

HOW DOES UNIVERSITY FACEBOOK BRAND TONE OF VOICE AFFECT STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY?

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ABSTRACT: This research studies the impact of universities' brand tone of voice in their Facebook communication with students and the perceptions students develop about their university. This phenomenological research used in-depth interviews and applied social impact theory (SIT). A purposive sample of 15 students from eight Bulgarian universities was collected using a snowball strategy. This study contributes to the existing literature on brand communications and brand tone of voice in higher education in particular. The main findings suggest that the brand tone of voice that universities use their Facebook pages is serious, formal, respectful, and rational. However, those definitions are loaded with different connotations. A respectful university sounds bureaucratically polite; a rational university is one that views its current students as a source of income. In adherence to social norms, students expect their university to speak in a serious and formal manner on Facebook. However, they find rigid communication and bureaucratic courtesy disrespectful. From practical perspective it can be assumed that universities need to abandon strictly formal, distancing, and non-inclusive brand tone of voice and their publicistic style and one-way communication.

KEYWORDS: brand tone of voice; university community; higher education institutions; Facebook communication, Bulgarian universities

Introduction

How does university brand tone of voice on Facebook affect current university students' perceptions of their university? Pressed by increased competition for students, talented faculty (teaching and research), and external funding, universities are increasingly adopting brand communications to develop a well-established brand (Wilkins et al., 2015). Relatedly, Waeraas and Solbakk (2009) suggested that in highly institutionalized HE systems, universities tend to conform their brand communications to dominant values, policies, and practices. Other studies stressed the potential for brand communications to differentiate universities from their immediate competitors (Mampaey, 2018). As social media has become omnipresent it has allowed universities to both publicly communicate their brand promise's authenticity and to encounter backlash when they appeared disingenuous or threatened institutional norms (Pringle & Fritz, 2018). Therefore, a university's reputation is vital to grow the audience of its Facebook page (Brech et al., 2016). However, frequent lower-quality content limits engagement with the university Facebook page (Lund, 2019). Clark, Chapleo and Suomi (2016) stated that social media engagement affects the perception of the quality of university-student relationships.

However, little research has explored brand tone of voice in a higher education context. Brand tone of voice invigorates the personality of a brand and communicates the human identity of the brand. Rutter, Lettice and Nadeau (2016) stated that the personality of an HEI brand is built on the context of language and communication, which impact the brand image of the university. The linguistic perspective is that a brand tone of voice develops through the linguistic styles or registers to convey the organization's personality at every stakeholder touchpoint (Delin, 2005). In brand management, the brand tone of voice is considered *how* a university communicates and increases the understanding of its personality and the public's identification with it (Kohli & Yen, 2020). Barcelos, Dantas & Sénécal (2018) noted that how "brands communicate with consumers can be thus decisive in shaping consumer attitudes and determining whether the relationship will progress beyond the initial encounter" (p. 61). In the case of higher education, a university and its current students negotiate the value of their relationship, which reflects the distinctiveness of the HEI. Although these studies confirm the importance of the brand tone of voice for communicating the brand personality in the business context, there is a lack of understanding of how the brand tone of voice on Facebook affects current students' perceptions of their university. Therefore, this research has the following research objectives:

1. To study the importance students assign to university communication on Facebook
2. To examine how universities communicate with their current students, and
3. To investigate the influence of the university brand tone of voice in its Facebook communication on the perceptions of current students.

Specifically, this research aims to provide a better understanding of brand tone of voice on Facebook in a higher education context. The significance of the current study helps to establish the brand tone of voice as a building block of university brand personality. The findings of this research have important implications for HEIs in conducting effective brand communications in their social networking sites for humanizing their brand and strengthening the university identification of current students. In what follows, we present the theoretical framework along with a review of relevant literature. Then, we describe the methodology of this phenomenological study and present the detailed results. Finally, we discuss our findings and draw conclusions about the impact of brand tone voice in Facebook communications on student perceptions about the university.

Theoretical framework and literature review

Social impact theory

This research used social impact theory (SIT) with a particular focus on immediacy. The theory explains how social influence changes individuals' behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs when interacting with others at the interpersonal, group, or sociocultural level (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Clarity, diversity, and lack of communication filters and barriers build immediacy (Rosette et al., 2011). Therefore, social impact increases proportionally to the immediacy of the communicators. Source immediacy is the psychological closeness to people or organizations that are viewed as similar to those perceived as different. The strength of a relationship is "the amount of time, emotional intensity, intimacy, and reciprocity that exists between [communicators], and it determines the diffusion of influence and information" (Perez-Vega, Waite & O'Gorman, 2016, p. 309). Thus, brand tone of voice has the potential to bring a university and its current students closer. However, discrepancies in it would deepen the understanding gap between them.

Brand tone of voice

Brand tone of voice has been studied primarily in the integrated marketing communications literature. A distinctive brand tone of voice is considered a vital ingredient of a brand's personality because it "is always distinguishable and identifiable by the customer" (Higgins, 1995, p. 38). The tone of voice reinforces the brand values and provides customers with clues about the brand's identity. For example, a bureaucratic tone of voice makes a brand appear impersonal and distant (Chernatony & Christodoulides, 2004). It signals consumers through the choice of words, which represent the brand personality (Koller, 2007). Additionally, a tone of voice can indicate belonging to a particular community. Thus, the tone of voice predetermines how a community speaks, writes, comprehends communication, and signifies belonging. Therefore, a proper tone of voice is critical to improve relationships with key publics of an organization. It helps the organization engage in a natural communicative exchange that is perceived as such by both internal and external audiences (Sweetser & Kelleher, 2016).

Facebook as a communication platform

Social media platforms play a crucial role in the communication system of a university. They play a vital role in the zero-moment of truth for prospective students and are a central communication playground in a current university student life cycle (Chininga et al., 2019). In most parts of the world, Facebook still takes the lead as the most popular social media platform among universities and the general public. Universities use it to communicate, engage, and build community (Brecht et al., 2016; Fährnich et al., 2020) and do social marketing (Clark et al., 2016).

Generation Z

Generation Z students have now entered university. This generation knows no world without social networking sites (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). This reflects the generation's expectations of a university to communicate in a way that is similar to how they communicate among themselves. Members of Generation Z want to have their opinion heard and considered. They value dialogue, not monologue. A dialogue mediates the acceptance of differences of opinion with the institutions in which the generation is a member (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Therefore, strictly hierarchical relationships and communication are hardly the most effective way to interact with the students of Generation Z. In this sense, a formal tone of voice could affect the understanding of the brand personality and in communicating the human identity of the brand.

Methodology

This phenomenological research focuses on the meanings and perceptions current students make of their university's brand tone of voice in its Facebook communication with them. The study used semi-structured in-depth interviews to gain deeper insights and interpretations of the "experiences, attitudes, perceptions and beliefs related" of the participating students (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019, p. 2) with the phenomenon studied. In addition, Nielsen Norman Group's four-dimensional model of brand tone of voice was used. The model contains four dimensions of brand tone of voice: 1) funny vs. serious, 2) formal vs. casual, 3) respectful vs. irreverent, and 4) enthusiastic vs. matter of fact (Moran, 2016).

Participants

A purposive sample of 15 Bulgarian students from eight universities was obtained using snowball sampling. To minimize subjectivity and increase validity, the researcher included data sources from different universities, educational degrees, and specialties to diversify the views of students. Burgas Free University, Varna Free University, and South-West University "Neofit Rilski" each had three representatives. Two students were from the Agricultural University of Plovdiv. The rest of the universities had one representative each. Facebook was the focus of the research because all 52 Bulgarian HEIs have an official Facebook page. Additionally, Facebook is the most popular SNS among 97% (3.8M) of Bulgarians in the country (Kemp, 2021). Of the 15 interviewees, seven were undergraduates, seven were graduates, and one was a doctoral student. They were registered in eight different programs: agronomy, architecture, logistics, primary and preschool education, psychology, business management and entrepreneurship, digital marketing, and tourism economics. Ten interviewees were women and five were men. Most of the interviewees (n = 13) were representatives of Generation Z and two represented Millennials.

Table 1.
Profile of interviewees

Interviewee	University	Specialty	Program	Age	Gender
Interviewee 1	Agricultural University of Plovdiv	Agronomy (Viticulture) and Organic Production)	Bachelor	23	m
Interviewee 2	Agricultural University of Plovdiv	Agronomy (Viticulture) and Organic Production)	Bachelor	20	m
Interviewee 3	Burgas Free University	Primary and Preschool Education	Master	33	f
Interviewee 4	Burgas Free University	Software Engineering	Bachelor	22	m
Interviewee 5	Burgas Free University	Law	Master	23	m
Interviewee 6	Varna Free University	Architecture	Master	21	m
Interviewee 7	Varna Free University	Architecture	Master	19	m
Interviewee 8	Varna Free University	Architecture	Master	21	f
Interviewee 9	Naval Academy "Nikola Vaptsarov"	Logistics	Bachelor	21	f
Interviewee 10	New Bulgarian University	Architecture	Master	19	f
Interviewee 11	Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski"	Psychology	Bachelor	21	f

Interviewee 12	South-West University "Neofit Rilski"	Business Management & Entrepreneurship	Bachelor	21	f
Interviewee 13	South-West University "Neofit Rilski"	Business Management & Entrepreneurship	Bachelor	23	f
Interviewee 14	South-West University "Neofit Rilski"	Digital Marketing	Master	23	f
Interviewee 15	University "Prof. Dr. Asen Zlatarov"	Economics of Tourism	Doctoral	32	f

Note. The table presents the interviewees' student profile: university, specialty, program, age, and gender.

Procedures

The 15 Zoom interviews were conducted in Bulgarian during the last week of April and the first week of May 2021. The average duration of the interviews was 36 minutes. There were two sets of questions. The first set asked demographic questions related to affiliation, program, major, age, and gender. The second set of questions focused on students' experience with and perceptions of how (brand tone of voice) their university communicates with them on Facebook. The questions were pilot-tested with four students with different majors from four different universities. Any ambiguities in the formulation of the questions were edited. By applying thematic inductive coding, the codes emerged naturally. All codes were recoded, and recurring themes emerged from the experiences of the interviewees (Roulstona & Choi, 2018) and configured narratives. The last stage allowed the main themes to crystalize. Thematic saturation was achieved by assessing the *base size*, the *duration*, and the *new information threshold*. It benefited the research because it "applies to contexts in which an inductive thematic analysis is used, where emergent themes are discovered in the data and then transformed into codes" (Guest, Namey & Chen, 2020, p. 2). To retrospectively calculate saturation, a base size of four interviews, a run size of two, and a new information threshold of $\leq 5\%$ were applied. The research reached thematic saturation with 15 interviews of 23.

Table 2.

Saturation of interview data

Interview #	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	...	Total
New themes per interview	11	8	10	7	8	7	5	2	4	2	2	1	1	1	0	1	0	70
# Base themes				36	42%	19%	17%	8%	6%	3%								

Note. The table presents the number of themes, which emerged from the interviews and the point of data saturation.

Findings

1. University Facebook communication is vital for closing the relationship chasm between the university and its students.

For most of the interviewees (n = 11; seven women and four men; six bachelor's students, four graduate students, and one doctoral student), it was very important that their universities communicate with them on Facebook and how they actually do it. They indicated three main reasons. First, for them, Facebook is the standard communication medium. It is "the easiest way the university can reach me" (Interviewee 7). Second, they did not consider traditional media such as email and telephone as appropriate communication channels. "I reject email as a way of communicating. Rather, it is a means of information, but not of communication" (Interviewee 1). Third, universities isolate themselves from students by not communicating on Facebook. They provide some information on Facebook and leave students to deal with it. As a result, a relationship chasm opens and divides current students from their HEIs. "Our university has built a wall between itself and us" (Interviewee 11). However, four interviewees (two undergraduate female students and two graduate male students) did not find it important for their universities to communicate with them on Facebook. For the only millennial female student, an email or a telephone call is sufficient to communicate with the university. The second female student clarified that it she thought it was pointless for a university to reach students on Facebook unless it was providing valuable information directly related to students. One of the two male graduate students thought that Facebook communication degrades the institution. "It was not serious for an HEI to

communicate with its students on Facebook” (Interviewee 4). The second male student indicated that communication with professors was more valuable than communicating with the HEI itself. Unfortunately, the represented universities communicate asymmetrically with their current students on Facebook, despite the importance for most students. “Many of my fellow students perceive the university Facebook posts as something one-directional” (Interviewee 4) that serves its own needs. Universities post the same content from their websites on Facebook without reformatting it. The website content hardly meets Facebook’s length and structure requirements.

2. Universities Facebook communication is one-directional and hierarchical.

Stylistically, the two dominant styles that Bulgarian HEIs use to ‘communicate’ on Facebook are the publicistic style and the official business style. Eleven interviewees indicated that their HEIs’ Facebook pages resembled information boards or electronic newspapers. They primarily posted news from their organizational websites related to the university itself, but of little importance to students. Therefore, Facebook communication is considered strictly hierarchical and rigidly formal. Emojis and GIFs could soften this rigidity but need to be appropriate for university-student relations. Most interviewees (n = 13) expect to feel equality and respect in their university’s Facebook communication with them. They easily distinguish between genuine and respectful address and bureaucratic salutation in their HEIs’ tone of voice.

3. Current university students perceive brand tone of voice as bureaucratically polite, negligent, and noncommunicative.

Interviewees perceived the brand tone of voice of their universities on Facebook as serious, formal, respectful, and rational. However, a respectful university prompted a bureaucratic-politeness connotation for most of the interviewees. A rational university is one interested in getting students’ fees. “To be honest, sometimes I have the feeling that my university simply wants to take our money because it sees us as a source of income” (Interviewee 13). For most of the interviewees (n = 13), the tone of voice of their HEIs must be serious and formal. “There is no way for a university, as an academic organization, to address its students informally” (Interviewee 1) because “when you talk with someone, many barriers fall” (Interviewee 12). However, for the others (n = 2) the use of a serious and formal tone of voice distances a university from its students and weakens the bond between themselves.

Table. 3
Brand tone of voice of universities on Facebook

funny	neutral	serious
formal	neutral	casual
respectful	neutral	irreverent
enthusiastic	neutral	matter-of-fact

Note. The table shows the interviewees’ perceptions of their universities’ brand tone of voice.

Three interviewees did not want or need a closer and emotional communication with their university on Facebook. “I don’t need the university to emotionally engage with me. I expect to get the necessary qualification, for which I am there, and I give my money” (Interviewee 12). Brand tone of voice plays a role in the way a listener evaluates a speaker, and verbal content is the primary factor in relationship building (Tsurutan, 2018). Therefore, in terms of a university’s brand tone of voice, the interviewees were asked to imagine their universities as a person and define its human characteristics. The positive characteristics that the interviewees used to describe their universities are authority (n = 7), innovation (n = 6), and international recognition (n = 7). They also used the terms motivating (n = 7), respectful (n = 7), and socially responsible (n = 7). The negative characteristics the interviewees identified as describing their universities were disappointing (n = 7), egotistic (n = 4), materialistic (n = 4), slow, uninspiring, and unrepresentable (n = 2). The university “had authority until I was accepted into it. Then I was disappointed” (Interviewee 11). No interviewees indicated that their universities are communicative.

Discussion and Conclusions

This research enriches the scholarship on brand tone of voice in Facebook communication. It examines how a university’s brand tone of voice on Facebook affects the perceptions of its current students. The study approached brand tone of voice from a social immediacy perspective, which is a

building block of the theory of social impact. Although the findings may not be representative of the 52 Bulgarian universities and all post-communist countries, they are in line with previous research findings such as Facebook as a tool for institutional communication (Amaral & Correia Santos, 2020), bonding communication, satisfaction, and loyalty (Sangperm & Pungpho, 2020), and communication management in HEI (Zsigmond & Portik, 2017). Based on the results, it can be suggested that the hierarchical, bureaucratic, and disinterested brand tone of voice the represented Bulgarian HEIs use in their Facebook communication hardly meets the needs of their current students. It reduced the social (psychological) immediacy of university-student relations by imposing filters and barriers in their Facebook communication. Moreover, they limited the engagement touch points, and the outcome is a psychological distancing of current students from the university. Therefore, this study adds to the existing scholarship on brand communications and particularly of brand tone of voice (Barcelos et al., 2018) in social networks (Chininga et al., 2019). For example, De Keyzer, Dens, and De Pelsmacker (2017) found that consumers were more engaged with factual posts than emotional ones on social networking sites. Students become dissatisfied with the communication, which, in turn, affects their engagement (following, interacting, liking, commenting, sharing, and participating) with university Facebook pages and content (Perez-Vega, Waite & O'Gorman, 2016). Most interviewees believed that their universities intentionally build a top-down communication hierarchy on Facebook that distances them from their current students and requires current students to conform to it. However, the greater the communication distance, the less social immediacy with current students. This is reflected in students' perceptions of universities seeing students as merely money sources, and university-student relationships hardly go beyond the demand and supply level.

Regarding the place, status, and role of their universities, most interviewees have a clear orientation in the university-student communication context. They expect closer but still formal communication. They do not seek Facebook communication where social norms could be overstepped by the university or its students. However, they find rigid communication and bureaucratic courtesy disrespectful. Unfortunately, this matches their perceptions of brand tone of voice of most of the represented Bulgarian HEIs. Therefore, it is not surprising that most of the interviewees did not find value in their university-student relationship. They strive to limit any subsequent interactions during their study. Most of the interviewees see their HEI simply as a place to acquire their degree and not as a university with which to identify. However, Balaji, Roy, and Sadeque (2016) indicated the importance of stronger student-university identification for present and future interactions. Stronger “supportive behaviors such as advocacy intentions, affiliation, participation, and suggestions for improvement” (Balaji et al., 2016, p. 9) are as strong as the student identification with the university. Brand tone of voice plays a vital role in increasing student engagement and identification. Unfortunately, most of the interviewed students equated their university brand tone voice with bureaucratic politeness and self-interest. The represented universities' prevailing brand tone of voice and communication style facilitated asynchronous and monologic communication. It makes them look like haughty and uncommunicative organizations that build communication fences to disengage themselves from their students. Such social media communication behavior has an adverse long-term effect on university-student relationships, particularly for members of Generation Z. Differences in the tones of voice of an HEI and its current students lead to misunderstandings with and the disengagement of a generation that connects and lives on SNS. A more relaxed brand voice tone would shorten the social distance between the university and its current students and “engender identification, loyalty, and commitment” (Frisby, Sidelinger & Tatum, 2019, p. 8). The dynamic social media communication environment poses new challenges for universities. For example, Instagram and TikTok are gradually replacing Facebook as the preferred social networking site for prospective and current students (Bonilla Quijada et al., 2021). Therefore, universities trying to exert (illusionary) brand communications control in SNS long-term would have adverse effects on the power of their brand image (Pérez & Torres, 2017) and reputation (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2021).

Practical Implications

The findings of this research have practical implications for universities in highly institutionalized HE systems such as former Soviet countries. The case of Bulgarian universities

suggests that the social media communication gap between universities and their current Generation Z students raises communication barriers. It can be assumed that universities need to abandon their strictly formal, distancing, and non-inclusive brand tone of voice and their publicistic and one-way communication style. A business communication style may be more productive for developing mutually beneficial relationships between a university and its current students.

Limitations of the Research

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was small. With 15 interviewees from eight universities of the 52 universities in Bulgaria, the results merely sketch rather than paint a bigger picture. Despite the relative variety of the sample in terms of educational qualifications and specialties, the investigation was unable to attract a more diverse pool of interviewees. In addition, only one research method was used, which limited the results and conclusions. A quantitative research method would allow a sampling of all significant educational disciplines of Bulgaria's 52 higher education institutions. However, the present findings do confirm previous findings related to Bulgarian HEI communication on Facebook. They also raised scientific and practical questions about the impact of the tone of voice of universities on their reputations and the university-student community.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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