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**SOCIAL MEDIA AS A SOURCE
OF INFORMATION ABOUT UNIVERSITIES
AMONG CANDIDATES FOR STUDIES**



SOCIAL MEDIA AS A SOURCE OF INFORMATION ABOUT UNIVERSITIES AMONG CANDIDATES FOR STUDIES

Magda Stachowiak-Krzyżan PhD Eng

Poznań University of Economics

magda.stachowiak@ue.poznan.pl • ORCID 0000-0002-4093-2238

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Summary

The main goal of the article is to indicate the importance of social media in the process of seeking information about universities by potential candidates for studies. To realize the set goal, quantitative research was carried out among a group of high school students, using the auditorium survey technique. The youth questionnaire was collected via the questionnaire for information sources used in the decision-making process about the choice of the future educational path. The conducted research confirmed that social media are one of the most important sources of information about universities, just after personal sources such as family and friends.

Keywords: social media, e-marketing, student candidates, generation Z, marketing communication, scientific institutions

Introduction

Changes observed in the socio-economic environment of the country, globalization and dynamic development of modern technologies to a large extent imply both the activities of universities, as well as affect changes in behavior and the decision-making model of candidates for studies (Michalak and Mruk-Tomczak, 2018). An attractive educational offer, properly communicated to future students, may be a competitive advantage of universities in a changing environment (Hall and Witek, 2016). At present, secondary school graduates - candidates for studies - belong to the youngest generation, called the "Z" generation. (Mruk-Tomczak, 2019). This generation has been brought up in the virtual world. Young people live both online and offline. Constant and unlimited access to the Internet makes it the most important communication channel and source of information about the surrounding world (Kucharski and Ligocka, 2012; Kubiak, 2017). Young people are one of the most numerous and active groups of various social networking sites — e.g. Instagram, Snapchat, Tik-Tok.

The popularity of social networking sites in Poland is still growing, more and more organizations undertake activities called social media marketing. This also applies to universities whose situation on the educational services market forces them to behave in an entrepreneurial way (Koszembr-Wiklik, 2015; Pabian, 2016; Koszembr-Wiklik, 2018). The market saturation and the decreasing number of students resulting from the demographic decline mean that universities have to compete more and more strongly for future students. Faced with the choice of higher education institutions, which to a large extent may determine the type of future professional work, communication in the virtual world is necessary. At the same time, the activity of Polish universities in social media and their influence on the choices of future students is a relatively new and at the same time very dynamic research area. What is more, the foreign studies conducted so far show that the activities of universities in social media influence the image of the university, especially among students - according to them the candidates for studies admit that the presence of the university in social media and information published on

their official Facebook profiles and the way of interaction with users influenced the final decision about which university they chose (Washenko, 2013). Worldwide, the universality of using social media in university communication activities is much greater (Chan & DiValdi, 2018; Rutter, Roper & Lettice, 2016; Peruta, Helm & Benson, 2015; Hanover Research, 2014) moreover, rankings of universities assessing their activities in social media are being prepared (e.g. The Higher Ed Social Media Engagement Report 2019, The UK University Social Media Rankings). (Chwiałkowska, 2014).

Social media, thanks to their diversity, give universities various opportunities, starting with promotional activities among potential candidates, as well as fulfilling the function of raising the prestige of universities, informing those interested in planned events, reporting on organized events, expanding knowledge in the selected field, enabling contact with current students and graduates, or engaging students in the life of the university (Ryńca and Suporek, 2018).

For the purposes of the article, literature studies, analysis of available Internet sources and quantitative own research were conducted using an individual interview questionnaire.

The aim of the article is to present the role of social media in the decision making process of candidates for studies. The aim of this article is to describe the characteristics of Generation Z and its activity in social media, as well as to identify the importance of social media in decision making processes concerning further education of future candidates for studies at universities. The results obtained in the research process will be helpful in developing suggestions and recommendations for people professionally involved in designing effective marketing activities in social media for universities including employees of marketing departments of scientific institutions. Considerations are conducted on the basis of literature sources, market data and quantitative research of the author.

Generation Z characteristics

Teenagers, graduates of upper secondary schools, are currently included in the generation Z (also known as the generation C from the word "connected"), i.e. people who are expert at dealing with the Internet, fluently use smartphones and dedicated mobile applications. Speaking of the generation Z in terms of time frames, there is no clear consensus among researchers and sociologists. Some people assume that it is a cohort that begins after 1990, while others take 2000 as the cut-off date (Kostyńska, 2019). Despite these discrepancies, it can undoubtedly be said that this is a generation of people who are different from their predecessors. Individuals belonging to particular cohorts grew up in different social, economic or technological conditions, witnessed various breakthrough events in the country and in the world (e.g. political changes in Poland, Poland's accession to the European Union, terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, etc.) which determine significant differences between generations. They will manifest themselves, among others, in the possession of different values, different perspectives, different visions of the future and views on reality. Sociologists over the years have distinguished 5 generations, using age as the main criterion: general generation, baby boomers generation, generation X, generation Y, and the youngest generation Z. It should be added that practically for each generation there are discrepancies in the range of dates determining the time period in which the persons representing the generation are included, they concern both the upper and lower boundary. The general generation includes all persons born before 1946, i.e. before the end of World War II. The baby boomers generation are the baby-boomers born in the years 1946-1964. Generation X, often referred to as the stable generation, is the persons born in the years 1965-1981/6. Generation Y is the generation of the Internet, persons born in the years 1984 to 1995/2000. The youngest generation Z is the generation of new technologies, which includes, as already mentioned, persons born after 1990. The most important differences between the three youngest generations, i.e. X, Y and Z are presented in Table 1.

Tabela 1. Różnice między pokoleniami X, Y, Z

| GENERATION X | GENERATION Y | GENERATION Z |
|--|--|--|
| GENERAL INFORMATION | | |
| Called "x" | Called "y", "Millenials" and "3F — food, fashion i friend" | called "generation C (connect, communicate, change)" and "digital natives" |
| Born 1965–1981/86 | Born 1980/82–1995/2000 | Born 1990/2000– ? |
| brought up in times of political, economic and political change | grew up with the development of technology, witnessed the opening of borders (Poland's accession to the EU) | born in a world without borders, limits and limitations |
| building and maintaining relationships through personal contacts | building relationships both "face to face" and in a virtual environment | communicate with people from the entire world via devices with the access to Internet (so-called "citizens of the world") |
| authority of elderly people, teachers, parents | authority of pop culture and television stars | authority decline |
| loyal, stable life | strongly oriented towards experience and impressions | inventive, creative, open-minded, with many interests |
| TECHNOLOGY AND INTERNET USE | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> mainly read and receive e-mails, active on news portals they want to be up-to-date with changes in the world, they are in their infancy in social media, resistant to new technologies and electronic gadgets. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> open to new technologies, look for personalized content, co-create content with other members of the community, share content with others, active in social media, multitasking and multiscreening, i.e. they perform several activities at once and use more than one device at the same time. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> addicted to technology, simultaneously living in an online and offline environment, constantly connected to the network, Image culture, interesting content — it attracts their attention, Instant generation, they want to have everything "here and now", they don't like to wait. |
| PROFESSIONAL AREA | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> want to be quickly independent, less educated, who has worked for one employer for many years, "they work for the sake of life" an important balance between work and personal life. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> less independent, their main goal is to desire a luxurious lifestyle, frequently changing jobs, are strongly committed to soft skills and personal development, professions such as: coach, blogger, leader. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> entering the labour market, well educated, mostly having or wanting to have a university degree, very good command of English, which they learn from an early age, remote working and multitasking, jobs : youtuber, influencer. |

Source: own elaboration.

Generation Z in social media

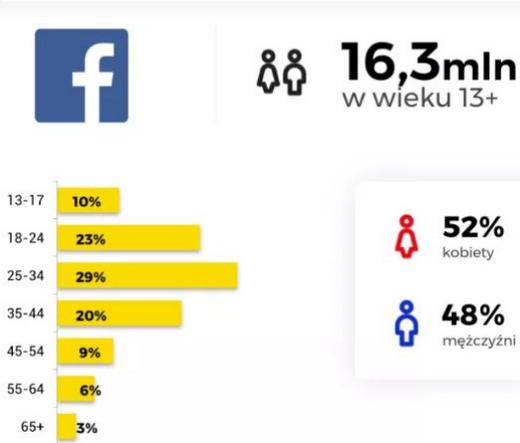
Young people, as already mentioned, are dependent on their smartphones. Young people live both online and offline. Almost every teenager in Poland is online every day (96%), regardless of gender, age or type of school (CBOS, 2018; Nask, 2019, Pyżaski et al, 2019). The Internet is used primarily for entertainment (listening to music, watching videos, playing games), socializing (through communicators and social networking sites) and educational purposes (doing homework, preparing for tests and tests and expanding knowledge, developing hobbies and interests). According to the survey, every day young Poles use the Internet on average for 4 hours and 12 minutes a day (Nask, 2019). So much time devoted to virtual space is intensified by the popularity of the phenomenon of multiscreening, i.e. using multiple screens at the same time. Watching television and simultaneously using a phone or a computer is a popular phenomenon among the representatives of the Z generation. 55% of people under 24 years of age check their social networking sites when watching TV (Grabiwoda, 2019).

Using social media is one of the most popular ways for teenagers to spend time online. Young people use social media regularly, several times a day, devoting no small part of their day to them. Speaking about social media in Poland, it is worth paying attention to the demographic structure of their users. In the vast majority of portals, the most numerous age group are young people aged 16–24, which is confirmed by the following statistics (see Fig. 1, 2, 3). Teenagers most often use smartphones (94%), laptops (58%) and desktop computers (29%) to connect to the network (Nask, 2019).

Representatives of the Z generation use social media for many purposes. For teenagers, the Internet is a space for entertainment and a center of social life, as well as a source of many benefits — from broadening knowledge in a specific field, to the possibility of creating one's own image or searching for identity.

Figure 1. Users of Facebook.pl by age and gender as of May 2018

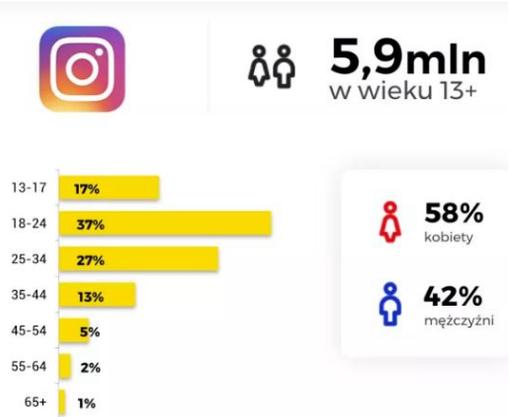
Facebook users in Poland — May 2018



Source: Górska, Z., (2018), Polish users of social media at the end of 2018: Messenger and Instagram grew faster than Facebook.

Figure 2. Users of the Instagram portal by age and gender as of May 2018

Instagram users in Poland — May 2018



Source: Górska, Z., (2018), Polish users of social media at the end of 2018: Messenger and Instagram grew faster than Facebook.

Figure 3. Users of the Tick Tock application by age and gender as of December 2018



Source: Luzak, B., (2019), Who are the Polish users of Tik Tok.

The role of social media in the process of making decisions on the choice of future educational path among young people is growing (Buchnowska and Woźniak, 2013). Social media are now becoming one of the most important sources of information for the young generation including information about universities.

Communication activities of universities in social media

Recognising the growing role and importance of social media, universities in Poland are not indifferent to the trend. More and more often in the communication activities of higher education institutions, activities in particular social networking sites play an important role. What is more, the decreasing number of students and growing competition between universities causes that currently it is not the university that chooses the candidates, but the candidates select and choose the university. Young people are more aware nowadays, because they have access to a lot of information that allows them to compare and evaluate the fields and universities they are interested in, ready-made rankings, whose credibility and importance is growing year by year, or many opinions of current students and graduates. During the decision-making process, personal interests are equally important nowadays as well as the curriculum offer, the level of teaching and the perspective of good employment and high earnings after graduation and a specific university.

The use of social media in marketing communication by universities may be more effective than in the case of many other business entities due to demography, i.e. the same age and education of the largest group of social media users and candidates for studies, as well as changing preferences of young people regarding sources of information on the educational path (Buchnowska, 2013).

Table 2 presents the types of social networking sites used by Polish universities in their marketing communication activities.

The vast majority of the social networking sites used support primarily marketing activities (social media marketing) related to building the image of the organization, presentation of its offer and attracting new customers. The basic advantage of social media is the possibility of two-way communication with the environment. The information provided to communities gathered around universities in social networking sites concerns mainly:

Table 2. Types and characteristics of social media used by Polish universities

| Type of social network | Short characteristics | Example of service | Objectives of higher education institutions' presence on the site |
|---------------------------------|--|------------------------------|---|
| Social network | It enables mutual contact, sharing information and opinions, grouping around issues | Facebook | Image building, community involvement, communication and information |
| Photo service | Allows the users to upload photos, comment on them and evaluate | Instagram, Snapchat, Tik-Tok | Image building, presentation of the university and its offer |
| Video service | Allows the users to upload videos, commenting on them and evaluating them | Youtube | Image building, presentation of the offer, involvement of the community, transmission and acquisition of information. |
| Social network for the employed | It brings together a community focused on professional development, exchange of knowledge and experience within a specific professional group. | LinkedIn, GoldenLine | Recruitment of employees, image building, establishing business contacts |
| Microblog | Internet logbook created on the basis of short entries | Twitter | Image building, information function, building relationships with users, engaging communities |
| Crowdfunding service | Platform to raise funds for implementing ideas, research and other activities. | GoUEP | Assistance in financing projects submitted by students, student scientific circles, employees. Support for the university community |

Source: Own elaboration based on: Buchnowska, D. (2013), Use of social media by universities and students in the light of own research, *Management science*, 2(15)/2013, pp. 36–50.

1. the university itself — its history, tradition, mission;
2. the educational offer — including: fields of study and educational results) and important information about the recruitment process;
3. activities of employees and students — including both scientific activities (obtaining grants, patents) and other activities, such as charity or activities for the benefit of the local community, etc;
4. successes and achievements of universities (e.g. achieved position in the ranking of universities), employees (e.g. holding important positions in the State), students (e.g. sports achievements, international competitions) and graduates (holding important positions in well-known companies);
5. interesting events at the university and beyond — conferences, open lectures, open doors for candidates, meetings with interesting people, business practitioners or cultural and educational events (e.g. scientists' night);
6. curiosities and novelties from the world of science.

Social media as a source of information about universities for candidates for studies

In order to identify the role and significance of the content published by universities in social media for the decisions made by candidates for studies, a research process was carried out. Research of candidates for studies — high school students was aimed at recognizing the role played by social marketing activities in the decisions made by candidates for studies. The following research objectives were set in the process of empirical research:

1. identification of the activity of young people — candidates for studies in social media
2. identifying sources of information on higher education institutions among candidates for studies
3. identifying the usefulness of university profiles in social media
4. evaluation of university profiles in social media by candidates for studies.

The personal scope of the research covered potential candidates for students, i.e. people aged 15–18, studying at a general secondary school in the city of Gniezno. The size of the research sample was 187 respondents¹. The selection of respondents was a purposeful choice among first, second and third grade students of a general secondary school. The spatial scope of the research covered the city of Gniezno. On the other hand, the subject matter of the research was focused on the communication activities of universities in social media. Attention was focused on the profiles of Polish universities in the most popular social networking sites, among them: Facebook, Instagram, Youtube and Snapchat. This choice was supported by reports indicating these sites as the most frequently used by the educational sector for marketing communication and the implementation of social marketing strategies. The temporal scope of the research covers September 2019.

In the quantitative study, the technique of direct interview with the use of a measuring instrument in the form of a questionnaire consisting of 15 questions was used.

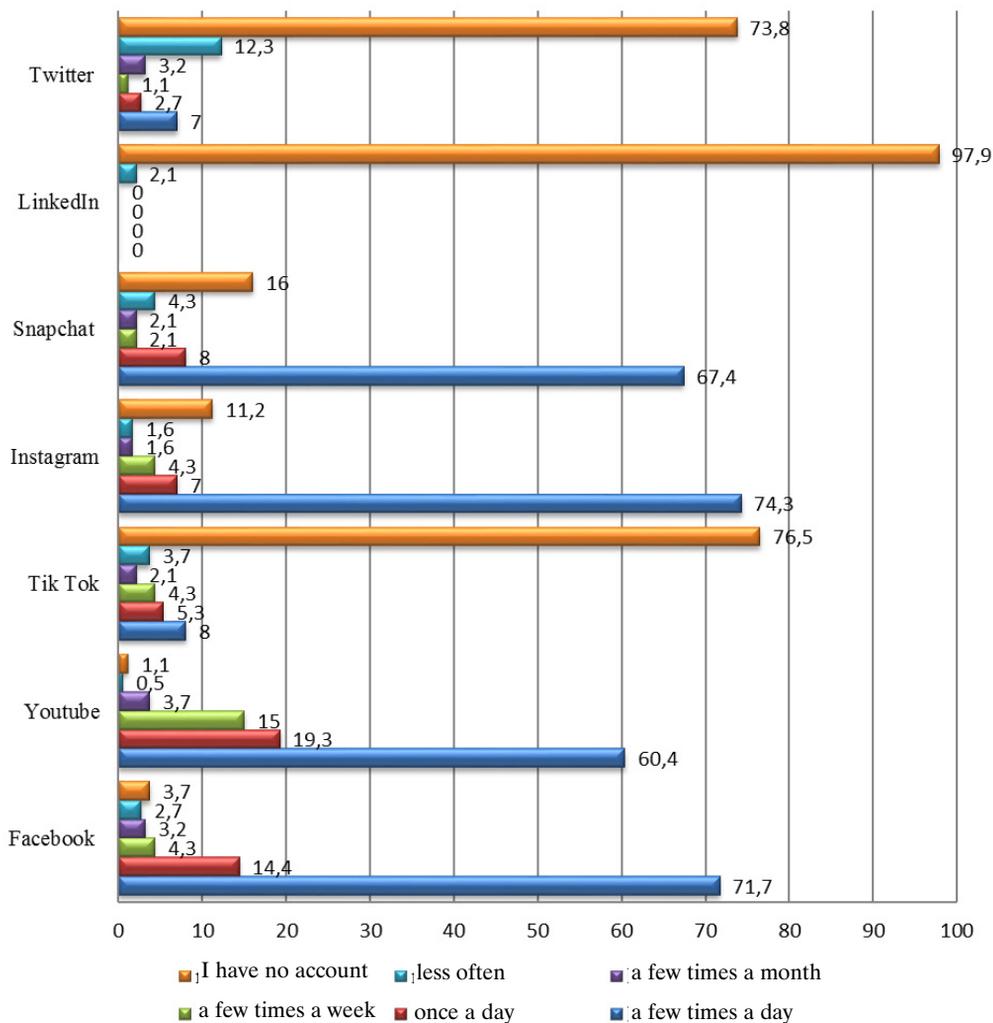
The vast majority of respondents were women (74% of all respondents), the remaining part — 26% men. The respondents participating in the study were young people, aged 15-18 years. They are students in high schools, grades 1, 2 and 3 (for some of them it is a secondary school or a secondary school). A detailed description of the structure of the analysed group, including gender, age, level of education and place of residence, is presented in a footnote².

The vast majority of respondents use the most popular social networking sites very often — several times a day (see Figure 4).

The most popular and most frequently used website is Youtube. Regularly, at least several times a week, 95% of respondents use it. On the other hand, the percentage of people without an account is small — 1.1%.

The second most frequently visited social networking site is Facebook. Nearly 90% of respondents use this website regularly (at least several times a week and more often), and over 85% use it several times a day. A small percentage of respondents, only 3.7%, do not have an account on this site, and therefore do not use it (which results from the fact that most social networking sites require an account to use it).

Figure 4. Frequency of use of social networking sites
 — Facebook, Youtube, Pinterest, Instagram and Snapchat (in percentage of indications)



Source: Own elaboration.

Instagram is the third most popular and frequently used social networking site among young people participating in the survey. It is used on a regular basis by 85% of respondents. The vast majority (almost 75%) of them use Instagram several times a day sharing photos or

viewing content from other users. 11% of respondents do not use the site at all or do not have an account/profile.

In the case of Snapchat, 77% of respondents say they regularly use the site, most of whom use it several times a day. This social medium is not used by every 6 respondents. It is worth noting that it is the only portal listed in the survey that can be used only by means of mobile devices equipped with a camera. This application has no equivalent in the computer version.

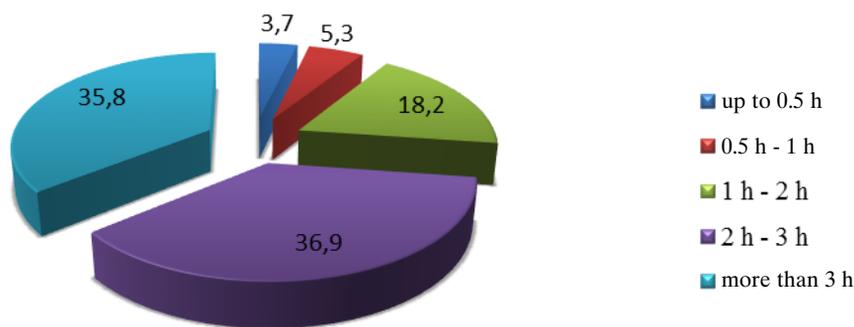
Significant differences can be observed in the case of Tik Tok, Twitter and LinkedIn. These are the least popular social networking sites among the representatives of Generation Z who took part in the survey. The vast majority of respondents do not use these services at all (over 3 of respondents). This may be surprising in the case of Tik Tok, which, according to the latest research, has been named the "most popular" social networking site among young people (Burtan, 2019). In the case of LinkedIn, little interest may result from the profile of this website, which specialises in professional and business contacts, i.e. the area of life which only young people will start in a few years' time, taking up their first gainful employment.

To sum up, the use of social networking sites is a kind of "daily ritual" for young people who like and want to be up to date with information about their friends and the environment in which they live. This was confirmed by the results of research and literature studies. Moreover, media and social networking sites provide also many other information, e.g. current events from Poland and abroad, with which young people want to be up to date. Thanks to mobile devices that accompany young people at every step, the frequency of using the most popular social networking sites is extremely high.

Generation Z representatives participating in the survey spend a relatively large amount of time on the Internet every day using social media (see Figure 5). This is mainly due to mobile devices (smartphones and tablets) with installed mobile applications. This causes that young people use social networking sites during their free time, e.g. at school, on the means of transport or in the shop queue. Over 1/3 of respondents spend more than 3 hours a day on this purpose, and 37% of respondents spend about 2-3 hours on it. Almost every fifth respondent spends 1 to 2

hours a day in social media. These results are reflected in research reports on the Internet and Internet users. A Polish teenager spends 4 hours and 12 minutes online every day. Every fifth respondent indicated that he spends at least 6 hours on Internet activity every day, according to a report on the National Research Institute NASK (2019). The Internet is a space where today's young people live. According to CSO data (2018), 99% of households with children have access to the Internet. 90% of young people use smartphones to connect to the Internet on a daily basis (Nask, 2019). Mobile devices are increasingly becoming one of the main devices to connect to the Internet, not only among the youngest Internet users. In 2018, the number of people connecting to the Internet via mobile devices for the first time was higher than the number of people using computers (IAB Poland, 2019).

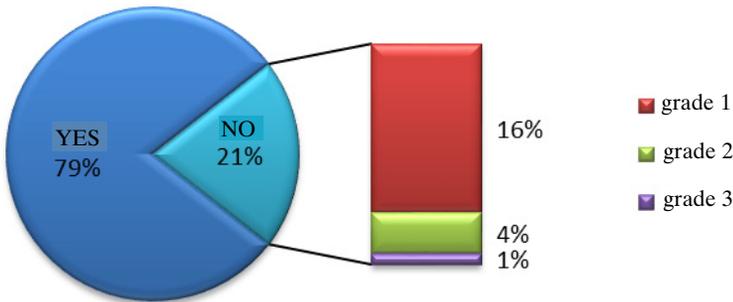
Figure 5. Time spent on social networking sites during the day



Source: Own elaboration.

The vast majority of respondents have already searched for information about universities (see Fig. 6). Every fifth respondent did not do it. Most of them were the youngest, attending the first class of high school, who had just finished the process of recruitment to high school and most probably had not yet thought about their further education path after finishing high school.

Figure 6. Seeking information about universities



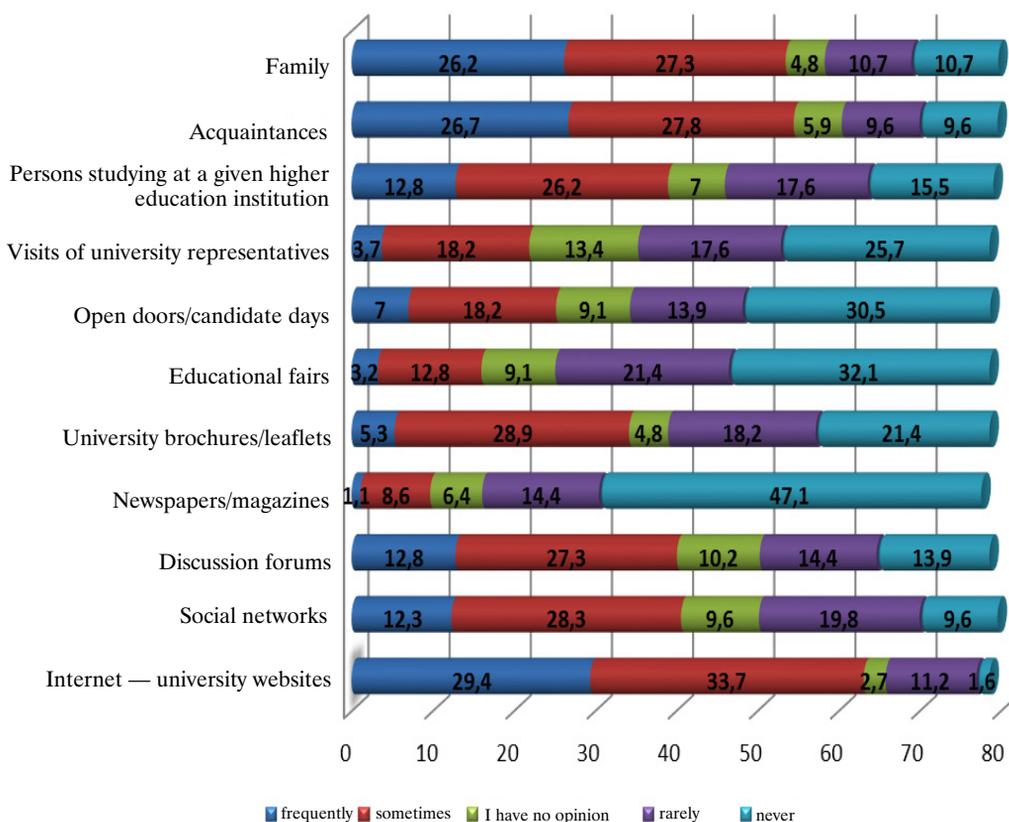
Source: Own elaboration.

The most frequently used source of information about universities by the representatives of Generation Z participating in the survey are Internet sources, including university websites (over 60% of respondents use them sometimes or frequently). The most important source of information is the Internet (Kucharski, Szopa and Halemba, 2017; Drapińska and Gołąb, 2009; Michalak and Mruk-Tomczak, 2018). Family and friends are another very valuable and often used source of information about universities, more than half of the respondents sometimes or frequently use them. Social networking sites, discussion forums and people studying at a given university are also a valuable source of information. These sources are characterized by the possibility to obtain the most objective and reliable information about universities, often on the basis of reliable opinions of people with direct contact and experience. The least popular and used source of information about higher education institutions are newspapers and magazines, as well as regularly organised educational fairs, where universities and their educational offer are presented.

The opinion of the representatives of Generation Z participating in the survey on the profiles of universities in social media is neutral for over half of them (52.4% of indications). At the same time, a large percentage of respondents consider them useful and very interesting (45.5% of answers). For every sixth respondent, social media, including profiles/fanpages of universities, constitute another means of advertising messages. A small percentage of respondents consider these profiles as

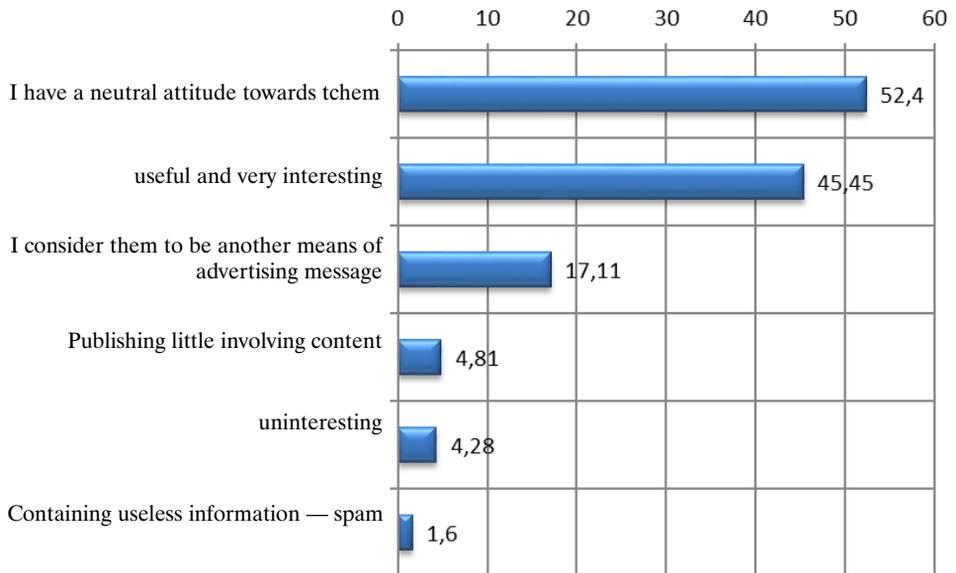
not very interesting (4.3%), publishing useless information — spam (1.6%) or not involving content (4.8%). These results indicate that social media have a high communication potential. Marketing activities carried out in them are not perceived negatively. A positive attitude, which was declared by almost every second respondent, may be interpreted as a kind of invitation from young people to talk to universities through this communication channel.

Figure 7: Sources of information about universities



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 8. Opinion on the profiles of universities in social media

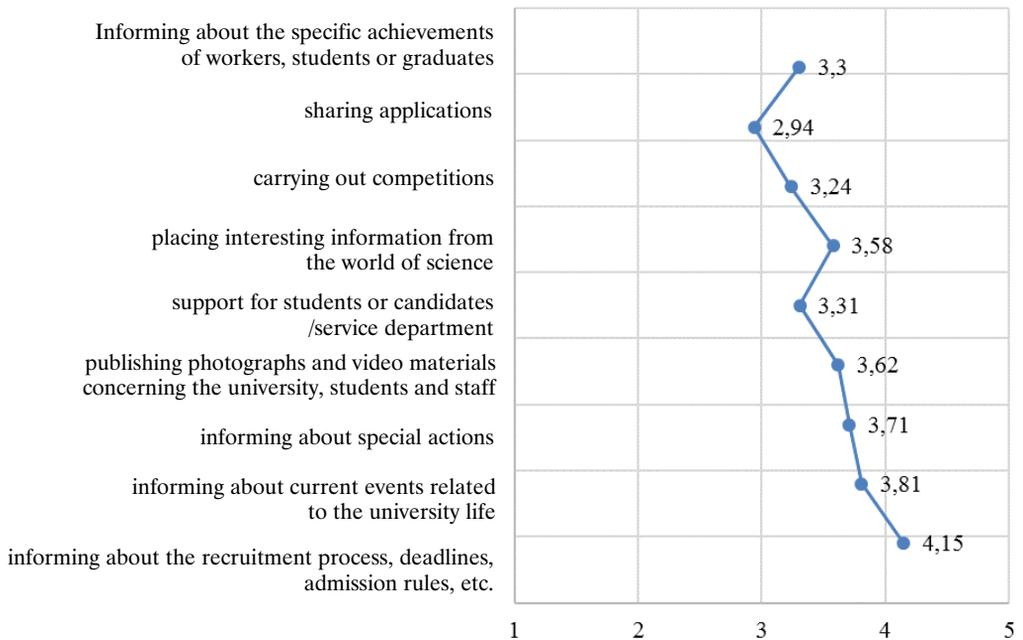


*multiple choice questions, answers don't add up to 100%.

Source: Own elaboration.

Generation Z representatives taking part in the empirical research as the most attractive activities undertaken by universities in social media indicated the information related to the recruitment process, including the terms and conditions of admissions (see Figure 9). Then the respondents indicated information about current events related to the life of the university and information about special actions in which the university is actively involved or which it supports and promotes. The least attractive, in the opinion of respondents, are activities in the form of available applications and competitions conducted on university profiles. At the same time, it should be remembered that candidates for studies are only one of several groups of communication recipients, therefore it is important to identify the most attractive activities in the remaining groups and, on this basis, design the communication strategy of a scientific institution. The activities must be diversified and at the same time coherent, as well as adapted to all stakeholder groups.

Figure 9. The most interesting activities undertaken by universities in social media



Source: Own elaboration.

Summary

Polish universities recognise the need to use social media, not only in the context of building relations with the environment, but also as a place to attract new students, which is confirmed by numerous studies conducted in this area (Koszembar-Wiklik, 2018; Wojciechowska, 2018; Tarczydło i Miłoś, 2019). Most of the best Polish universities have accounts in the most popular social networking sites and conduct vigorous communication activities (Chwiałkowska, 2013; Chwiałkowska, 2014).

The conducted literature studies and empirical research provide the basis for the formulation of observations and conclusions. Despite the limitations resulting from the targeted selection of respondents, the results obtained are consistent with other research conducted in this

area, such as that of the Nask Research Institute. Social media are activities to which young people devote relatively much time every day — up to several hours, it is a natural place for them to develop social contacts, entertainment, education and many other activities. Social media, just behind personal sources of information such as family and friends, are one of the most important sources of information about universities. University websites, social networking sites or discussion forums are places where young people seek information, opinions or recommendations that shape the image of universities and influence the final decisions concerning the choice of further education path. The attitude of young people towards university activity in social media is positive or neutral. A small percentage of young people participating in the survey declared a negative attitude towards them.

Undoubtedly, modern communication channels connected with the Internet and social media will play an increasingly important role in the decision-making processes of the next generations of candidates for studies, and therefore it is necessary to properly use them by the marketing departments of Polish universities in attracting candidates and designing communication activities. Literature studies and the results of empirical research allow to formulate several recommendations for people responsible for designing and implementing communication strategies of scientific institutions:

1. Social media should be treated as one of the university's communication channels with its stakeholders, including candidates for studies.
2. Communication in social media must be carried out with the use of various social networking sites, because each of them offers different possibilities and functionalities, which will be effectively used to achieve synergy effects. Activities within different social networks should complement each other and not duplicate each other.
3. The emerging generation of higher education services is a different cohort of people, significantly different from current students and graduates, which largely determines the forms of communication and communication channels with this group of recipients.
4. Future candidates for studies expect social media coverage of the

recruitment process, but also information about current events at the university and special actions.

5. At the same time, it should be stressed that candidates for studies are only one of the few stakeholder groups with which the university communicates via social media and therefore communication must be differentiated in terms of content, form and channels of communication in order to ensure a holistic approach and reach out to all target groups in line with the idea of marketing 360°.

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¹ The small size of the research group does not allow conclusions and generalisations to be drawn for the whole population. The obtained results may, however, provide some support in making decisions in the context of planning university communication activities in social media.

2 Structure of respondents 1) by sex: 74% women, 26% men 2) by age: 15 years old 21%, 16 years old 34%, 17 years old 25%, 18 years old 20% 3) by level of education 1st grade 50%, 2nd grade 28%, 3rd grade 22% 4) by place of residence village 35%, city up to 20,000 inhabitants 12%, city over 20,000 to 100,000 inhabitants 52%, city over 100,000 to 500,000 inhabitants 1%.

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Magda Stachowiak-Krzyżan, PhD Eng. — Poznań University of Economics — Assistant Professor at the Department of Product Marketing, Poznań University of Economics, Institute of Marketing. Scientific interests: consumer behaviour, social marketing, marketing communication and clothing market in social media. She conducts classes on the Basics of Marketing, Consumer Behaviour, Product Management and Service Marketing.



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