

Instagram for Integrated Online Marketing Communications

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This study explores integrated online marketing communications strategies as innovative approaches leveraging Social Media SM capabilities. The focus was on Instagram usage for branding by educational institutions. The problem was formulated as follows: How do universities in the UAE use Instagram to manage their brand image and what impact does that have on their followers? Analysis of sample content with a total of 9,840 posts confirmed that studied universities placed more emphasis on product/brand-related publications. The classification of tracked reactions revealed five main categories: love, interrogation, criticism, belonging, and sympathy. Positive comments admire cultural events, while criticism revolves around improving places. The data revealed that SM can improve the overall performance of educational institutions and ensure their visibility. The authors believe that future studies on the role of social media as a strategic tool for communicating in other contexts should be made to measure its evolving weight, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Key words: *Instagram, marketing strategies, branding, integrated marketing communications.*

Introduction

Social media (SM) provides organisations the opportunity to communicate directly with the public to build their business and establish a good reputation. For this reason, educational institutions have found themselves facing the imperative of integrating into the virtual business world by using Social Media as an integrated communication tool to reach a wider audience in a faster way and at lower costs. SM then became part of the communication and branding strategies (Anagnostopoulos et al, 2018). Instagram's popularity, as a social networking site in addition to its great capacity to share photos, videos, and stories, represents a great opportunity for educational institutions to publicise their programs and announce their plans to attract the

largest number of followers and create a positive image in the browsers' minds through appropriate marketing strategies. The present study is dedicated to analysing how higher education institutions in the United Arab Emirates use Instagram to communicate their brand image, influence the behaviour of their followers, build and maintain relationships, as well as gauge their followers' response through the likes and comments they add. The main objectives behind this research is to discover the role played by Instagram as an integrated communication tool in the education field, explore the most important online public relations' strategies used by universities in the United Arab Emirates through social media, and measure the extent of users' interactivity and their degree of satisfaction.

The authors chose to address Instagram's uses as a marketing communications tool, since the social media penetration rate in the UAE reaches 99 percent, which is the highest in the world, and 44 percent of people aged 13 years and over are using Instagram (Chaffey, 2019). Emirate universities use Instagram to enhance their performance and reputation as well as impose their image in front of the fierce competition, to attract more students and to achieve internationally respectful ranks. The results of this research will certainly enlighten us about the power of social media for branding purposes.

Literature Review

Social media as a set of Internet-based applications based on ideological and technological grounds that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010), has allowed people to share personal experiences, comment on current events, meet people and interact with them without any restrictions. Several studies have addressed the role of social media as a virtual open space for communication, interaction and influence using many tools such as blogs, instant messages, and virtual communities in different contexts (Guijarro et al., 2018, p. 1412; Snoussi et al., 2019, p 28). Lee et al. (2018) focused on the relationship between social media users and organisations; they noted that trust is the basis of all online communications. Luc, Stamp & Antonoff (2018) studied the range of users' perceptions of belief in social media and stressed the public's high sense of integrity, empathy, and goodwill in these networks; It was also seen as a transparent channel that reduces corruption and aids in crisis management (Alexander 2013; Bertot 2012); as well as an engine for political change (Chan et al. 2018). Ranginwala & Towbin (2018) explained that social media could function as an operational monitoring strategy for forecasting risks, falling costs, and adjusting widespread diseases in times of crisis.

Parallel to that, many studies focused particularly on the impact of Instagram as an integrated tool for public relations and marketing campaigns; Huey and Yazdanifard questioned in their research article the use of Instagram as a marketing tool (Huey, 2014). They concluded that Instagram is highly effective in branding and highlighted the fact that SM isn't only for

advertising but also for trade, as some brands are investing in it as a place to sell their products as well. Vinayaka and Manik explored the question, “How Instagram is changing the way Marketing works?” They explained the way Instagram allowed brands to get and stay in touch with their audience using pictures and videos (Vinaika et Manik, 2017). The authors also noted that Instagram connects a huge number of people of a unique age group nationally and globally which benefits marketers on a whole new level. Alhabash and Ma (2017) stressed the power of Instagram as a social network indicating that it was ranked as the first application in terms of use during their study, with the most time spent on daily and the highest use intensity, followed by Snapchat, Facebook. However, Twitter appeared at the end of the list. Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018) pointed out that Instagram has offered organisations an easy way to make fans contribute significantly to their marketing campaigns and polishing their reputation by allowing them to engage, either through likes or even better through comments. Authors concluded also that the engagement on product-related attributes was far more than on non-product-related attributes.

Dash and Sharma compared, in their paper entitled, ‘Marketing Response Modelling: Impact of Digital Marketing for a Luxury Car Brand,’ the effectiveness of traditional advertising media versus digital marketing. By marketing a luxury car brand in both ways, they found out that digital marketing had five times the response of traditional advertising media including newspapers, magazines and display events’ (Dash et Sharma, 2019). Mirchandani and Gaur found several interesting results through their examinations in their article, ‘Current trends & prospects of social media analytics in business intelligence practices.’ They concluded that using social media in businesses allows users to create a better understanding of the audience as well as manage their relationship with them, through comments, shares, tweets, and re-tweets; social media appears then as an effective tool that improves the overall performance of organisations. (Mirchandi and Gaur, 2019).

To sum up, the literature review revealed a certain impact of social networks as communication and interaction bowl as well as an influenceable tool in business, marketing, and public relations. Several studies have focused on the use of Instagram for marketing purposes such as in advertising campaigns and trade operations. This research will also address the uses of Instagram as an integrated communication tool, but a special focus will be put on the higher educational institutions in the United Arab Emirates; the branding / non-branding strategies adopted to reach the audiences, keep them attracted and enhance their feedback and interactivity, will be investigated.

The main *problem*, therefore, is to inquire about the ways universities in the UAE use Instagram to manage their brand image and engage with the online target audiences, as well as the real impact on their Instagram followers.

The study includes three research questions as follows:

RQ1: What are the main uses of Instagram by the universities included in the sample?

RQ2: What kind of social media branding strategies do they implement?

RQ3: What kind of impact do they have, through Instagram followers' comments, shares, and likes?

Method

This exploratory study is based on mixed methods combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyse the content of Instagram pages related to the sample's Instagram pages. Three universities are included in the sample:

- The American University of Sharjah (AUS),
- American University in the Emirates (AUE),
- Zayed University (ZU).

Authors selected these three universities not only because of the sufficient number of posts and followers they have but also because they are representative of all types of universities included in the United Arab Emirates: AUE is a private higher educational institution; AUS is a semi-government university and ZU is a public tertiary institution.

A part of the data identifying the sample (number of followers, followings, and posts) was gathered on 16 March 2017 while presenting a research paper about social media as an emerging marketing tool for universities. Then, a second gathering was made on 16 November 2019 to investigate the evolution of Instagram uses by the educational institutions in the UAE (the purpose of the present study). The content of the studied pages (posts, comments, likes, and views) that was published from 15 August to 15 September 2019 was incorporated in the Data collection. The authors chose these dates because they coincide with the registration period for the fall of 2019, and thus the use of social media for the dissemination of recruitment campaigns is at its peak. The sample included a total of 9840 posts belonging to the sample Instagram pages.

Concerning the theoretical framework, this research is guided by the foundations of the Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC), adopted by the American Association of Advertising Agencies (AAAA), and developed by Caywood (1996), which refers to the comprehensive plan that includes and integrates all the strategic roles of the various communication disciplines (such as advertising, sales promotion and public relations) to provide clarity and consistency, and the impact of maximum communication. According to this definition, IMC is the procedure of strategically controlling the process of communicating with

the target audience and encouraging customer interaction. The marketing strategy from this view is then designed to bring all aspects of direct and indirect communications together to serve the brand through Social Media.

Hutton (1996) argued that marketing relationship approaches should be based on trust, contentment, and shared values to enhance the relationship between the marketer and the consumer. Consequently, educational institutions are called to focus on the relationship with the target audience by publishing their activities, sharing their news with followers and considering their opinion and advice on future decisions in academic issues or logistical facilities.

Authors will trace sample strategies to maintain and strengthen the relationship with Instagram followers as well as motivate them to continue interacting positively with what is posted regularly. The authors also took into consideration the Digital Marketing Theories as strategies implemented to promote all types of brands, products, or services online to reach a broad range of target audiences. Special focus will be placed on brand / unrelated bilateral strategies because of their close association with Public Relations strategies.

Results

To answer the RQ1, about the main uses of Instagram by the universities included in the sample, a special focus was put on the nature and particularities of usage in terms of the volume of follow-up and posting. The data showed a great evolution in terms of the numbers related to posts and followers in the universities included in the sample. The number of followings was decreased considerably in the AUS (-298) and relatively in the AUE (-93) but increased in ZU (+40). (seeTable1).

Table 1: University sample profile page (monographic view)

	<i>16 Mar. 2017</i>		<i>16 Nov. 2019</i>	<i>progress</i>
American University in Sharjah UOS	Posts	1.323	2.322	+999
	Followers	8.258	16.9 k	+8642
	Following	550	252	-298
American University in the Emirates AUE	Posts	2.018	3.445	+1427
	Followers	5.602	27.1 k	+21498
	Following	181	88	-93

Zayed University	Posts	809	4.073	+3264
ZU	Followers	6.333	19.4 k	+13067
	Following	12	52	+40

Source: The Authors (analysis data), Page 6

Authors have to add also that despite the mentioned increase, ZU still has the least number of followings and the largest numbers of posts. From 2017 to 2019, the sample of Instagram's uses as a way to showcase the universities' services, improve their images, and attract new students has considerably deepened. It has to be noted, then, that the sample's investment in social media as a tool for integrated communication has reached a degree of maturity and professionalism compared to the situation in 2017.

In the next step, the content analysis of the Instagram pages of the sample was conducted to identify the users' particularities and examine the process of communicating with the target audience and encouraging customer interaction.

According to the data, ZU uses Instagram intensively compared to the AUS and AUE. The number of ZU posts reached 49 photos and 9 videos. AUE posted only 11 photos and 1 video during the same period. The second observation is related to the high number of videos' views tracked for AUS. (It reached 25076 views). AUS succeeded in engaging users in writing comments (105 comments for the videos and 50 comments posted for the photos).

Table 2: Overview of posts and user responses

Photos			Videos			
	Likes	comments		Comments	Likes	Views
AUS (n=16)	3649	50	AUS (n=12)	105	446	25076
AUE (n=11)	3364	45	AUE (n= 1)	1	0	14456
ZU (n=49)	3630	11	ZU (n= 9)	12	0	6404

Source: The Authors (analysis data), page7

The RQ2 questioned the social media branding strategies implemented by the sample. To answer this research question, the authors addressed the brand attributes.

Brand Attributes

As specified with details in the appendix1, the data revealed certain attributions. Some of the attributes are product/brand-related (the University). The posts emphasised the following:

- Announcements for advertisements' purposes
- Administrative teams

- Faculties members
- Students
- Facilities
- Services
- Buildings
- Academic programs

Some attributes are not product /brand-related, such as:

- Celebration of certain special days under the local context
- Announcements
- Awareness content (videos mainly)

Product/brand attributes differ from one university to another; while AUS's Instagram posts emphasised students (37.50 percent) of its published content, and then faculties members (16.66 percent), ZU placed more importance on the services with (40.74 percent), then on announcements and advertising posts (25.92 percent). The AUE seemed not to have an emphasis on a particular brand attribute. (see Table3).

Table 3: The difference in Product properties

Brand attribute	ZU (N= 27)		AUE (N=9)		AUS (N=24)	
	Frequen cy	%	Frequen cy	%	Frequency	%
Announcement for advertising purposes	7	25.92	2	22.22	4	16.66
Administrative team	2	7.40	0	00	2	8.33
Faculty members	0	00	1	11.11	4	16.66
Students	2	7.40	2	22.22	9	37.5
Facilities	2	7.40	1	11.11	1	4.16
Building	1	3.70	1	11.11	2	8.33
Programs	2	7.40	1	11.11	0	00
Services	11	40.74	1	11.11	2	8.33
Total	27	100	9	100	24	100

Source: The Authors (analysis data), page8

To answer the RQ3 about the kind of impact they have, through Instagram followers' comments, shares, and likes, the authors examined the users' engagement quantitatively and qualitatively.

Users' Engagement

Instagram followers' engagement has been tracked quantitatively by counting likes and comments. (see Table4).

Table 4: Followers' engagement level per product activity

Brand attribute	AUS			AUE			ZU		
	C	L	V	C	L	V	C	L	V
Announcement for advertising purposes	9	458	888	10	911	14456	3	386	2764
Administrative team	9	403	1847	0	0	--	--	295	--
Faculty members	11	1399	--	6	286	--	--	185	--
Students	94	833	14906	2	274	--	3	229	--
Facilities	--	83	--	2	384	--	--	124	--
Building	11	640	4824	5	274	--	6	438	--
Programs	--	--	--	1	295	--	7	196	--
Services	1	54	1771	7	470	--	4	522	--
Total	135	3037	24236	33	2894	14456	23	2375	2764

C= Comments, L= Likes, V= Views

Source: The Authors (analysis data), page8

Interactivity and users' engagement in terms of comments is advanced in AUS with 135 comments on brand/product-related posts. Besides, the number of views tracked was the highest compared to the two other universities with 24236 views for the same kind of posts in the same university. The data identified different strategies universities use via Instagram; each university focused on one brand-related attribute:

- AUS chose to concentrate on registered students and make them the hub of the teaching process, provide them with all facilities they need, and spoil them with entertainment programs and the events calendar.
- AUE chose to focus on services that the university provides (clubs, language centres, IT support...etc).
- ZU found it better to concentrate on its academic programs (offered and to be offered).

To sum up, the universities included in the sample placed more emphasis on product/brand-related posts than on non-brand-related items (135 comments for AUS' brand/product-related posts and only 20 comments for the non-product-related posts for the same university). Accordingly, the users' response was a component of this option. The non-product-related posts did not succeed in attracting the users and gaining their attention and engagement. (see Table5).

Table 5: Differences in users' responses to product and non-product related posts

	AUS			AUE			ZU		
	C	L	V	C	L	V	C	L	V
Product related	135	3037	24236	33	2894	14456	17	2375	2764
No product-related	20	1058	840	13	470	--	6	1255	3640
Total	155	4095	25076	46	3364	14456	23	3630	6404

C= Comments, L= Likes, V= Views

Source: The Authors (analysis data), page9

To determine how well universities were able to satisfy their Instagram followers (RQ3), the authors proceeded with a qualitative analysis of the tracked feedback. The data revealed feedback that can be classified into four main categories: Loving, questioning, criticising, belonging, and sympathising. (see Table6).

Table 6: Categories of users' comments (qualitative results)

Categories	Categories explanation	Tracked Graphics
Loving	Confident remarks that show love and compassion with what the university posts	<p>I am proud to see you shine</p> <p>Happy faces:</p>  <p>Red Heart:</p>  <p>Thank God I wish you a good day! Aren't you the cutest? Hats off AUSers!!!</p>
Questioning	Comments including inquiries about the topic published by the university	<p>Can I apply?</p> <p>When will you open the registration?</p> <p>Is the Ph.D. program opening soon?</p> <p>Is the discount including a GPA of less than 2.80?</p>
Criticising	Negative comments showing no satisfaction or criticism about what is posted by the university.	<p>No parking!!!</p> <p>Why ABET now, I am already graduate!!!</p>

Enthusiasm and belonging	Positive comments that show bonding and unity with what is posted by the university.	Fire:  Thumb up:  Zayed built UAE and we will continue what he began. Zayed! Peace on his soul!!
Sympathising	Positive comments showing compassion with what is published by the university.	Happy New Hijri Day!!! May God bless him!! Good Luck!!!

Source: The Authors (analysis data), page 9

While "loving", "belonging" and "sympathising" refer to positive comments that show love, compassion, and unity, "questioning" refers to comments including inquiries about topics published by the university.

Positive comments focused on product/brand-related posts by admiring the cultural and entertainment events that were marketed through Instagram. Particular attention has been noted for publications on students' participation in university events and competitions as well as their interaction within their educational environment.

"Criticising" refers to negative comments showing no satisfaction or criticism about what is posted by the university. Authors note that the criticism was small in terms of comments' number and all revolved around issues related to the improvement of the place.

Discussion

The results reveal that the use of social media as a tool for integrated communication and marketing purposes has reached a degree of maturity and professionalism by the universities of the emirates included in the sample of 2019, compared to the situation in 2017. The authors indicate that usage was generally intense in terms of the number of posts tracked as well as the number of followers. About the branding strategies implemented by the sample, the data revealed certain traits. Some attributes are related to the product/brand (colleges, facilities, buildings, advertisements, etc.), and some features are not (the celebration of certain special days in a local context and awareness content as community social services). Besides, the sample focused more on product / brand-related posts than on non-brand / product-related elements. The data outlines the different strategies universities employ via Instagram. The American University of Sharjah focused on student activities while American University in the Emirates chose to focus on services and facilities. Zayed University found it best to focus on its academic programs. The categorisation of tracked feedback revealed five main categories:



Loving, questioning, criticising, belonging, and sympathising. Positive comments focused on product/brand-related posts that admire cultural and entertainment events marketed with Instagram, while criticism has been small in several comments and all revolve around issues related to improving facilities.

The mentioned findings meet with the results of several previous studies focusing on using Instagram for branding and/or managing their relationship with their audiences. Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018) emphasised the pivotal role of followers in enhancing the good image of the organisations and contributing to making its promotional strategic plans successful through social networking sites. In the same context, Mirchandani and Gaur (2019) also mentioned that using social media in businesses allows users to create a better understanding of the audience as well as to manage their relationship with them.

Conclusion

Finally, the central role of social media must be emphasised, not only as a tool for communication, dialogue, and the exchange of views but also in commerce, business, and administration. Instagram has become an effective integrated communication tool that helps improve the overall performance of educational institutions in the world, contributes to the success of their marketing strategies, strengthens the relationship with students enrolled, and attracts more audiences.

Instagram's strength lies in its superior ability to attract followers through images, whether silent or animated, as well as the short and eloquent text that has a great impact on followers and entices them to follow and join (without forgetting the role of HashTags in increasing visibility). This facilitates the practice of linking permanent relationships with customers through the virtual space by applying Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC), and strategic control in the process of communicating with the target audience and encouraging customer interaction, to serve the brand through social media.

With the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, the weight of social media is definitely becoming heavier and heavier and its role as strategic communications and marketing tool will increasingly rise. Thus, a prospective study on the uses of Instagram in other contexts like medical awareness campaigns would be a good addition to the field of scientific research.



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Appendix1. A detailed description of product features

Brand-related	Brand of attribute	explanation	Example of publications
	Announcement for advertising purposes	for Adding an announcement about activities or events or decisions made by the university to make the students' environment seem to be attractive and of great quality.	Selfies' competition organized by the AUS. Announcement of the Libraries' workshops in the AUS. Announcement for a Ballet in the AUS. Post about 40% discount for Al Saada and Fazaa cardholders in the AUE. Post: Register now, or Apply now in the AUE page Post of ABET accreditation got by the college of engineering in the AUE.
	Administrative team	Employees/staff belonging to a different department at the university.	Photos of a graduate student with her project in the ZU. Photo of the admission team orienting new students A video covering the advising activities that the admission and registration team are doing during the first day of classes.
	faculty members	Professors and instructors working in the universities sample	Photo of the new faculty members joining AUS
	students	Using students picture or speeches to advertise for the university	Videos of international students speaking about their experience in the AUS. Students participating in Aqdar world summit2019 from ZU. Students gathered in the AUE cafeteria.

	facilities	Any services that can attract students to desire to embrace the university	Mosaic of photos about the library in the AUS. The photo of students sitting in the cafeteria inside the AUE.
	buildings	Any building from inside or outside that describes the university	Panoramic picture of the AUS from outside Video speaking the residential in the AUS.
	services	Any services offered to students by the universities' sample.	e-services portal announcement for ZU.
	programs	Any announcements about academic programs included in the universities' sample.	-Announcement about new programs for graduates (Master and Ph.D.) in ZU.
Non-product related	- Celebration of certain special days under the local context	Celebration of several events or special days in the year	Photo about Emirate Women's' day showing some staff discussing with female students (no indication to the university unless in the text). Hijri new year announcement with a personalized card including the Logo of the AUE.
	announcements	Any announcement about activities or events that the university is not implicated in	Video about Aga khan award of architecture. (one of the winners are alumni but the video was all about the award). The text congratulated the winner. Post about the death of one of the faculty members in the AUE. Media coverage of the national events and the participation of the UAE in the international conferences and summits (ZU).



		Photos and videos publishing the speeches of Dubai Ruler, UAE Ministers. Coverage of the Youth council activities in the ZU. Announcement of the death of one of the AUE faculties.
Awareness videos	Videos to educate students or Instagram users.	Video about faculties' survival tips shared by the students posted on the AUS page. Video about soft drinks danger posted by ZU.

Source: The Authors (analysis data)