

Investigation of higher education institutions' social media uses in the context of public relations: The example of Twitter

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Abstract

Social media platforms, which are used very effectively by young people, continue to gain importance in many areas with the increase in the number of users and the intensity of use, and they are also a very effective environment and tool for higher education institutions, especially where young population study, to carry out their public relations activities and set their agendas. Higher education institutions are seen as the center of knowledge production and how they use social media in the process of communicating with their target audience is an important issue that needs to be examined. Twitter, one of today's popular social media platforms, enables institutions and organizations to communicate with their target audiences faster, less costly, simultaneously and in two ways. The purpose of this research is to examine how higher education institutions use Twitter in their public relations activities. The research was designed as a case study, one of the qualitative research types. Using the URAP-2020 list, 10 universities, five states, and five privates were determined. Universities' posts were analyzed by the content analysis method. Accordingly, it was concluded that state and private universities in the research group actively use Twitter to communicate effectively with their target audiences, differ in terms of usage purposes and interaction rates, and there is no difference in terms of distribution of shares according to days.

Keywords: Higher education institutions, public relations, social media, Twitter, URAP, content analysis.

INTRODUCTION

In today's world where competition is increasing in every field, higher education institutions frequently benefit from public relations activities to manage, develop and maintain their relations with their internal and external stakeholders. Higher education institutions that cannot communicate and interact effectively with their stakeholders may encounter major problems in the continuation of their existence, so they need to reach the goals they have determined by using appropriate communication channels effectively (Yılmaz, 2015). Higher education institutions want to announce their education and training content, and technological and scientific activities to their stakeholders with correct and effective communication methods, to differentiate from other universities and to stand out with activities that will add value to their institutions. Relevant units of universities, which manage public relations activities, carry out simultaneous activities in many areas with these purposes and work to reinforce their corporate identity and support their image and reputation. At this point, it can be said that social media is one of the most ideal channels that can ensure the effective execution of public relations activities with its rapidly developing interactive structure. Kartal & Algül (2019) stated that social media platforms, which are a very important opportunity and environment for public relations activities, have an important function in the image and reputation management of institutions.

Twitter is one of the most popular social media channels today. Institutions and organizations carry out their public relations activities and reach their stakeholders easily through their Twitter accounts. When examined in this context, it is seen that higher education institutions also use Twitter actively. Therefore, this research was conducted on Twitter, one of the social media platforms. Twitter is the first platform to offer a mobile social website and microblogging services (Kuang, 2018) and is defined as a free social

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network and microblogging application that allows individuals to share their current thoughts and situations within 280 characters and see other users' posts (Kuyucu, 2013). Due to these opportunities it provides, it appears as a platform that institutions and organizations frequently use in their public relations activities. Higher education institutions are seen as the center of knowledge production and it is a matter of curiosity about how they use social media in the process of communicating with their stakeholders. In line with this information, this research aims to examine how higher education institutions use Twitter in their public relations activities.

In the article, first of all, the definition, purpose, and functions of public relations, public relations activities, and social media as a public relations tool are included in the literature. Then, explanations about the research questions, research model, research group, and data analysis created in line with the purpose of the research were presented. Finally, the findings are presented, these findings are discussed and suggestions for future research are presented.

Public Relations

Public relations definition, purpose, and functions

Although the concept of public relations covers a short period such as a hundred years, its existence is parallel to the history of humanity (Bekman, 2020). Therefore, it can be said that the concept of public relations has a short history but a long one. Kazancı (1980) considers public relations as a planned effort that provides both influencing the administration and being influenced by the public, creating methods for this purpose and offering opportunities. The International Public Relations Association (IPRA) defines public relations as a continuous and organized management task that an initiative does to obtain and maintain the understanding, sympathy, and support of individuals with whom an organization operating in the public or private sector interacts or may be (Pira & Kocabaş, 2005).

Public relations plays a major role in communicating with the intended stakeholders of private or legal persons and gives a positive direction to behavior by establishing a strong bond between relations (Şeker, 2020). Thus, the concept of public relations in its simplest form can be considered as "the management of a two-way communication process between an organization and its people" (Reddi, 2019). At the same time, public relations can be defined as a management function that works to determine public attitudes, then plans and implements communication programs aimed at understanding and acceptance from the public (Karatepe, 2008). Biber (2009) defines public relations as planned and systematic communication efforts that organizations implement to obtain the social support, prestige, trust, and consent they need in democratic societies where the understanding of pluralism has developed.

Public relations has become a necessity rather than popular as an application that serves the purpose of maintaining the existence of the organization and ensuring its continuity (Güz, 2000). The main purpose of public relations is to create,

develop and maintain mutual understanding between an institution and its stakeholders. When mutual understanding is achieved, both parties approach each other in an unbiased and impartial way, so that the institution and its stakeholders benefit from it (Kalender, 2013). According to Poyraz & Yöndemli (2015), public relations is communication activities carried out to gain the sympathy of the public and to create mutual goodwill. It can be said that the communication dimension of public relations covers the research, planning, implementation, and evaluation of the communication to be managed with the stakeholders. In this context, every organization and manager who wants to leave a positive impact on its stakeholders, maintain its existence, and achieve its determined goals has to include public relations practices and determine public relations goals (Güz, 2000).

Public relations is a strategic management function that helps establish and maintain lines of mutual communication, understanding, acceptance, and cooperation between an institution or organization and its stakeholders; includes management issues; assists management in keeping abreast of public opinion and responding to opinions; defines and emphasizes management's responsibility to serve the public interest; it enables management to follow change and use it effectively and uses research and ethical communication techniques as its main tools (Wilcox et al., 2014). Public relations have important functions such as monitoring social change, determining social demands, and expressing themselves (Biber, 2009). The stakeholders of public relations, including internal and external, focus on two-way communication, mutual benefit, and understanding, goodwill, social responsibility, communication, or strategic communication (Kalender, 2013).

Public relations activities

Today, public relations activities have an important role for public institutions, private institutions, organizations, and non-governmental organizations in terms of establishing effective communication and interaction with their stakeholders (Okay, 2013). These activities are primarily mass communication activities and are carried out to reach and influence stakeholders (Peltekoğlu, 2013). Research, planning, and communication techniques are used in the execution of activities in public relations. To plan and implement effective public relations activities, organizations need to identify and define their issues with their stakeholders very well and determine the communication, tools, and environments to be used in reaching them within the time and budget possibilities, and this process is considered recognition in public relations. The transfer of the information that the institution or organization wants to give about itself to its stakeholders face to face, through the media, or events such as exhibitions, festivals, and fairs are called publicity in public relations (Kalender, 2013). Therefore, it can be said that public relations have two functions, primarily recognition, and promotion.

Even if the public relations activities are well organized, if they cannot convey their messages to their stakeholders, the activities do not matter. To ensure trust, support, and continuity

in public relations activities, it is necessary to benefit from the media, especially from social media channels, and thus reach stakeholders (Bayhan, 2020).

Social media as a public relations tool and environment

The increasing interest in information and digital communication technologies has increased the power of social media while adding a new dimension to the socialization process. In this context, social media is considered one of the most ideal channels, as it can be updated continuously, is open to multiple uses, and enables virtual sharing (Vural & Bat, 2010). These features of social media are the features that have an important role in the communication processes of institutions or organizations with their stakeholders in public relations.

Public relations is becoming a more preferred practice thanks to the rapidly developing social media networks and their communication and interaction with its stakeholders (Bekman, 2020). This shows that the structure of public relations has transformed. The stakeholders of public relations are customers, government officials, media, working individuals, dealers, suppliers, and citizens (Esrock & Leichty, 2000). Organizations carry out their public relations activities for both their external and internal stakeholders. In this context, the external stakeholders of higher education institutions are potential students, potential employees, student families, alumni, the people of the region and the country, other higher education institutions and organizations, trade unions, suppliers, financial experts, public opinion leaders, and media organs, while the internal stakeholders are the central organization, students, partners, academic and administrative university staff (Yılmaz, 2015).

Social media platforms have become mass media not only in interpersonal interaction but also in conveying messages in line with the goals and purposes of organizations (Onat, 2010). Institutions and organizations can easily convey their corporate messages to their stakeholders through social media channels, provide crisis management by providing the necessary guidance when faced with a crisis, and create a strong impact on their stakeholders (Bekman, 2020). In traditional media, the flow of information is one-way and the masses are only allowed to consume information. Social media, unlike traditional media, provides a versatile information flow that enables users to interact with each other (Himmelboim et al. 2012). To put it briefly, the interactive nature of social media distinguishes it from traditional mass media.

While social media platforms can be used to convey messages such as traditional media (newspaper, television, radio), they can also be used to gather information about stakeholders and to follow the public on issues concerning the institution or organization (Esrock & Leichty, 2000). The quick feedback feature that social media offers to users is also very important. Thanks to this feature, institutions, and organizations can easily analyze the opinions, expectations, or reactions of their stakeholders on any subject and have the opportunity to re-

evaluate their decisions and policies according to the result to be obtained from this. Organizations not only provide important information that is useful through social media channels but also these channels provide an environment for organizations to continuously two-way communicate with their stakeholders (Breakenridge, 2008). Thus, the interactive nature of social media can enable organizations to communicate with their stakeholders more closely than was possible before (Esrock & Leichty, 2000). In terms of public relations, social media channels are the newest communication channels where organizations can convey their corporate communication messages and support application areas such as crisis management, event management, forming public opinion, and cooperation with stakeholders (Onat, 2010).

As a public relations tool and environment, social media plays a major role in fulfilling the functions of recognition and promotion of public relations and in developing public relations practices with its dialog-oriented structure (Yağmurlu, 2011). It ensures reaching stakeholders quickly and simultaneously, transmitting the necessary documents, information, and data to the press instantly, learning the opinions, wishes, and expectations of the stakeholders easily thanks to its interactive structure, the continuation of important public relations activities such as conveying new developments on any subject to stakeholders, monitoring visibility and conducting research on the agenda (İşler et al. 2013).

METHOD

Purpose of the Research and Research Questions

Young people heavily use social media platforms. It is important to examine the use of social media in the public relations activities of higher education institutions, which especially educate the generation of young people and whose numbers continue to increase throughout our country. In this context, the research was carried out on Twitter, one of the social media channels.

The purpose of this research is to examine how higher education institutions use Twitter in their public relations activities. The research questions created for this purpose are as follows:

1. Do state and private universities in the top 20 of the YÖK URAP-2020 list use Twitter as a public relations tool?
2. What is the use of Twitter by universities in terms of public relations activities?
3. For what purposes do universities use Twitter?

Research Design

The research was designed as a case study, one of the qualitative research types. A case study is a research in which one or more events, environments, programs, social groups, or interconnected systems are examined in depth and an entity is defined and customized depending on space and time (Büyüköztürk et al. 2016).

Research Group

The purposive sampling method was used to determine the research group and the sample was determined by using the URAP-2020 (University Ranking by Academic Performance) list. URAP is a non-profit institution that considers making Turkish and world university rankings as a social service ("University Ranking by Academic Performance", n.d.). The

2016). This research was carried out in line with the mentioned stages.

In the data collection process of the research, the official Twitter accounts of 10 universities in the URAP-2020 list were taken as a basis. To analyze the data, coding charts were created in line with the determined criteria and values, and the research was carried out based on this coding chart. The shares made by

Table 1. URAP 2020 State and Private Universities Ranking

No	State Universities	Number of Followers on Twitter	Private Universities	Number of Followers on Twitter
1	Hacettepe University	40.078	Koç University*	39.693
2	Middle East Technical University *	158.888	İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University*	77.134
3	İstanbul Technical University	75.199	Sabancı University*	34.960
4	İstanbul University	107.502	Bezm-i Âlem Vakıf University	6.029
5	Gazi University*	303.173	Çankaya University	2.943
6	Ankara University*	279.711	Acıbadem Mehmet Ali Aydınlar University	4.393
7	Gebze Teknik University	7.331	Başkent University	15.223
8	Ege University*	123.092	TOBB University of Economics and Technology	15.117
9	Boğaziçi University*	113.838	Yeditepe University*	30.797
10	Yıldız Technical University	48.238	Atılım University	10.233
11	Atatürk University	46.747	Özyeğin University	20.422
12	Marmara University	59.115	İstanbul Medipol University	25.635
13	İstanbul University-Cerrahpaşa	6.224	Bahçeşehir University*	54.064
14	Dokuz Eylül University	21.644	İstanbul Arel University	17.445
15	Erciyes University	25.014	Kadir Has University	17.448
16	Selçuk University	38.561	Yaşar University	14.273
17	Karadeniz Technical University	9.960	İzmir Economy University	10.832
18	İzmir Institute of Technology	9.316	Demiroğlu Bilim University	---
19	Çukurova University	5.095	Doğuş University	16.519
20	Fırat University	10.767	Altınbaş University	8.863

*The specified universities constitute the sample of the research.

first 20 state universities and the first 20 private universities in the URAP list were determined, and then the five state universities and five private universities with the highest number of followers on Twitter were selected as samples (The number of followers was accessed on 28.11.2020).

Data Collection and Analysis

Content analysis was used in the analysis of the collected data. The process performed in content analysis is to gather similar data within the framework of certain concepts and themes and interpret them by arranging them in a way that the reader can understand. Within the framework of this basic purpose, there are four basic stages in content analysis: coding the data, finding the themes, organizing the codes and themes, and defining and interpreting the findings (Yıldırım & Şimşek,

universities between October 1, 2020 and December 1, 2020 on Twitter accounts have been tabulated. The data obtained in tabular form were evaluated by the IBM SPSS Statistics v23.0 program. The frequencies and percentages reached and state and private universities were analyzed comparatively.

RESULTS

The general characteristics of universities consist of visual and numerical data regarding the values encountered in their Twitter accounts. Here, Table 2 summarizes the information consisting of 10 universities' dates of joining Twitter, the total number of tweets, the total number of followed and followers, the number of likes and tweets in the list, and the sharing of information on corporate websites, considering the data up to 27.10.2020.

When Table 2 is examined, it is seen that Yeditepe University has the highest number of tweets with 14075, Bahçeşehir University is in second place with 11461, and Sabancı University is in third place with 7740. According to the number of people they follow on the Twitter accounts of universities, Sabancı University has the highest number of followers with 165 users. The number of followers of the Twitter accounts of institutions and organizations is very important. The higher the number of followers, the more likely they are to interact and the wider the audience. Gazi University, with 302739 followers, is the most followed university among the

24.5% of the posts of Middle East Technical University were activity, 32.8% of Gazi University news, 19.7% of Ankara University's activity, 38.5% of Ege University announcement, 61.9% of Boğaziçi University posts with news content. It is seen that, in the category of private universities, 40.9% of Koç University's posts receive celebration/congratulations, 29.4% of Bilkent University's publicity, 28.9% of Sabancı University's events, 31.4% of Yeditepe University's publicity,

Table 2. General Characteristics of Universities' Twitter Accounts

Universities	Dates of Joining Twitter	Tweet	Followed	Followers	Likes	Lists	Link to Website	Blue Verified Badge
Middle East Technical University	September 2009	6089	4	160739	8	1	+	+
Gazi University	March 2011	5938	8	302739	6	0	+	+
Ankara University	April 2010	5139	30	279613	438	0	+	+
Ege University	August 2011	1920	115	123062	0	0	+	+
Boğaziçi University	June 2011	5458	75	118383	385	0	+	+
Koç University	January 2012	3826	41	40871	80	0	+	-
Bilkent University	November 2009	3406	25	78182	314	0	+	+
Sabancı University	August 2010	7740	165	35559	5476	1	+	+
Yeditepe University	June 2010	14075	95	30900	1115	1	+	+
Bahçeşehir University	June 2009	11461	37	54323	1149	0	+	+

examined Twitter accounts, while Ankara University ranks second with 279613 followers, and Middle East Technical University (METU) ranks third with 160739 followers. According to Table 1, all universities include information about their corporate websites in the biography section. In addition, it is seen that Twitter accounts of all universities except Koç University are approved accounts.

27% of Bahçeşehir University posts with announcement content.

Table 4 shows the distribution of retweets, likes, and comments on the posts made by state universities on their corporate Twitter accounts. It is seen that a total of 53 posts by METU received 1803 retweets, 14719 likes, 343 comments, a total of 198 posts by Gazi University received 3108 retweets, 35370 likes, 1295 comments, a total of 117 posts by Ankara University

Table 3 shows the content type distribution of the posts made

Table 3. Distribution of Universities' Twitter Posts by Content Type

University		Announcement	News	Activity	Promotion	Celebration/ Congratulatory	Visit	Commemoration	Condolence	Visibility in the Media	Other	Total
Middle East Technical University	N	10	12	13	4	4	1	3	1	4	1	53
	%	18.9	22.6	24.5	7.5	7.5	1.9	5.7	1.9	7.5	1.9	100
Gazi University	N	22	65	48	7	12	18	1	3	20	2	198
	%	11.1	32.8	24.2	3.5	6.1	9.1	0.5	1.5	10.1	1	10
Ankara University	N	9	16	23	18	15	11	3	2	16	4	117
	%	7.7	13.7	19.7	15.4	12.8	9.4	2.6	1.7	13.7	3.4	100
Ege University	N	5	4	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	2	13
	%	38.5	30.8	0	0	15.4	0	0	0	0	15.4	100
Boğaziçi University	N	2	52	10	15	3	0	1	0	0	1	84
	%	2.4	61.9	11.9	17.9	3.6	0	1.2	0	0	1.2	100
Koç University	N	6	0	12	6	18	0	2	0	0	0	44
	%	13.6	0	27.3	13.6	40.9	0	4.5	0	0	0	100
Bilkent University	N	3	3	2	5	2	0	1	1	0	0	17
	%	17.6	17.6	11.8	29.4	11.8	0	5.9	5.9	0	0	100
Sabancı University	N	24	25	26	4	7	0	3	1	0	0	90
	%	26.7	27.8	28.9	4.4	7.8	0	3.3	1.1	0	0	100
Yeditepe University	N	9	3	9	16	4	0	3	1	3	3	51
	%	17.6	5.9	17.6	31.4	7.8	0	5.9	2	5.9	5.9	100
Bahçeşehir University	N	17	7	12	12	9	0	2	4	0	0	63
	%	27	11.1	19	19	14.3	0	3.2	6.3	0	0	100

by state and private universities on their corporate Twitter accounts. It is seen that in the category of state universities,

received 5100 retweets, 45365 likes, 640 comments, a total of 13 posts by Ege University's received 23361 retweets, 50137

Table 4. Distribution of State Universities Shares Interaction

	Total Number of Tweets Posted Between 01.10.2020-01.12.2020	Total Retweet	Total Likes	Total Comments
Middle East Technical University	53	1803	14719	343
Gazi University	198	3108	35370	1295
Ankara University	117	5100	45365	640
Ege University	13	23361	50137	1251
Boğaziçi University	84	2220	19434	112
Total	465	35592	165025	3641

likes, 1251 comments, and a total of 84 posts by Boğaziçi University's received 2220 retweets, 19434 likes, 112 comments.

Table 5 shows the distribution of retweets, likes, and comments on the posts made by private universities on their corporate Twitter accounts. It is seen that a total of 44 posts by Koç University received 626 retweets, 3620 likes, 39 comments, a total of 17 posts by Bilkent University received 507 retweets, 6884 likes, 42 comments, a total of 90 posts by Sabancı University 726 retweets, 4665 likes, 93 comments, a total of 51 posts by Yeditepe University received 690 retweets, 4345 likes, 51 comments, and a total of 63 posts by Bahçeşehir University received 3349 retweets, 14079 likes, 129 comments.

Table 5. Distribution of Private Universities Shares Interaction

University	Total Number of Tweets Posted Between 01.10.2020-01.12.2020	Total Retweet	Total Likes	Total Comments
Koç University	44	626	3620	39
Bilkent University	17	507	6884	42
Sabancı University	90	726	4665	93
Yeditepe University	51	690	4345	51
Bahçeşehir University	63	3349	14079	129
Total	265	5898	33593	354

Table 6 shows the distribution of shares on Twitter accounts of state and private universities by day. It is seen that, in the category of state universities, 89.9% of the shares of METU, 92.9% of Gazi University, 83.8% of Ankara University, 92.3% of Ege University, 82.1% of Boğaziçi University are shared on weekdays. It is seen that, in the category of private universities, 93.2% of the shares of Koç University, 100% of Bilkent University, 86.7% of Sabancı University, 92.2% of Yeditepe University, 84.1% of Bahçeşehir University are shared on weekdays.

DISCUSSION

Social media platforms, whose number of users and popularity are increasing day by day, have come to a very important position in the management and promotion processes of institutions and organizations in Turkey. The number of higher education institutions is increasing day by day, and these institutions need to be present on social media platforms and manage these platforms effectively and correctly to reach students, who constitute an important stakeholder group in terms of both inter-institutional and international competition, to be preferred in a fast, easy and less costly way. Universities can easily communicate with their stakeholders, regardless of time and place, with the corporate social media platforms they have created. This new media system, which includes basic information about universities and makes it possible to be updated at any time, also strengthens the memorability of the shared messages by enabling the sharing of sounds, images, and videos as well as text (Yılmaz, 2015). Especially on platforms

such as Twitter, which are used extensively by the young population studying at universities, universities easily convey all the messages they want to convey to their stakeholders with a shared text, audio, image, or video. In this research, which is based on five state and five private universities that make up the URAP-20 university ranking, coding charts were created to analyze the results of the Twitter accounts of 10 universities, and then the Twitter accounts of the universities were examined within these coding scales.

According to the data obtained when the general characteristics of the universities' Twitter accounts are examined, it can be said that private universities participate in Twitter earlier, share more, follow more people on Twitter, and like the posts of

accounts they follow or do not follow on Twitter. On the other hand, it can be stated that state universities have more followers. However, it is seen that all of the universities that make up the research group include information on their official websites on their Twitter accounts. One of the old and not very popular characteristics of Twitter is lists. Lists on Twitter is an application that brings together users whose tweets are liked or of interest and allows them to see the tweets of those people. It

is understood from the results that the list feature is not preferred by universities as it does not find much use. Another conclusion reached is that only Koç University does not have the blue verified badge on Twitter. The blue verified badge on Twitter ensures that an account of public interest is authentic ("Twitter", n.d.). In this context, it can be suggested that Koç University completes the account approval process to both support its corporate identity and let its stakeholders know that the account is authentic.

When the distribution of the shares of universities on Twitter is analyzed by content type, it is seen that state universities share more news content, while private universities share more activity content. Accordingly, it can be said that the Twitter usage purposes of state and private universities differ from each other. It can be suggested that state and private universities increase the diversity of sharing on Twitter.

When the interaction distribution of the shares of the universities is examined, it is seen that the total number of tweets sent by state universities between 01.10.2020 and 01.12.2020 is 465, while the total number of tweets by private

Table 6. Distribution of Universities' Twitter Accounts by Days

University	Number of Tweets During the Week		Number of Tweets Over the Weekend	
	N	%	N	%
Middle East Technical University	45	89.9	8	15.1
Gazi University	184	92.9	14	7.1
Ankara University	98	83.8	19	16.2
Ege University	12	92.3	1	7.7
Boğaziçi University	69	82.1	15	17.9
Koç University	41	93.2	3	6.8
Bilkent University	17	100	0	0
Sabancı University	78	86.7	12	13.3
Yeditepe University	47	92.2	4	7.8
Bahçeşehir University	53	84.1	10	15.9

universities is 265. Accordingly, it can be stated that state universities produce more content on Twitter and use Twitter more actively than private universities. However, when we look at the total number of retweets, likes, and comments, it can be said that the contents of state universities generally receive more interaction than private universities. In this context, it can be deduced that there is a positive relationship between content production and interaction, and accordingly, it can be stated that private universities can increase their interaction with more original content production for their stakeholders.

When the distribution of the shares of the universities is examined according to the days, it is seen that the posts made by both state universities and private universities on the weekends are more limited than the posts they make on weekdays. Considering that the internal and external stakeholders of universities have more free time on weekends than during the week, it can be said that universities can communicate more effectively with their stakeholders by increasing their content production on weekends. Individuals can use social media channels for different purposes. Since the current study was conducted on Twitter, which is one of the social media channels, it may be recommended to conduct comparative studies covering different social media channels in the future.

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