

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ONLINE STRATEGIES IMPLEMENTED BY FOUR UNIVERSITIES FROM ROMANIA

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Abstract

The online promotion strategies play a crucial role in the positioning of higher education institutions on the global market. In this context, this paper aims at revealing the pillars of online strategies developed by four universities from Romania in order to outline their competitive identity both on the national and international educational services market. The research methodology involved in-depth analyses of these universities' online strategies, by embedding their websites accessibility, design and interactivity, organization of content, SEO results, as well as their presence in social networks. The results emphasize relevant gaps in what concerns each university online promotion strategy, but also they lead to the formulation of best practices for the improvement of these strategies. The managerial implications are focused on proposals for decision makers reading the ways to promote the academic brands through multiple communication channels.

Keywords: Higher education, online promotion, search engine optimization, social networks

Introduction

In the higher education sphere, information and communication technologies (especially Internet) have an extraordinary impact on everything from teaching and learning; institutional management, administration, and finance; to external relations; library services; research production and dissemination; and student life (Guri-Rosenblit, 2009).

The results of globalization in higher education field involves the use of information technology (IT). IT facilitates communication, permits efficient storage, selection, and dissemination of knowledge and allows providers to offer academic programs through e-learning (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

As teachers are using the university website's facilities (such as information search, Alumni community, blogging etc.) in order to engage their students in various academic topics (O'Hanlon, 2007), the maintenance of updated institutional websites becomes a necessity. Moreover, being considered opportunities for educational communication and mentoring, social networks may become another technology that had great potential for improving the higher education experience (Roblyer, 2010).

A research conducted by specialists in this field (Gomes & Murphy, 2003) explores how academic institutions use Internet technologies to provide relevant information to their prospective students, as well as how prospective students use the same technologies in their decision making process regarding the selection of a university.

A previous study focused on the online promotional strategies of higher education institutions (Micu et al., 2009) highlight the fact that the universities from Western Europe develops real marketing strategies in the communication with the students or other stakeholders, providing different facilities.

According to Sebil (2013), globalization and the convergence of technologies has made the role of distance education in educational institutions to take on new and radical dimensions. Thus, the institutional websites of the universities must pay the adequate attention to the promotion of distance education.

A recent research (Sula & Banyar, 2014) analyses the functional possibilities of microsites within the higher education system, considering that the microsites represent a suitable communication tool for addressing the target group, represented by the prospective and current students; this approach enables a wide range of up-to-date subjects covering various areas of marketing communication.

Universities' websites accessibility and implementation

In this section, we will make a comparative analysis of the following sites:

University	Site	Abbreviation
"Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați	www.ugal.ro	UGAL
"Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași	www.uaic.ro	UAIC
West University of Timișoara	www.uvt.ro	UVT
University of Bucharest	www.unibuc.ro	UB

Table 1: Sites of the universities under analysis

„Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați has an obsolete website, slightly unkempt. Site's description (its name) is in accordance with the university, it comprises a description, it has an information function, not very conclusive, taking into consideration the typology of the institution.

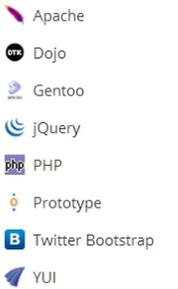
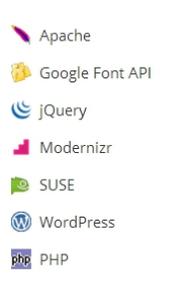
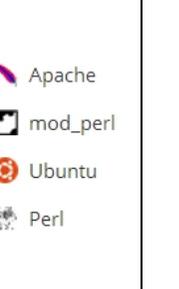
“Ugal.ro” server is found in Romania and it has implemented different technologies, web server Apache, Java script Framework Dojo and jQuery, programming language php, and so on.

Ugal.ro has a normal loading speed of 0.95 second (for a band of 80.53 kB/s); for improving the loading time, it uses a compressing of “gzip” type. The site might have a faster loading speed if it would implement a caching method type, might use less CSS and JavaScript files and would not use nested tables. The site optimizes correctly and quickly, both for the mobile variant, as well as for mobile devices.

“*Alexandru Ioan Cuza*” University of Iasi website, at a first sight, has a modern and simple, well organized and structured aspect. The name of the site comprises university’s designation, but it does not comprise a presentation of the site.

The server of the University of Iasi is found in Romania and it implements vital technologies for its operation, web server Apache, Java script Framework jQuery, Word Press, programming language php, and so on.

Uaic.ro is loading in a long time, 3.32 seconds (for a band of 40.6 kB/s), due to using many CSS and JavaScript files, and it does not use a gzip type compressing method.

	UGAL	UAIC	UVT	UB
Designation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Site description	Yes	No	No	Yes
Server situated in Romania	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Technologies implemented on server				
Loading time	0.95 second(s) (80.53 kB/s)	3.32 second(s) (40.6 kB/s)	0.59 second(s) (42.56 kB/s)	0.45 second(s) (56.66 kB/s)
The server uses a “caching” type method	No	Yes	No	Yes
The site uses a gzip type compression	Yes	No	No	Yes
The site does not use “nested tables”, which can slow down pages rendering	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
The site does not use too	No	No	No	Yes

	UGAL	UAIC	UVT	UB
many CSS files (more than 4)				
The site does not use too many JavaScript files (more than 7)	No	No	No	Yes

Table 2: Summary of the accessibility and implementation instruments for the sites of these four universities

For improving the loading speed, the site uses a caching type method and it does not use nested tables.

This site optimizes correctly for the computer version; in case of mobile devices, for small displays, some buttons are not aligned correctly.

West University of Timișoara has implemented a modern website, with an attractive, well-structured and organized aspect; it has as title the abbreviation of the university name; the site's description is missing. "uvt.ro" Server is found in Romania, and it has implemented different technologies, Apache web server, JavaScript Framework jQuery, php programming language and so on.

The page of the university of Timișoara has a very good loading time, 0.59 second (for a band of 42.56 kB/s) and it does not use nested tables method; however, the loading speed might be improved in case it would use less CSS and JavaScript type files, and it would use methods of caching type and compressing of gzip type.

The site optimizes correctly for the computer variant, but it has not implemented a mobile devices optimization system.

The site conceived by the University of Bucharest, at a first sight, is simple and modern, with an aspect which the users are familiar with, the name of the site being the same with the name of the university, and it has incorporated a relevant description.

The University of Bucharest server is found in Romania and it has implemented the main technologies, which allow an adequate operation.

"unibuc.ro" Site is loading very quickly, 0.45 second (for a band of 56.66 kB/s), due to implementing the methods of catching type and compressing of gzip type on the server; the good loading speed is due also to the presence of a small number of CSS and JavaScript file types; it does not use "nested tables" method.

Unibuc.ro optimizes correctly and quickly, both for mobile and mobile devices variants.

Design and interactivity

Ugal.ro, even though it has an obsolete aspect, is performed in a professional, elegant style, inducing the impression of reliability to the

viewers. The site anchors the identity of the university, by inserting the logo and favicon.

	UGAL	UAIC	UVT	UB
The design complies with the tendencies	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
The design is simple and well liked	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
The theme of the site is well chosen, without creating a discomfort to the user	No	Yes	Yes	No
The site comprises the university logo	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
The site comprises the favicon	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
The site comprises the banner	Yes Static type	Yes Slideshow type	Yes Slideshow type	Yes Slideshow type
The site comprises a photo gallery	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
The site comprises a newsletter	No	Yes	No	No
The site comprises also other instruments of interactivity	No	Yes There is a system for a virtual tour within the university	Yes There is a system for a virtual tour within the university	No

Table 3: Summary of sites' design and interactivity instruments for these four universities

The site has implemented a banner, a rectangular form with 1015 with 270 pixels dimensions, being a classical banner, without animation. Due to the large area it covers and to its positioning, it supposes a high impact.

„Dunărea de Jos” University web page has implemented a photo gallery. The site has no interactive instruments.

The *University of Iași* web site complies with the simplicity rules, the colors being personalized in a professional, elegant style, inducing to the users the perception of seriousness. The colors have a large impact on people, managing to inspire them, to create a visual comfort, making them want to stay on the respective page in order to surf for information, etc.

The site's web design supports the identity of the institution, by incorporating the logo and the favicon within the site.

Within the site, it can be found a banner with a rectangular form, with the dimensions of 1174 with 367 pixels, being animated and well positioned; the banner increases the site's promoting.

The site has incorporated interactive instruments, a newsletter system and an application for making a virtual tour within the university.

West University of Timișoara has implemented a site which complies with the simplicity rules, the colors being personalized in a modern, professional style, inducing to the viewers the perception of innovation. The colors have a large impact on people, managing to inspire them, to create a visual comfort, making them want to stay on the respective page in order to surf for information and to make them want come back.

The site's web design supports the identity of the institution, by incorporating the logo and the favicon within the site.

Within the University of Timisoara site, it can be found a banner with a rectangular form, with the dimensions of 960 with 268 pixels, being animated with very suggestive images, leading to a successful promotion. The site has no newsletter system, but it comprises an application for performing the virtual tour within the university.

The university of Bucharest site complies with the simplicity rules, the colors being personalized in a stylish style, inducing the perception of professionalism to the viewers. The colors have a large impact on people, managing to motivate them, but at the same time, it creates a visual discomfort, the colors being too dissonant and with dark tones. The site has not the same theme of forms and colors for all site's pages, which might create confusion to the user. The site's web design supports the identity of the institution, by incorporating the logo and the favicon within the site. The site has implemented a banner with a rectangular form, with the dimensions of 1015 with 270 pixels, being animated. Due to its large area and positioning, it imposes a large impact.

Organization and contents

All these four sites, it can be easily observed a good organization of the information presented, the user obtaining it by accessing directly or step by step different menus or buttons – links. Within „Dunărea de Jos” and Bucharest universities, a cascade type menu would ease and reduce the access time at the page desired by the user.

A good organization and complete contents can be observed at all these four websites.

Search engines and SEO Indexation

Within this document, we will analyze the position of the websites, within their search on six search engines, according to the following terms:

1. University;
2. Faculty;
3. Studentships;
4. Higher education;
5. Chancellor's Office.

The terms were selected randomly and they have relevance for the typology of the institutions. For each term, the average grade of ten searches will be calculated.

	UGAL	UAIC	UVT	UB
Search for „University”				
<i>Google</i>	3	2	18	1
<i>Yahoo!</i>	27	13	Over 50	1
<i>Bing</i>	Over 50	11	Over 50	1
<i>Ask,</i>	29	Over 50	48	2
<i>AOL Inc.</i>	Over 50	Over 50	Over 50	2
<i>Media</i>	31,8	25,2	43,2	1,4
Search for „Faculty”				
<i>Google</i>	3	Over 50	Over 50	Over 50
<i>Yahoo!</i>	Over 50	16	49	Over 50
<i>Bing</i>	Over 50	28	23	33
<i>Ask,</i>	Over 50	Over 50	Over 50	7
<i>AOL Inc.</i>	Over 50	6	Over 50	Over 50
<i>Media</i>	40,6	30	44,4	38
Search for „Studentships”				
<i>Google</i>	Over 50	1	7	Over 50
<i>Yahoo!</i>	Over 50	38	Over 50	Over 50
<i>Bing</i>	Over 50	33	Over 50	Over 50
<i>Ask,</i>	Over 50	Over 50	Over 50	Over 50
<i>AOL Inc.</i>	Over 50	4	Over 50	Over 50
<i>Media</i>	50	25,2	41,4	50
Search for „Higher education”				
<i>Google</i>	Over 50	Over 50	Over 50	28
<i>Yahoo!</i>	Over 50	Over 50	Over 50	Over 50
<i>Bing</i>	Over 50	48	Over 50	46
<i>Ask,</i>	Over 50	Over 50	43	Over 50
<i>AOL Inc.</i>	Over 50	Over 50	Over 50	Over 50
<i>Media</i>	50	49,6	48,6	44,8
Search for „Chancellor’s Office”				
<i>Google</i>	2	13	Over 50	Over 50
<i>Yahoo!</i>	22	Over 50	Over 50	Over 50
<i>Bing</i>	Over 50	Over 50	Over 50	Over 50
<i>Ask,</i>	Over 50	28	Over 50	Over 50
<i>AOL Inc.</i>	Over 50	Over 50	Over 50	Over 50
<i>Media</i>	34,8	38,2	50	50

Table 4: Average of positions in the search engines for different terms

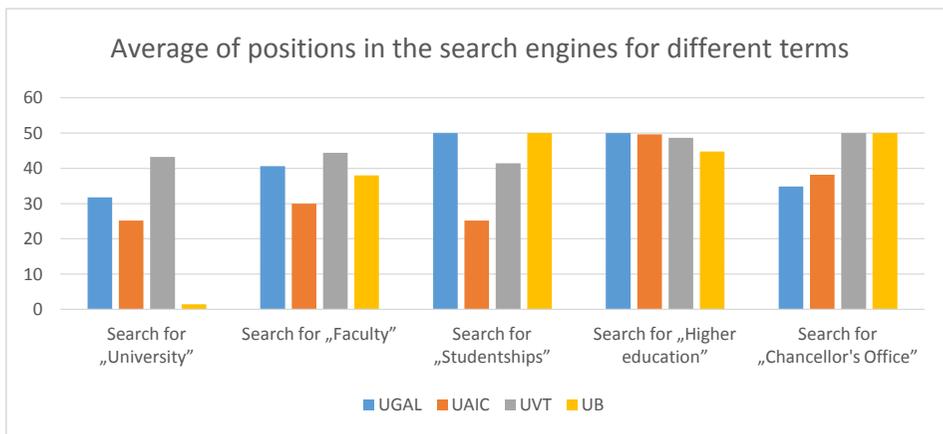


Figure no. 1 - Average of positions in the search engines for different terms

Within SEO analysis, it is highlighted the importance of being in accordance with using key words. In order to improve the high rank chance in the search results, with a certain key word, it should use the most important key words constantly in the contents, title, description, H titles, internal links and back links.

	UGAL	UAIC	UVT	UB
Key words (one word)	for (30) from (28) project (10) faculty (8) partners (8)	from (12) for (10) in (9) studies (9) research (8)	uvt (10) admission (4) parvan (3) all (3) PhD (2)	and (6) theology (3) university (2) social (2) law (2)
Key words (two words)	For project (8) Posdru project (7) Parteners for (7) Posdru axis (5) Dunărea jos (5)	Alexandru Ioan (4) University studies (3) Ioan from (3) Alexandru University (3) University PhD (3)	Virtual tour (2) See all (2) uvt Vasile (2) Vasile parvan (2)	
Key words (three words)	For posdru project (7) Partners for project (7) Posdru project axis (5) posdru dmi axis (4) Dunărea jos university (3)	Alexandru Ioan University (3) Ioan Cuza from (3) Alexandru Ioan Cuza (3) Cuza from Jun (2) Economics business administration (2)	uvt Vasile parvan (2)	

Table 5: SEO Analysis

The bolded words are relevant sites. This analysis was done with the help of the site <http://www.woorank.com/>. We can conclude that the

University of Iasi website uses enough key words relevant for the institution. On the contrary, the other universities should introduce more key words, which would be relevant to the site's contents.

Promotion through online socializing networks

	UGAL	UAIC	UVT	UB
 Facebook Likes	29	56	241	49
 Facebook Shares	94	71	130	148
 Facebook Comments	13	24	34	40
 Twitter Backlinks	3	2	35	7
 Google™ +	8	300	301	11
 StumbleUpon	0	24	1	0

Table 6 Activity indices within online socializing sites

These four universities have implemented accounts on the main online socializing sites, from Table 6 resulting that the universities of Iași and Timișoara have bigger activity than the other two, within on-line socializing websites.

Conclusion and proposals

In conclusion, we can say that the internet has become a space useful to all persons, not only for spending their free time, but also at work and anywhere else.

Through information, people have learned that what is new is not also impossible, having the possibility to exchange opinions with other persons in what concerns their interests.

At the same time with the information development, companies started to grow, a great advantage being the internet as it developed its “technologies”, the volume of information starting to be increasingly larger. This led to an increased online promotion.

The universities should allocate budgets for online promotion campaigns, introducing banners on sites with high traffic also on partners' pages.

Ugal should implement a modern design, a cascade type of menu in order to facilitate quick accessing of the desired page by the user, without being forced to enter on intermediary pages. The University of Galati would increase its promotion within the site if it would implement interactive instruments, as for example an application for virtual tours; a newsletter system should be also implemented.

Alexandru Ioan Cuza University should implement methods for reducing access time, for correcting the optimization for the mobile devices.

The University of Timișoara should implement a system of optimization for mobile devices and a newsletter system.

The University of Bucharest should change its colors theme, as it can lead to user's eyesight fatigue, should implement the same type of design on all pages, a cascade menu type, in order to facilitate quick accessing of the desired pages by the user, without being required to enter into intermediary pages. For a focused promoting, it must implement interactive instruments, like an application for virtual tours; it should also implement a newsletter system.

I propose that these four universities must introduce more key works, and to optimize the SEO adequately. An intensive activity on the online socializing networks must bring a higher number of users.

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