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OF UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

**University Branding.**

**An Analysis of University Services Delivered via the Internet**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to assess how the information can be more easily disseminated on the Web sites of higher education institutions. Marshall McLuhan saw the language developed in a book as a proof in favor of knowledge. "When information comes in contact with another information, the results are sensational and effective". In terms of talent and how fast they adapt, the youth of today, Generation Net as Don Tapscott calls them, have the power to transform the present. They come up with new approaches on collaboration, sharing information and innovation in business and governance from around the world. There is strong evidence that organizations that embrace these new ways of working are more efficient registering a growth and greater success. We selected for this purpose a number of foreign students on master programs (based on the experience they have already) from two prestigious universities Hacettepe in Ankara, Turkey and NUPSPA in Bucharest, Romania, and based on some questions and interviews we set up a strategy for how to improve quality management for university - Web services for students based on their perceptions. We started with the assumption that better e-integration, infrastructure, and Web-services will go to better quality management and from here to better results on intake of international students (with more successful students, research and education of high quality) - assuming that internationalization yield increase higher education quality, public benefit, better competition, better access to funds etc. The SWOT analysis will be the centerpiece of our discussions with the students from those two groups – one from Hacettepe and the second one from NUPSPA.

**Keywords:** e-services; universities; e-learning; Web services

## **1. Introduction**

In today's globalizing world, competition is very intense not only between businesses but also amongst the public institutions. Of course, not all of those are subject to competition but some of them are. The competition between public educational institutions, for example, varies around such issues as the education is an important pole of development for a society, attracting many investments. Among those, universities are an important center of education and one of the most important consequences of the economic change is the fierce competition between them (Gordon, 1999; Lever & Turok, 1999; Mishra & Rolland, 2009; Zhang & Zhao, 2009). The universities especially compete with one another especially for imposing a brand likely to be obtained from those investments. The fact that investment in today's world is active and moving makes this competition all the more severe (Waitt, 1999).

University branding is attracting the attention of university and faculty administrators and the other stakeholders more and more every day. The reputation of a university is a very important factor in

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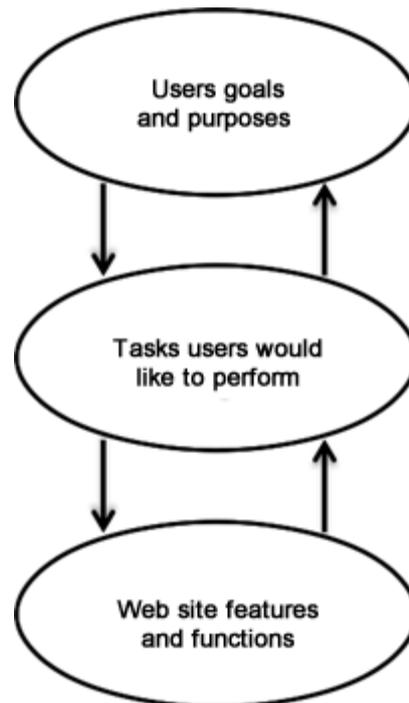
attracting new students and by that, financial and other resources into the university and retaining them there. Therefore, the brand of a university also needs to be managed just like a company brand; otherwise, the brand of a university may be damaged due to the information circulated around through the modern channels of communication (Kerr & Johnson, 2005). Using branding techniques for the universities is increasing more and more because of the national competition in today's local, national and even in the international markets. In addition, the great changes in the social and political texture of the modern society require the universities branding as a prerequisite in the 21st century to be implemented through a public-oriented approach. The commonly accepted duty of universities administrations is to constitute (or to reconstitute, if necessary) conditions of the universities, faculties and departments in the most effective way in order to be able to attract the potential students (Rogerson, 2000).

## **2. Background**

A growing number of Web designers, committed to the principles of user-centered design, seem to understand how to create highly usable, user-centered Web sites. This principle is an approach in designing computer interfaces that places the Internet user in the center of the design effort (Karat & Karat, 2003). User-centered Web sites practitioners strive to improve and increase the usability of the Web site by focusing on the tasks and/or activities that visitors would like to perform when interacting with a Web site. Focusing on users is critical in computer software design interfaces, because a Web site which is appropriate for one user group may be completely inappropriate for other users. For example, the university Website is usually sharing information to the students; only on the admission period it is possible to find on it news that may concern potential candidates. By emphasizing users and their tasks, User-centered Web sites practitioners will create systems that provide the appropriate functionality and are easier to use (Henneman, 1999).

Usability must be the ultimate goal for Web designers. Creating a highly usable Web site means that the Web site matches what the site visitors need and want. Usability as defined by the ISO 9241 (ISO, 1997) standard is "the extent to which a product can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction in a specified context of use." As can be seen from this definition, the concept of user goals is central to understanding usability.

Customer value is a marketing literature concept similar to the usability when considered within a value in use perspective. The value in use perspective emphasizes the instrumentality of products in achieving the customer's goals. As a result, value in use involves an evaluation of the effectiveness of a product within a particular usage context. The work of Woodruff (1997) on value hierarchies is particularly relevant for understanding user behavior online. Web sites are used by its visitors to accomplish their goals – this is a means-end approach to conceptualize the online value that provides a way to explain how the online customers derive value from their usage experiences. Building on the works cited above the definition of online value is:



**Figure 1: Perceived Website value (adapt after Porter, 2005)**

...an Internet user perceived preference and evaluation of that particular Web site features and functions that facilitate (or block) the performance of the tasks that are instrumental in achieving the user goals and purposes associated with the Web site visit.

This model (see Figure 1) of perceived Web site expectation integrates concepts like user centered approach design together with marketing means-end theory. The perceived value of a particular Web site is based on the scope of its visitors in achieving their goals. Likewise the perceptions of the effectiveness of goal accomplishment are influenced by the degree to which the Web site supports the necessary tasks or subtasks the citizen would like to perform in order to accomplish the goal. The user's tasks fulfillment and how effective this process is, is associated to the functions and purposes of that particular Web site along with its specific characteristics. An extension of this model for our study is that user perceptions of Web site value are related to both student and future student expectations regarding what the university Web site should act and what they would like to receive from it – during their online interaction (Vrabie, 2014). The more knowledge the university administrators and Web designers have about the user's goals, the better chance of creating a truly valuable Web site.

Fournier (1998) in a study of how consumers develop relationships with their brands, advances the concept of brand relationship quality as being a multidimensional construct composed of positive affective feelings (like self-connection), behavioral ties (commitment), and cognitions (brand partner quality). This concept is mediated by a number of psychosocial filters with the outcome determining the stability and durability of the consumer/brand relationship and is perfectly fitted to the student-university interaction.

Pedersen, Nysveen and Thorbjornsen, (2012) operationalized the concept dimensions and tested whether customer communities (person-to-person interaction) or personalized Web sites (machine-to-person interaction) were most effective in building brand relationship for hypothetical products. They found that for less experienced consumers, person-to-person interaction is more effective; for more experienced users, personalized Web sites were more effective.

### 3. Methodology

Since the beginning of this university year we formed a focus group composed of 40 students at master programs (20 from the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration in Bucharest, Romania and 20 from the Hacettepe University in Ankara, Turkey) and ask them to analyze and rate the Web site of the faculty where they have studied at the bachelor level. We wanted to find out the level of perceived expectation that students have when interacting with the Web site of their university (table 1). Each of the participants was asked to answer a series of open questions and finally to conclude by presenting a SWAT analyze on that specific Web site.

**Table 1. List of analyzed institution**

University name		Web address
The Bucharest University	Romanian Universities	<a href="http://www.unibuc.ro/">http://www.unibuc.ro/</a>
The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies		<a href="http://www.ase.ro/">http://www.ase.ro/</a>
The National University of Political Studies and Public Administration		<a href="http://www.snsa.ro/">http://www.snsa.ro/</a>
The University of Pitesti		<a href="http://www.upit.ro/">http://www.upit.ro/</a>
The Dimitrie Cantemir Christian University		<a href="http://www.ucdc.ro/">http://www.ucdc.ro/</a>
İzmir Institute of Technology		<a href="http://www.iyte.edu.tr/">http://www.iyte.edu.tr/</a>
Middle East Technical University		<a href="http://www.metu.edu.tr/">http://www.metu.edu.tr/</a>
Bilkent University	Turkeys Universities	<a href="http://www.bilkent.edu.tr/index.html">http://www.bilkent.edu.tr/index.html</a>
Hacettepe University		<a href="https://www.hacettepe.edu.tr/">https://www.hacettepe.edu.tr/</a>
Yıldız Technical University		<a href="http://www.yildiz.edu.tr/">http://www.yildiz.edu.tr/</a>
Ankara University		<a href="http://www.ankara.edu.tr/">http://www.ankara.edu.tr/</a>
Anadolu University		<a href="https://www.anadolu.edu.tr/">https://www.anadolu.edu.tr/</a>
Turkey Ondokuz Mayıs University	<a href="http://www.omu.edu.tr/">http://www.omu.edu.tr/</a>	

We will present in this paper the participants views (and ours as well) of this type of interaction between students and their universities.

### 4. User Experience

The concept of *customer/consumer*, or nowadays, for the purpose of this paper, *user* experience, as a key in branding, predates the Internet (Hock & Deighton, 1989). Defined as a “structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), brand community is definitely

not an Internet-specific phenomenon. Even if this is a fact, Muniz and O'Guinn studied Internet user groups, observing the importance of product-related Web sites in group activities. The user experience is aligned with the brand's values. The "like me" new Web sites feature shows to a specific user that he is not alone; he is into a community made up of people with the same interests. The site experience compels the user through a process of not only registering for an account, email signup, commerce, and submitting odds statements, but also in flying throughout the browsing experience.

For the purpose of this paper, a SWOT Analysis of a Website refers to finding strong points and weak points that could increase or affect both the usefulness of the Web site and the University brand. In Table 2, we presented some of the most common strengths and weakness we have identified during the interviews.

**Table 2. Most common strengths and weakness identified**

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Weakness.</b>	<b>%</b>
Most of the universities have...		Most of the universities don't have...	
daily updates;	92	an online user-counter;	61
the feature to download templates;	77	an events calendar (with <i>join</i> button);	70
history info;	100	possibility to subscribe to a newsletter;	85
on-line libraries or access to international on-line libraries;	100	online advising for students;	92
a search engine;	70	an user-friendly Web site;	69
useful and relevant content;	100	foreign language support;	61
on-line map of the university campus	70	the possibility to make on-line payments;	92
information about the classes timetable	92	pictures with the university facilities (and comments);	85
		information for the international students;	70
		web services for students with disabilities;	92
		links to Funding Institutions and Scholarship opportunities for students;	85
		customized GUI (Graphical User Interface).	100

In our opinion, the weaknesses must be taken into consideration more than strengths, because those are the things that may improve the user experience when browsing the Web sites. A good user experience is leading to an increase visibility of the university name and brand.

"E-transformation" should exceed the expecting an automated computerization of public offices. Universities as a sub-system of general socio-economic systems, is in a dynamic interaction of equilibrium with physical environment, legal system, government policies, and level economic development etc. (Öktem & Aydın 2005).

As it may be seen from the table above, the most common weaknesses (that are missing on high scale on almost all the Universities Web sites that were taken into consideration in this study) are focusing on the idea of Web interactivity: (1) an events calendar with *join* button, (2) online advising for students, (3) the possibility to make on-line payments, (4) pictures with the university facilities and comments, (5) customized GUI. This is, of course, due to the increased level of social media participation among students... but this is showing the students interest in involving into the University activities (1 and 2), in using its facilities (4), and, of course, in rising their own comfort and efficiency (5 and 3).

## **5. Future Trends**

Definitely we shall not use the expression "*Web experience is still in the early stages*" anymore. Since the existence of Web 2.0 (W3C 2005) both marketing creativity and technological developments interact more simply by adding new features to the future Web sites. The experience to date, at the public institution level, focuses almost exclusively on Web tools that are not interacting with the individual user, but with all in the same manner (Vrabie, 2014)... except maybe with some section of the Web sites (e.g. Virtual classes or Virtual campuses) where students may use an individual account. Understanding interaction between users through the Web platform is critical to success (e.g. Facebook, MySpace etc.). Using data mining technics will help the academia to get closer to the students' needs and, by that, to create interactive experience that enhances overall user experience.

Starting with the assumption that better e-integration, infrastructure, and Web-services will go to better quality management and from here to better results on intake of international students, we may anticipate the next move that shall be done... developing high quality Web platforms for students and academia with an increase level of participation for each user to the content of the University Web site (allowing everyone to customize its personal account according to its needs).

## **6. Conclusion**

Despite the strengths of the University Web platforms that were taken into consideration in this paper, there are different weaknesses inherent in traditional Web approaches. The current trend toward blending both posting information on the Internet and Web interaction is a positive direction that needs further attention and study.

Years ago, the Internet provided just another channel for communication... nowadays this is The Channel of communication... Research indicates that brand development can take place as a result of customer exposure to online activities in ways that are similar to the branding effects of off-line marketing activities (Roberts 2007, Kotler 2014). It must be well understood that the students are accessing the universities Web platforms with immediately usable skills for browsing it and a realistic understanding of its role, related of course, to their future.

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