

Evaluating Strategic Marketing in Higher Education through Social Media: A Study with Reference to Saudi Arabia

Khalid A Alotaibi¹ --- Venkata Sai Srinivasa Rao Muramalla²

¹*College of Education, Salman Bin Abdulaziz University, Hotat Bani Tamim, Saudi Arabia*

²*College of Business Administration, Salman Bin Abdulaziz University, Hotat Bani Tamim, Saudi Arabia*

ABSTRACT

In the general education system of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an attractive and potential market for educational services having nearly 75 percent of the students in the total region. As the demand for primary and secondary education increases, the demand for higher education is also increasing in the kingdom with a total strength of 1.7 million students pursuing higher education by the end of 2014. However, the enrollment at the post-graduate level is very low; the Saudi government is planning to diversify the university education and expected to increase the enrollments at a minimum of 5 per cent every year in all the universities located the kingdom. So, there is a need to increase the enrollment of students in the kingdom at undergraduate as well at post graduate levels. However, in United States, among the universities, 95 per cent are adapting all kinds of social media tools; it is unclear if the universities in the kingdom are not realizing the importance of establishing social media networks to reach their potential students for the enrollment in various courses as well as establishing good communication network among the stakeholders of the sector. Even to do so, one institution needs a better social media strategy to attract the students by means of various social media blogs such as, LinkedIn, facebook, Pinterest, Twitter and many other channels. Today, entry of private universities and the institutions offering online educational services in the kingdom are focusing on creating brand value and conducting educational programmes and activities by using virtual communication technologies. Therefore, majority of the institutions of higher education are recognizing the trend of social media usage and attracting prospective students by following and observing such trend all around the world countries. In this context, the present study has an overwhelming objective of identifying the strategy to adapt the social media in marketing of higher educational institutions in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Education services, Social media, Strategic planning, Marketing campaigns, Potential students.

1. Introduction

Social media or social network websites become crucial for communication development in the way individuals and organizations across the globe create a collaborative environment.¹ The reasons to use social media accounts by educational institutions is to provide information on recent campus activities, cultural programmes, sports and extra-curricular activities along with current news and highlights of the institutions. The social media is also useful to create an environment of effective communication among the stakeholders of the institutions. The social networks of educational institutions also helpful in creating different groups of online communities with a common interest of sharing

information about education related issues and about the people they care about. Even, these kinds of online communities are emerging as dynamic platforms for establishing a purposeful communication between the prospective students, alumni and parents who are having some sort of emotional attachments with the institutions' activities. Therefore, all the educational institutions are using the social media and formulating marketing strategies to create brand value and differentiate from their competitors. Having a strong economy and industrial background, the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia is provided with huge infrastructure and information technology facilities and are seeing exciting results from the use of social media network. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an attractive market for education services in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region accounts for 75 percent of total students in the GCC general education system.ⁱⁱ As the demand for primary and secondary education increases, the demand for higher education is also in upward trend with an increasing capacity of universities to 1.7 million students through 2014. The government also expands and diversifies the post-graduate programs offered within the Kingdom and seeks to increase the amount of post-graduate students to 5 percent of all university students. So, there is a need to increase the enrollment of students in the kingdom at undergraduate as well at post graduate levels.ⁱⁱⁱ Meanwhile, every university in United States establishing a unit of social media unit in their campuses as part of their administrative affairs and it is unclear if the universities in the kingdom are not realizing the importance of establishing social media network to reach their potential students for the enrollment in various courses.^{iv} Even to do so, the institutions demanding a suitable social media strategy that can be uniquely designed and planned to optimize the usage of social networking sites. The majority are planning to engage some of the industry professionals who are expertized in marketing of educational institutions and dedicated to create a strong brand image of the institutions.^v However, apart from educational institutions, many service oriented businesses are failing online with a simple reason of understanding the purpose of social media in a wrong way of approach.^{vi} Many campaigns in the markets are also failing because of failure in saying right things to the right people. Among the several reasons, the major issue of using the social media is of choosing a receptive audience. For instance, an educational institution has 30,000 students on campus, but only 2,000 are having accounts in specific social media like Twitter and Facebook. Among these students the regular followers of the social media networks is around 80 per cent to the total. Whatsoever, social media is becoming a game-changer in marketing of higher education, where the marketers are using the social networks in communicating and interacting with their prospective students.^{vii} With this introduction, section II of this paper is to provide the status of social media networks in Saudi Arabia, section III focus on evaluating social media strategy that can be effective in marketing of higher educational institutions and section IV has the conclusion.

2. Social Media in Saudi Arabia

The nature of instantaneous connectivity of social media and the high range of applications available in the social networking platforms generating more interests in people of the kingdom to access social media. According to industry analysis,^{viii} by the end of 2014, Facebook occupied the top position in the world and become the first social media network crossed the milestone of having 1.35 billion active accounts, Twitter ranked 5 with 284 million and Tubmlr has moved to 230 million users on their site. According to Shareaholic Social Media Traffic Report,^{ix} the two popular social network websites Facebook and Pinterest are recognized as the more potential sites in creating a powerful platform to the marketing firms as well as the other kinds of information publishers. Of the total traffic among social media network websites in September 2014, nearly 30 per cent of referrals are driven by the leading eight major sources which is nearly 17 per cent for the same period last year. As shown in table 1, the social media traffic compared among the various networks year-over-year, the starting three networks as shown in the table has increased their share of traffic. Even, these three sites have raised their share of visits to nearly 50 per cent for the total 13 months. However, the rest of the players for the same period have recorded with a decline in their network traffic.

Table-1. Social Media Traffic Referrals (September 2013 – 14)

Social Media	September 2013	September 2014	Change from Sept'13 – Sept'14. (Percentage & Percentage Points)	
Facebook	10.37%	22.36%	115.63%	11.99pp
Pinterest	3.68%	5.52%	50.07%	1.84pp
Twitter	1.17%	0.88%	-24.97%	-0.29pp
				<i>Continue</i>

Stumble Upon	0.56%	0.41%	-26.49%	-0.15pp
Reddit	0.26%	0.18%	-30.56%	-0.08pp
Google+	0.04%	0.07%	57.02%	0.03pp
You Tube	0.29%	0.04%	-87.27%	-0.25pp
Linkedin	0.07%	0.04%	-47.37%	-0.03pp

Note: The overall traffic and percentage of share of visit for the networks.

Source: The Shareholic Content Marketing Blog. (Data for the period from 200,000+websites from nearly 250 million unique visitors.) Website Accessed 25 January 2015. <http://www.ofelio.com/>

The usage of social media among the world regions by the year 2013, East Asia is recorded highest with 37 per cent of total users followed by North America with 11 per cent of social network users and only 4 per cent of total share is represented Middle East region. Among the Arab countries, Saudi Arabia has an average of 31 percent social media penetration by July 2014 which is more than the world average of 27 percent. Even the trend in internet usage by the end of June 2014, the number of internet users worldwide was 3.04 billion of which 0.6 per cent share is in Saudi Arabia.^x With less than 20 percent of population living in rural areas, Saudi Arabia's social media has unsurprisingly grown massively in 2013 with a penetration of 51 per cent to total population, and this growth has had a direct implication on its usage in the Kingdom. In a research^{xi} on status of social media in Saudi Arabia mentioned that those who are using mobiles to access social networking websites are tremendously increasing during the last 5 years. The study has identified the number of users of social media is increasing for Facebook and Twitter and LinkedIn is behind in the race. Those who are using Facebook in the Kingdom were 6 million in 2012; and it is touched 7.8 million in 2013, of which 5 million were accessed through mobiles. It is also noted that there are 73 percent of users for twitter who are accessed the social network by using the mobile phones. In the figures and analysis disclosed by The Social Clinic stated that the penetration rate of internet users in Saudi is highest in the world.^{xii} Table 2 shows the details of social media usage in Saudi Arabia. Majority of the internet users are of facebook and twitter. In the kingdom, about 150 million tweets are done in a month, of which 85 percent were posted in Arabic language with majority of them tweeted on Thursday, Friday and Saturday of the week. Average time that Saudi internet users spend each day through a desktop or laptop is nearly 5 hours, with mobiles it is of more than 3 hours, where as the average time spending by Saudi's on social media per day is of nearly 3 hours.

Table-2. Social Media Usage in Saudi Arabia, 2014.

Social Media	Percentages of internet users own an account in social media.
Any Social Network	94%
Facebook	89%
Twitter	77%
Google+	75%
Instagram	33%
Linkedin	31%

Source: Slideshare.net, slide number 130 of 183.

According to the findings of a study published in Saudi Gazette recently,^{xiii} those who are using Facebook, 74 percent were men and mostly belong to the age group of between 26 and 34. In comparison of social media usage among the provinces in the Kingdom, 46 per cent of total Facebook users are in Riyadh province followed by 28 per cent registered are belong to Jeddah. With regard to different languages used in posting the tweets in the kingdom, 49 percent are in Arabic language to the total of 25 languages generally used by the tweeters.^{xiv} As shown in the above table 2, Facebook and Twitter are the popular social networking sites and LinkedIn became unpopular compared to other social networking links. All universities in the kingdom are having the accounts in one or more social network websites in the kingdom.

3. Social Media Strategy in Marketing of Saudi Higher Education










Since Kingdom was established in 1932, higher education system is having a rapid transformation. At present by the end of 2014, nearly 1.8 million students completed studies at various universities and institutions of higher learning in comparison to only around 8,000 in 1970.^{xv} There are 25 public universities and 27 private universities and other institutions offering nearly 3200 programmes at various levels such as junior college, bachelor, diploma, master, doctorate and fellowship programmes scattered services with around 2400 departments and specializations.^{xvi} In the year 1975 the Ministry of Higher

Education was established. According to Academic Ranking of World Universities 2014^{xvii}, four universities in the Kingdom are ranked among the top 500 universities. King Saud ranked 151 among top 200 world universities followed by King Abdulaziz University ranked 201 among top 300 and King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals and King Abdullah University of Science and Technology ranked 301 and 401 among top 400 and 500 universities in the world.

As universities in the kingdom find the ways to turn the attention of students across the world, successful marketing strategy has become increasingly important for institutions. Universities formulate strategies to differentiate themselves from competitor institutions. Successful marketing only can help with increasing enrollment, expanding fundraising capabilities, and other outcomes. As social media began popping up everywhere, there has been talk of using it to benefit the academic field. Institutions that prepare, represent and organize a unified message in social media only can achieve a competitive advantage in hiring and maintaining loyalty among the stake holders of the community.^{xviii}

Among the various types of marketing channels the educational institutions are adapting such as emails, search engine optimization, event marketing, press releases, online ads, direct mail, print display ads, sponsorships, mobile marketing, webinars, radio ads and television ads; social media is having a significant role. Apart from the purpose of communicating with the stakeholders, all the universities registered with social media networks for the purpose of news distribution, to recruit students and faculty, to raise funds from the donors and other research agencies and societies, to diffuse incidents and situations.^{xix} As shown in table 3 the data of social media usage among the top 5 universities in Saudi Arabia^{xx} has been provided. Ranks are given basing on the usage of social media among the selected universities which represent how the peer institutions are using social media. To clarify here that any university which is marked either at rank 4 or rank 5 in the table is expected to be focused more on more academic events and are become more information source rather being an active platform. In case of less concentrated in engaging its communities and stakeholders, then no matter how well-designed and planned their websites and it will not be having any interest.^{xxi}

Table-3. Social media and its usage among the Top 5 universities in Saudi Arabia.

University & Usage Social Networks		 King Saud University	 King Abdulaziz University	 King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals	 King Faisal University	 Umm al-Qura University
	Likes:	113,713 (1)	64,111 (2)	35,696 (3)	10,073 (4)	2,745 (5)
	People Talking:	2,107 (1)	2,056 (2)	456 (3)	36 (5)	403 (4)
	Followers:	124,256 (2)	187,537 (1)	15,093 (4)	70,238 (3)	365(5)
	Tweets:	20,049 (2)	29,483 (1)	2,791 (4)	3,454 (3)	430 (5)
	Views:	15,583 (2)	2,856 (3)	336 (5)	39,745 (1)	478 (4)
	Members:	23570 (1)	1,677 (4)	23243 (2)	482 (5)	3,453 (3)

Note: Ranks of social media usage are given in parenthesis.

*Statistics current as of 14.01.2015 only as per the knowledge and idea of authors in data collection.

Source: Social network websites and blogs of selected universities.

Even, few universities are mentioned in the above table for the purpose of the present study, every institution in the kingdom is adapting the practice of using any kind of social media; still there is a need to realize the return on investing in technology and other infrastructure that is required for the establishment of Facebook or Twitter accounts. All universities and other institutions in the kingdom has to answer the questions as how much referral traffic did the institution website page generate from social media channels? How active are institution's social platforms, and is the follower/fan count growing? Are the

posts or Tweets being shared, liked, and retweeted? How many links has it generated? How many times was it shared? Which social network the institution most plan on investing in? How much the institution is spending time on social media? etc., are some of the questions the higher educational institutions in the kingdom should evaluate on timely basis. In fact, social media has revolutionized how universities and colleges communicate. In the United States, among the top colleges using social media,^{xxii} Harvard introduced a concept called *virtualvisitas* for its students to administer the admissions and other academic activities through social media experience. The average number of tweets for admission of various academic programmes through the social media is recorded at 500 tweets and the students who joined in through this programme are nearly 82 per cent which is highest since from the beginning of the programme in 1973. Stanford, one among the top ranked universities in the United States also using social media for the purpose of research and its related activities. Princeton's wealth of Campus Media permitted its students and staff to share the news events and campus activities through social media and webcasts. Above all, these trends obviously considered to be relied on students pursuing higher education and as consumers of social media apart from the other stake holders of the institutions. This kind of tendency represents that the potential students are joining in the social networking websites and finding enough time to share their experiences online. Therefore, an effective social media strategy is required for the higher educational institutions in Saudi Arabia in order to differentiate themselves from among 60 institutions. Hence, following issues has to be evaluated before formulating an effective marketing strategy for the higher educational institutions to use the social media in a more effective and efficient ways:

3.1. Prepare to Get Social

Create a social media team to plan and organize a suitable strategy for the effective utilization of social media and its continuous improvements leading towards the generation of great content and information on institutional values and the image. The team aims at managing the social media system to link with other systems of the educational institutions such as public and community relations and automation of system administration in coordination with recent available technologies.

3.2. Choose the Audience

Institutions should know the target audience before selecting or choosing a social media. The social media is useful to reach the target audience and it will show the path to reach them in more elaborative ways. Initially the institutions have to recognize the potential students and other stakeholders who belong to different kinds of segments such as demographics, interests, values, opinion and locations. However, all the institutions have information about their target audience which includes past, present and potential students, those who applied for admissions, family members, teachers and other communities of educational purposes. To satisfy the needs and demands of each segment, every institution has to identify a suitable social media.

3.3. Monitor Social Media

In the emergence of search engine technology in the World Wide Web, the authentication of information and recorded conversations in various social networking websites does matters more in bringing institution address before the internet browsers. This helps to know about what people are saying, do people likes the institution, is an event organized is a hit and whether they are happy by your admissions process etc. Negative feedback some time can be the best intelligence the institutions can gather about to improve the admissions and enrollment of students.

3.4. Planning for Content

Registering with social networking websites and accessing the accounts in those networking sites is a primary task to enter the world of social media. The content of the institutions' information is the main source for tweeting on issues related to the institution. Even a video, poster or updates of any content in institutions' social media is a major drive to speak on by the social network communities.

3.5. Measure the Efforts

The primary goal of any institution adapting social media is to raise the number of admissions through social media campaigns, but only measuring Facebook fans and Twitter followers are only the means in achieving institution's goal or objective. Hence, awareness and attention among the stakeholders

of the institutions is an essential element in measuring the social media. For example, if one institution has 20,000 who are following any one of the institutions' social media, and the total number of accounts registered in social media of the institution together has 300,000 followers, obviously the total expected reach of target audience will be 320,000.

4. Conclusion

Now days, the usage of social media in educational services is creating the opportunities to share the information on current developments and the market for this kind of services is also rapidly growing across the world. The reports on higher education industry reveal the fact that the total amount of higher education market around the world is about \$43 billion by the end of 2013 and is expected to reach nearly \$66 billion in 2019 with a compounded annual growth rate of (CAGR) of 7.5 per cent during the period. At international context, the higher education sector is highly focused on trends and technologies in social media. Majority of the institutions are formulating the strategies to create associations and communities of themselves in social media. In the expectations of the industry, nearly 75 per cent of the learning platforms are creating using information technology to facilitate the social media as the primary tool to educate the students. In Saudi Arabia, number of educational institutions both from the public and private sectors are competing in the usage of social media. The competition is growing to get the students admitted in to their institutions. The existing social media and other internet based social networks and blogs in the kingdom are not only offering better solutions to the higher educational institutions in reaching their target audience but also concentrating on social media connectivity with the major stakeholders of the higher education sector.

References

- ⁱ“The Use of Social Media in Arab Countries: A Case of Saudi Arabia”. Springer Link. Accessed 3 January 2015. http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-3-642-36608-6_13
- ⁱⁱ“Education Sector in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia”. United States Saudi Arabian Business Council (USSABC) – Education Sector Overview, 2009. SABC. Accessed 11 January 2015. http://www.us-sabc.org/files/public/Education_Brochure.pdf
- ⁱⁱⁱ“Investing in the Saudi Education Sector”. Alternative Research Group – GCC Education Industry, Alternate Research. Accessed 4 January 2015. <http://alt-research.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/PE-note-GCC-Education-Industry-ver-11.pdf>
- ^{iv}HR Hanover Research. Accessed 5 January 2015. <http://www.hanoverresearch.com/insights/why-marketing-strategy-matters-in-higher-education/?i=food-beverage>
- ^vKiley, K. “A New Brand.” Inside Higher Ed. Accessed 15 January 2015. http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/10/04/former_corporate_marketers_taking_communications_roles_on_university_campuses; Armini, M. “Beware Higher Ed's 'Mad Men'.” Inside Higher Ed, May 27, 2010. <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2010/05/27/armini>
- ^{vi}A Fathom Publication. Lorman. Accessed 5 January 2015. <http://www.lorman.com/resources/ultimate-guide-to-marketing-an-educational-institution-with-social-media-100304WP>
- ^{vii}“Using Social Media Marketing in Higher Education”. QS Top Universities. Accessed 5 January 2015. <http://www.topuniversities.com/blog/using-social-media-marketing-higher-education>
- ^{viii}“Leading social networks worldwide as of December 2014”. ranked by number of active users (in millions). Statista – The Statistical Portal. Accessed 11 January 2015. <http://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>
- ^{ix}“Social Referrals year – over – year”. Shareaholic. Accessed 16 January 2015. <https://blog.shareaholic.com/social-media-traffic-trends-10-2014/>
- ^x“Internet Users in the World”. Internet Live Stats. Accessed 15 January 2015. <http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/>
- ^{xi}“Facebook and Twitter gain more users in Saudi Arabia”. Al Arabiya News – Digital. Accessed 6 January 2015. <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/media/digital/2014/01/09/Use-of-mobiles-in-social-media-on-the-rise-in-Saudi-Arabia.html>
- ^{xii}“Global Digital Statistics 2014”. Slideshare. Accessed 8 January 2015. <http://www.slideshare.net/wearesocialsg/social-digital-mobile-around-the-world-january-2014>
- ^{xiii}“Use of Mobiles in Social Media on the rise in KSA”. Saudi Gazette. Accessed 5 January 2015. <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.region&contentid=20140109192016>
- ^{xiv}“Social Media in Arab World: Influencing Societal and Cultural Change?”. Accessed 3 January 2015.
- ^{xv}“About Saudi Arabia”. Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Washington DC. Accessed 13 January 2015. http://www.saudiembassy.net/about/country-information/education/higher_education.aspx
- ^{xvi}“Ministry of Higher Education”. Saudi Arabia. Universities and Colleges. Accessed 13 January 2015. <http://www.mohe.gov.sa/en/studyinside/Government-Universities/Pages/default.aspx>
- ^{xvii}“Academic Ranking of World Universities 2014”. Shangai Rankings. Accessed 6 January 2015. <http://www.shanghairanking.com/World-University-Rankings-2014/Saudi-Arabia.html>
- ^{xviii}“Harnessing the Power of the University Brand: Five Steps to an Effective Branded Facility”, Perkins+Will. Accessed 16 January 2015. <http://www.perkinswill.com/files/Branding%20for%20Higher%20Education.pdf>
- ^{xix}University Communications and Public Affairs. Accessed 14 January 2015. <http://ucpa.ucsd.edu/resources/social/social-101/>
- ^{xx}“QS World University Rankings”. QS Top Universities. Accessed 17 January 2015. <http://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2014#sorting=rank+region=71+country=77+faculty=+stars=false+search=>
- ^{xxi}“How Do Universities Use Social Media Successfully?”. ZD Net. Accessed 13 January 2015. <http://www.zdnet.com/article/how-do-universities-use-social-media-successfully/>