 2008). Moreover, McCormick (2022, para 4-5) posits that online existence puts an organization on the map through three steps that include the organization through its actions taken and the content produced, the internet expressed as where the university stands concerning the search engine and social media algorithms, and the public or how stakeholders perceive the university online, what they say about it, and how they engage with it. On the other hand, McCormick (2022) stresses the fact that an online presence is tied to the university's "visibility, credibility, and reputation" (para 6).

Ensuring the effectiveness of marketing through SMP channels, it is supposed to continue to increase the base of "stakeholders" and establish contacts with them constantly, always providing them with information about services, advertisements, and developments, and building trust with the targets, according to what they see on the university's platforms when they display advertisements based on helpful information and not advertisements publicly commercial or marketing. Because users of these platforms usually ignore commercial advertisements, they stand before any information that might be useful to them.

2.7 SMPs, Awareness, and Changing Stakeholder Behavior

SMPs' role has grown year by year. Today, they represent the most significant tools to influence public opinion, nurture and educate young people, and build awareness. Cunningham & Craig (2016) describe SMPs as part of the "Globalization media" that represents invisible virtual borders, and "this is what made SMPs the most influential in the behavior of individuals, in the formation or directing of their trends, and the formation and generation of their ideas" (Bashir, Hejase, Danash, et al., 2022, p. 12). Along the same line, Dwivedi, Ismagilova, Hughes, et al. (2021) contend that SMP platforms "build

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awareness, personalities, tendencies, behavior, perceptions, and trends in issues, principles, and values related to brands". Chivandi, Samuel, and Muchie (2018) also stressed the SMPs' role in identifying "trends, consumer patterns, and values" (p. 3).

2.8 The Use of the Internet and Social Media Platforms in the World

Hootsuite (2022), in cooperation with "We are Social", a leading social media management platform, reports "the growth of social media users continuing to trend upwards. There are now 4.62 billion social media users worldwide, representing a growth of more than 10 percent since this time last year. The number of social media users is now equivalent to more than 58 percent of the world's population" (para 2). Also, Kemp's (2022a) annual report on the Datareportal site shows that during 2022, the proportion of people who access the Internet in the world is at 62.5%, given that the world's population is 7.91 billion. Of this number, only 67.1% have a mobile phone, while 58.4% have accounts on social media platforms. In addition, more than 4 in 10 working-age internet users say that they visit social networks specifically to research brands and products that they're thinking of buying, i.e., 52.3% of females and 47.7% of males of internet users aged 16 to 24 and 48.4% of females and 51.6% of males of internet users aged 25 to 34. Moreover, data show that 61% of all users search for information, 53.1% keep up-to-date with news and events, and 42.3% specifically look for education and study-related purposes.

2.8.1 Statistics in Lebanon

In Lebanon, located in West Asia, the number of Internet users compared to the population is 75.2%. The number of users of social media platforms is 75.19%, a percentage that marketers must note in terms of attracting international students. Of course, the highest percentage of users of social media platforms was the increasing trend, which increased by 15.8% (Kemp, 2022b). Moreover, the percentage of the population who owns a mobile phone was 68.4%, with 99.5% of social media users accessing it via smartphones which is supposed to be noticed when focusing on preparing digital content suitable for phones. The use of smartphones and tablets is growing dramatically (1.3% and 15.5%, respectively), while the use of laptops and desktops is declining (-2.9%) compared to 2021 (Kemp, 2022b).

To further understand the commercial role of these platforms, an overview of the digital business (E-commerce), where the performance of each activity is reported in order of percentages of Internet users in the world between the ages of 16 and 64 years for the years 2020 and 2022 and 18-44 years for the year 2022 2020 (Bashir, 2022a; 2022b; Nguyen, 2022). The highest percentage came from search engines (2020) and ads on social media (2022). Table 1 depicts the detailed findings.

Table 1. Most Effective Channel for Brand and Product Discovery (from any device)

Channels	16-64 years 2020*	16-64 years 2022**	18-44 years 2022**
	Percent, %	Percent, %	Percent, %
Search Engines	33.9	28	29
Ads on Television	32.6	22	23
Word-of-mouth recommendations	29.4	26	31
Ads on social media	28.2	34	43
Brand or Product Websites	27.6	26	31
Online Retail Websites	26.0	26	31
Ads on Websites	25.3	15	16
Recommendations or comments on social media	24.4	17	22
TV Shows of Films/Podcasts	24.2	22	16
Consumer Review Websites	24.0	17	16

Source: * Bashir, 2022a, b; ** Nguyen, 2022.

The importance of ratings, reviews, and online research, as well as digital advertising and word of mouth that these reviews support, are demonstrated in Table 1. The importance of searching for discovering brands and the channels through which they are made is due to highlighting the need for marketers to work in universities to build and install their brands through social media platforms, and to promote positive word of mouth.

After looking at the extent to which users are exposed to and interact with ads on each platform, it is possible to understand part of the behavior and tendencies of Internet users in Lebanon. Tables 2 and 3 illustrate the latest statistics about Social Media Platforms' use in Lebanon based on a total population of 6.73 million persons (Kemp, 2022c, February 15).

Table 2. SMPs' Use in Lebanon

Facts by February 15, 2022	No. of Users	% of the Total Population
Internet users	6.01 million	89.30
Active social media users	5.06 million	75.20
Cellular Mobile Connections	4.60 million	68.40
Share of social media users accessing via mobile	6.70 million	99.50
Users of social media 18-44 years	2.82 million	41.90
Users of social media 25-54 years	2.84 million	42.20

Source: Kemp, 2022c, February 15; GlobalStats., 2022, November.

Table 3. Tools and Applications Used to Access Social Media Platforms

	Percentage
Share of Web Traffic by Device	
Mobile Phones	61.85
Laptop & Desktop Computers	35.95
Tablet	02.09
Share Mobile Web Traffic by Mobile OS	
Android	76.81
Apple	22.89
Samsung	00.26

Source: Kemp (2022c, February 15).

Table 4. Web Traffic Referrals from SMPs

SMP	Percentage	Year-to-Year Change	Market Share, %
Facebook	86.09	+24.0%	64.73
YouTube	05.46	-66.6%	06.82
Instagram	02.81	+04.9%	08.31
Twitter	02.80	-36.2%	13.63
Pinterest	02.34	-63.4%	05.30
LinkedIn	00.13	-61.8%	00.21

Source: Global Stats (2022, November).

Table 5. Potential Advertising Reach as %of the Total Population

SMP	As % of total population	Those over the age 13	Those over the age 18
Facebook	46.80	59.20	-
YouTube	75.20	-	84.30
Instagram	32.70	41.30	-
Twitter	07.30	09.20	-
LinkedIn	14.00	-	19.60
Messenger	27.50	-	34.80
Snapchat	16.40	20.70	-

Source: Kemp, 2022c, February 15.

The famous "Hootsuite and We Are Social" and the "Global Stat" reports on Lebanon's statistics for the year 2022 found that Facebook was at the top (86.09%) in web traffic referrals from SMPs as shown in Table 4 (Globalstat, 2022, November). Also, YouTube occupied the highest percentage of the audience with ads (75.2%), which is the most responsive to ads, followed by "Facebook" in second place, "Instagram" in third place, and Messenger ranked fourth (see Table 5).

Table 6 shows that Facebook was on top in Lebanon, being the platform that has not seen a significant decline in new user registrations over the years. While YouTube's share fell 64%. According to Bashir, Hejase, Danash, et al. (2022), "This is likely due to the technology 'Facebook TV' or (Facebook Watch *), which the company added to the platform in 2017, first in America and then around the world, and came as an alternative to watching videos on YouTube" (p. 10). Instagram has seen a significant decline and then tripled its share. Twitter has seen a significant rise from 2020 to 2021 and will continue rising at a slower rate till 2022, likely "due to the acceleration and abundance of political, economic, and health events that have occurred in the country since the end of 2019, given that this platform is mostly for political activities and interactions" (ibid).

Table 6. Use of SMPs in Lebanon Since 2020

Date	2020	Apr-21	Nov-22
Facebook	64.43%	62.42%	64.73%
YouTube	17.78%	18.19%	6.82%
Twitter	6.48%	12.04%	13.63%
Instagram	4.66%	2.76%	8.31%
LinkedIn	0.2%	0.55%	0.21%
Pinterest	6.11%	3.88%	5.31%
Reddit	0.12%	0.09%	0.76%

Source: Global Stats, 2022, November.

According to Napoleoncat (2023a), the number of Facebook users between the ages of 18 and 24 is 1,001,300 (24.91% of total Facebook users 4,020,100), and Instagram is 654,400 (30.26% of total Instagram users of 2,162,400) (Napoleoncat, 2023b). It is worth mentioning that the category 18 to 24 years constitutes the target group sought after by university marketers.

2.9 Influential Factors Toward the Choice of a University

Universities must identify their target audience to design and issue the appropriate content. Fields (2021) posits that "A target audience is the intended recipient of an organization's message, product, or services. Typically, target audiences get defined by behavioral or demographic data" (para 1). Also, university marketers must investigate and identify possible referent groups who act as "influencers" of the target consumers' opinions to decide on a specific service. Hoyer, MacInnis, Pieters, et al. (2017) define a reference group as "the group of people with whom we compare ourselves for information about behavior, attitudes, or values" (pp. 311-315). Reference groups influence people's behavior and decision-making in a particular way. Reference groups are either direct (membership groups) or indirect (non-membership groups). Direct reference groups touch the lives of individuals directly. For students, those groups are parents, siblings, friends, and teachers. This group can influence the psychological core and the decision-making process based on the information we obtain from them and how it is evaluated (Lamb, Hair & McDaniel, 2002). "Among those who influence university students' choices, parents and siblings are most important" (Briggs, 2006). "Friends, peers, and teachers also have a key role" (Fletcher, 2012; Rudhumbu, Tirumalai & Kumari, 2017). Maniu & Maniu (2015) also agree that "Recommendations from families, peers, friends, teachers, and other reference groups have a strong influence are trustworthy in choosing the university to go to" (p. 39). One must note that parents

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are generally becoming more aware of educational assessments (Veloutsou, Paton, & Lewis, 2005). The same is true of high school and high school teachers, who are called "university's strongest allies in helping students decide on the choice of the University" (Briggs, 2006). Like other for-profit companies, HEIs must nurture and strengthen relationships with stakeholders, including students and their parents, policymakers, institutions and companies, employees, universities, and other colleges (Rae, 2007), think tanks, the media, etc.

Aydın (2015) and Bashir, Hejase, Danash, et al. (2022) reviewed many factors that are classified into three categories "institutional, media, and reference", as discussed in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1: Influential factors considered by universities

1. **The media factor**: Universities visits to schools, secondary schools, and institutes, visits to university representatives, orientation exhibitions, traditional and digital advertisements, etc.
2. **Institutional factor**: University posters and publications, university website, university internet, official university channels, availability of specialization, cost, geographical location, etc.
3. **Reference factor**: Reference groups that fall within the scope of stakeholders.

2.10 Building a Strong University Brand

"Brands are defined by the name and most important assets of the company that affects customers, and the service or product mark that distinguishes it from others" (Keller & Lehmann, 2003), and includes a three poles system: products and services, the brand concept (value), and the brand name and symbols (Kapferer, 2004). For HEI, "the brand emerges as a function of how well the institution is performing in meeting the needs of its customers. It is the result of effective marketing" (Temple, 2006). Brands greatly attract emotional levels through key associations and avatars (Simms & Trott, 2006). In addition, brand awareness has been defined as "The familiarity of potential buyers with the product category and a brand associated with the category" (Voxco, 2021, para 4). Some researchers consider that the "value" of the company's brand lies in its ability to distinguish itself in the minds of the concerned (Balmer & Gray, 2003). All of the abovementioned definitions help one understand the meaning and purpose of the brand. "To ensure sustainability in higher education institutions, many universities are gradually shifting the promotional landscape from traditional tools to brand promotion" (Pinar, Trapp, Girard & Boyt, 2011).

Historically, university branding has been developed with various goals that include "Creating awareness among prospective students and their parents, target donors, professors, business leaders, alumni, and select officials with branded messages" (Joseph, Mullen & Spake, 2012), and others to "improve the international ranking of HEIs" (Bunzel, 2007), while some universities are promoting themselves to create an entirely new image, some are branding themselves to improve awareness of the names, perceived quality, and strong symbols (Paden & Stell, 2006). Among the most important reasons for branding are academic quality (Kurz, Scannell & Veeder, 2008), student club activities, educational programs, and unique specializations, which can be strongly highlighted through SMP ads.

In light of the fierce competition, universities boosted their efforts towards building their brands to differentiate themselves with the aim of becoming among the students' first choices. Being the first-choice university means being the best university in the student's mind. In Lebanon, under the economic crisis, trademark initiatives that lead to an increase in registration numbers are more needed than ever. And universities have to use "branding strategies" (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014).

Successful university branding campaigns lead to better qualifications for students and an increase in applications (Joseph et al., 2012), an increase in the retention rate of professors and students, and increasing the polarization of faculty members and donors (Dennis, Papagiannidis, Alamanos, & Bourlakis, 2016), increasing recruitment rates (The University of Rhode Island, 2022), and more donations and media attention, research, and strategic partners (Sevier, 2007).

A strong brand means cultivating more committed students, graduates, and more strategic partners of the university (Dennis et al., 2016), and it appears as a good influence on the institution to meet its clients' needs. "There is a difference in corporate brands and the relationship between the university and students, compared to relationships in the for-profit sector" (Balmer & Liao, 2007). Students are not just customers. They are "founding lifelong members" of the university's brand community. This is why university branding is a complex process. According to Dennis et al. (2016), a university brand is created to evoke the associations, emotions, and images that distinguish the university from competitors.

Ultimately, university branding is no longer an option but a necessity and, if implemented effectively, can provide the university with the "soft power" it is looking for. According to Nye (2017), "soft power is the ability to affect others and obtain preferred outcomes by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment" (p. 2). Consequently, when students buy into the university's branding, they will be active disseminators of its competitive advantage to others (Dennis et al., 2016). The aforementioned is supported by Chen (2016) whose findings show that "Loyalty has a moderating effect on the influence of brand image and satisfaction on the sharing of satisfying experiences and recommendations to others" (p. 31). So, there is a need to convey a unique brand image to them. Chen (2016) posits, "The educational brand image thus influences the selection of students, parents, and society" (pp. 23-24) and motivates students to share their experiences and satisfactory assessments, especially through social media platforms.

A common feature of these platforms is that individuals are attracted to those who have similar interests or behaviors. Therefore, using these platforms to bring like-minded people together to discuss their experiences in organizations can help build broader brand awareness and refine the organization's image.

Leader-Chivee, Hamilton, and Cowan (2008) assert that the implications of SMP go beyond recruitment and retention. Connectedness is often linked to workplace performance. Hence, if universities effectively enhance their presence on these platforms, their system for marketing and branding will be very attractive (Bashir, Hejase, Danash, et al., 2022). This approach gained significant importance when traditional omnibus marketing campaigns were replaced by audience preferences for in-person conversations via social media. Palmer and Koenig-Lewis (2009) provided evidence that "emotions associated with the use of social network websites may be more important as a key success factor for direct marketing" (p. 162).

2.11 Word of Mouth (WoM), Online WoM, and Reputation

2.11.1 Word of Mouth

Chen (2016) posits that in an educational system, the brand image established by universities influences students' decisions to select a university. "With a positive university brand image, students can recognize the differences among universities and develop their selection intention" (p. 24). Capitalizing on the fact that SMP has become an important venue for the interchange of opinions and

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views, Word of Mouth (WoM) gained potential significance among students seeking to target a preferred HEI.

Word of mouth is defined by Gheorghe (2012) in an integrated manner grouping several researchers' inputs as follows, "an informal and non-commercial form of a person-to-person conversation between a communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organization, or a service or/and between the actual or potential consumer and other people such as product/service providers, independent experts, family, and friends" (Gheorghe, 2012, p. 133). Professional marketers assert that social media and word-of-mouth activities are the two most likely marketing activities to increase student engagement, as these are largely used to create positive "verbal recommendations" (recommendations, reviews, posts, experiences…). It is known that individuals are more inclined to believe information received from oral sources because it comes from the beneficiaries and not the institutions/companies (Gildin, 2003, p. 94). Due to the social nature of individuals, users of these platforms feel automatically encouraged to comment on personal experiences posted, which, once shared, become important tools in influencing others. Future students believe that the information in these posts is "transparent" and, to them, there are no "hidden" experimenters' plans and goals to mislead their peers. Universities must be careful when moving "word of mouth" into a virtual arena, where stakeholders primarily control the content. Thus, if the beneficiary is not satisfied, whatever the degree of this dissatisfaction, it will generate bad effects on the organization when it explains in publications about its unsuccessful experiences. One mistake with any organization or company is liable to confusion that is not forgotten easily on social media platforms (Özdemira, Tozlub, Şenc & Ateşoğlu, 2016).

Students rely a lot on the opinions of their peers when deciding about their universities, and they take great advantage of word of mouth on social media platforms due to the heavy participation of students. Since information received through word of mouth is considered particularly reliable, it is a major influencing factor in the behavior of the recipient and the consumer in purchasing decisions (Huete-Alcocer, 2017, p. 2). Therefore, students as "beneficiaries" of higher education are affected by word of mouth, who freely cross social media platforms. Hence, the "Choice of a university is strongly influenced by the opinions of current students or peer faculty students" (Băcilă, 2008; Simões & Soares, 2010; El Nemar & Vrontis, 2016). Future students can easily access comments and current or former students' impressions of their university. In addition, pages on these platforms in Lebanon, such as the "Lebanon Students" page, collect and display students' evaluations of high schools and universities and open discussions about them, which facilitates access to peer opinions from the rest of the students.

2.11.2 Online WoM

Yang (2017) contends that the extensive use of ICT capabilities and the current new form of online WoM communication led to what is known as electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWoM). In addition, the popularity of SMP has boosted the importance of this form of communication and has "made it one of the most influential information sources on the Web" (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016). Moreover, Huete-Alcocer (2017) asserts that "The advantage of this tool is that it is available to all consumers, who can use online platforms to share their opinions and reviews with other users" (p. 2). WoM and eWoM share the capability of allowing interested parties to try to understand what factors motivate consumers by assessing their online opinions. Nevertheless, eWoM provides another advantage over traditional WoM besides being more accessible anywhere and anytime in so far as it allows "to gauge the impact of those comments on other people" (Cantallops & Salvi, 2014).

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Electronic WoM capitalizes on the power of SMP in "encouraging current students to write blogs about their experiences in universities, providing prospective students with an authentic student-to-student communication platform on 'real' life as a student, and what to expect" (Qi & Mitra, 2016, p. 93). Notwithstanding the above, some researchers consider eWOM reviews to be electronic versions of traditional WOM reviews, however, Huete-Alcocer (2017) identified "several differences between the two concepts including credibility, privacy, diffusion speed, and accessibility" (p. 3).

2.11.3 Reputation

Veh, Göbel, and Vogel (2019) comprehensively summarized several researchers' definitions of a corporation's reputation as "its overall appeal, its fame and esteem, a signal of key characteristics, and attributes derived from past actions. Reputation matters also to corporate practice because it is a valuable intangible asset that may contribute to competitive advantage and superior financial performance" (p. 316). On the other hand, the HEI's reputation is about educational quality, the quality of its students, innovative curricula, variety of programs, digitization, quality of services, etc. (Colin & Mahr, 2017, p. 1954). Consequently, establishing a favorable reputation among current students helps attract future students and should, therefore, be a key goal of a university.

Two components constitute reputation: Emotional and cognitive (Hall, 1991). The knowledge (cognitive) component "reflects the company's perceived competence, and whether stakeholders are confident in its capabilities and reliability and consider it a major, solid competitor in its market" (Raithel & Schwaiger, 2015, p. 946). The emotional component refers to the firm's character or likeability as a reputation aspect since "students' attitudes toward their universities have a cognitive and emotional component" (Raithel & Schwaiger, 2015). A university's reputation may also be building a two-dimensional situation that is "a core intangible asset of the institution that creates barriers to competitive threats" (Schreiber, 2011, para 11). A strong institutional reputation indicates that the products and services provided by the institution are of the highest quality and that the institution is responsible and will treat its customers well (Carmeli & Tishler, 2005).

Institutional image and reputation have a high explanatory power in how students make decisions about the university to study (Ancheh, Krishnan & Nurtjahja, 2007). Supporting the academic reputation and image of the university, according to Lafuente-Ruiz-de Sabando, Zorrilla, and Forcada (2018) as cited by Mateus and Acosta (2022), are factors such as "teaching, research resources, graduate education, adoption of the various perspectives of the stakeholders, and even more so when citizens of other countries are included" (p. 3). Nevertheless, the aforementioned determinants of HEI's reputation are boosted further through social media platforms that have become a necessary and essential need (Bashir, Hejase, Danash, et al., 2022). Consequently, recommendations and reviews are illustrated on the organizations' website pages that are written by "customers" as more reliable than the service provider's advertisements and more reliable than product reviews written by the product experts themselves. That is an essential part of building a reputation. When talking about "peer reviews", it means students' comments on university publications or even writing posts on their pages. "Institutions should strive to shape their stakeholders' attitudes to generate positive behaviors towards them" (Duarte, Alves & Raposo, 2010; Morgan, Kosteniuk, O'Connell, et al., 2022).

As previously stated in this paper, other drivers for building a university's reputation are "more creative digital progress and innovation stemming from the development of information technologies" (Colin & Mahr, 2017, p. 1954). Here, innovation regarding curricula and teaching methods is the university's ability to adapt quickly to constant changes and its ways of communicating with students. As for digital

advancement, it means "the creation of virtual campuses, the development of online e-learning solutions, the diffusion of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), or the digitalization of university services with the development of platforms or mobile applications" (Lafuente-Ruiz-de Sabando, Zorrilla & Forcada, 2018). Students' satisfaction with digital progress may be assessed by an indicator (eWoM), their perception of it in their universities, which is known as the PDA or (students' perception of their universities' digital advancement), as the results of some research showed that it has the most impact on the university's reputation and the behavior of students in building a positive reputation (Colin & Mahr, 2017, p. 1954). Universities can highlight this digital advancement, educational quality, and other strengths and distinctions through SMPs in a strategic and in-depth manner to build positive word of mouth and a positive reputation.

2.12 HEIs and Integrated Marketing Communications

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) "involves bringing together a variety of different communication tools to deliver a common message and make a desired impact on customers' perceptions and behavior" (Lumen Learning, 2022, para 2). IMC has attracted the attention of academics and practitioners since the early 2000s. However, "only a few studies analyze the adoption of this approach by universities and how they manage the process of integration. In addition, the benefits arising from the application of this approach in other sectors have made IMC a crucial strategic element and it may be a sustainable competitive advantage to those universities that implement it successfully" (Porcu, del Barrio-Garcá, Rodríguez-Priego & Crespo-Almendros, 2012, p. 3421). Choudaha and Chang (2012) posit, "Universities need to look beyond and experiment with traditional forms of polarization, including social media platforms". Bashir, Hejase, Danash, et al. (2022) assert that "Many years ago, universities began adopting SMPs and realizing the power behind their use as a component of an integrated marketing mix" (p. 14). As institutions grow, changes in consumer behavior require them to re-strategize their marketing activities in the digital space and to be fully aware of how they affect consumers' attitudes, values, and beliefs. Gibbs and Murphy (2009) and Gibbs (2002) considered the relationship marketing approach to be the best for HEIs. Relationship marketing means building and maintaining a value-sharing relationship (Kotler et al., 2005) between an organization and its three main "customer" groups: alumni, current students, and future students. The quality of these relationships correlates positively with long-term stakeholder loyalty (Kohnke, 2012, p. 14).

A university's integrated marketing communication strategy involves prioritizing digital platforms as a primary source in influencing future students (Porcu, del Barrio-Garcá & Kitchen, 2012) and, therefore, demanding relevant content published by universities to boost students' participation, satisfy their needs, and thus achieve satisfactory results for university management. The aforementioned creates a challenge for marketers, i.e., "to get current students and alumni to contribute by creating useful and positive content for their organization, and writing on their personal accounts and university pages" (Bashir, Hejase, Danash, et al., 2022, p. 14). University marketing teams need to be proactive when dealing with SMPs. They need to practice close monitoring of the behavioral developments of the student market in the way they use SMPs. The advantage of digital pages is that the university is readily available, and accessible, and allows for two-way dialogue and discussion. Students often post questions that go unnoticed or go unanswered by publishers on these platforms, and some of them are answered late "so that the platforms lose their vital advantage and speed of response" (Martin, 2015). When students' inquiries are not answered some of them may turn to a competing institution.

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Despite the importance of digital marketing, there is still a need for a mix of traditional, new, and relational media in universities (Integration media marketing PR). Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) makes marketing communication "efficient and effective because it relies on multiple communication methods and customer touchpoints to deliver a consistent message in more ways and more compelling ways" (Lumen Learning, 2022, para 5). The marketing mix of higher education institutions includes public relations activities, digital marketing, innovations, and mass customization strategies (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). Digital marketing includes websites, social media platforms, and other electronic media, where these channels are a quick, inexpensive, and effective means of promotion in terms of spread and time. Constantinides and Fountain pointed out that first, universities need a lively and informative blog to communicate with potential students and then with reference groups, second because it has a marked impact on student opinions.

2.12.1 Achieving the Objectives of Marketing Communications in Universities

Higher education institutions may use various promotional tools to help them achieve their marketing communication objectives. But in all cases, they "must take into account the following headings: market, mission, message, media, money, and measurement, whenever they use any of those tools" (Camilleri, 2017). Those tools must be well-designed and persuasive to influence the targeted students. This paper will address more about the media tools.

2.12.2 Direct Marketing via Digital and Mobile Technologies

HEIs' websites are assumed to be comfortably available to the user from different devices (responsive) such as computers, smartphones, tablets, etc. In addition to the need to improve the existing content and its availability in various languages to target international students. Sites can display testimonials/opinions of students, including reviews and ratings that may serve as "reliable proof" of the level of service they provide to their students. University websites can also support facilities for interaction and communication, such as live chat box services (Camilleri, 2019, p. 18). And live broadcasting of activities, meetings, and seminars through easily accessible channels such as "Facebook" and "YouTube" to interact with students, answer their inquiries, or address their concerns and guide them. If these sites are attractive, they can be used to collect data about users, by requesting to fill in information such as name, mail, telephone, and place of residence as a maximum so that the users do not stop filling it out. This is to use that information in marketing and communication through many and varied tools, through paid promotion on social media platforms, to reach those interested and retarget them everywhere. These marketing endeavors aim to create "personal and one-on-one" relationships with potential students, to make each student feel that the university takes special care of them.

2.12.3 User-generated Content, Interactive Marketing, and Social Media

Taking advantage of user-generated content on various websites that promote the university constitutes one of the most significant marketing tools. HEIs can communicate with students in informal ways to improve interaction. SMPs may reveal interesting insights into the language proficiency of potential students (Chehimi, 2021; Chehimi & Alameddine, 2022), their interests, and their perceptions of the university's brand image. Its presence on these platforms (Presence on social media) is a marketing goal in itself. UGC is a rich source of data for reaching potential students. According to Beveridge (2022), "User-generated content (also known as UGC or consumer-generated content) is original, brand-specific content created by customers and published on social media or other channels. UGC comes in many forms, including images, videos, reviews, a testimonial, or even a podcast" (para 2).

"These writing stimuli may lead to a 'social contagion' of writing posts, placing likes and supporting the institution of higher education" (Camilleri, 2019, p. 20; 2020, p. 16). It is assumed the university will republish this content by sharing, retweeting, mentioning, or screenshotting. In a related context, informal and spontaneous videos posted by students may appear more realistic than the marketing materials the marketers had professionally prepared. So, the university should motivate current students and alumni to film such videos and document their feelings or memories at the university or the like.

2.12.4 Building SMP Rapport with Public Relations (PR)

PR activities reflect the message and mission besides they also play an "important role in identifying and building relationships with influential individuals and groups responsible for shaping market perceptions in the industry (HEIs) or product category (degrees and diplomas) where an organization operates" (Lumen Learning, 2022, para 42). In addition, PR efforts are proactively planned to "build and maintain a positive institutional image; keeping the target audiences informed; continuous cultivation of good relationships with *influencers*; generate goodwill among students and their networks, the media, and other target audiences by raising the organization's profile; stimulate demand for the university, its programs, and services; and head off critical or unfavorable media coverage" (ibid, para 43). Bates (2022) posits that "it is safe to say that the new way of word-of-mouth marketing is social media marketing" (para 1). Moreover, Bates stresses that "PR and social media are used to build and maintain trust in companies and their products, it is only natural that the two must be in sync" (para 2). SMPs have benefitted PR functions significantly by boosting their reach, becoming friendlier to stakeholders, and being timely (real-time). On the other hand, SMPs capitalize on conversational, interactive, engaging, and impact-measured messages. Nevertheless, even with the existence of a multitude of Key Performance Indicators (KPI) that universities use to measure the performance and successes of their campaigns in achieving general, digital, and strategic goals, including analyzing and comparing them, some researchers considered that "it is difficult to measure the real return on investment through social media platforms" (Marrs, 2021), due to the presence of intangible results (Bates, 2022) that are entrenched in the awareness of the target audience and interact cumulatively with time, which is difficult to measure in each campaign separately.

2.13 The Relationship between SMPs and the Success of Higher Education

Many researchers have shown the effectiveness of digital marketing when used by higher education institutions as a tool to attract students (Helgesen, 2008; Fierro, Cardona Arbelaez & Gavilanez, 2017; Bashir et al., 2022a, b; Bashir, Hejase, Danash, et al., 2022). Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka's (2006) research focused on "the need to address and identify the gaps between the information that potential students want and that which universities disseminate in their forms of marketing communication". These gaps indicate there is room for improvement in higher education digital marketing communication. In addition, Gondane and Pawar (2021) asserted "the effective role and influence of Digital promotions through social networking sites on students' decision-making process" (p. 2505). The role of SMPs in polarization can be "directly related to the success of HEIs, and influence their educational policies" (Bashir, Hejase, Danash, et al., 2022), as "online marketing efforts are closely linked to the success of universities" (Anyangwe, 2011). As for Lebanese HEIs, after the decision taken by the former Lebanese Minister of Education & Higher Education, Akram Chehayeb, in 2014 (Article 71, Clause 8 of Law No. 285 issued on April 30, 2014) (MEHE, 2014), which stipulated preventing universities from publishing external advertisements on traditional and digital media and advertising,

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except their website and their platforms, the need for successful digital marketing strategies through SMPs became the basis for the modernity and development of the progress of these institutions.

2.14 Challenges and Opportunities for Universities in the Digital Age

The innovative functionality of social networks has been the HEI administrators' challenge. An institutional environment analysis (i.e., SWOT) is done to examine the micro- and macro-environmental factors that could impact student-centered learning (Camilleri, 2019), especially for the need to attract creative students and seasoned professors with high productivity and innovation amid intense competition. Qi and Mitra (2016) posit that "being social may mean being active online, it is obvious that for HEIs to cultivate audiences may require consistent engagement with participants on social media platforms" (p. 91). The SWOT analysis, which can be applied to private universities in Lebanon, indicates the need for HEIs to conduct in-depth and continuous research on the needs of potential students, as well as to attract successful academics to improve the institution's financial and strategic performance, in addition to other factors (O'Leary, 2015). For example, "Digital skills and ICT competencies are pre-requisite for employment, personal fulfillment, social inclusion, and active citizenship in today's rapidly-changing world. Hence education institutions are there to help their students develop competencies" (Ross, 2007; Hoskins & Crick, 2010; Camilleri & Camilleri, 2017). Also, there are many HEIs today that rely on Big Data and analytics to take advantage of new market segments in different contexts (Ababneh, Aljarrah & Cavus, 2020) to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage over other institutions. Moreover, Manca, Caviglione & Raffaghelli (2016) contend, "The information gathered from massive learning platforms and social media sites allows us to derive a very comprehensive set of learning information. To this aim, data mining techniques can surely help to gain proper insights, personalize learning experiences, formative assessments, and performance measurements, as well as to develop new learning and instructional design models" (p. 27).

SWOT analysis sheds light on the potential opportunities and threats that may arise for private HRIs in Lebanon from SMPs, as they can affect the performance of the university and its long-term prospects. Therefore, SWOT factors are extracted from many researchers' works like Palmer and Koenig-Lewis (2009), Qi and Mitra (2016), Aman & Hussin (2018), Camilleri (2019; 2020), Barnhart (2020), Gondane & Pawar (2021), Lumen Learning (2022), and Bashir, Hejase, Danash, et al. (2022).

2.14.1 SWOT Analysis

A. Strengths and Opportunities

   1) Providing two-way communication between institutions (staff and professors) and students.

   2) Contributing to building brand awareness and raising the institution's image.

   3) Facilitating an active sharing of university feelings and experiences with friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and the general public, thus contributing to building a good reputation among stakeholders.

   4) Boosting the quality and effectiveness of marketing strategies by dynamically accessing rich data about the target audience, dividing it into segments, and personalizing messages according to each platform.

   5) Enabling the building of a digital, realistic, and consistent environment for the university with stakeholders by capitalizing on current Big Data and Artificial Intelligence capabilities in going through and monitoring the reactions of individuals and opinions in real-time, following up, and resolving them with the possibility of directing them.

6) Improve the opportunities for potential students to collect information in general about the university and its majors, in particular, to collect peers' reliable information.

7) Enhance competitive advantage by meeting the students' needs and attracting them after studying the market, allocating communications, and endless marketing opportunities.

8) Capitalizing on selected social media platforms to promote and establish blogs, podcasts, wikis, online forums, etc. to reach target audiences (Hsu, 2007; Lu & Churchill, 2011).

9) Supporting positive WoM and eWoM marketing by communicating student testimonials/opinions, reviews, and evaluations to attract more students from different markets (Dumpit & Fernandez, 2017).

10) Motivating professors and researchers to participate in academic conferences and publish their work on these platforms for competition and further spread.

11) Establishing research groups or groups of single and specialized interests to improve cooperation and teamwork among employees of HEIs, between them and other institutions, and between them and students.

12) Ease of linking students with specialists from a distance in cultural, scientific, practical, and social meetings.

13) Benefiting from the university's international students as brand ambassadors (Dennis & Ammigan, 2022).

B. Weaknesses and Threats

1) Loss of control: "SMPs pose a threat to the organization, especially if the dissatisfied and angry beneficiary chooses to publish their views" (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009, p. 168). One of the clear examples of the loss of control is related to the transmission of negative experiences and their dissemination through the comments feature on the university's pages in these platforms and blogs, which authorizes anyone, whatever their capacity, to write in an abusive manner or to issue accusations, rumors, and so on. Even worse, when writing is done on students' pages, control is lost, and the university has no power to suppress negative word-of-mouth.

"The Internet is no longer an isolated sandbox that can be walled anymore, it is fully integrated into all elements of business and society" (Li & Bernoff, 2008, p. 7). Negativity won't go away just because the university doesn't engage in negative conversations, nor is it supposed to take it seriously. Negative comments, at the very least, are an opportunity to change the organization's perception about an issue or did not know it existed (Solis, 2010, p. 9), and negativity contributes in one way or another to the development of individuals and organizations. At that time, it can turn the threat into an opportunity, collect evaluations, negative notes, suggestions, or complaints, and use them to develop and advance. This notion turns into a greater opportunity through the responses of the university administration, whether directly to the comment itself or indirectly by publishing content that clarifies what is required in a separate post without drawing attention to the issue of the objection or through the current students. "Marketers are supposed to tend to create a positive perception and correct the negative, i.e., making the customer trust the information gathered" (Spenner & Freeman, 2012, para 15). University administrators and marketers must accept that not all student engagement on SMPs will be positive and prepared to deal with such negative impressions. Indeed, there may not be an ability to control all messages and impressions fully; however, it can help guide it if university management is part of the conversation rather than avoiding it. Moreover, some platforms such as "Facebook" do not

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provide the ability to turn off comments (Facebook, 2021) as does "Twitter" (News 18, 2022). Paying attention to complaints, building a satisfied "special community", and developing and strengthening the relationship with it based on these complaints or opinions (accounted for in detail) is marked as the most significant pillar of the pursued marketing strategies.

2) Respect time: Social media platforms can be an additional burden for employees in HEIs, as time should not be devoted to them only because there are competitors. Nevertheless, the prompt response time has to be planned proactively.

3) Impersonating the university to mislead or direct abuse: Anyone can create an account in the name of the university on an SMP, even for a specified period, before it is reported, closed, or dismissed by the university and carry out activities that harm the reputation and image of the institution. Bad situations and rumors often spread like wildfire. The statements published by the concerned parties, which clarify the reality of the matter, do not receive sufficient resonance in front of public opinion to remove the effects of the rumor. Therefore, the institution should establish its name on these platforms through (Verification) otherwise, someone else, whether humble with good intentions, a rebellious, or disaffected student, can impersonate the institution. The required platform company is contacted and the university's official papers are sent to obtain the blue mark that proves the official page (Meta Business Help Center, 2022; Twitter, 2023). This method may be one of the effective ways to confront impersonators.

4) Staff incompetence: Weakness and decline in keeping pace with the rapid changes and developments in the highly competitive digital market for higher education, as managers in higher education institutions fear the incompetence of the marketing department in keeping pace with developments affecting these platforms daily in the world, or their lack of understanding of them, in addition to their ability to comply.

5) Ethics: Avoid consumerism and miscalculations, such as miscalculating the transmission of some materials, scenes, news, or topics on university platforms.

6) Using language that is not suitable for everyone: What is meant here is not the Arabic or foreign language and the like, but rather the discourse and marketing language with the audience (tone of voice), or what is known as the brand's voice or "tone", which is supposed to be appropriate, easy, and understandable for all groups and ages.

7) Response: Universities can be slow to respond to the constant changes in SMPs and digital marketing. It may have to constantly adapt its curricula and courses to meet stakeholder requirements in a better way (Rae, 2007). And whenever this is delayed, it returns with negative results.

8) Lack of awareness of the educational and administrative bodies of the importance of the roles and technologies of social media platforms and how to benefit from them (Chugh, 2023).

9) Not expanding the marketing area: Marketing efforts of higher education institutions may focus on limited local areas, ignoring the rest of the promising markets (Rae, 2007), inside and outside the country.

10) The political, social, cultural, and legal factors: That can hurt HEIs and appear through these platforms, such as religious, cultural, and political identity, which can be repulsive to students due to some different orientations and affiliations.

11) Not having an integrated marketing strategy: It's an enormous challenge to create a Strategy for a multi-channel organization, but it starts with creating an overarching social media marketing strategy for the institution itself (McLachlan, 2022).

2.15 The University's Website

University websites provide the basis for an attractive user environment (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). SMPs are an ideal extension for digital and relational marketing activities due to their collaborative and interactive nature. It is not possible to talk about successful digital marketing without an attractive design and continuous development of the official university website, as one must focus on enhancing the students' experience and providing the official information needed by all stakeholders. Sawlani and Susilo (2020) asserted in their research that "the University brand image is positively affected by the integration of social media, website, and search engine marketing" (p. 55). Therefore, universities need to develop strong and effective policies and appoint specialized and experienced staff to monitor competing websites and learn about the various methods of displaying information and other services (not only in Lebanon but also in universities abroad). Moreover, developments in technology allow university marketers to collect more data about their audiences as they use facilitation services from Google and Bing including Google Analytics, and Track systems that track users' movements (measuring traffic and other activities in real-time phenomena). Goorts (2022) posits that "Google Analytics is the de facto standard for web analytics". Google Analytics enables obtaining an accurate picture of the visitors' activity to the university's website that allows, while personalizing communications, to track and monitor the effectiveness of Internet marketing on each platform and then direct it when needed. Marketers can also broadly target online users with real-time mobile ad campaigns to drive conversions. Also, Google AdWords can be used to identify the most popular search terms. Identifying, selecting, or focusing on ads that are effective in converting potential customers. The site determines which keyword and message combinations are most effective in specific markets, helping marketers to address their audiences more targeted. Reuben (2008) carried out a study that dealt with the use of communication platforms in polarization and communication suggesting that higher education institutions open pages for students' reviews/assessments/complaints/suggestions on the website, and allow them a kind of "freedom" to express their opinions without necessarily disclosing their identities. Because whether the university does this feature or not, the conversations will happen elsewhere between the students and their families, friends, or others. It is likely to occur in locations in which the organization has no control. Therefore, the institution can take a proactive step in front of students and provide them with this window to "be able to steer and to control" (Mahaney, 2012, p. 5) a large percentage of comments and negative WoM. Some researchers have proposed a solution by creating a group of "ambassadors by the administration", who manage interaction with other students (Hennigan & Apfel, 2012), especially in responding to negative comments and confronting them instead of having the university administration in the forefront, whether on the official university pages or non-formal pages. The unofficial pages will allow the creation of an atmosphere of free and effective discussion without restrictions, and the university administration will be able to listen to the real opinions and assessments of students without fear regarding issues related to their university, their professors, etc. They are answered by the "student ambassadors" thoughtfully and informally after agreeing with them on the contents, and they are taken seriously and dealt with by the university administration.

2.16 Research Questions

Research Question 1: Are universities using their websites effectively?

Research Question 2: Are universities using selected social media platforms effectively?

Research Question 3: To what extent do universities differ in their use of social media to attract potential new students?

3. Materials and Method

This research uses a mixed quantitative-qualitative approach following a positivist philosophical stance (Hejase & Hejase, 2013, p. 77). It uses descriptive analysis as well as interviews with expert social media professionals.

3.1 Sampling and Sample Size

Lebanon has 51 universities offering degrees to more than 290,000 students. Among these universities, one (1) public university (Lebanese University with ~36% of the total student population), and 50 private universities and colleges (the remaining students, or ~ 64% are distributed among them). A non-probabilistic and convenient sampling technique was used in selecting six (6) universities conveniently based on the criterion of being a private university. Table 7 provides a summary of the selected universities.

Table 7. Selected Sample Universities

University	Date of Establishment	Number of Students - 2022	Website
Saint Joseph University-USJ	1875	12,650	https://www.usj.edu.lb/anglais/
American University of Beirut-AUB	1866	8,132	https://www.aub.edu.lb
Islamic University of Lebanon-IUL	2001	~10,000	https://www.iul.edu.lb
Al Maaref University-MU	2015	2,771	http://www.mu.edu.lb
Lebanese International University-LIU	1996	~36,000	https://www.liu.edu.lb
Lebanese American University-LAU	1924	8,228	https://www.lau.edu.lb

3.2 Data Analysis

Moreover, to understand the users' behavior is to assess how they search online, as shown in Kemp (2022c, February 15), Google received the highest total share as a percentage of web traffic referred by search engines, 95.94%, in Lebanon. For example, Bashir, Hejase, Danash, et al. (2022, pp. 10-11) conducted a Google search about the six Lebanese universities chosen for this research using both Arabic and English languages. Results were distributed as depicted in Table 8.

Table 8. Google Search for Six Lebanese Universities

University	Language	Number of Times
Al Maaref University	Arabic	601
	English	261
	First Initials	1549
American University of Beirut	Arabic	755
	English	1288
	First Initials	2588
Islamic University of Lebanon	Arabic	1775
	English	477
	First Initials	2058
Lebanese American University	Arabic	-
	English	1065
	First Initials	2518
Lebanese International University	Arabic	1206
	English	748
	First Initials	1895
Saint Joseph University	Arabic	240
	English	-
	First Initials	2835

Source: Bashir, Hejase, Danash, et al., 2022. (Modified by the researchers to reflect itemized details).

Worth noting that the highest traffic is usually observed during the registration periods throughout the year.

3.3 Methods of Obtaining Data and Information

Information and data were obtained through monitoring, observation, interviews, and reported data from an electronic questionnaire, books, references, studies, websites, various institutions, and specialized professionals. Bashir, Hejase, Danash, et al. (2022) carried out earlier field research using a formal electronic survey of 41 questions, prepared using dyadic and multiple-choice questions and 5-level Likert scale statements to collect the necessary information characterizing students' decision-making. The reliability and validity of the study were assessed. Results showed adequate Cronbach's alpha values to validate the assessment of the universities' approach toward SMPs. Moreover, best practice indicators were utilized in the assessment of websites and universities' use of SMPs. This data collection method is standard. Moreover, the theoretical background was created based on secondary data reported in books, scientific articles, periodicals, and professional reports from known statistical institutions (Hootsuite, Napoleon, and We Are Social) related to the subject of the study.

3.3.1 Interviews

The interview is an important means to reach the facts that the researchers cannot know without going down to the reality of the application. Several specialists in the field of digital marketing were interviewed discussing best practices to benefit from their knowledge and statistics on users in Lebanon on everything related to digital marketing and social media platforms. The formal interviews were conducted with three experts namely, the first from a digital marketing company "Greynab" (an award-winning creative digital marketing agency with core skills in web development, content creation, digital transformation, animation, social media, and design), the second from a Lebanese university digital marketing function, and the third from another Lebanese university from the Faculty of Business Administration.

3.4 The Analytical and Statistical Methods Used

Collecting information and data related to scientific research requires some tools that contribute to the analysis process. All data extracted from professional sites and the previous research were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The Statistical Product and Service Solutions (Hejase & Hejase, 2013) package, IBM SPSS version 23.0, was used for its ability to process data.

3.4.1 Descriptive Analysis

Used to describe the variables in the form of frequencies and percentages represented in tables for simplicity.

3.4.2 Website Analytics

The success of the website's role requires a comprehensive, professional, and appropriate design (Responsive) for all devices. Responsive design of websites is user-friendly and has become a best practice because it is an effective way to reach both desktop/computer and mobile audiences. In many private universities in Lebanon, the website usually provides basic information in a roundabout way and lacks the depth of information potential students might need. To make the site livelier and to achieve higher interaction, it is preferable to display links to access social media platforms or to allow visitors to interact directly with basic publications visible on the site after linking them to the platform.

Therefore, current practices encourage HEIs to present direct and easy information and instructions, linking them to SMPs to integrate with the site, and creating discussion hubs such as forums and blogs that allow current students and alumni to blog about their experiences and share videos and photos (Ridley, 2023).

When HEIs' marketing teams revise/add/support the website with new features, they are supposed to make sure that they have developed ways to evaluate the success of this feature and the extent to which it is useful, or not. The second part of this research will elaborate on the recommended website metrics that can be used to evaluate the success of a feature. In a related context, universities in Lebanon can benefit in this regard from the online directory of international higher education (www.4icu.org), which reviews accredited universities in more than 200 countries, and ranks university websites based on search engine rankings. Ebizmba.com also ranks the top 15 most popular social networking sites based on average site traffic from Alexa Global Traffic and country traffic rank.

4. Conclusion

Based on the results of a previous study (Bashir, Hejase, Danash, et al., 2022) where students were surveyed to assess their opinion of private universities in Lebanon, i.e., explored some of the main topics related to university pages on these platforms, and on our practical experience in this field, and our work for years in media and digital marketing in companies and a private university in Lebanon, this study deals with the latest assessments of the use of SMPs in HEIs' digital marketing strategies. This study addressed the possible determinants for successful marketing techniques reported by researchers worldwide capitalizing on social networking sites. Our study aims not only to present and study the problem but to provide scientific and practical solutions to it. Through the integrated articles, parts 1 and 2, we seek to provide a practical and academic experience, to contribute and help marketers in universities to succeed in their digital marketing strategies, and provide suggestions to them regarding the content, the required human cadre, publishing mechanisms, and the best standards and practices in this field. Within this study expert opinions and best practices recommendations are collected from experts in the field. And because social networks are constantly evolving, it is important for marketers in higher education to stay on top of these changes and to keep up with them scientifically and practically.

Creating effective digital strategies helps universities target students who are suitable for their universities, and reach graduates, as "communication with them (alumni) in higher education digital marketing is very important because they may be active supporters and can be re-entered into specific recruitment strategies" (Spilker, 2017). To know if universities are capitalizing on the use of social media platforms, the following questions must be asked: Were the universities monitoring what was said about them on these platforms? Do universities monitor the Internet for posts, conversations, news, and interaction about their subjects? Do universities explore the opinions, needs, and tendencies of students? In any case, attracting students to universities cannot be limited to digital marketing only, but rather it is a combination of integrated marketing communications, which is an approach to promoting a message through multiple strategies that work together and reinforce each other, including multiple media such as print, television, and radio, websites, social networks, and related efforts. The marketing mix is one of the elements of the marketing strategy that can be applied in HEIs. The traditional marketing mix consists of product, price, promotion, and place (Kotler & Keller, 2008), so marketing strategy development requires coordination and a combination of all elements of the marketing mix. However, in this research, digital marketing, in particular, is explored from the context of how Lebanese universities manage their communication on social media platforms to expose to their stakeholders their programs of study, activities, and recruitment practices and if these institutions have performed adequately as monitored and measured based on international standardized metrics.

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