

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE RECRUITMENT OF STUDENTS BY HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

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Abstract

With growing competition on the education market, many colleges and universities in the hospitality and tourism field are faced with the problem of attracting new students. In order to increase market share, they have to change their marketing perspective and focus on the identification of new opportunities. Thus, the use of social media by a higher education institution as part of marketing and recruiting strategy is one more evidence that this institution has many similarities with service providers. On the other hand, the majority of tourist companies placed their advertisement for vacant positions in social media platforms using them in parallel with traditional methods. The aim of this paper is to investigate to which extent higher education institutions in Serbia use social media to recruit potential students, but also to analyze how students of hospitality and tourism use social media for the selection of college or university.

Key Words: social media, recruiting, higher education institution, tourism companies, Serbia

JEL classification: J21, Z32, L83

Introduction

Service sector is experiencing expansion which is a result of globalization, deregulation as well as new information technologies. Service-related fields such as tourism, hospitality, leisure, sport and events, are a major category of world's international trade in service (Vukić & Vukić, 2018). It is necessary to take a series of measures to achieve success in increasing revenue from tourism (Tešanović et al.,

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2013). The changes in the service sector have also affected the operation of higher education institutions (HEIs) which have, for the first time, faced fierce competition. To confront the severe rivalry of other institutions as well as the big waves of transformation in the education sector, higher education institutions have gravitated towards a business-like model and adopted business practices in marketing and branding to stand out from their competitors (Bunzel, 2007). A careful choice of marketing strategy aims to reduce the risk of intangibility and to improve performances of education institutions. Performance of every company is a result of many different factors such as profitability, market share, sales, promotion as well as good relationships between the employees. (Vukic et al., 2018). In order to establish long-term relationships with their target market, higher education institutions (HEIs) need to create a strong brand that will effectively communicate with them. Brand is very important because it represents more than products and services, as it includes trust and emotions (Vukic et al., 2016). Potential students have similar attitudes toward higher education brand as a product or service brand. Strong university brand can create the belief that the chosen university is excellent and the prospect of studying at this school will bring added values and pleasant experience; thereby, the brand can boost the confidence of the potential students to proceed to the purchase stage (Ali-Choudhury et al. 2009). Schultz and Schultz (2004) view integrated marketing communications (IMC) as strategic business process and marketing decisions made across multiple channels that help drive brand communication.

All the above stated trends have given rise to the modernization of universities worldwide and induced them to start using new information technologies for business purpose. Before social media technologies, the communication between companies and their stakeholders was mostly a one-way communication, where the company had total control over brand communication. In recent years, with the emergence of social networks, the marketing and recruitment process has been transformed which can be noticed from Recruiter National Survey from 2018, where the top investments for growing an employer brand are: social media (47%), company career website (21%), and marketing and advertising (12%) (www.jobvite.com).

Social media platforms can be defined as information technologies which support interpersonal communication and collaboration using Internet-based platforms (Kane et al, 2014). Social media like Facebook, Twitter,

Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, and so on are used daily by millions of people worldwide, especially young people. Higher education institutions commonly use social networks as the platform for recruiting the potential users of their services, for communication with their stakeholders, for promotion of learning processes (Hauptmann & Steger, 2013) but also for the creation of a positive image as well as for the humanization of the brand using content marketing strategy. Also, they can serve to shape the way that students construct their social and professional identities (Sacks & Graves, 2012). Social networking sites allow students to participate in formal (e.g., study of course material) and informal (e.g., look for useful information everywhere) learning conditions. Students can match with people with a similar way of thinking and exchange knowledge in an informal way (e.g., exchange of their educational experiences) for educational purposes (Cheung et al., 2011). However, despite the numerous positive effects authors, Paul et al. (2011) revealed a statistically important negative influence between the students' academic performance and the time they spend on social networks.

Redman and Wilkinson believe the main reasons for the transition to social media as a recruitment tool are "related to issues of cost and speed" (Redman & Wilkerson, 2009). Social media can particularly be of assistance to smaller schools with limited advertising budgets in order to better compete with better-funded institutions (Shinn, 2011). Author Wheeler (2012) is of the opinion that social media will play an increasing strategic role in reaching international students which can result in more positive educational experiences not only for the international students, but also for domestic students who are exposed to global perspectives.

Despite the fact that students are considered as heavy users of informational technologies, authors Constantinides and Stagno (2011) believe that the impact of these in their choice of institutions is low compared to traditional forms of university marketing. In addition to a good strategy, authors Griffiths and Wall (2011) state that careful monitoring of social sites is critical, and procedures and standards to manage information on sites should be continuously reviewed and revised. With this statement authors Peruta, and Shields (2018) agree, and emphasize that social networks are constantly tweaking their algorithms, which impact social media managers to create content that satisfies the needs of all audiences such as prospective students, current students, alumni, university sports fans, faculty, community members, etc.

This study aims to research how social media is used during the recruitment process by higher education institutions and to investigate students' attitudes towards them for this purpose.

Literature review

Literature exploring the social media use by higher education institutions is very scarce despite the fact that its use has become an integral part of the strategy for promotion and recruitment of new students of nearly all colleges and universities. Papers exploring this topic mostly dealt with the use of social media for recruitment purpose (Barnes & Mattson, 2009; Merrill, 2010; Spraggon, 2011; Kuzma & Wright, 2013; Allinen, K., 2018), the quality of the relationship between the university and students with the help of social media (Clark, et al., 2017; Sutherland et al., 2018), the use of social media for communication and recruitment of students by university (Stagno, 2010; Stageman, 2011). However, few authors explored the use of social media by hospitality and tourism higher education institutions.

Some of the first authors who investigated social media use by higher education institutions were Barnes and Mattson (2009). They used telephone surveys to investigate 4-year accredited institutions in the U.S. Their results showed that social media use by colleges for recruitment purposes is on the rise. Most of the respondents (89%) said that social media is somewhat important to their future admissions strategy and that they need to learn rules of engagement in online environments.

Merrill (2010) researched the use of social media for recruitment of international students by higher education institutions from Germany, Canada and New Zealand. This author concluded that the most popular social media used are Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. The research conducted by Cappex.com (2010) brought similar results, with the addition of the note that the traditional recruitment methods are still popular.

Spraggon (2011) examined 20 undergraduate business schools in order to reveal how they use social media for promotion. By analyzing their websites, he noticed that best social media practice theory and practices observed are disconnected. According to this author resolution of this problem is a new model for social media for schools program aimed for recruitment, retention and alumni investment.

According to the survey carried out by Varsity Outreach (2011) it was concluded that the use of Facebook for student's recruitment is increasing and that 93% out of 150 universities and colleges have a Facebook page or group.

Kuzma and Wright (2013) researched 90 universities in three continents, Asia, Africa and Europe in terms of their use of social networking for recruiting and marketing purpose. Results showed inconsistency in use of social media in those three different areas. Overall conclusion of this author is that higher education institutions should integrate social media in their marketing strategy because of better recruitment and provision of more successful students' experience.

Clark, Fine and Scheurb (2017) explored how social media engagement impacts relationship quality between the university and students. Results indicated a positive association between students following a university via social media and the perception of having a high-quality relationship with their university. Furthermore, it was pointed out that the integrated appearance of a university on multiple social media sites leads to an even higher perception of relationship quality.

Study of 24 Bulgarian universities revealed that 23 of them possess various integrated social media tools like discussion forums, chats, wikis, internal messaging, blogs, creating learning groups, collaboration tools (Parusheva, et al., 2018).

On the other hand, social media use by students for college search in Netherlands was explored by Stagno (2010). He concluded that 95% of participants had a social media page but social networking sites were last on the list of resources potential students use to search for college and to obtain information. Most common sources of information were campus visits, university websites, and brochures.

Similar results were obtained by Stageman (2011) in the USA territory where it was concluded that students use university social media more to build a network of friends, connect with school officials, and make a smooth transition from home life to school life than to chose particular college.

Use of social media by hospitality and tourism higher education institutions in Serbia

Appearance on the tourism market requires an awareness of contemporary trends, as well as the consumers' motives and preferences (Vukic et al., 2014), which also applies to educational institutions that have many similarities with service and tourism providers. Competitive advantages of some of state-owned higher education institutions cannot be taken for granted anymore. Although given the number of graduate students from higher education institution has been doubled (Vukić & Vukić, 2018), their marketing strategy require the use of information technologies in order to be more attractive in the eyes of their potential students.

It is estimated that approximately 2 billion internet users are using social networks and this number is still expected to grow as mobile device usage and mobile social networks increasingly gain attraction. The most popular network worldwide is Facebook with 2.27 billion monthly active users, You Tube is on the second place (1900 billion users), third is WhatsApp (1500 billion users), fourth is Facebook Messenger (1300 billion users), fifth is WeChat (1083 billion users) and sixth-ranked photo-sharing app Instagram had 1 billion monthly active accounts (statista.com, 2019).

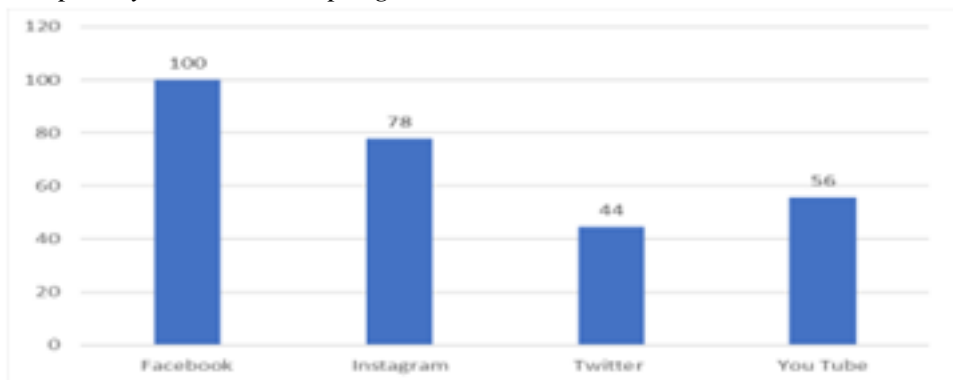
The process of incorporating social media as a recruitment technique is not simple. Colleges and universities frequently struggle with the need to coordinate their traditional marketing strategies with their newer, non-traditional forms to ensure that their marketing communications are, by definition, integrated (Peruta, & Shields, 2018). The use of social media in hospitality and tourism higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia was delayed compared to their use in developed countries. One of the reasons for the delay is the absence of serious competition at the higher education market as it has been dominated by state-owned institutions, which can be concluded from the publication of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (<http://www.stat.gov.rs>). However, in the last decade competition became very fierce and therefore numerous universities and colleges adopted digital strategy as a part of their positioning strategy.

With the aim of analyzing the use of social media, 9 state-owned higher education institutions were analyzed, i.e. 6 colleges and 3 faculties which, according to the author's knowledge, have some of hospitality and tourism programs. The following institutions were included in the

research: The College of Hotel Management, Belgrade (2019); Higher Business School Leskovac (2019); College of Applied Studies Arandelovac (2019); The Business and Technical College of Applied Sciences, Užice (2019); The High Technological School of Vocational Studies, Šabac (2019); The College of Tourism, Belgrade (2019); Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism, University of Kragujevac (2019); Faculty of Economics (2019); University of Belgrade and Department of Geography, Tourism and Hotel Management, University of Novi Sad (2019).

As observed from the Figure 1, there are four different media listed: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and You Tube from official websites of above-mentioned schools. However, not all of these channels are promoted on the official websites of the schools. Four out of the nine institutions have an account on all the mentioned social media.

Figure 1: *Social media portfolio of educational institutions with Hospitality and Tourism program*



Source: *Author's Own Research*

Social networking site Facebook clearly appears as the winner because all nine institutions have an official profile (100%). Most of the institutions provide contact details, short description about them and the link to return to the main website. All schools have the information in Serbian, which could affect the international students' understanding of the provided information. Media platform least used is Twitter (44%) as it turned out that, although four out of the nine institutions have an account, the only partially active account is the account of Faculty of Economics, University of Belgrade. The growing trend showed Instagram with 78%, which could achieve the popularity of Facebook.

Methodology

In order to examine students' attitude towards use of social media for recruitment purpose by educational institutions, an online survey was conducted in Serbia. The research involved 208 students of the College of Hotel Management in Belgrade. Data were collected during the summer semester of the 2018/19 academic year. The questionnaire consisted of 23 questions divided into four main sections. The first is the socio-demographic part, which includes gender, age, year of study, study program, average grade and study status. The second part of the questionnaire relates to the attitudes of the students towards the importance of social media for the recruitment of new students. The third section investigates the attitude of students toward content of their college account, whereas the fourth part focuses on students' attitudes towards the use of social media for educational purpose.

The study used a five-point Likert-type scale where 1 point means "Completely disagree", 2 points "Disagree", 3 points "Neutral", 4 points "Agree" and 5 points "Completely agree". Data collected via the questionnaire were analyzed and interpreted through the SPSS statistical analysis software package program. The sample mainly consisted of women (55.3%). The overall sample average age is 21.17 (SD=2.030). The majority of them were students of Hotel Management (57.7%); students of Gastronomy Management accounted for 32.7% and students of Restaurant Management 9.6%. 72.6% have average grade lower than 8. More detailed statistics regarding demographic data is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: *Demographic data*

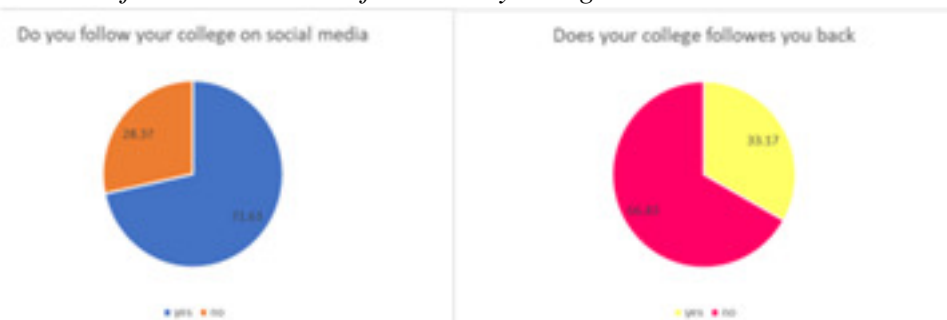
Category	Variable	Number of respondents	Percentage %
Gender	Male	93	44.7
	Female	115	55.3
Year of study	First year	46	22.1
	Second year	82	39.4
	Third year	35	16.8
	Senior undergraduate	35	16.8
	Graduated	10	4.8
Study program	Hotel Management	120	57.7

	Restaurant Management	20	32.7
	Gastronomy Management	68	9.6
Average grade	From 6.00 to 8.00	151	72.6
	From 8.01 to 10	57	27.4
Study status	Current student	197	94.7
	Graduated student	11	5.3

Source: *Author's Own Research*

Most of the students follow college profile on social media (66.83%) as shown in Figure 2, while only 33.17% of students are followed by social media profile of their college. Such a small percentage of following users back by official account is an indicator of the fact that the accounts of college do not use enough social media tools which present the perfect opportunity to see their content and interact with them. The number of female students following the college profile on social networks is slightly higher (57.7%) than the number of male students (42.3%). The highest number of followers is among the students of hotel management (54.4), then students of gastronomy (32.9%), whereas the smallest number of followers is found among the students of restaurant management (12.8%). Of all the followers, the students of the second year are most numerous (40.6%), followed by the students of the first year (23.1%) and of the third year (17.5%), whereas the number of senior undergraduates and graduated students is the smallest (18.9%).

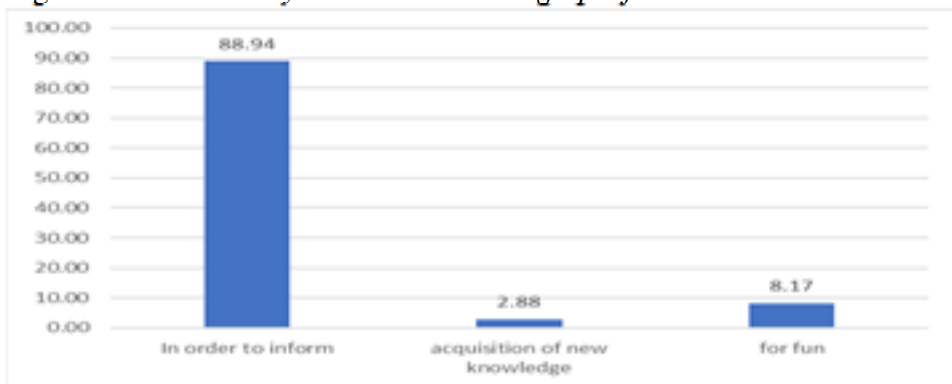
Figure 2: *Number of students who follow college on social media and number of students who are followed by college*



Source: *Author's Own Research*

Regarding the reasons for visiting the college profile on social media, a vast majority of respondents (88.94%) stated getting information, while a significantly smaller number (8.17%) responded that they are doing it for fun, and only 2.88% cited acquiring new knowledge as the reason (Figure 3).

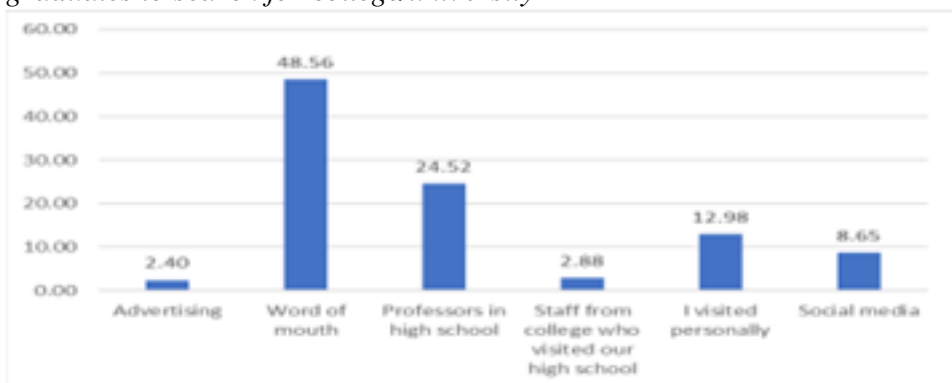
Figure 3: *Reasons why students visit college profile on social media*



Source: *Author's Own Research*

The students of restaurant management are the only group using the profile exclusively for the purpose of finding information, while the students from the other two study programs use the profile for other purposes as well. Third year students and senior undergraduates follow the college on social networks more for fun (52.2%) than the students of the first and the second year (42.8%).

Figure 4: *Method of recruitment used most often by students and recent graduates to search for college/university*



Source: *Author's Own Research*

When it comes to method of recruitment used most often to search for college or university, it is interesting to note that as much as 48.56% of students used "word of mouth", 24.52% got informed through their high school teachers, 12.98% personally visited the school, 8.65% used social media, whereas a very small number of students used advertising (2.40%) and visits of staff from the college (2.88%) as means of recruitment (Figure 4). The evident conclusion is that social media are used to a lesser extent than traditional methods of recruitment.

Students were also asked to rate how important they thought Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn each are in the recruitment process. From Table 2 it can be concluded that the respondents find Instagram most important, Facebook holds the second position, while LinkedIn and Twitter have the lowest average ranking. Such respondents' replies coincide with the social networks use by educational institutions shown in Figure 1, and therefore we can say that these institutions have made a good choice of the networks they are using in order to communicate with their target group. It is interesting to note that the respondents opt for Instagram rather than Facebook, which could be a signal for a more intensive campaign on this social network.

Table 2: *Importance of different social networks for recruitment of new students*

Social network	means	Std.dev.	min	max
Facebook	3.56	1.310	1	5
Instagram	3.83	1.353	1	5
LinkedIn	2.23	1.356	1	5
Twitter	2.01	1.196	1	5

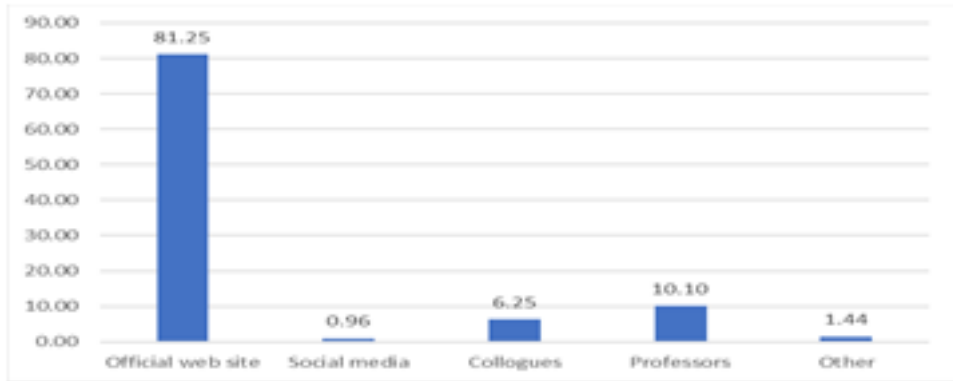
Source: *Author's Own Research*

The next issue that was explored was the considered trusted source of information when respondents need data about studying (Figure 5).

The source the respondents trust most when searching for information about studying is the official web site (81.25%) as it is thought to provide more accurate information about service package of a school than any other source of information. Teachers come second (10.1%), colleagues third (6.25%), and slightly more than 1% trust other sources of information (1.44%). The least trusted source are social media (0.96%) because the information provided by them is subjective. On the basis of these results, we can conclude that students find the traditional methods

of getting information notably more reliable when searching for information about educational service.

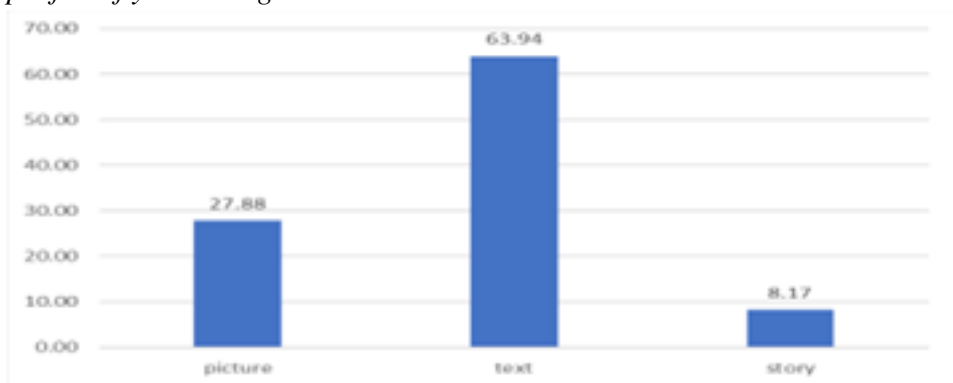
Figure 5: *The trusted source of information by students*



Source: *Author's Own Research*

When visiting the college profile on social media, the respondents primarily pay attention to the text (63.94%) and then to pictures (27.88%), whereas they pay little attention to the story (8.17%). Men (51.7%) pay more attention to the pictures than women (48.3%); women (55.6%) pay more attention to the text than men (44.4%), while substantially more women (76.5%) than men (23.5%) pay attention to the story (Figure 6).

Figure 6: *Which content do you pay attention first when it comes to profile of your college on social media?*



Source: *Author's Own Research*

In addition to the attitudes related to the use of social media for recruitment purpose, this survey also explored students' attitudes toward

the content of college social media account. As can be seen in Table 3, respondents on average agreed with nearly all of the proposed statements (with 3.04 as the lowest average score on the scale from 1 to 5).

Respondents agreed most strongly with the statement "Promotional activities of the faculty/college on social networks have a positive impact on attracting new students" as well as with "College account on social networks provides reliable and valuable information on enrollment options". The least agreed statements were that the college profile is interesting or that it provides educational content.

Table 3: *Students' attitudes toward the content of college account*

Statement	means	standard deviation	min	max
College account on social networks provides reliable and valuable information on enrollment options	3.47	1.187	1	5
College account is interesting	3.05	1.277	1	5
College account provides reliable and valuable information on studying and events at the faculty	3.32	1.280	1	5
College account provides information on companies where students can do an internship	3.31	1.316	1	5
College account provides educational content	3.04	1.243	1	5
Promotional activities of the college on social networks have a positive impact on attracting new students	3.53	1.179	1	5

Source: *Author's Own Research*

Regarding the students' attitudes toward the use of social media for education purpose, they agree that the teachers should use social networks in communication with students (mean=3.70, SD=1.355); however, they are not sure whether social networks should be given priority over the traditional ways of communication such as e-mail (mean=3.34, SD=1.523).

Table 4: *Students' attitudes towards use of social media for education purpose*

Statement	means	Std. Deviation	min	max
Teachers should use social networks in communication with students.	3.70	1.355	1	5
In communication with students, social networks should be given priority over the traditional ways of communication	3.34	1.523	1	5

Source: *Author's Own Research*

On average, the students neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement that the image of college on social networks may affect their future employment (mean=3.35, SD= 1.249). However, it is notable that the largest number of students who agree with this statement are students of restaurant management (mean=3.75), then students of gastronomy (mean=3.43) while the largest number of those who disagree are the students of hotel management (mean=3.23).

Conclusion

In the global business environment, due to the rapid increase in the number of competitors and the straining of their relations, the preservation of acquired market positions as well as the increase in market share are becoming a major challenge for every company. In order to achieve these business goals, it is necessary for the companies to strive to provide good customer service, high quality products, competitive communication strategy, but most of all to create and deliver values corresponding to the customers' preferences.

Such challenges exist in the higher education market as well, where colleges and universities face significant changes when it comes to recruiting new students. Recruitment is a long-term process which requires a strategic approach not only before the student enrolls the desired faculty but also beyond graduation. The choice of methods used by universities to maintain student's attention has an impact on how students perceive their institution's brand, and can influence the attachment to the institution and in turn the students' intentions to engage with the university in the future. The higher education market in Serbia is still dominated by state owned institutions; however, in the last ten years there has been an increasing number of private school systems which

might increase their market share in the near future. In order to remain competitive, the state-owned higher education institutions should not take their competitive advantage for granted. The development of modern information technologies has enabled the connection between educational institutions and their potential users in much more direct ways which can significantly reduce recruitment costs compared to the traditional methods. Development of social media presence can provide each faculty with the ability to manage their own social media efforts while maintaining some type of "brand" or regulation as to the content that can be shared.

The results of the present study have shown that most students in the sample follow their college on social media but a very small number of them is followed by the school. It is common knowledge that it is no longer enough to simply be present on the network - it is also very important to have proper engagement and interaction with those who companies are trying to reach. Otherwise, the education institution reduces its communication through social network to a traditional advert. As far as methods of recruitment in the enrollment process are concerned, we can conclude that students in Serbia still predominantly use traditional methods which they, at the same time, trust more than social media. If they had to choose, the most preferred social networks for recruitment would be Instagram, followed by Facebook, which means that social media strategy of educational institutions should be most intensive on these networks. Respondents agreed most strongly that the promotion on social networks has a positive impact on attracting new students, but also that the profile of the school they are studying at is not interesting enough. In order to be more interesting, school profiles need to have more two-way conversations with students. One of the ways to achieve that is to share news and ideas not necessarily directly related to the school, but serving some educational or informative purpose. It is very important to follow the development of the school brand on social media by responding to comments, answering questions and addressing complaints. Implementing humor, quizzes (polls), contests, interactive videos in social media appearance can be a very effective way of promoting schools. Social media have undoubtedly changed the way higher education institutions recruit potential students, making the recruitment more efficient, faster and more productive. Although the results of this study have shown that students currently consider traditional recruitment methods more reliable, they agree that professors should use social

networks for communication purposes. This indicate that in the near future we can expect a change in their attitudes in favor of social media.

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