

The Use of Facebook and Instagram in Communication with New Students: the Case of Portuguese Public Universities

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Abstract— The growing use of social networks and a large number of people using them have attracted the attention of Higher Education Institutions for some years now. These institutions have a strong presence on these platforms currently and have learned to take advantage of their influence to get closer to their target audience, especially students. In this context, the study presented in this article aimed to understand the kind of use Portuguese Public Universities make of social networks, particularly Facebook and Instagram, to communicate with their new students. Methodologically, a descriptive study was conducted. Facebook and Instagram pages of all Portuguese Public Universities were analysed in September 2018, a period that corresponds to the new students' first contact with the institutions. The data collected and the analysis of variables such as the kind of topics posted, shared content and the kind of interaction generated made it possible to realise that universities use social networks to communicate with their audience, mainly when they chose to link an image to their web page (on Facebook) and when they use photographs and videos (on Instagram). During the period under review, posts focusing mainly on welcoming new students and on the welcome messages delivered by the Presidents/Boards of the universities were abundantly shared.

Keywords— universities, communication, students, Facebook, Instagram

I. INTRODUCTION

Currently, the communication carried out by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is inextricably linked to technological infrastructure and digital media whose use is meant to increase the contact with their audience. Over the last few years, the way people choose to communicate and to consume and share information has changed, not only due to the diversity of the existing communication platforms but also due to the characteristics of the new generations who have become increasingly connected and more confident in their ability to multitask [1].

HEIs are aware of this new reality and have adopted new communication strategies in order to create competitive advantages that will help differentiate themselves from their competition [2]. In addition to the importance of the activities they develop following their primary mission, today HEIs seek to adapt to the shifting demands of the market by changing their communication paradigm, among other things [3]. The communication departments that exist in the universities were created to improve the communication strategies of these institutions and bear witness to this willingness to evolve. In fact, "the increase in and the diversification of universities' communication activities seem to be closely related to the increasing competition and to the

development of the business-oriented dimension of these organizations" [4, p. 232].

It is, therefore, crucial to deepen the relationship between communication, social networks and HEIs, in an attempt to understand the way strategic communication practices, work and to understand how HEIs take advantage of social networks by their specific needs. The study presented in this article assumes that HEIs promote dynamic communication to create more excellent proximity to their target audience and to achieve their goals.

In methodological terms, the authors chose to conduct a descriptive study that allowed observing the Facebook and Instagram pages of all the Portuguese Public Universities (PPU) during September 2018. The choice of these two social networks was based on the fact that Facebook is the most widely used social network nationwide and worldwide, and because Instagram is a network widely used by young people [5]. According to [6], public universities play a prominent role in Portuguese higher education. The author also considers that their students are committed to learn and to achieve the highest possible scores in higher education.

In this context it is essential, first, to understand the way HEIs use social networks in a general context and, then, to focus on a specific educational dimension, always considering the two social networks already mentioned. The objective is then to answer the starting question that guided the entire study: What use do Portuguese Public Universities make of social networks during the period that encompasses their new students' welcome reception?

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Communication is a fundamental practice for society because it allows the sharing of information and knowledge [7]. In organisations, the concept of communication is closely related to a wide range of objectives set to achieve a specific goal. That way, can strategic communication be described as an institutional communication practice? Each organisation seeks answers that will enable them to understand the different relationships that take place within each one of them. As it happens with all human beings, individually or in groups, these organisations develop new processes or try to improve those that already exist based on their own experiences or the experience shared by other people or organisations [8].

Strategic communication is directly associated with organisational/institutional communication and consequently plays a relevant role in the transformations of the 21st century due to its ability to adapt [9]. According to the same authors, the evolution of ICT has provided organisations/institutions

with new ways of communicating. Strategic communication is usually described as a "strategic game in which players make use of symbolic interaction to solve their problems or maximise opportunities" [9, p. 20].

Understanding HEIs communication becomes even more relevant in such a context as these institutions realise that their audience is all over the Internet and "(...) now they are paying more attention than ever before - they want to make themselves present, because they recognise that their audience is highly "connected" to the network (...)" [4, p. 14]. The evolution of the communication paradigm in HEIs becomes a complex challenge, and for communication to be successful, well-defined strategies must be implemented.

According to [10] one needs to identify the target audience, develop the message, choose the media and, finally, carry out a thorough analysis to obtain opinions and reactions that can help improve and understand customer satisfaction. In [3] opinion, the identification of the target audience is one of the first steps to be carried out when one starts to design communication strategies in an HEI: "(...) first of all the interest groups of the institution must be identified in order to associate the company with its different target audiences and define the goals we aim to achieve for each of those groups with the help of organisational communication" [3, p. 34]. [11] states that education institutions live off the relationships they are capable of creating with their audience. So it is fair to ask: what is the HEIs' real audience? According to [12], in HEIs there is no point in treating the target audience as a client, but the truth is that HEIs sell educational services and thus the author divides the HEIs' audience into three different types:

- students, who are considered the HEIs' main target audience;
- parents, since they play an important role in the students' lives;
- moreover, finally, the entities that hire the students according to their qualifications and the skills they have developed in the HEIs.

According to [13], teachers can also be included in the HEIs' audience, because like parents, they also stand by their students during their education process. Former students can also be regarded as some sort of HEI audience. Usually, these students are of great importance to universities, because they inevitably convey an image of the institution, be it positive or negative. When they enter the labour market, former students mirror, to a certain extent, the education they have received from the institution they have attended during their academic career [14].

As far as the communication with the audience is concerned, [15] claims that HEIs can use social networks for various purposes: to promote the institution itself, to disseminate information, and for educational purposes as well. The same authors state that social networks support that offers excellent opportunities because they enable the creation of relationships, promote interaction and allow significant advantages when the strategies surrounding their use are well defined.

In this context, several universities have been exploring the advantages that social networks offer to advertise their academic activity [16]. The same authors, following a study conducted in three different universities, concluded that the

social networks most widely used by students and teachers are Facebook and Twitter and that the main reasons behind this choice are the opportunity they provide to share content, to engage in conversations, and to foster relationships.

For all the above reasons, it is a fact that the use of social networks also brings new communication practices to HEIs, so it seems essential to develop research that will help identify uses, purposes, content and interactions related to the way information is shared through these platforms.

III. THE STUDY

The following objectives guided the study presented in this brief article:

- To understand the use of social networks in Portuguese Public Universities (PPU) communication during the period during which they welcome their new students;
- To identify the social networks most widely used by PPU;
- To identify the content shared by PPU on the different social networks;
- To observe the interactions created by the posts made by PPU on the different social networks;
- To understand what PPU use social networks for;
- To provide guidelines for an excellent social network communication strategy.

To achieve the objectives previously set out, a descriptive study was carried out. This option seemed appropriate, considering that the objective of this research was to analyse the posts made by PPUs on Facebook and Instagram. According to [16], in this type of study, the objective is to describe a particular phenomenon by making use of the data previously collected, and by thoroughly analysing and interpreting said data.

The instrument used for data collection in this study was an analysis grid which, according to [17], is a process that allows structuring the collected data systematically. This grid was created based on the following indicators:

Day | Topic | Nature of the post | Reactions | Comments | Answers to comments | Hashtags | Shares | Content

The data inserted into the analysis grid was collected by one of the researchers of the study through direct observation of the Facebook and Instagram pages of the universities under analysis.

The universe of this study was composed of the Portuguese Higher Education Institutions. The sample comprises all public higher education institutions. According to DGES (General Directorate of Higher Education), there are 13 universities in the country.

We chose to analyse PPUs Facebook pages for two reasons: it is the most widely used social network worldwide and the platform most widely used by the Portuguese. Instagram was selected because it is a recent social network and is mostly used by young people, i.e., by the primary audience of HEIs. Thus, and taking into account that a large part of the communication developed by an educational institution is directed to its usually young students, the choice of these two social networks is fully justified. September 2018

was chosen as the period to be studied, as it is the month in which students are informed of whether or not they have been accepted in a university (1st phase and 2nd phase), and because for many students, this month represents their "first" contact with a higher education institution and the beginning of the school year.

IV. RESULTS

As previously mentioned, the social networks used by the 13 PPU's were analysed. As shown in Table 1, and based on the data collected, The University of Beira Interior was the first university to create a Facebook page, back in 2009. More recently, in 2015, the University of the Azores decided to create a Facebook account. There is no evidence of any activity on Instagram carried out by the University of the Azores and the Nova University Lisbon so far. The University of Coimbra is one of the first universities to have a profile on Instagram. The creation of its account dates back to 2012. In turn, the University of Évora created its Instagram account only in 2017 and is consequently one of the last universities to join that social platform.

Table 1 – Year the HEIs Facebook and Instagram pages were created

University	Facebook	Instagram
ISCTE - Lisbon University Institute	2012	2016
UAç - University of the Azores	2015	----
UAlg - University of Algarve	2012	2015
UA - University of Aveiro	2010	2014
UBI - University of Beira Interior	2009	2015
UC - University of Coimbra	2010	2012
UE - University of Évora	2013	2017
ULisboa - University of Lisbon	2014	2014
UMa - University of Madeira	2014	2016
UM - University of Minho	2011	2016
UNL - Nova University Lisbon	2012	----
UP - University of Porto	2013	2014
UTAD - University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro	2011	2015

Regarding the number of followers of the Portuguese Public Universities social networks (Table 2), data shows that at the time of the study, the University of Porto had the highest number of followers on both social networks. On Facebook, it had a total of 150,972 followers. The University of Coimbra also has a significant number of followers (139,645).

In September 2018, the University of the Azores had the lowest number of followers (2,333). The University of Madeira has the second-worst score with 4,435 followers. The remaining institutions had between 20,000 and 87,000 followers, as shown in the table below. The University of Porto stands out with its 31,500 followers on Instagram, and the worst score was obtained by the University of Madeira with 1,201 users. The evidence clearly shows that the Universities of Évora (1,889), Beira Interior (4,526) and Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro (2,587) also had a relatively low number of followers at the time of the study compared with the Universities of Porto, Aveiro and Coimbra.

Table 2 – Number of followers on Facebook and Instagram

University	Facebook	Instagram
ISCTE - Lisbon University Institute	50 905	4 757
UAç - University of the Azores	2 406	-
UAlg - University of Algarve	42 783	5 782
UA - University of Aveiro	89 725	17 800

UBI - University of Beira Interior	54 067	4 526
UC - University of Coimbra	139 645	25 800
UE - University of Évora	28 234	1 889
ULisboa - University of Lisbon	43 496	15 500
UMa - University of Madeira	7 813	1 201
UM - University of Minho	91 332	16 600
UNL - Nova University Lisbon	22 777	-
UP - University of Porto	150 972	31 500
UTAD - University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro	29 625	2 587

According to the data presented in Table 3, it can be seen that there is a higher number of posts on Facebook than on Instagram. The universities with the largest number of posts on Facebook were the University of Madeira and the University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro. The University of Coimbra was the institution with the highest number of posts on Instagram.

Table 3 – Total number of posts made by PPU's

University	Facebook	Instagram
ISCTE - Lisbon University Institute	14	2
UAç - University of the Azores	0	----
UAlg - University of Algarve	47	7
UA - University of Aveiro	41	21
UBI - University of Beira Interior	41	1
UC - University of Coimbra	50	36
UE - University of Évora	25	4
ULisboa - University of Lisbon	28	9
UMa - University of Madeira	53	11
UM - University of Minho	42	23
UNL - Nova University Lisbon	37	----
UP - University of Porto	32	6
UTAD - University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro	53	18

September 2018 was the month chosen to conduct the analysis, so, as can be seen from Table 4, it is only natural that most of the universities posts are aimed at their new students. We recall that September is usually the month when students get back to school and when new students are introduced to their new schools. In light of the above, the results show that the Instagram posts made by universities were entirely directed to their new students. On Facebook, on the other hand, the University of Lisbon was the only institution whose posts were entirely aimed at the new students. The University of Aveiro, the University of Évora, the University of Minho, the University of Porto and the University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro also dedicated a large part of their social network posts to new students during the month under review.

Table 4 - Total number of posts aimed at new students

University	Facebook	Instagram
ISCTE - Lisbon University Institute	14	2
UAç - University of the Azores	0	----
UAlg - University of Algarve	14	7
UA - University of Aveiro	20	15
UBI - University of Beira Interior	12	1
UC - University of Coimbra	10	25
UE - University of Évora	16	4
ULisboa - University of Lisbon	7	7
UMa - University of Madeira	10	4
UM - University of Minho	22	17
UNL - Nova University Lisbon	12	----
UP - University of Porto	18	6
UTAD - University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro	19	13

Data presented in Table 5 makes it possible for us to see that the nature of the posts is different according to the two social networks analyzed. On Facebook, posts are mostly academic, whereas, on Instagram, their aim is mostly promotional.

Table 5 – Predominant nature of PPU posts

University	Facebook	Instagram
ISCTE - Lisbon University Institute	Promocional	Académico
UAç - University of the Azores	----	----
UAlg - University of Algarve	Académico	Académico
UA - University of Aveiro	Académico	Académico
UBI - University of Beira Interior	Promocional	Académico
UC - University of Coimbra	Académico	Promocional
UE - University of Évora	Académico	Promocional
ULisboa - University of Lisbon	Promocional	Promocional
UMa - University of Madeira	Académico	Divulgativo
UM - University of Minho	Académico	Promocional
UNL - Nova University Lisbon	Informativo	----
UP - University of Porto	Académico	Promocional
UTAD - University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro	Académico	Promocional

The next step was to analyse the posts that generated more significant interaction (see Table 6). The number of reactions (or likes on Instagram) was the indicator chosen to represent users' level of interaction. There was a large number of posts shared (this indicator is valid for Facebook only) during the period of time under analysis. On the other hand, there were fewer interaction generated by users' comments.

Table 6 – Post which generated higher levels of interaction

	Facebook			Instagram	
	Reactions	Comments	Shares	Likes	Comments
ISCTE	684	8	247	423	1
UAç	-	-	-	-	-
UAlg	229	4	134	370	0
UA	873	56	689	1360	13
UBI	753	12	222	122	1
UC	905	37	687	1995	14
UE	399	23	371	134	3
ULisboa	224	67	126	1100	52
UMa	36	2	16	37	2
UM	857	55	213	1435	22
UNL	155	1	88	-	-
UP	2000	53	822	2014	27
UTAD	840	17	434	475	3

Finally, and according to the last analysed indicator - the type of content- (Table 7), it can be seen that the contents that got shared the most on each of the social networks under analysis are distinct. On Facebook, the content that was most frequently posted by universities are images with hyperlinks to the institutions' websites. The University of Évora is an exception since most of its posts include videos or photographs. On Instagram, most of the posts contain videos or photographs.

Table 7 – Type of content that prevails on Facebook and Instagram

University	Facebook	Instagram
ISCTE	Image w/hyperlink	Photograph and video
UAç	----	----
UAlg	Image w/hyperlink	Picture and video
UA	Image w/hyperlink	Photograph
UBI	Image w/hyperlink	Video
UC	Image w/hyperlink	Video

UE	Video	Video
ULisboa	Image w/hyperlink	Picture
UMa	Image w/hyperlink	Picture
UM	Image w/hyperlink	Photograph
UNL	Image w/hyperlink	----
UP	Image w/hyperlink	Photograph
UTAD	Image w/hyperlink	Photograph

V. RESULTS DISCUSSION

The main objective of this study was to understand how Portuguese Public Universities use social networks during the period when students are about to enter their new school. Based on the review of the literature, the social networks selected were Facebook because it is the most popular social media platform nationwide and worldwide and Instagram because it is a growing social platform and because young people mostly use it. The results obtained show that each one of the PPU has a Facebook page. Most of them also have an Instagram account. The University of the Azores and the Nova University Lisbon are the exceptions.

There are differences in the way the universities analysed use their Facebook page, mainly when considering the number of posts they make. The University of the Azores was not taken into consideration since it hasn't used its Facebook page since 2015 (the year its page was created).

This study shows that the Portuguese Public Universities post more on Facebook than on Instagram. These results are following those obtained in a study conducted by [11], in which the author concluded that Facebook is the most widely used network by Public Higher Education Institutions. HEIs have been using Instagram as well, but the fact that this social platform is still relatively recent may explain why it is less popular among these institutions.

During the development of the study, some differences between the two social networks analysed became evident. Evidence shows that during September 2018 most of the posts made by universities were aimed at their new students (both on Facebook and Instagram), i.e., most of the topics had to do with enrolments, registrations, welcome messages, messages from the Presidents/Boards of the institutions, among others. That way, and under a study conducted by [18], it was found that the posts that include welcome messages addressed to the new students are those that "got the most likes, whereas, the posts containing information on conferences got less likes" (p. 52). The posts that generated more interaction due to the reactions and likes, comments, responses to comments and sharing they triggered were directly related to new students, whereas posts that were related to conferences or workshops, among other offers, were those that generated less interaction.

Based on the analysis of the indicator related to the nature of the posts, the study clearly shows that these social networks have different communication objectives. On Facebook, the content of the posts is prominently academic and focused essentially on the dissemination of publications produced by the universities, i.e., research work, welcome messages to new students and messages from their Presidents/Boards. On Instagram, data analysis reveals that posts are predominantly promotional and are mostly related to the promotion of the institution. In light of the above, the results clearly show that the communication objectives of each social network are distinct.

According to [19], Facebook is used to share posts that are much more detailed, whereas Instagram is most commonly used for instant messaging. Facebook is, therefore considered a more institutional social network used by universities to promote their activities and offers using more detailed and comprehensive information. With Instagram, universities promote themselves using videos and photographs.

A study conducted by [20], whose objective was to analyse the Facebook posts made by several Brazilian HEIs, showed that the indicator of the reaction enjoyed higher scores than the shares or comments indicators. The same author believes that this is because users seek activities that require less effort. This study also revealed that the indicator of the reaction provided the highest level of interaction (and likes on Instagram). The shares indicator (action only allowed on Facebook) came right after.

Comments and responses to comments are the indicators that generated the least interaction. Comments made by universities on social networks are scarce: many of them did not comment on a single post of their followers, and those that chose to engage with their followers did it only occasionally. However, this pattern is not necessarily negative. To better understand this indicator, we would need to conduct a more thorough analysis, since the low number of comments may mean that further comments or replies to comments are not required.

The conclusions reached in this research reveal that most of the posts made by universities during the month under analysis were made on Facebook, but also show that the highest level of interaction happened on Instagram due to a large number of likes observed. It is believed that this is because Instagram has already achieved a strong position in the lives of young people and because it is a social platform widely used by these age groups. Data collected from the study conducted by [21] reveals that young people who use social networks seem to have "traded" Facebook for Instagram.

Evidence also shows that universities' Facebook posts are predominantly images containing a hyperlink to the institution's website. Those image hyperlinks mean that a simple "click" on one of the pictures displayed will take the user to another web page. It is believed that this is due to the importance attached by universities to their institutional websites and to the role they play in the communication process and to the fact that HEIs are aware of the support that social networks are currently providing to that communication process. This study, following the research work conducted by [22], seems to confirm the idea that websites are still:

"(...) the most powerful tools in the communication between organisations and their audiences, because of the advantages and possibilities they present and that have already been discussed. When one focuses on university communication, these social platforms seem to be of particular relevance, since universities are institutions where the information process plays a decisive role, and in which web pages represent one of the first and most important places where prospective students or students go to look for relevant information" (p. 134).

On Instagram, universities post photographs predominantly and videos. It is worth noting that this social network does not allow the sharing of images with hyperlinks to other pages or websites. The fact that Instagram is capable

of generating more significant interaction may have to do with the kind of content provided. The content displayed on this social platform is considered more dynamic and appealing since the posts found are mostly videos and photographs.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that most universities use Hashtags in their posts. Greater use of this indicator is visible on Instagram, and it was possible to conclude that the posts where the universities used Hashtags were those that managed to generate more significant interaction. According to the literature review, the use of this functionality will allow universities to reach their target audience, i.e., to grow beyond the regular page followers and generate greater visibility [23].

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Currently, the Portuguese Public Universities target audience spends much time on the Internet, especially on social networks. The study conducted made it possible to conclude that universities are aware of this reality and are increasingly using social networks to communicate with their students during September to try and establish the first contact using the channels that students mostly employ in their daily life. The question is whether or not the institutions make fair use of social networks to establish close relations with their audience. The conclusions suggest that during the month under review, the universities made fair use of the functionalities of social networks, turning them into strong communication allies.

The analysis carried out showed that universities stimulate social networks according to their objectives and the target audience they intend to reach, i.e., the new students. This study provided us with some critical considerations that will surely be important to improve HEIs communication strategies involving social networks:

- To use Hashtags in the post descriptions, in order to identify the topic of the post and allow it to reach a larger number of people;
- To take into account the relevant comments made by followers. Given that replying to everyone is impossible, an answer should be given to those raising essential issues;
- To avoid sharing the same type of content. It is important to diversify the posts to avoid being repetitive and visually tiring.

Finally, we should stress that the methodological limitations of this study do not allow the data obtained to be generalised. The conclusions obtained are only valid for this context and are not representative of the communication carried out by PPU's in other contexts and at other times.

This study focused merely on two social networks during a specific period. It would be necessary for future studies to analyse and compare other social networks. The variables used were limited to the objectives of this study, however other relevant variables can be identified: the timing of the posts, for instance, to understand the time of day the institutions share the most and the time of day posts generate more significant interaction; the number of views of the videos compared to other contents, to understand the scope of each post according to the type of content shared, among others.

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