

The Impacts of Social Media's Adoption in Higher Education Institutions: An Approach for Social Media's Return on Investment and Branding in Universities

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Abstract—Social Media platforms have for a while been embraced by educational institutions as powerful instruments in reaching larger audiences. In fact, universities' involvement in Social Media in the form of creating and administrating Social Media "Profiles" dates back to the very start of the Social Media evolution. Seen as innovative highly influential instruments, Social Media with its different platforms has been implemented largely in universities' marketing strategies, support services, and recruitment tactics. Nonetheless, few available scholarly have in the past addressed the practicality of conducting a Return on Investment (ROI) process for organisations, let alone for educational institutions. Given that having a clear forecast of the benefits and rewards for implementing Social Media in universities is a key factor leading to its adoption, developing a ROI for higher educational institutions remains a necessity. In this research, a ROI model that depicts the use of Social Media in the higher educational context is developed. Furthermore, an extensive research on SM's use by universities was conducted to identify key factors that drives the need for universities' Social Media adoption. The study also provides valuable insights on the elements of effective SM branding through identifying major factors of successful branding strategies. In addition, after a detailed investigation, the research suggests a SM branding approach that adds value to existing research and can be adopted by universities as a valued approach to reaching effective SM branding.

Index Terms—social media, return on investment, branding, higher education, digital marketing

I. INTRODUCTION

Measuring Return on Investments (ROI) for social-media's activities has always been a topic of much debate. Some researchers stated that, it is in fact the fastest growing concern in marketing [1]-[3].

No doubt SM networking sites have contributed to the rapid expansion of many online businesses as well traditional businesses, yet, achieving meticulous calculations of SM's returns remains a dividing subject. While some researchers treated marketing on SM sites

like online advertising, where measuring its returns could be relatively easy, others have strongly disagreed citing great differences between SM marketing and traditional online advertising [4], [5]. Consequently, the measurement of SM's returns much more complex than analysing the traditional indicators that were typically assessed for online advertising including: unique visitors, page views, cost per clicks and others.

II. SOCIAL MEDIA'S RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Current research on Social Media's ROI provides limited information of how returns on SM investments could be measured, in fact, little has been done to develop an evident framework for measuring returns for traditional businesses let alone for universities and educational providers. In this paper, several reviewed research work and reports on SM's ROI were analysed and accordingly, an approach which would help in measuring universities' ROI for social media was developed (Fig. 1).

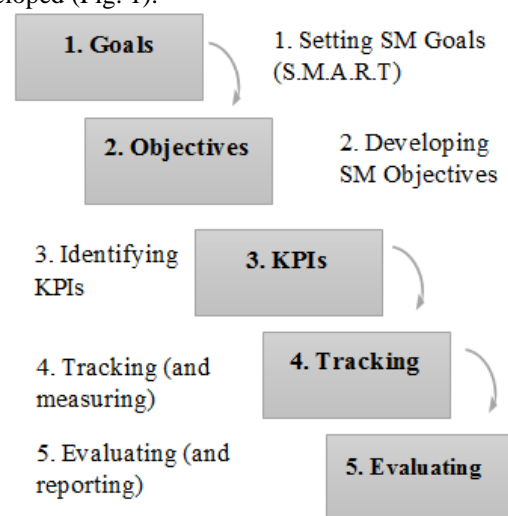


Figure 1. Research proposed approach

A. Stage 1. Setting Goals

Social media goals, in simple words, answer the obvious question of “what does the organisation intend to

achieve by adapting to SM?” With the many benefits that could be attained through SM activities, organisations must be specific when setting their SM goals. Hence, we posit that identifying SM goals is an integral initial stage for a successful SM strategy.

In this stage, decision makers highlight the benefits from investing in SM in the institution. The SM goals represents the anticipated outcomes of the organisation’s overall SM strategy. Furthermore, the success and failure of a university’s SM strategy depends on the extent to which these goals are accomplished.

To further assist the SM team in setting such goals, we suggest the following:

1. Aligning SM goals with the university’s strategy: SM goals cannot be isolated from the university’s overall strategy. Conversely, they should harmonize with the organisation’s strategy as they are designed to fulfil the needs of the university.

2. Aligning SM goals with the overall social media strategy: SM goals are a vital part of the SM strategy. Setting these goals should help put together an SM strategy and guide the activities and processes involved in Social Media.

3. Determining the potential audience of the SM accounts: one significant aspect of SM is its competency in being a powerful targeted-marketing tool. When identifying a target audience, content must be customized to speak directly to the audience. This makes it vital for the SM team to know their intended audience before setting SM goals.

4. Adhering to the S.M.A.R.T goals framework (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timely) [6].

B. Stage 2. Objectives Development

Organizations must define clear objectives for their SM adoption and implementation. The objectives should derive directly from the SM goals. Hence, SM objectives are set to achieve the overall organizational goals.

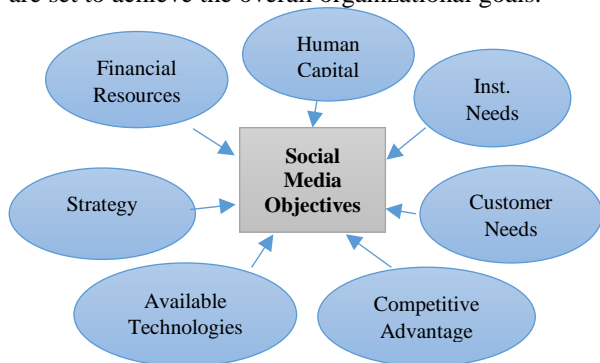


Figure 2. Factors influencing SM objectives

At this stage, it is essential for decision makers to have a clear understanding of the organisation’s needs, position and its overall strategy. Thereby, the identified objectives must be aligned with the organisation’s strategy, and are tailored to address its needs and enhance its competitive advantage or position in the market. One important aspect in this regard would be assigning the

right decision makers to identify best suited objectives. It is also extremely valuable for decisions makers to utilize available support systems to aid their findings. Fig. 2 shows the main factors that might influence the SM objectives.

Nevertheless, Social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, are constantly evolving and changing. New features and activities are constantly developed and introduced instigated by the rise in new technologies. However, this fact cannot challenge the need for organisations to be active in SM, on the contrary, it can be turned into an opportunity for organisations to reflect upon their SM objectives. The changing nature of the SM landscape could be utilized by organisations to regularly review and update their existing SM objectives. The most common organisations’ SM objectives could be identified as: brand awareness, strengthening customer engagement and maintaining customer satisfaction.

C. Stage 3. KPIs and Tasks

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are organisational metrics typically used to assess and analyse factors that are considered critical to the success of an organisation’s objective [7]. In the case of measuring ROI for social media, creating KPIs is deemed essential for meeting organisations’ SM objectives [8]-[11]. Hence, the fulfilment of SM objectives can only be achieved through developing a set of KPIs that are not only used to assess the progress of the SM plan, but also to guide the SM team throughout its implementation and execution phase.

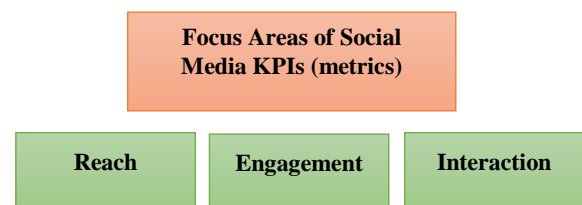


Figure 3. Social media’s KPIs focus

Given that Social Media is an umbrella term used to describe the many different online social outlets or “platforms”, KPIs might differ depending on the SM outlet that is being used. As an example, when measuring Facebook’s ROI, KPIs will be a set of factors that are specific to this platform such as likes, comments, profile visits and so on. Nonetheless, SM platforms have so much in common which make it feasible for a set of mutual KPIs to be used in measuring various SM outlets. Hence, the focus of the KPIs would be to assess the level of engagement, reach and interaction between the SM team and the SM audience or users. Typically, SM KPIs targets three main aspects of SM platforms, the reach, engagement and interaction (Fig. 3) [12]-[15]. The major criteria are the “reach” or the popularity of the account on the targeted platform i.e. the number of users that are subscribed in the SM account. The second criterion is the engagement level, which might differ according to the adopted SM platform. For this criterion, KPIs generally assess the number of responses on published content. It can be the number or volumes of shares, clicks, reactions

to posts, likes or views depending on the platform. Lastly, KPIs that are designed to measure the interaction level on a SM platform. Hence, interaction with users is with no doubts the most appealing aspect of social media. It can be measured by calculating the number of messages (and emails), correspondences, and posts received from the SM account's audience.

D. Stage 4. Tracking: Tools and Software Including Facebook Stats

After identifying specific KPIs for the SM program, it's vitally important to track and monitor every KPI individually. Hence, tracking each KPI has a significant impact on the overall SM program as they provide accurate evidence on how well the program is progressing. For this, the SM team must designate an appropriate approach and make use of the available tracking tools to constantly monitor each KPI. Currently, there are many SM analytics software, majority of which are provided online, these tools can be utilized to monitor the identified KPIs. The SM team should decide on what tools are needed based on the specifications and requirements of their identified KPI and overall SM program. Hence, using an adequate tracking or analytics tool can be both cost effective and timely process.

Nonetheless, tracking and monitoring KPIs could be performed by using existing systems and software used to track and report metrics and measures by the marketing department. That said, the SM team responsible for monitoring KPIs can be formed as part of the institution's marketing department rather than being specific to a business unit. In addition, most SM platforms provide analytics features embedded in their online platforms and accessible by the admins of the accounts i.e. google analytics, Facebook insights etc..... These tools can be used as primary sources for collecting data from the accounts, as well as monitoring pre-identified KPIs.

E. Stage 5. Evaluation (and Reporting)

This phase builds on all previous stages and lays down the next course of action for the SM team. At this stage, the KPIs for the SM program have been identified, they have also been tracked and monitored and ready to be evaluated. In addition, the SM program's objectives and goals are outlined in detail in the initial stages of the process. Hence, the outcomes of this stage, the evaluation stage, finalises the overall work put into the program. The evaluation stage (Fig. 4) proposes three consecutive steps starting with data analyses, followed by results' interpretation and ending in documenting and reporting.

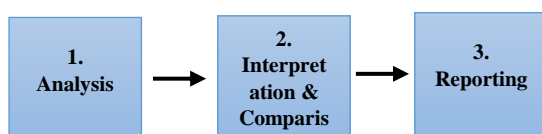


Figure 4. Evaluations steps

Results Analysis: Data from the tracked KPIs will be used as a primary source of the analysis. The collected data will then be presented as data summaries and

presented visually as tables, figures and different forms of diagrams in order for the SM team to extract key results which later are documented and interpreted. Hence, the interpretation of the results will determine the weaknesses and strengths in the SM program.

Interpretation (and comparing) results: The analysed results are assessed and interpreted to determine if the performance of the SM activities meets the projected results of the program. In addition, the results will be compared and measured with the goals and objectives of the SM program. At the end of the evaluation step, the SM team will have a clear and concise stance on what met the goals of the program, and what failed to achieve the anticipated objectives. As a result, the SM team will identify areas of improvements based on suggested evidence to then be included in finalised reports.

Reporting: Finally, the results of the ROI study will then be reported to the executives. This step includes the documenting and reporting of the evaluation stage for the decision makers to have an in-depth understanding why some of the expectation were not met. The decision-makers (executives) will be able to advice on the outcomes of the completed SM program based on the findings of the reporting stage. Further decisions (by the responsible team) on changes, inclusions, modifications, termination of the SM program will be made as final activity in this process.

III. SOCIAL MEDIA BRANDING

In a nutshell, SM branding involves the use of SM platforms as infrastructures to create, build or expand on brand identity and other branding activities (e.g. brand association, brand awareness etc. [16]-[18]). Accordingly, SM branding is achieved by creating content for the SM platforms as well utilizing diverse features and characteristics of such platforms. This includes publishing marketing content tailored to brand building and raising community awareness amongst SM users. Despite the clear similarities of SM branding and traditional branding methods, several practices stand out as unique for using SM in brand building [19]-[23]. Below is a description of major SM branding characteristics, as found supported through an in-depth analysis and record keeping of current scholarly [19]-[24]: as shown in Fig. 5.

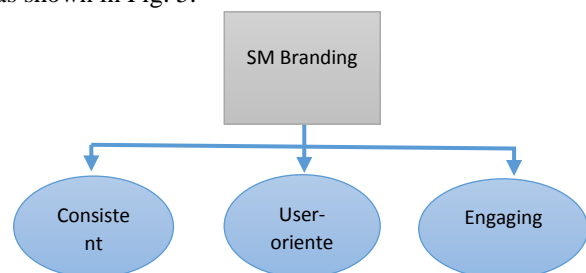


Figure 5. Characteristics of social media

A. SM Branding Characteristics

Consistency: branding on SM is far from "set and forget" or a one-off practice that is cut once reaching a deadline. It is a continuous process that is constantly

monitored to ensure SM users are drawn to the brand. Traditionally, SM users show considerable interests in active SM accounts, where regular content are being posted. Hence, branding activities on SM must be as regular to ensure continuous interests from users. This involves posting branding content on a scheduled basis using new materials and styles that appeal to users.

Nonetheless, all SM branding activities must be cohesive and consistent with the organisation's marketing image, while being distinct from other brands to ensure the conception of a SM brand identity. As a result, SM teams must develop strategies that are based on brand consistency initially before executing any related SM branding activity. It is important to acknowledge the fact that all SM branding efforts will be wasted if the consistency factor is absent in this regard.

With new technologies and algorithms being implemented on different SM platforms, it is now much possible for SM teams to automate or schedule their posts. Besides, the ease of which content can be shared or transferred across different SM platforms can assist in delivering a consistent branding content. Consequently, SM teams can use the same branding content on different platforms resulting in a more unified SM branding strategy.

Target audience: marketing on SM is best known for its targeted contents. Given that organisations typically post content that are relevant and appealing to specific user types. Thus, the principle in developing SM marketing content is that a specific target audience is being addressed [24]. This can be clearly seen in the existence of multiple SM accounts for the same organisation. Hence, the act of segmenting SM users and creating designated pages or accounts to address them directly is a unique characteristic of SM marketing. All the same, SM branding activities must be customised to speak the language of a specific target audience. This can only ensure the effectiveness of branding on SM as the needs and interests of audiences are being met. As an example, the common act of creating multiple SM accounts for one specific university, where each account is targeting a specific type of users, e.g. international students, specific community, alumni etc.

Engaging content: SM branding rely heavily on the use of engaging content. This specific type of content is a key to achieve better brand awareness results. Given that SM is characterised by its effective engaging nature, branding on SM can have great momentum if engaging content is being utilised. For that, SM Branding activities should mainly consist of engaging content such as shares, re-posts, media-content (visual content e.g. photos, memes, videos, infographics), testimonies (reviews), questionnaires (surveys, quizzes), hashtags, conversations (chat posts), tags, and others. This type of content that categorizes effective SM branding has great influence on supporting brand image and the overall brand.

B. A Model for Educational Institutions' SM Branding

The use of SM by educational institutions is notably different from that of traditional businesses where

revenue in its monetary value is mostly anticipated. When looking at retail businesses for example, their activities on SM can clearly be associated with promoting sales and generating revenue. This can be seen in announcements (posts) for products sales, offers (deals), events, new collections, etc. however, in the case of educational institutions, most SM content are customised to fulfil the needs of a specific target; or in large, their SM accounts would act as a secondary online information source, with their official website being the main online outlet. Hence, branding on SM is a core objective for most educational institutions' SM strategies. Fig. 6 shows the proposed model for SM branding by educational institutions.

Given that SM is mainly used by institutions to support their overall online marketing efforts. As well as the difficulties institutions encounter in their attempt to track and relate financial gains generated directly from their activities on SM. It is typical for universities to include SM strategies as part of their overall marketing strategy. Hence, the identity or the brand that most universities portray to their audiences including online audiences is usually designed and accomplished by the marketing department.

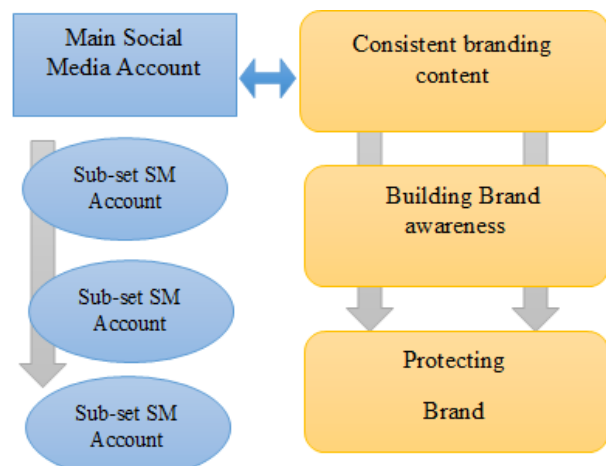


Figure 6. A Model for SM branding for educational institutions

Consistent branding content: SM Institutional branding must be applied on each of the multiple SM accounts administered by the university and designated to different audiences i.e. departments and academic units. This will eliminate conflicts within content of the multiple accounts, and consequently convey a unified message to the distinct audiences. Hence, users of different types should be able to link the content (in terms of posts) directly to the university. In universities, where a diverse SM audience can be divided into distinct groups, SM teams must be able to address the unique needs of each group, yet, keep a consistent delivery method and style. This can be achieved evidently by creating separate accounts with a consistent naming scheme that links all accounts to the same university. For example, the main (or central) SM account can carry the full name of the university, while other accounts can bear the university's abbreviation along the name of the department, units, courses, staff or students.

Nonetheless, consistent style and approach must be followed on all related accounts. In addition, the logo and marketing slogan of the university should be present on each of the identified accounts. Universities' SM branding techniques should not be different to that of traditional marketing brand practices, meaning that consistent design, colours and style must be adhered to for building brand knowledge and brand recognition.

Brand awareness: Institutional branding serves the main purpose of promoting a university's brand and image. At its core, SM branding in universities involves the use of marketing promotions, advertisements, digital media (pictures, videos, and infographics) to create a public awareness of the university's brand. Along with a consistent branding techniques and approaches, SM accounts should supply the audience with an interesting and informative content that would build a sense of trust between the university and the audience. Providing that SM, by default, promotes the process of audience segmentation, SM teams might need to understand the psychological and sociobiological traits of each segmented group to then develop targeted content which can lead to effective brand awareness. Besides, SM brand awareness could be achieved though sharing content across the different platforms where a maximum number of users will be exposed the brand.

Brand protection: SM accounts for universities are set to play a significant role in protecting brand, image and reputation of the institution. Not only do SM accounts promote the institution's brand, it can also be used to support and protect the brand. When necessary, SM accounts can be used to clear out misconceptions and false information that might be circulating about the institution. This can be established by posting facts, statistics and official statements for the broad SM audience to be informed and educated on occurring issues or conflicts.

Along the same lines, a SM account can act as a prompt information source for updates and announcements by universities. The engaging nature of SM can also help in clarifying facts about the university in a timely and efficient manner. For example, testimonies (reviews) generated by users (audience) can be used to aid universities' claims and build trust on brand's promises.

IV. CONCLUSION AND FINDINGS

Today, most world universities not only do administer official websites, but are also remarkably active on social media platforms. With the majority of universities around the world having a presence on at least one social media platform, a probing question arises; how do universities measure their social media's returns if any? To answer this question, a comprehensive study was conducted to understand how did the available scholarly address social media's return on investments, consequently, a proposed approach to measuring universities' SM ROI was introduced. The developed approach had 5 major steps, including setting SM goals, Identifying objectives, developing KPIs, tracing KPIs and evaluating and

reporting results. Nonetheless, the study on universities' adoption process of social media leads to the discovery of a key advantage of social media's use that is "SM Branding". SM branding was found to involve the use of SM platforms as infrastructures to create, build or expand on brand identity and other branding activities (e.g. brand association, brand awareness etc...). This meaning of SM branding was further explored by studying different scholarly with an objective of identifying a set of characteristics for SM branding. The defining characteristics of SM branding were found to be consistency, user-oriented and engagement features that distinguish SM branding from other digital branding tactics. Consequently, a SM branding approach was devolved to the benefit of universities, where the acquired knowledge was applied to construct a simple but effective approach that can facilitate the adoption process of social media in universities. The research was based on qualitative methods, namely record keeping of available scholarly, in gathering information on SM branding [19]-[24], which can be the basis of future quantitative researches concerning Social Media's in the higher educational context.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The submitted work was carried out with no conflict of interest.

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