

## ICSIM

## Linking Universities to the Target Market via Web Sites: A Content Analysis of Turkish Private Universities' Web Sites

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### Abstract

Internet is becoming more and more important in business. It has many advantages such as reducing marketing costs and extending target group easier. Universities, which lead the scientific developments in a society, can also benefit from the Internet. Universities have different characteristics and audiences compared to corporations. With the new generation, Web sites become more crucial in order to meet and convince prospective students, who grew up with the Internet. From this point of view, Web sites should be up-to-date, fast, interactive and user friendly.

The purpose of this study is to explore the current content information of the Turkish Private Universities' (TPUs) Web sites. By July 2013, there are 71 TPUs, but only 61 of them have an available Web site (The Council of Higher Education, 2013). The scale to assess content of the Web sites consists of 41 items and they are divided into 4 groups based on their target audience: (1) students/prospective students, (2) employees/prospective employees, (3) external stakeholders and (4) media. According to the findings, the arithmetic mean of items for students/prospective students is moderately high with 58 percent score, employees/prospective employees is moderately high with 57 percent score, external stakeholders is moderate with 50.49 percent score and media is high with 81.42 percent score.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the 2nd International Conference on Strategic Innovative Marketing.

**Keyword:** Web sites, education marketing, TPUs

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### 1. Introduction

With the enormous growing of information and communication technologies, people spent more time on the Web. Internet is a massive network of networks, a networking infrastructure. However, the World Wide Web, or simply Web, is a way of accessing information over the medium of the Internet. Web is an information-sharing model that is built on top of the Internet. Thus, Web is just a portion of the Internet, albeit a large portion, but they are not the same (Beal, V. 2013). Brown (2000) suggests that, Internet has a societal impact similar to that of electricity, but is developing more rapidly (Poock, M.C. & Lefond, D. 2001). Bell & Tang (1998) suggests that,

according to a senior official of Internet giant Netscape, it took radio 38 years, television 13 years but just five years for the Internet to reach 50 million users (Poock, M.C. & Lefond, D. 2001).

Wernick (1991) suggests that, the university becomes a commodity and its prospective students become consumers (Callahan, E. 2006). For business, the objectives of having a Web site are fairly transparent; in higher education however, a heterogeneous audience dictates that these goals are manifold and can become confused (Middleton, I., McConnell, M. & Davidson, G. 1999). If we assume that universities are the brands for education marketing, than Web sites should be the crucial part of this marketing process. Simmons (2007) refers to “i-branding”, and argues that many organizations are searching for new Internet branding strategies that might assist them in creating distinctiveness whilst engaging with customers (Chapleo, C., Duran, M.V.C. & Diaz, A.C. 2011).

In this study, we first aim to conceptualize Web sites in businesses, especially in higher education institutions. Second, we try to summarize the growing literature, and finally we'll give the results of the study, which was conducted on TPUs Web sites.

## 2. Literature Review

It is said that the centerpiece of any successful program is an interactive Web site designed specifically for the targeted audience the company is seeking to reach (Educational Marketing: A New Strategy for Building Customer Loyalty 2010). At this point, higher education institutions, as members of education marketing, have similar ideals as business industry has. As Hite & Railsback (2008) indicate, university Web sites have developed almost as rapidly as corporate Web sites. Similarly, Lincoln (2001) found more than 81 percent of university marketing faculty reported creating and maintaining individual faculty Web sites (Middleton, I., McConnell, M. & Davidson, G. 1999). Furthermore, his study showed that the amount of material being placed on academic Web sites had increased significantly over time.

The primary goal of university Web sites is to provide information, especially to prospective students (Padmanavar, S.S. & Joshi, M.J. 2011). Even though, prospective students are the main audience of a Website, Middleton, McConnel & Davidson (1999) suggest that a Web site of a university has two kind of audiences: the internal users and the external users. The internal users are comprised of staff and students. Some items on Web site such as telephone directory, timetables and lecture notes mainly target them. Middleton, McConnel & Davidson (1999) also indicate that, external users can be categorized by eight groups: Prospective students, prospective staff, other academics, business people, alumni, news media, donors and benefactors, legislators and others. On the academic side, the Web has become a significant part of student experiences within and outside the classroom (Bradbard, D.A., Peters, C. & Caneva, Y. 2010). Nevertheless, McAllister & Taylor (2007) identified the audiences of a university Web site in more detail. They suggest that university Web sites have four main audiences: (1) students/prospective students, (2) employees/prospective employees, (3) external stakeholders, and (4) media.

Abdullah (1998) suggests that, following the increase in internet usage, the most preferred tools in the field of education turned out to be Web sites (Kutluca, T., Aydın, S. & Baki, A. 2009). Universities that own Web sites, that have high external links, are perceived to have inculcated globalization initiative and are in agreement with the information-for-all initiative, as promoted by the open access movement (Utulu, S.C.A. 2008). Poock & Lefond (2001) found that high school students wanted to obtain information within three clicks; if they did not, they lost the initial positive feeling associated with the search. In another study, college students also did not want to have to scroll down the page to search for information (Poock, M.C., & Bishop, B.A. 2006). After a deep literature review, Poock & Lefond (2001) summarize the characteristics of effective Web sites with 8 categories: content, enjoyable experience, organization of the site, limited impact of graphics, ease of navigation, uniqueness of site, focus on target audience, speed of connection.

The literature has proposed a number of factors that may be used to assess Web site architecture, including HTML size, download time, image size, number of images, home page size, number and size of fonts, navigation tools, number of colours and screen length (Utulu, S.C., & Bolarinwa, O. 2012). The Web site quality model

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