



## **A Case Study on How Romanian Schools use Facebook to brand themselves**

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### **Abstract**

*Social media tools have an increasingly important role in external communication and the promotion of an institutional image. Taking advantage of this trend, the Romanian pre-university education institutions make use of them in order to send information about the identity of the organization and the educational model approached, so as to attract new members, to expand the education community or to promote its offer and its educational events performed. The purpose of this study is to analyse the way in which high schools in Bacău carry out a permanent communication and promotion campaign on social media. We have analysed the official pages of these high schools on the Facebook social network between 1<sup>st</sup> May and 10<sup>th</sup> October 2019. The high schools included in our study have gone half way by marking their social media presence and posting as much information as possible about their activities, information which strengthens the institutional brand. This timid penetration of social media needs to be followed by constant activity performed with professionalism in order to ensure that the results are at least satisfactory.*

**Key words:** Bacău; brand; educational marketing; institutional brand; social media marketing

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## **1. About institutional brand in educational marketing**

As in business and education, brand management brings a sustainable and competitive advantage to the educational institutions which invest in consolidating and promoting it. A brand is a “name, symbol, logo, design or image, or any combination of these elements, which is designed to identify that product or service” (Kotler, p.425). In education, the topic of brand is associated either with the quality of education offered by a particular school in the (pre) university environment, or with the image of that school (Eger, Egerova & Kryston, 2019). Educational institutions can be increasingly managed as corporate brands (Khanna, Jacob & Yadav, 2014).

In the context of the modern world, the education market is very competitive and pupils / students can express their choice for either private or state education. Educational institutions must participate in institutional marketing and branding activities (Bélanger, Bali & Longden, 2014). Some studies have shown that branding efforts can increase brand confidence (Idris & Whitfield, 2014), upsurge the sense of belonging, and encourage students’ commitment to school / university (Roy, Sadeque & Makam, 2019, p. 210). First of all, the biggest challenge of the branding process is to build and maintain strong relationships, relationships based on trust with the relevant target audiences (pupils / students, parents, teaching and administrative staff within the institution, stakeholders) (Voss & Kumar, 2013). In this relationship, gaining the student’s trust is of major importance because a student who enrolls to attend a school and obtain a diploma, actually enrolls for a lifelong relationship with that school / university, because he/she will always have his / her name related to its name (Rutter, Roper, & Lettice, 2016). Secondly, the position of the school / university must be determined in relation to the other competing institutions. The traditional theory of brand positioning (Ries & Trout, 2001) suggests that it must possess “a single key attribute or a basic brand promise”, a credible, valuable and different attribute “in order to occupy a place in the students’ minds. For example, universities have over the years included in their communication strategy key attributes such as ‘excellence’, ‘quality’, ‘reputation’, ‘learning’, ‘teaching’ or ‘innovation’ (Hemsley-Brown, 2012).

The investments in successful branding prove valuable because they bring reputational gains to the educational institutions (Stern, 2006). These brand benefits come from emphasising both the functional (cognitive) value of the school which has the core mission of managing teaching-learning, quality and innovation, and the emotional (affective) value which underlines the empathy conveyed to the audience. The name of the school / university has the power to evoke emotions, images, connections that should be used in the process of communicating with external audiences (Chapleo, Duran & Diaz, 2011). The trust of external audiences in the institution comes with their realisation that the promises delivered at the end of the learning process overlap with those made at the beginning, in the student recruitment stage (Pringle, Fritz, 2018). Summarising the research done in the field of institutional branding, Bennett & Ali-Choudhury (2009) specify that a brand mainly consists of (1) a collection of promises presented to the outside world concerning the brand’s benefits (brand as ‘covenant’), (2) a set of distinctive features that define the brand’s inherent nature and reality (the brand’s quiddity), and (3) an assortment of aesthetic designations and external communications that describe the brand (the brand’s symbolic and external representation)”.

It is very important that all marketing communications of schools/universities mention only those promises that they can really deliver/fulfil, include only those benefits that can be supported by the actual capabilities of the institution (Gutman & Miaoulis, 2003). Only the consistent fulfilment of promises strengthens the reputation of the educational institution. At the level of promises, the institutional offer meets the students’ expectations. Some studies (Gutman & Miaoulis 2003, Bennett, 2007) show that the recruitment messages of prospective students contain references to the quality of administrative and student support services, acknowledged

teachers, clubs, sports and social facilities on campus, prospects for a decent career after graduation. Students' expectations refer to the possibility of enrolling in certain study programmes/ specialisations/ faculties, distance between the institution and home, affordable fees and accommodation costs (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003).

## **2. Social media marketing**

As the demand for quality education increases and the competition between state and private education for the best pupils / students becomes tougher, high schools and universities are looking for new ways to recruit. The old ways, with brochures, presentation catalogues, campus visits, have been adapted or replaced according to the expectations of digital natives (Hayes, Ruschman & Walker, 2009). They want to reach future schools through social media because they can interact directly not only with the schools concerned, but also with other people interested in the same schools, they can receive personalised information in a short time (Smith, 2011). After being admitted to those schools, students use social media to communicate with friends and colleagues, keep up to date with campus news, make professional contacts, and feel connected to the school / university life (Hesel & Williams, 2009).

Schools have acknowledged the role of social media in the student recruitment process and have included this channel in their marketing communication, although this has not always been very easy. Educational marketers need to approach social media marketing taking into account the defining characteristics of social media - interactivity, openness, flexibility, fast-paced information flows (Pârvu & Ipate, 2012). Today there are many active schools which are either present on multiple platforms (Facebook, Twitter, You Tube, Instagram) or have chosen to have multiple pages/profiles on a single platform. A strong social media presence can strengthen an institution's reputation and help shape its brand image (Pringle & Fritz, 2018). The content posted on social media should be new, current, so that visitors must not conclude that nothing interesting happens in that institution.

A school must assign financial resources to manage its social media marketing on an ongoing basis. Social media is a safe place where schools can meet their audiences, social networks being very easy to access by those in the target demographic group. Research shows that university followers on social media are receptive to content which covers topics related to sports, general university news, school spirit, and admission (Peruta & Shields, 2018). In addition, each platform provides an analysis tool to instantly measure the effectiveness of school posts and campaigns. The biggest challenge for social media marketing is that the algorithms which drive news feeds are constantly changing. Peruta & Shields (2017) claimed that the organic reach of Facebook posts is less than 5%. This means that if a university has 1,000 fans, a social media post made by that school will only reach the news feeds of 50 fans. Schools must pay Facebook to ensure that their posts are intentionally placed in the target audience's news feeds and to direct messages to an audience segmented by demographic (age, gender, level of education, interests) or geographic criteria of their choice.

In Romania as well, schools and colleges have been open to the opportunity offered by social media. They quickly realised that having a social media account helps to a) communicate easily and quickly with pupils/students/parents/teachers, b) attract more pupils/students, c) involve alumni in promoting the school or funding it and d) offer materials about school events to media contributors. In his study, Alexandru (2013) shows that in Romania most schools in the pre-university education have Facebook accounts, much fewer of them are present on Twitter, YouTube or LinkedIn. The presence of Romanian universities in social media is even higher, with faculties also having Facebook accounts, sometimes even some specialisations or departments within them ( Alexandru ,2013). The presence of Romanian universities in social

media has been more extensively studied (Coman, Nechita & Bularca, 2020; Ilieș & Fărcaș, 2013; Pârnu & Ipate, 2012) compared to the presence of schools in the pre-university environment.

### 3. How Romanian Schools use Facebook to brand themselves. Case Study: Bacău, 2019

Our study starts from the observation according to which the presence of Romanian schools in social media has been insufficiently explored. In the documentation stage prior to our study, we identified only one other older study related to our chosen research topic (Alexandru, 2013). We undertake through the present research to try to provide answers to the following two research questions:

RQ 1- What is the type of content posted on the Facebook page of high schools in Bacau City?

RQ 2- What is the engagement rate calculated for the Facebook page of each high school in Bacau City?

In order to provide answers to the two research questions undertaken by our study, we monitored the official pages of high schools in Bacau between 1<sup>st</sup> May and 10<sup>th</sup> October 2019. The list of high schools in the city from which our study started can be seen in table no. 1. After careful analysis of the latest posts, we discarded two Facebook pages from the initial list because they had no posts made during the period mentioned above.

Table 1. High schools in Bacau City with an official Facebook page (1.05.2019)

	High school name	Facebook page		
		Date of establishment	Number of appreciations	Number of followers
1.	Gheorghe Vranceanu National College	12.06. 2012	5,418	5,455
2.	Ferdinand I National College	19.08. 2013	4,447	4,441
3.	Stefan cel Mare National Pedagogical College	1.01. 2019	465	472
4.	Ion Ghica Economic College	9.05.2010	1,684	1,691
5.	Mihai Eminescu College	12.11.2016	1,225	1,244
6.	Henri Coanda College	30.12. 2017	325	338
7.	Gheorghe Apostu National College of Art	14.07. 2011	2,665	2,688
8.	St. Joseph's National Catholic College	28.04.2014	1,837	1,858
9.	Anghel Saligny Technical College	10.11. 2016	632	648
10.	Dumitru Mageron Technical College	30.08.2010	1,587	1,589
11.	Grigore Antipa College	22.10.2018	1,128	1,129
12.	Nicolae Vasilescu-Karpen Technical College of Communications	14.02.2014	4,654	4,669
13.	Petru Rares Technological High School	14.04.2016	390	401
14.	Sports High School	12.05. 2014	1,377	1,386

The research method used in our study is content analysis. In order to be able to use this method in the analysis of the type of content posted on Facebook by the administrators' page of the high schools included in the study, we adapted the category grid used by Taecharungroj (2017). We selected the following ten categories for our study: *high school, curriculum, campus, students, alumni, jobs and employers, events, high school image and reputation, announcements, and others*. During the monitoring of the Facebook pages, we did not identify any posts which included images or references to the physical environment around or near the high school (*campus*), so we used only nine categories. Two different people were instructed to encode the information / posts on the Facebook pages already mentioned according to the content type

criteria. Inter-coder reliability was tested on 10% of the samples. The inter-coder reliability results reveal an acceptable level of agreement (Cohen's kappa of 0.70).

We shall describe each of the nine categories of information/ posts included in our analysis. In the *High School* category, we included texts that referred to the members of the teaching staff or promoted activities carried out in the respective school. In the *Curriculum* category we have included posts about courses or programmes offered only by that school or about news/ innovations in the content of the lessons taught. The *alumni* category includes the manifestations or activities which focused on the former school graduates and their remarkable achievements or activities. The *Students* category includes all posts which promote students and their activities / achievements / charities or which provide details about the student life and the atmosphere in that institution. The *Jobs & Employers* category is especially common in high schools which prepare graduates who can integrate into the labour market immediately after graduation, having a profession for which they had been trained during the four years of high school, a category which includes posts about employers who have a collaborative relationship with the educational institution or who provide descriptions of future professions. The *Events* category includes posts about seminars, conferences (academic) or sports, cultural-artistic, scientific activities held and *Image & Reputation* those which promote the history/ reputation/ identity of the school and its role in society or the local community. The *announcements* category includes information related to the programme and school holidays, entrance exams or completion of studies and their calendar, scholarships, or camps and school trips. In the *Other* category we included a lot of information from external sources, information that has no direct connection with that school (YouTube videos, motivational quotes about education, reading or leisure recommendations, excerpts from religious services or the Pope's visit to Romania).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of post types by high school

	Sum	High school	Curriculum	Students	Alumni	Jobs & employers	Events	Image & Reputation	Announcements	Other
NV Karpen Technical College of Communications	142	4 2.81%	1 0.70%	55 38.73%	3 2.11%	3 2.11%	14 9.85%	9 6.33%	47 33.09%	6 4.22%
Ferdinand I National College	117	0	2 1.70%	62 52.99%	2 1.70%	0	33 28.20%	5 4.27%	13 11.11%	0
Grigore Antipa College	69	11 15.94%	2 2.89%	8 11.59%	1 1.44%	1 1.44%	5 7.24%	0	30 43.47%	11 15.94%
Gh. Vranceanu National College	65	1 1.53%	4 6.15%	35 53.84%	3 4.61%	0	15 23.07%	4 6.15%	3 4.61%	0
Mihai Eminescu College	36	0	0	7 19.44%	1 2.77%	4 11.11%	5 13.88%	2 5.55%	16 44.44%	1 2.77%
Anghel Saligny Technical College	35	0	0	17 48.57%	0	2 5.71%	8 22.85%	4 11.42%	2 5.71%	2 5.71%
Gh. Apostu National College of Art	30	0	3 10%	4 13.33%	0	0	12 40%	0	11 36.66%	0
St. Joseph's National Catholic College	20	0	0	2 10%	0	0	2 10%	0	8 40%	8 40%
Stefan cel Mare National Pedagogical College	16	0	0	5 31.25%	0	0	4 25%	1 6.25%	6 37.50%	0
Dumitru Mageron Technical College	7	0	0	0	0	1 14.28%	2 28.57%	1 14.28%	3 42.85%	0
Sports High	6	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	4	

School				16.16%			16.16%		66.66%	
Ion Ghica Economic College	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3
									40%	60%
Total	548	16	12	196	10	11	101	26	145	31

In our study, we analysed 548 posts collected from the official and active pages of high schools in Bacau between 1.05-10.10.2019. In our sample we included the 12 high schools present on Facebook and ordered them in descending order, from the page of NV Karpen Technical College of Communications with 142 posts, to that of Ion Ghica Economic College with only 5 posts, which can be easily observed in the first column of Table 2. Looking at the last row of Table 2, we can see that the most common type of post is related to *Students* (35.76%), followed in second position by *Announcements* (26.45%) and in third position by *Events* (18.43%). The least used posts are *Alumni* (10%) and *Jobs & Employers* (11%), explained on the one hand by the fact that the connections with alumni become weaker after they enter the job market or become students at universities at home or abroad, and on the other hand that only four of the 12 high schools in our sample train their future graduates for a specific profession (nurses, teachers, construction workers or technical fields).

Regarding the Table 3 related to the most frequently used types of posts by each high school, we can see that the posts about *Students* are the most frequent, as students are the ones who give soul to school institutions not only offline but also online. In the posts about students, Ferdinand I National College and Gh. Vranceanu National College praise the student-performer, the student who participates in school debates, competitions and contests in scientific fields in particular and wins recognition for intellectual work at (inter) national level. The student-performer in the artistic field, shining on stage, is presented by Gh. Apostu College of Art. We also have the presentations of the less shining students involved in school activities, but extremely important for their personal and professional development or for stimulating their involvement in extracurricular activities (volunteering, charitable actions, civic involvement), presentations given by N. V. Karpen Technical College of Communications or Anghel Saligny Technical College. For all these high schools which have chosen to give priority to students and their activities/performance, the involvement of students in the institutional brand building process is vital. It is the students who bring to the forefront the core values upheld by their high schools (performance, hard work, equal opportunities, involvement, inclusion), students are best suited to play the role of “brand ambassadors”.

Table 3. Top three most common post types by high school

High school / College	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>
NV Karpen Technical College of Communications	Students	Announcements	Events
Ferdinand I National College	Students	Events	Announcements
Grigore Antipa College	Announcements	High school	Other
Ghe. Vranceanu National College	Students	Events	Curriculum / Image & Reputation
Mihai Eminescu College	Announcements	Students	Jobs & employers
Anghel Saligny Technical College	Students	Events	Image & Reputation
Gh. Apostu National College of Art	Events	Announcements	Students
St. Joseph's National Catholic College	Announcements	Other	Students / Events
Stefan cel Mare National Pedagogical College	Announcements	Students	Events

Dumitru Mageron Technical College	Announcements	Events	Jobs & employers
Sports High School	Announcements	Events	-
Ion Ghica Economic College	Other	Announcements	-

The second most used posts were *Announcements* (26.45%). These announcements posted on Facebook by the respective high school page administrators can be made for internal audiences (students and teachers) or for external school audiences (parents, media or local community representatives). *Announcements* are intended to inform about past, present or future activities, about notable results obtained by the students in school competitions, about the many events taking place in the school. Others refer to either technical data or to the administrative and organisational aspects (number of scholarships awarded and the necessary documents to be submitted to the secretariat, school fairs, detailed educational offerings by specialisation, calendar of admission or final examinations, holiday periods, school regulations, additional training programmes for examinations, state allowances or public transport passes). These announcements posted on Facebook have the advantage that they can be (re)read at any time by anyone who is interested and who receives this information only if they have liked the high school page.

Since high schools offer relatively similar subjects or majors to their competitors, marketing activity is more than necessary to emphasise the differences offered by one's own institutional brand. The posts on the *Events* Facebook page, which come third in the list of those analysed by us, with a share of 18.43%, manage to reinforce the differences between high schools very well, given the very similar educational offers (specialisations and subjects of study). In the postings analysed, the *Events* category also includes students' participation in thematic excursions, creative camps, nature activities, radio and television broadcasts, educational projects or exchanges of experience with educational partners in European countries through Erasmus projects. Highly appreciated are also the posts presenting students' conferences with different institutional partners in the local community, educational fairs, award ceremonies for students with outstanding results, activities in the non-formal education area, performances, sports competitions, training and internships with students, the Bobsleigh Ball or the graduates' parades through the city centre. Basically, high schools interested in their own image and reputation promote these events intensively to show internal and external audiences that they differentiate themselves from the competition through the added value they bring to students' training, both cognitively and emotionally.

It is very important for the school's internal and external audiences that the school is present in social media and provides the necessary information about its work. Equally important is the feedback on how many people the message reaches, which is a real challenge for the school's marketing team. Because the organic reach of Facebook posts is less than 5% for brands, the marketing team's concern will be to increase it by engaging users in liking, commenting or sharing posts.

In order to provide a relevant answer to the second research question, we turned to two notions (Total Engagement and Proportional Engagement) defined and already used in other established studies (Peruta & Shields, 2016; Peruta & Shields, 2017; Shields & Peruta, 2018). In order to measure the engagement activity on posts, the authors used Total Engagement which is the sum of likes, comments and shares on each post.

In Table 4 we presented the number of likes, comments and shares for each of the 12 Facebook accounts under analysis. In order to save space and to make the data easier to interpret, we have listed all posts and the sum of likes, comments & shares on each post under Total Engagement, but we have only listed the arithmetic average of all posts made on each account.

Table 4. Interactivity & engagement on the analysed Facebook pages (1.05-10.10.2019)

High school name	Posts between 1 <sup>st</sup> May and 10 <sup>th</sup> October
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		2019				Total Engagement
		Number of posts	Number of likes	Number of comments	Number of distributions	
1.	Gh. Vranceanu National College	65	9103	371	444	153.17
2.	Ferdinand I National College	117	12,032	696	458	111.56
3.	Stefan cel Mare National Pedagogical College	16	287	24	0	23.81
4.	Ion Ghica Economic College	5	7	0	5	2.4
5.	Mihai Eminescu College	36	905	41	162	30.36
6.	Gh. Apostu National College of Art	30	885	42	87	33.73
7.	St. Joseph's National Catholic College	20	825	28	16	43.45
8.	Anghel Saligny Technical College	35	805	9	80	24.86
9.	Dumitru Mageron Technical College	7	172	5	60	31.71
10.	Grigore Antipa College	69	3861	29	2094	79.95
11.	Nicolae Vasilescu-Karpen Technical College of Communications	142	6888	229	1921	65.53
12.	Sports High School	6	95	3	2	16.67

The very low figures obtained in *Total Engagement* show that the high number of posts does not guarantee increased organic reach. For schools, it is crucial to spread and distribute their own message and this is achieved by involving internet users in liking, commenting and sharing their own content in their network of friends. This performance is achieved to a modest extent by only two high schools: Gheorghe Vranceanu National College and Ferdinand I National College, the total engagement value in their case being higher than 100 and reaching the maximum value of 455, respectively 600 internet users who receive the school's messages on the wall.

In fact, it is not enough to post as much information as possible about everything that is happening at school, but it is necessary to make sure that this information is sent to as many of the target audiences as possible.

## Conclusions

Although for other countries there is more empirical data on how schools/colleges/universities use social media to create and promote their own brand, in Romania, these studies are extremely limited. Although posting on Facebook is free, the school marketing team has to find out what is a reasonable amount of posts made in a given unit of time or what is the ingredient in the post which stimulates interaction: excessive posts push the audience away, uninteresting posts do not provoke them to interact with the content by liking, commenting or sharing in order to maximise the post's visibility. From an institutional branding perspective, school social media managers need to increase the connection between users and the institution through very careful management of Facebook pages (limiting the frequency of posts to avoid over-saturation, posting engaging media, including photos, polls on topics of common interest). In Romania, there is a need not only to enhance the presence of schools in social media, but also to professionalise communication in the field, based on an understanding of the particularities of online communication, the need to combine the need to inform & connect the target audience with the need to strengthen the brand of the school.



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