RESEARCH ARTICLE

University Online Communication: Between Institutional Identity and Digital Interactivity

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Abstract

Online communication has become a strategic component in building the university image in the context of the accelerated digitalization of higher education. This study aims to analyze how two Romanian universities – the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Craiova (UMF Craiova) and the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA) – use digital media to communicate their institutional identity, attract audiences, and build relationships with stakeholders. The analysis is based on a qualitative content analysis of the official websites and social media accounts of the two institutions. The results reveal convergences in the use of online media, as well as important differences in storytelling, interactivity, and communication sustainability. The study is framed within the most recent theories of strategic university communication in the digital era.

Introduction

In the post-digital era, university institutional communication no longer serves merely an informative function but becomes a vector for strengthening reputation, engaging the academic community, and affirming institutional identity. Beyond disseminating standardized messages, higher education institutions are compelled to develop storytelling strategies, tailor content according to audiences, and maintain a coherent presence across multiple communication spaces.

Online communication has undergone an evolution and diversification that is difficult to investigate in depth. The multitude of communication platforms has significantly contributed to the hyper-segmentation of messages and audiences. In this context of democratization of media and platforms, it is no longer about choosing or prioritizing one channel over another. The essential message must travel across as many platforms as possible, including traditional ones. This highlights a primary challenge of contemporary communication in general and of online communication in particular. We can speak of avatars of the essential message, adapted to the patterns of different platforms.

Another challenge is credibility, the attribute the receiver invests in a message. The multiplication of messages generates avatars, but also misleading projections that distance the receiver from the core message. Thus, any source capable of nourishing the credibility of a message must be identified. In the space of fluid identities – the space of online communication – it is necessary to identify a reference point, a supportive source for the message and its meaning. One such node is the institutional website, which should list verifiable identities, rules, results – information that opens a window to the physical existence of the institution and transposes its identity into the online environment. The institutional website is the portal that links the real with the virtual.

This research starts from the observation that a university's website and social media accounts are not merely technical information channels, but symbolic portals reflecting the vision, values, and performance of the institution. The study explores to what extent two Romanian institutions – UMF Craiova and SNSPA – leverage these resources to construct a coherent and credible digital institutional image.

The research objectives are to identify the types of content communicated online, to understand the logic of message adaptation according to platform, and to evaluate the degree of interactivity promoted by these institutions. The initial hypotheses include: the website remains a central communication node but is insufficient without interactivity; social media is used mainly for information, not relationship building; and the dimensions of sustainability and internationalization are still underrepresented in the digital communication of Romanian universities.

Methodology

The research is qualitative, using a content analysis approach. The official websites of UMF Craiova (www.umfcv.ro) and SNSPA (www.snspa.ro), as well as their institutional accounts on Facebook, LinkedIn, X (Twitter), Instagram, and YouTube (where available), were examined in detail. Indicators analyzed included informational structure, visual branding, institutional storytelling, interactivity level, transparency, and the presence of sustainability and internationalization components.

The analysis was supplemented by a contextual evaluation of each institution, through consultation of institutional documents (university charter, annual reports, regulations), public traffic data, and available multimedia materials. To better understand the development directions of university communication in Romania, the results were compared to international standards of best practices as found in the academic literature.

Theoretical Framework

Strategic university communication is defined by Chiciudean, Mucundorfeanu, Năstasă-Matei, and Toma (2022) as a multidimensional activity involving five key dimensions: informational accessibility, visual branding, storytelling, bidirectional interaction, and institutional transparency. According to Mocanu (2022), the university website should become a true "digital campus," capable of mediating relationships between the institution and its publics through a multisensory and personalized communication offering.

According to the model proposed by Chiciudean et al. (2022), strategic university online communication includes five essential dimensions: (1) accessibility and navigational structure, (2) visual identity and branding, (3) institutional storytelling, (4) interaction and bidirectional communication, and (5) transparency and public accountability.

Van der Geest (2005) argues that website design is essentially communication design, and each graphic or architectural element conveys an institutional message. Zamfir, Mocanu, and Militaru (2022) introduce the concept of communication sustainability, emphasizing the importance of visible sections dedicated to ESG (environmental, social, governance) policies. Similarly, Albers (2004) highlights the need to align user goals with information architecture, stating that an effective website supports orientation, information retrieval, and engagement.

According to Mocanu (2022), universities must build a coherent and recognizable communication brand in which values, vision, and academic uniqueness are clearly expressed in digital language. A successful academic brand involves a stable visual identity, an audience-adapted narrative tone, and multimedia content that humanizes the institution.

A central principle in contemporary communication is interactivity. Modern university websites function as engagement spaces: they offer dynamic forms, live chats, online feedback, FAQ sections, thematic forums, or interactive platforms.

According to Zamfir et al. (2022), the university website is the central platform for communicating institutional sustainability. This includes visible sections on the university's ESG commitments, presentation of relevant projects, publication of reports, and student involvement in sustainable initiatives.

Chiciudean et al. (2022) and Mocanu (2022) agree that the website should not be analyzed in isolation but as part of a communication ecosystem that includes social media, newsletters, video platforms, and mobile apps. Coherent integration of these channels is a sign of professionalism and strategy.

The concept of co-creation in digital university communication is also essential. It involves moving from a traditional one-way communication model to a participatory one, where users are not just recipients but partners in constructing the message (Okushova et al., 2016).

Access to international education requires clear communication in globally circulated languages. Multilingual versions of university websites are essential for attracting international students, academic partners, and foundations.

Comparative Analysis

The University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Craiova offers a structured, modern, and performance-oriented online communication. The website is logically organized, frequently updated, with a professional visual interface and content tailored to different categories of users: students, faculty, the general public, and partners. Sections on admission, research, and events are well developed, though sometimes redundant or scattered. The platform is available in English, but the translation is incomplete, which may hinder international access.

UMF Craiova has expanded its digital presence by integrating an online library, a multimedia studio, a university radio, and a student magazine—demonstrating a genuine commitment to multi-platform communication. Social

media is used strategically, with a professional yet accessible tone, visually consistent imagery, thematic campaigns, and clear audience segmentation: students, professors, researchers, alumni, international partners. However, user interaction remains low, with a lack of real-time feedback mechanisms, polls, Q&A sessions, or open forums.

In terms of storytelling, UMF Craiova incorporates narrative elements into its health prevention and education campaigns, using empathetic language and powerful imagery to generate emotional engagement. Campaigns like "Prevent Regrets" or "Your Body. Your Power" are relevant examples of community-oriented communication.

The university launched an updated version of its institutional website in 2022. The site serves as the primary source of information about UMF Craiova's activities and is also the institution's main digital communication platform. It is organized hierarchically, with well-defined sections serving various informational needs. The main menu offers quick access to categories such as: About Us (general information about the mission, vision, and organizational structure of UMF Craiova), Faculties (access point to individual faculty pages with details on study programs, academic staff, and activities), Admission (a comprehensive guide on admission procedures, eligibility criteria, and calendar), Research (dedicated to ongoing projects and scientific publications), Students (with resources including academic guides, scholarship information, and digital platforms), and a communication section subdivided into Events (for academic events organized by UMF Craiova) and News (press releases and broader informational content beyond academic events).

Given the complexity of the information, the site is well organized, using a category and subcategory system that allows intuitive navigation. However, some information is redundant or scattered, which may cause difficulties for users less familiar with the platform.

In terms of content, it is well written, using a formal yet accessible language. Sections are frequently updated, reflecting a clear commitment to maintaining the relevance of the information. Content is tailored to various user groups: students have access to academic resources, scholarships, Moodle platform access; faculty members find information on research, publications, and regulations; the general public can access details on health campaigns, community initiatives, and admission.

The site loads quickly, ensuring a smooth user experience.

Some shortcomings have also been identified. While users can subscribe to a newsletter and access a contact page, they are not encouraged to provide feedback.

Regarding areas for improvement, linguistic diversification is worth noting. The site offers an English version, but some sections are only partially translated, which may impact international accessibility.

From a visual design perspective, the site is simple but professional, aligning with the university's visual identity. Blue and white tones are used, resulting in a harmonious, friendly look, although in some sections the contrast may seem insufficient.

From an accessibility standpoint, the site is optimized for mobile devices and is responsive, but some interactive elements are difficult to use on small screens (e.g., spreadsheets, regulations). There are also insufficient features for users with visual impairments (e.g., text enlargement options, audio descriptions for images).

In terms of interactivity and digitalization, the integration of the Moodle platform for educational management is a strong point, and the ability to make payments and access administrative documents digitally is notable. Integrated communication is relatively well implemented. The site includes links to UMF Craiova's official social media pages. These are integrated, but lack features that encourage direct user interaction.

Strengths of the site include: well-defined structure with intuitive navigation, clear and well-written content updated regularly, integration of educational platforms and online administrative services, and the presence of an English version relevant for international users.

Weaknesses include: lack of real-time feedback mechanisms, limited accessibility for users with disabilities, incomplete translation of certain sections, and insufficient promotion of mobile applications.

The www.umfcv.ro website is an efficient and well-organized platform that reflects UMF Craiova's commitment to transparency and digitalization. Optimizing accessibility and interactivity could significantly improve user experience and strengthen the institution's position both nationally and internationally.

Social Media Communication

Social media is an essential communication tool in today's academic environment, and the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Craiova is adapting to digitalization in this area as well. The institution has chosen six social media platforms to disseminate information, promote activities, and build relationships with various stakeholder categories: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Threads, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube. Posts are

regular and tailored to the audience, but interaction is limited. The tone is formal yet accessible. Communication is predominantly one-directional, with few examples of real-time feedback.

Exploring the visual qualities of the online presence, we observe that on Facebook and Instagram, posts are well-designed, with consistent use of institutional colors (blue and white) and clear graphic elements. Imagery includes high-quality photos of the campus, events, and student activities. Visual presentations on Threads and LinkedIn are less developed compared to Facebook and Instagram. LinkedIn posts are more formal, while Threads uses more casual images.

The video content on YouTube is well-edited, using clear frames, subtitles, and professional angles. Video presentations of events and campaigns are informative and visually engaging.

All platforms adhere to UMF Craiova's visual identity, strengthening the institution's professional image. However, there is a certain lack of visual diversity, which may affect long-term audience interest.

From a targeting perspective, UMF Craiova segments its audience on social platforms as follows:

- Facebook, Instagram, and Threads: students and prospective students
- LinkedIn:
- Medical professionals: doctors, pharmacists, researchers, and other experts interested in academic activities, research, and professional collaborations
- Academic staff and international researchers: individuals involved in academic exchanges, research projects, or conferences organized by UMF Craiova
- Partner organizations: other universities, NGOs, and institutions seeking collaboration with UMF Craiova
- Students and alumni: those interested in career and mentoring opportunities or who wish to stay connected with the university
- YouTube targets:
- Students and prospective students: individuals seeking detailed information about study programs, the campus, admissions, or student life
- The general public: community members interested in health education campaigns or other social initiatives
- Academic staff and researchers: individuals interested in scientific presentations, conferences, or academic events broadcast online
- Alumni and partners: former students and collaborators following the university's activities

UMF Craiova's YouTube channel includes videos on admissions, faculty presentations, and major events, offering a comprehensive perspective on university activities.

The analysis of digital communication channels shows a consistent presence with room for development. For instance, the YouTube channel recorded 4.4K views in the past 28 days and 328.5 hours of watch time—an increase of 188.5 hours compared to the previous period. This indicates that users not only access but also watch the content for significant periods.

On Facebook, there were 264,309 total views in the past 28 days, reflecting a visible impact of posts, with 6,722 content interactions—suggesting significant audience engagement.

On Instagram, there were 56,111 total views, with 77.2% from existing followers; 60% of the views came from short videos, indicating users' preference for this format. In the last 30 days, 7,855 accounts were reached.

UMF Craiova has built a solid and coherent presence across multiple social platforms, adapting its communication strategies to the specifics of each network and its target audience. Visual qualities are kept to high standards, and the messages conveyed are relevant and well-structured. To further improve communication efficiency, it is recommended to continuously monitor interactions and adjust strategies based on received feedback.

At the organizational level, UMF Craiova has created and continues to develop a multimedia studio, producing audiovisual materials including a podcast, an online radio (https://www.umfcv.ro/ro/despre-noi/comunicare/radio-umf-craiova), and a student online magazine (https://www.umfcv.ro/ro/despre-noi/comunicare/umf-craiova-life), published quarterly.

SNSPA, by contrast, maintains a more reserved and formal digital communication style. The website has a clear architecture and well-written content, but lacks message diversification. The news section acts as a press release aggregator, and social media is used occasionally, without a visible engagement strategy. SNSPA cultivates a strong academic image, but one that lacks dynamism, limiting itself to the dissemination of official messages.

SNSPA's Online Communication Channels

SNSPA's website includes links to its institutional social media pages. The institution is active on Facebook and X (Twitter), but the integration of these networks into the website is weak. There are no live post feeds, institutional hashtags, or transmedia thematic campaigns. The website does not function in synergy with the rest of the digital ecosystem.

The official Facebook page features occasional posts that do not appear to stem from a coherent communication strategy. In the past week, there were posts about the Summer School (June 2–6, 2025) and occasional holiday greetings (Environment Day, Teachers' Day).

Posts are focused on official announcements and events, with no visible posting calendar. Consequently, the tone is formal and academic, fostering neutral communication that lacks emotional engagement. No other types of community connections are initiated. We found no questions, polls, or calls for engagement. One-to-many communication is preferred. Thus, the page typically replicates official information from the website.

The same applies to the X (Twitter) account, SNSPA\official, which is oriented toward official communications and institutional positioning. Activity on the platform appears sporadic. Announcements, event promotions, and official statements are posted. The messages are formal and informative, published in English—indicating that SNSPA seeks international visibility and interest.

In contrast, the LinkedIn account—National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA)—seems better suited to SNSPA's preferred style of communication, considering its neutral, academic tone. With 22K followers and 22K alumni, the account is performing well. Here too, announcements are published about academic programs, university events and conferences, and institutional achievements. Interactivity is again absent, but the profile clearly communicates areas of activity, international orientation, and academic role. The LinkedIn page helps strengthen the institution's professional reputation and allows candidates and partners to understand alumni career paths, study directions, and opportunities offered by SNSPA. These are the accounts linked from SNSPA's website. A link to the Instagram account is missing, even though it exists—thus, we chose not to include it in our analysis. We also found no YouTube channel for SNSPA.

The platforms we examined play a key role in consolidating SNSPA's brand. Consistent use of SNSPA's official logo, color palette, and institutional fonts contributes to a professional and unified image.

The types of content favored by the institution are announcements and press releases. The homepage includes a "News" or "Recent Events" section that functions as an aggregator of press releases and official statements. These are well written, with clear titles, publication dates, sometimes illustrative images, and detailed links. Content covers project launches, international participation, admission announcements, interviews, and debates. Posts are regular (weekly), but activity intensifies during certain periods (e.g., around admissions or major external events). Naturally, the tone remains academic, formal, and professional. The same one-to-many informational flow persists, and multimedia is not utilized.

Events are promoted in the "News" section and occasionally shared on social media, as previously noted. Examples include the EU Future debate, book launches at the SNSPA Library, and international conferences in academic partnership. Rarely are live streams, video recordings, or direct public engagement opportunities provided.

While conferences help strengthen the academic image, most events are not available online and are not archived for public access. Follow-ups, photo galleries, or comments are also absent. Through press releases and announcements, the site reflects official academic activity. The information is clear, dated, professionally written, and relevant.

The lack of interactivity is a weak point. This communication behavior is mirrored both on the website and across social platforms. This reluctance could be explained by Romania's cultural context, where traditions of communication, debate, and negotiation are underdeveloped. However, SNSPA—arguably the most important school of communication in the country—could set a communication model for other universities to follow. Surprisingly, SNSPA overwhelmingly favors traditional communication. Press releases are not easily shareable on social media or via newsletters. We found no video recordings of conferences, presentation PDFs, or photo albums.

Traditional communication on SNSPA's website is efficient in terms of information, but insufficiently leveraged for dialogue with the public. We may ask whether it is time to shift from a "message transmission" model to a "relationship building" one, considering that SNSPA's communication experts favor traditional approaches over modern principles such as interactivity, personalization, accessibility, participation, and co-creation. The institution may need mechanisms for interaction, participation, and feedback—even in traditional formats adapted to digital, since it does not entirely reject transmediality.

The consistent use of formal tone and academic language excludes storytelling campaigns and emotional messaging. SNSPA does not practice differentiated communication for various audience categories—the same content is reposted from the website to Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, with varying frequency. We found no interactive online services (electronic forms, chatbots, polls), and the admissions platform is external and minimally integrated.

The visual and identity dimension (Okushova et al., 2016) is coherent but lacks symbolic depth. The site does not reflect university life, infrastructure, or institutional values through images. We identified no sections dedicated to sustainability (Zamfir et al., 2022). There is a lack of transparency on ESG policies, ecological initiatives, or reporting.

Multimedia content, live streams, podcasts, thematic campaigns, or storytelling elements are missing. Interactivity is nearly nonexistent, reducing the institution's capacity to build digital relationships with its audiences. The site does not offer virtual tours, mobile applications, or interactive forms, and the English version of the site is fragmented. Despite SNSPA's mission to train communication professionals, its institutional digital model does not reflect an innovative vision in the field.

Limitations

This research is limited by the selection of only two case studies, both from Romanian public universities. No interviews or focus groups with users of digital platforms were conducted, and digital performance data (web traffic, engagement rate, etc.) was not available. Furthermore, mobile applications or content marketing strategies—which could complete a university's communication ecosystem—were not analyzed.

Future Directions

Future research should consider extending the study to private or international universities and incorporating quantitative methods. A comparative analysis of the impact of online campaigns on student enrollment, retention, or institutional reputation would also be valuable. Integrating an ethnographic component—by observing audiences' digital behavior—could provide further relevant insights.

Elements of network analysis could also be introduced to understand the flow of information between institutional platforms and their users. Additionally, exploring the relationship between online communication and internationalization strategies, as well as the impact of sustainability communication on academic branding, would enrich the findings.

Conclusions

University online communication in Romania is evolving but still reflects a traditional vision centered on information dissemination rather than interaction and engagement. UMF Craiova is approaching a modern institutional model oriented toward dialogue and communication coherence, while SNSPA appears to adopt a more conservative stance, emphasizing formality and lacking message personalization.

To become relevant players in the global educational environment, universities must harness the full digital potential of communication: participatory design, real-time feedback, interactivity, emotional storytelling, sustainability, and international accessibility. Without these dimensions, the university website risks remaining a mere digital notice board in a world that increasingly demands dialogue, meaning, and community.

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