

FOCUSING ON THE NEEDS OF PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS AS A FACTOR IN INCREASING THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF THE UNIVERSITY

Eudochia JOMIR

Academy of Economic Studies from Moldova

eudochia.jomir@ase.md

ORCID: 0000-0001-6556-6409

Abstract

The last period has brought major challenges for universities in the Republic of Moldova, among the most important being attracting applicants and retaining enrolled students. The deductive approach of the research involves developing and submitting, based on the results obtained from the research, proposals and recommendations regarding the need to apply effective educational marketing in order to increase the university attractiveness and improve its image among applicants. The main objective of the paper is to use the research results to develop recommendations on meeting the needs of prospective students and increasing the attractiveness of higher education institutions among them. This article presents the importance of the perceived image of the university, the factors that influence it, and the importance of information sources in the student's decision to study or not at a particular university. In this regard, the research provides best practice guidelines for building an attractive online and offline presence, which can then be applied and used by any university.

Keywords: marketing; university marketing; university image.

JEL Classification: M30, M31

INTRODUCTION

In the age of technology, universities are forced to keep pace with changes relating both to the development of means of communication and to the way in which new generations of students relate to what university means. It is no longer just about the quality of educational services, but also about image, reputation, expectations, facilities etc. (Coman et al., 2020). With the global increase in competition in higher education, universities are faced with the need to explore alternative ways to redefine their value proposition in order to differentiate their offerings and attract students (Anabila et al., 2020).

At the same time, the competition enhancing on the national and international market for higher education services outlines the importance of applying a new mindset and conceiving the activity of higher education institutions, centred on the principles of modern marketing, and the application of effective educational marketing strategies that require studying consumer behavior in educational services and, in particular, how prospective students make purchasing decisions and what factors determine their choice of university. The focus of marketing activities must shift from supply to demand, that is, from a product-oriented to a consumer-oriented approach. „With the advent of marketing, the idea of serving the needs of customers in higher education has become an integral part of the missions and strategic visions of many universities, especially in the developed world.” (Maringe, 2006) As a result, students should be treated as consumers, education as a service, and educational institutions as service providers in a competitive market, where university marketing has become a reality for universities in the Republic of Moldova as well.

I. LITERATURE REVIEW

In an ever-changing and increasingly globalized world, the topic of educational marketing and increasing the attractiveness of universities is increasingly mentioned, with much research and analysis being carried out both nationally and internationally (China-Birtal, 2024). The usefulness of these studies is justified by the fact that "a strong academic brand not only generates a high level of awareness and loyalty among education consumers, but also facilitates the creation of solid, long-lasting relationships with all stakeholders, including students, teachers, industry partners, and the international academic community (Panait, 2021). At the same time, although there is extensive theoretical knowledge in the field of educational marketing, this term is considered relatively new, having been mentioned for the first time in the mid-1980s, there is a major discrepancy between the theoretical potential and practical applicability of these concepts within universities (Panait, 2021). At the same time, even though the specialized literature on educational marketing is very extensive, we cannot yet speak of a fixed recipe or theoretical models that would guarantee success. Among the international authors who have analyzed the subject

are Phillip Kotler, K.M. Judson, Karen Fox, Felix Maringe, Cătălin Glava, Andrei Panait Alina Filip, while among the authors from the Republic of Moldova, the following stand out: Grigore Belostecinic, Nicolae Bucun, Galina Bulat, Viorelia Moldovan-Batranac, Ecaterina Şişcan, and others. Research in this field allows educational institutions to focus on the special needs of beneficiaries, identify unmet needs, and, consequently, create new needs (Tintiuc, 2020).

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS APPLIED

In order to achieve the proposed objectives, information was gathered from various secondary sources (scientific literature in the field, documents, statistical reports, previous studies), using direct marketing research methods, information gathering and processing, such as opinion polls using the survey method, including the use of various attitude scales (semantic differential, Likert scale, constant sum scale).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demand for higher education services has experienced a decline, although the number of providers on the domestic market decreased only slightly and access to university services on the international market is becoming increasingly easier. The expansion of access to international study programs and scholarships is another factor that has contributed to the decline in demand for higher education services, including economics, in the domestic market. A lot of young people have benefited from scholarships offered by other countries to Moldovan citizens on the basis of cooperation agreements in the field of education or individual contracts (Şişcan, 2024). Certainly, in the framework of the establishment of the single European area of higher education and the appearance of new opportunities to study abroad for graduates of pre-university education, the universities of the Republic of Moldova are facing growing competitive pressure, and it is necessary to apply effective strategies of educational marketing to engage with target audiences, to increase awareness and foster student enrolment (Belostecinic & Jomir, 2023c).

In order to identify the perception of applicants regarding higher education in the Republic of Moldova, an opinion poll was conducted in 2023-2024 on a sample of 764 respondents, of whom 77.8% were high school students and 22.2% were college students in their final year of study. After analyzing the results (Figure 1), it was established that 47.9% of respondents want to continue their studies at a university in the Republic of Moldova, 21.7% opt for a university in Romania, 15.7% choose a university in other countries, and 14.7% of them have not yet decided.

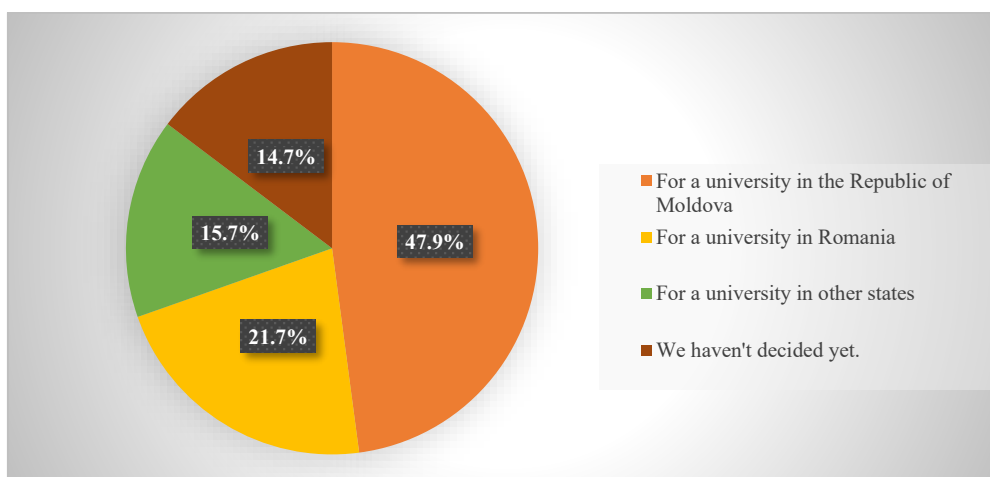


Figure 1. High school graduates' preferences for continuing their university studies

Source: Developed by the author based on (Questionnaire on the perception of prospective students regarding higher education in the Republic of Moldova)

Whether they choose to pursue university studies abroad or remain in the country, the main reasons that determine high school graduates to pursue university studies (Figure 2) are increasing their chances of having a higher quality of life, developing skills and knowledge, accessing better employment opportunities, improving their financial prospects, increasing their independence and autonomy, etc.

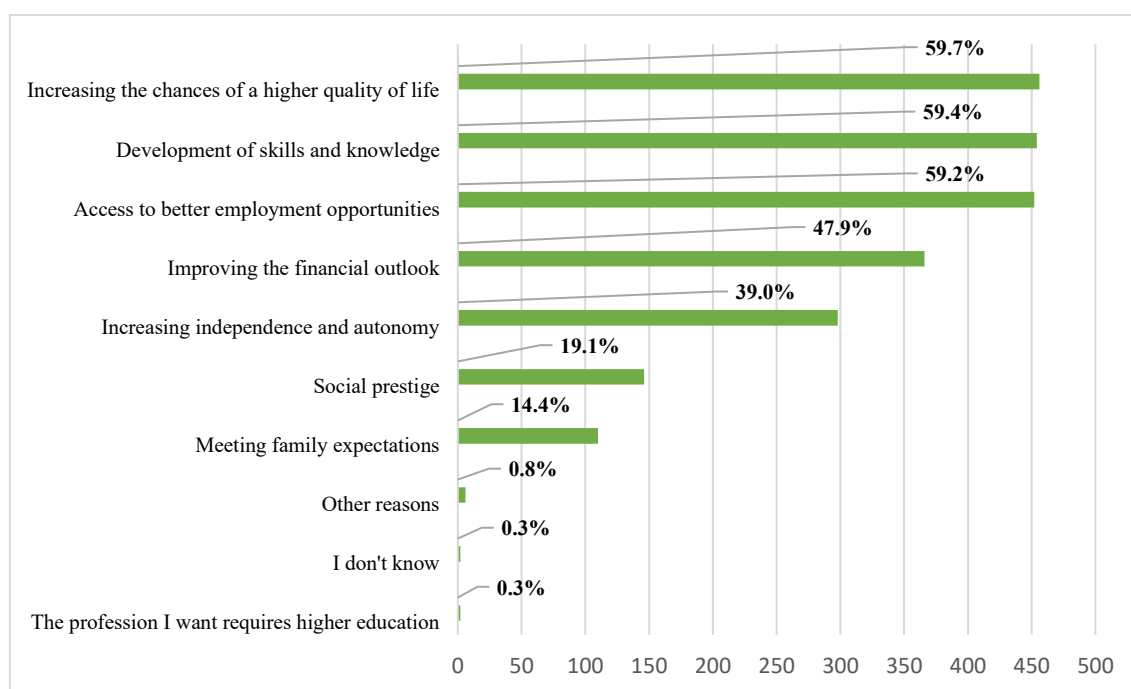


Figure 2. Main reasons for pursuing university studies

Source: Developed by the author based on (Questionnaire on the perception of prospective students regarding higher education in the Republic of Moldova)

Once reasons for choosing university studies are known, it becomes relevant for educational institutions to use them as strengths in promotional messages to shape the university image in the minds of potential students. The way the image is reflected in the eyes of the beneficiary of educational services shapes the university brand. With regard to higher education, "the brand represents the totality of perceptions and feelings that the public associates with that university" (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009). Any brand, whether promoted online or offline, has and highlights its visual identity elements – "a tool whose role is to convey the desired message as effectively as possible through visual language" (Rauschnabel et al., 2016). This also applies to higher education institutions, where the image perceived by the target audience, if it corresponds to their representations of the educational institution, determines the demand for the educational offer. We thus understand that through identity, the brand defines how it wants its image to be perceived. Thus, in order to create the desired image in the consumer's mind, key elements must be strategically addressed when establishing its identity. Thus, within higher education institutions, one of the central elements of visual identity is the university logo. For these reasons, in this study, survey participants associated the names of universities in the Republic of Moldova with their respective logos.

In this context, study participants were asked to match the name of the university with its logo from a list provided. The results shown in Table 1 highlighted a different level of recognition of university logos, ranging from 25.1% to 88.2% (Figure 3).

Table 1. Degree of recognizability of university logos in the Republic of Moldova

No.	University	Degree of recognizability (%)
1.	Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova	88,2%
2.	Technical University of Moldova	85,9%
3.	Free International University of Moldova	85,5%
4.	Institute of Criminal Sciences and Applied Criminology	82%
5.	Academy of Music, Theater, and Fine Arts	80,6%
6.	IMI – NOVA International Management Institute	79,6%
7.	Grigore Țamblac State University in Taraclia	79,1%
8.	Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu State University in Cahul	78,5%
9.	Cooperative-Commercial University of Moldova	76,7%
10.	Comrat State University	73,6%
11.	Constantin Stere University of European Political and Economic Studies	63,9%

12.	Ion Creangă State Pedagogical University	58,9%
13.	Moldovan-American University	55,8%
14.	Nicolae Testemițanu State University of Medicine and Pharmacy	54,2%,
15.	State University of Physical Education and Sport	47,4%
16.	Moldova State University	42,9%
17.	Academy Stefan cel Mare of the Ministry Internal Affairs of the Republic of Moldova	41,6%
18.	Alexandru cel Bun Military Academy of the Armed Forces	35,9%
19.	Slavonic University of Moldova	25,1%

Source: Developed by the author based on (Questionnaire on the perception of prospective students regarding higher education in the Republic of Moldova)

Thus, the most frequently recognized logo was that of the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova (Figure 3), being correctly associated in 88.2% of cases, which demonstrates that it meets the requirements of a successful logo: representative, relevant, memorable, attractive, while the most difficult to recognize was the logo of the Slavonic University of Moldova (Figure 4) – 25.1%.



Figure 3. The most recognizable and least recognizable logos of universities in the Republic of Moldova

Source: Developed by the author based on (Questionnaire on the perception of prospective students regarding higher education in the Republic of Moldova), ase.md, surm.md

Also, when choosing a university, applicants take into account its perceived image in society (Figure 4), with 29.6% of respondents considering that the perceived image of the university matters a lot, 20.4% believing that it matters a lot, 23.4% consider that the perceived image is of medium importance, for 12.4% of respondents the image matters little, and 14.2% consider that the perceived image does not matter at all.

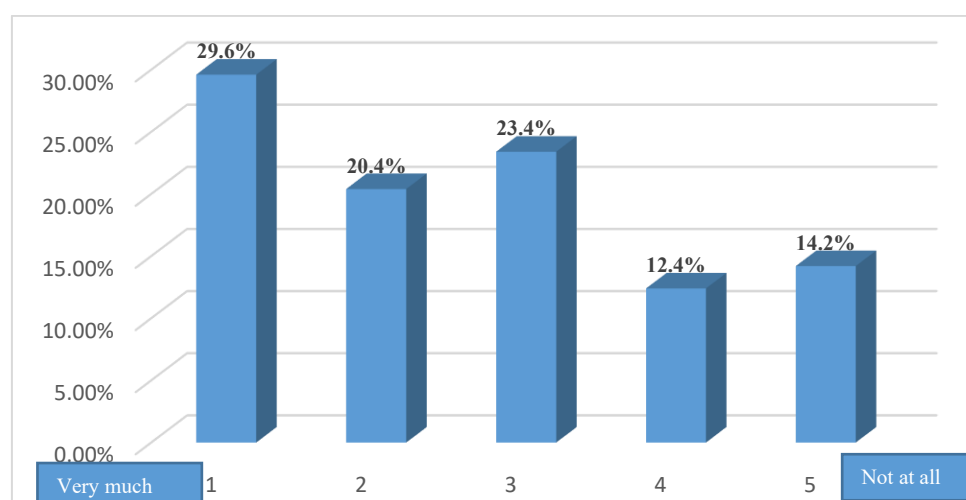


Figure 4. The importance of the university's perceived image in society in the process of choosing a higher education institution

Source: Developed by the author based on (Questionnaire on the perception of prospective students regarding higher education in the Republic of Moldova)

Given that image plays a significant role in university choice, five key factors were identified that influence the perceived image of a university (Figure 5): quality of studies – 72.8%, facilities offered by universities (scholarships, academic mobility, well-equipped laboratories, sports halls, libraries, entrepreneurial development opportunities, etc.) – 57.3%, international reputation – 48.4%, the success of university graduates in their professional careers – 36.6%, scholarship programs offered by economic agents, institutions, and other university partners – 36.4%.

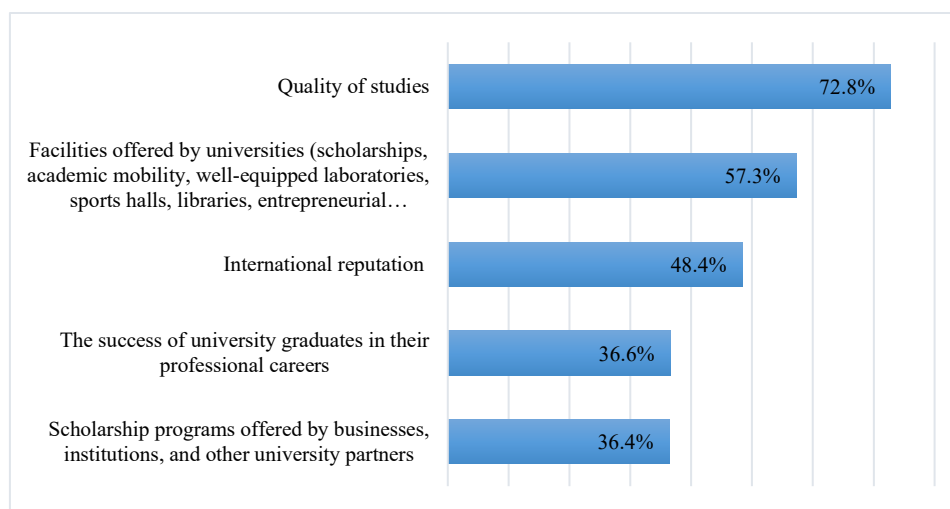


Figura 5. Top cinci factori care influențează imaginea percepută a unei universități

Source: Developed by the author based on (Questionnaire on the perception of prospective students regarding higher education in the Republic of Moldova)

Choosing a university for a prospective student often turns into a real challenge. High school graduates are often pressed for time and unable to visit all universities to gather the information they need, so the most common method is to obtain information through the online platforms used by the universities. However, there are many cases where obtaining information online is difficult because the institution does not have a well-implemented online promotion strategy and the way in which information is made available to students is not well organized (Coman et al., 2020).

Lately, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, online promotion has become an essential component of all organizations, institutions, and companies, most of which use various strategies in this direction. Thus, its effectiveness has also been proven in higher education institutions, with universities adopting this method to promote their activities and educational offerings using their websites or social media (Coman et al., 2020). Thus, following the ranking by prospective students of the importance of sources of information on educational offerings (Figure 6), the university website was at the top of the ranking, followed by social media, admission guides, participation in admission events, visits by university representatives to high schools and colleges, recommendations from parents, etc., with email consultations and radio advertising ranking last, the latter being considered the most ineffective.

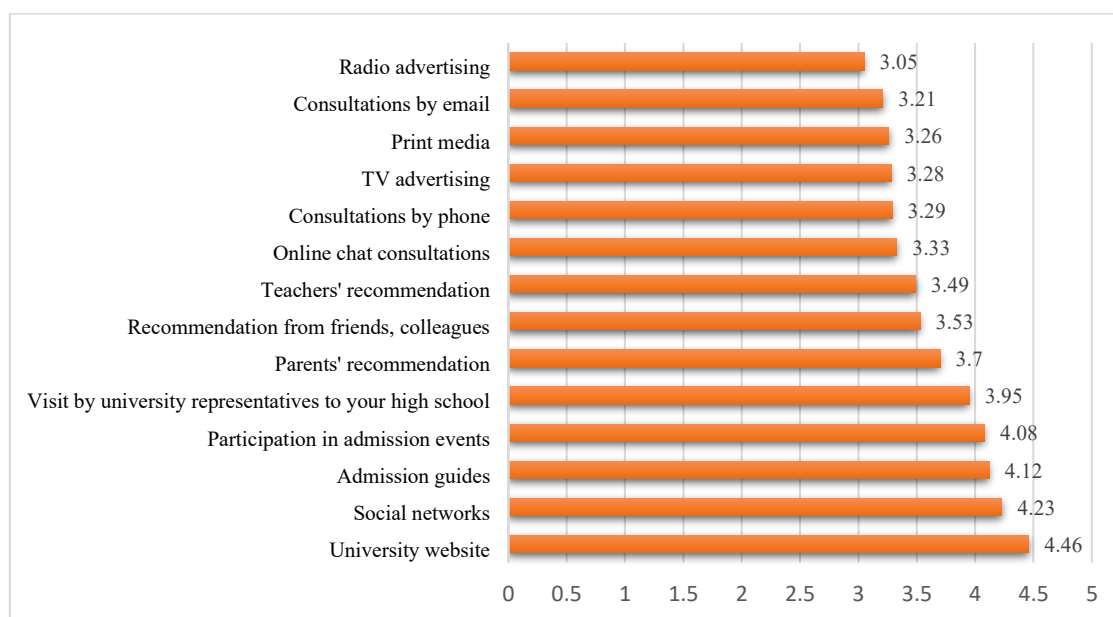


Figure 6: Importance of sources of information on university educational offerings

Source: Developed by the author based on (Questionnaire on the perception of prospective students regarding higher education in the Republic of Moldova)

University websites ranked first in terms of importance for providing information about educational offerings (Figure 6) and are also one of the most widely used forms of online media worldwide. Thus, the way in which a website is now perceived has changed. Whereas in the past it was a means of presenting an organization, it is now an active medium for promoting, attracting, and retaining customers. (Coman et al., 2020)

Regardless of the channel chosen, the way in which the brand promotes itself online must correspond to the values and principles of the institution. The messages conveyed may be related to the purpose of the institution's activity, and in the case of universities, the message can focus on the university's history, prestige, and values, as well as the diversity of the study programs it offers, information on admission procedures, upcoming events, open days, and information related to projects developed within the university, research projects, and future competitions (Belostecinic & Jomir, 2023b). One of the persistent problems is related to interactivity and the lack of a form of presentation that is attractive enough to transform the consumer, i.e. the student and potential student, into a captive consumer. That is why a website is not enough. Without social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, the online battle is lost before it even begins (Coman et al., 2020). Users interact with brands on social media largely to obtain information and for entertainment. The advantage of social media advertising is the ability to segment the target audience geographically, demographically, based on behavior on these networks, etc. (Balaban, 2021).

"Every social network operates based on algorithms that dictate what content reaches the user based on their profile, the types of posts they have liked in the past, the time of day the post was published, the engagement of the post immediately after publication, the hashtags used, and the list goes on. Social media is an extremely competitive area, with platforms characterised by dynamism and transformative power." (Balaban, 2021) Since social networks are ranked second in terms of importance as sources of information on educational offerings in this study, the survey respondents ranked each social network used in the Republic of Moldova in descending order of importance as a source of information, thus applying the Rank Ordering Method. we obtained the results of the importance of each social network, with the most important being ranked first, the next second, and so on. At the same time, the same method was used to determine the relevance of each source of information.

Thus, the surveys were processed using SPSS software, determining the coefficients of importance and relevance (weighting) of social networks (Figure 7). In the opinion of the study participants, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok are the most important social networks, with Odnoklassniki at the opposite end of the spectrum. Similarly, in terms of the relevance and usefulness of information, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok are ranked at the top, with Odnoklassniki again at the bottom.

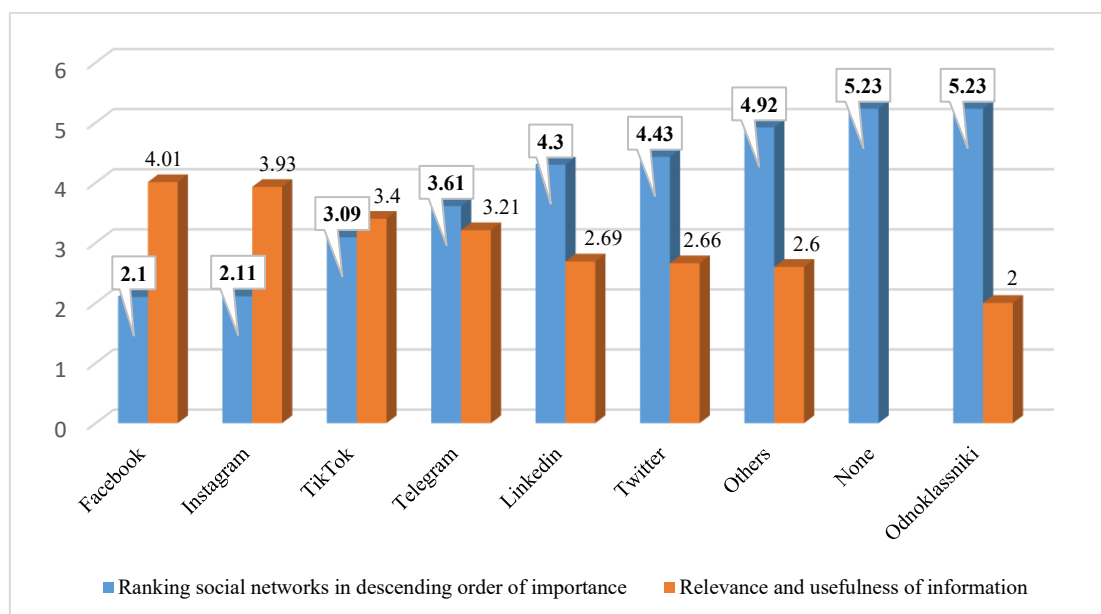


Figure 7. Correlation between the importance of social networks and the relevance and usefulness of their information

Source: Developed by the author based on (Questionnaire on the perception of prospective students regarding higher education in the Republic of Moldova)

Ranked in the top 3 in terms of importance, relevance, and usefulness of information, Facebook allows universities to promote themselves by posting images, texts, using hashtags, disseminating links, promoting upcoming events, and, last but not least, interacting with the public. Instagram is a network with a strong aesthetic dimension, where the emphasis is on high-quality video and photo productions that can convey the visual identity

and values of the university in a memorable and persuasive way. Tiktok, being based exclusively on creative, entertaining, and easily shareable video content, increases the visibility and attractiveness of the university if it reaches its target audience through viral trends and original content. New platforms are emerging, and traditional platforms are constantly adding new tools in their ongoing effort to increase user retention on these applications. (Balaban, 2021)

Given that university websites were found to be the most important source of information on educational opportunities, it was noted that 72.8% of respondents accessed university websites to find out about study opportunities and offers, 19.5% did so occasionally, and 7.7% did not visit them (Figure 8). "The institutional website is an effective channel for transmitting information, establishing relationships with customers, partners, and the general public, but also for presenting educational offerings. To attract visitors' attention, the website must load quickly, have a successful design, easy-to-read texts, be constantly updated, inspire confidence, be easy to use, be visible to search engines, and correspond to the interests and needs of users. Visitors' opinions about the university's website, navigation system, etc., influence the perceived image of the university and its ability to attract potential students. The website must be optimized and compatible with mobile devices, providing information about what the university represents, its offer in terms of study programs, courses, additional services (canteen, sports club, extracurricular activities), frequently asked questions with answers, the values offered by the university, study organization models (in-person, part-time, online, distance learning, blended learning), various educational materials, virtual tours, success stories of former students, etc. The presence of a live chat function or chatbots makes it possible to answer visitors' questions. For many people, the website creates their first impression of the university and its image. It is estimated that by 2027, the number of smartphone users worldwide will reach 7.7 billion, which gives it increasing importance in educational marketing. (BEMS, 2022)

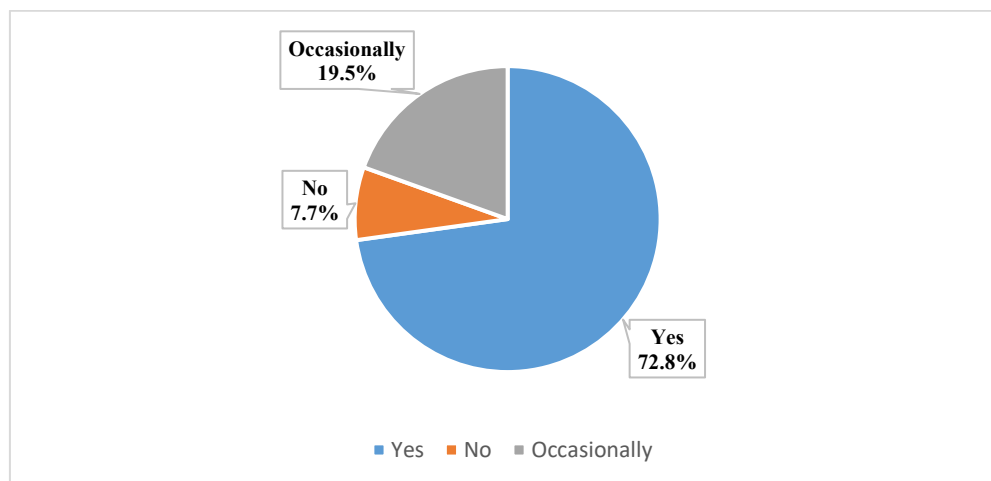


Figure 8: Accessing the university website as a source of information about study opportunities and offers
Source: Developed by the author based on (Questionnaire on the perception of prospective students regarding higher education in the Republic of Moldova)

The quality of a website is determined by several contextual and content factors. Contextual factors refer to the ease of use and physical attractiveness of the website. Website content must be interesting, useful, constantly changing, and designed in such a way that customers want to visit it repeatedly. A website should represent a clear and memorable brand, be fast, mobile-friendly, and easy to use. Websites should be periodically reevaluated in terms of their attractiveness and usefulness, and an important source of improvement is both users' opinions about what they like and dislike about the site and their suggestions for improvement (Belostecinic & Jomir, 2023). Since internet users are oversaturated with information, it is essential that the university's website, considered one of its most important "spokespersons," contain the most relevant and interesting information for potential students (Dobre & Milovan, 2019).

In the study, we figured out what info people want to find on university websites when they check them out (Figure 9): study programs (majors) offered 84%, info on admission requirements – 69.1%, tuition fees – 63.1%, facilities offered by the university (dormitory places, libraries, hubs, incubators, academic mobility) – 58.9%, merit scholarships and scholarships offered by university partners – 54.5%, content of the study process throughout the entire period – 44.5%, Other academic facilities (libraries, canteens, hubs, business incubators, sports halls) – 40.8%, opportunities to get involved in extracurricular activities – 40.3%, provision of accommodation in student dormitories – 39.5%, information about the university's academic and scientific achievements – 35.3%, stories of graduates who have achieved remarkable career success – 34.3%, the presence of renowned professors at the university – 33.5%, data on the history and development prospects of the university – 26.7%.

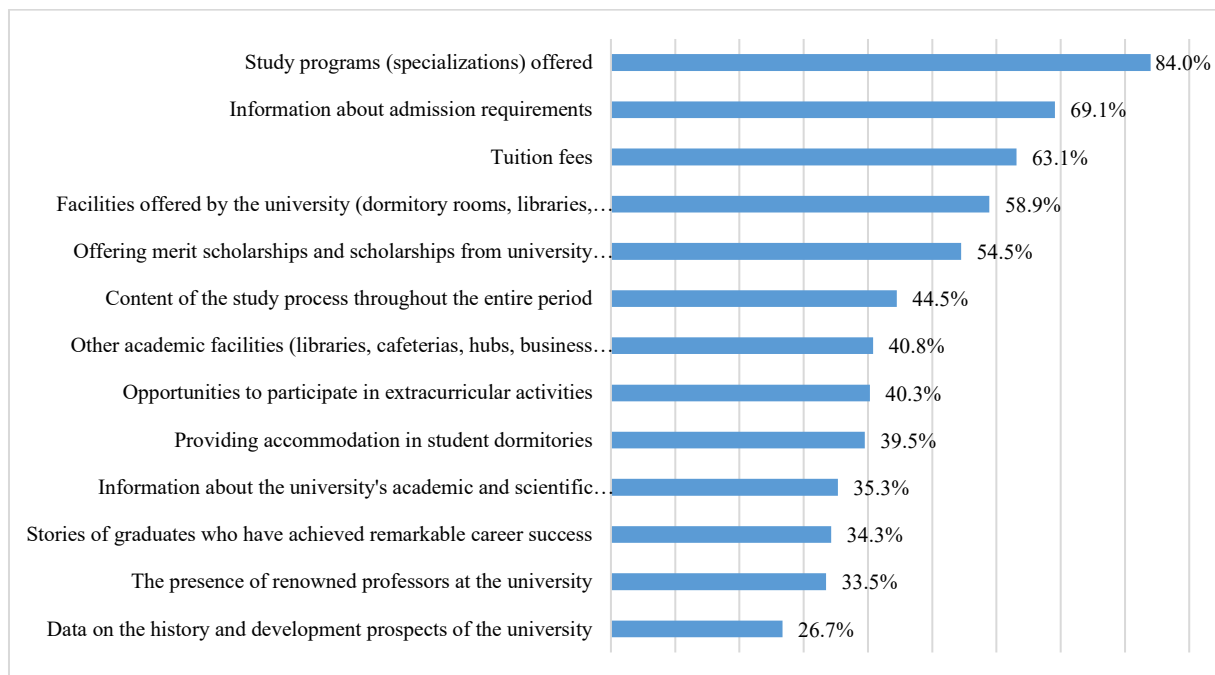


Figure 9: Information that prospective students want to find on university websites

Source: Developed by the author based on (Questionnaire on the perception of prospective students regarding higher education in the Republic of Moldova)

If the information presented on the university website is not as clear as possible, it will not achieve its goal, and material that is too long and difficult to read is often ignored (Enache et al., 2013). In this regard, the survey assessed the quality and usefulness of the information available on the websites of universities in the Republic of Moldova. (Figure 10). Thus, it is rated as very high by 23.8%, high by 38.2%, average by 31.7%, low by 5%, and very low by 1.3%, showing that university websites need substantial improvements in terms of the information provided and highlighting the unique characteristics of the university, its ability to meet the needs of students, which generates confidence in the institution's ability to provide a certain type and level of education (Dobre & Milovan, 2019).

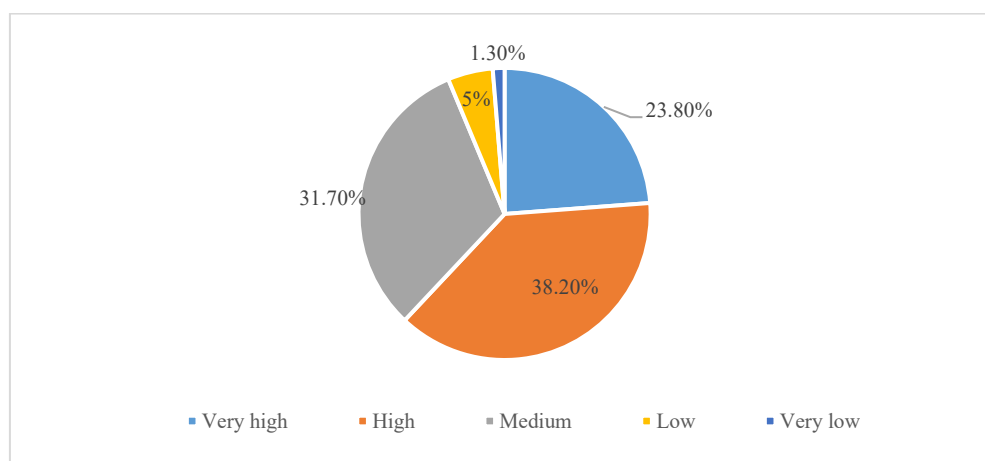


Figure 10: Quality and usefulness of information available on university websites

Source: Developed by the author based on (Questionnaire on the perception of prospective students regarding higher education in the Republic of Moldova)

Overall, the study underlines that higher education institutions gain attractiveness when they consistently align their offer with the real needs and expectations of prospective students, ensuring that both academic offerings and communication strategies are perceived as relevant, and the digital channels and formats used resonate with young generations.

IV.CONCLUSION

The results of the study emphasize that focusing on the needs of high school graduates is an essential element in increasing the attractiveness of the university. The determining factors in choosing a higher education institution—the quality of studies, the facilities offered, international reputation, the success of graduates, and scholarship programs—facilitate the creation of a favorable image that influences the decision to apply to a particular university. At the same time, online promotion, through the university's website and social networks, is becoming the main channel of information, its effectiveness being determined by the consistency of the message and the constant updating of content.

Thus, in order to remain competitive in a globalized education market, universities in the Republic of Moldova must adopt educational marketing strategies focused on the consumer of educational services, combining online and offline promotion, differentiation through unique visual identity elements, and continuous adaptation to the technological and behavioral changes of new generations of students. Implementing these practices could help attract more students and retain them, thereby strengthening the institution's long-term prestige.

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