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SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AS A TOOL FOR PROMOTING EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

The article explores how educational institutions can effectively utilize social media to enhance their visibility, attract potential students, and foster an online community that supports their educational mission. The authors research social media as a tool for introducing schools and universities to the public and engaging followers in sharing the institutions' values and educational goals. Having analyzed the most popular social media platforms in Ukraine and the world, the authors prove that Facebook is an outstanding leader among social media applications, although the age range of its followers is not considered here. On the other hand, if an educational institution is interested in opening up to a younger target audience, it's essential to draw their attention to using platforms like Instagram. The survey conducted among the students of H.S.Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University enrolled on Bachelor's and Master's Degree programs proves social networks to be now one of the most powerful tools for promoting goods and services on the market. An educational institution's task here is to carefully analyse target audience preferences and create ideal conditions for them to choose a particular university for obtaining an academic degree. As social media continues to evolve and new trends and technologies appear, educational institutions must remain agile and adaptive, embracing emerging challenges.

Key words: social media, educational institutions promotion, higher education, communication, target audience, followers.

Introduction and the current state of the research problem. In today's digital age, social media has transformed from a mere communication tool into a powerful platform that significantly influences various aspects of our lives. For companies, social platforms are an indispensable tool for building relationships with their audience (Ярмолюк et al., 2020). For educational institutions, social media offers an unprecedented opportunity to engage with a global audience, build brand awareness, and promote educational values. With billions of people using social media platforms daily, universities and colleges have favourable circumstances to reach and engage with a vast audience (Peruta & Shields, 2017).

With the rise of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter, schools, colleges, and universities are no longer confined to traditional marketing methods. Instead, they can leverage these digital channels to connect with prospective students, alumni, parents, and the broader community, promote their programs and resources, and build a strong brand presence. In marketing, consumers have a more favourable attitude toward brands placing their products on Instagram (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019). In education, the same principles may be applied.

Social media nowadays is a unique tool for building communication between people, groups, and communities; the average social network user is active and open to receiving new information, which unlocks almost limitless potential for promoting goods and services (Ярмолюк et al., 2020) by setting up personal and corporate profiles, engaging in online communication, sharing content that can be viewed simultaneously by people all around the world, and building networks for collaboration by connecting with chosen individuals, institutions or accounts (Drăghici, 2023).

The Ukrainian educational services "market" requires not only creating competitive educational offers but also constantly improving its communication to attract the audience in the competitive environment (Поплавський, 2021). Younger people, known as "digital natives" (Smith et al., 2020; Tkalac Verčič & Verčič, 2013) perceive and use information or interact with each other with technology. Thus, future students' digital skills and literacies must be considered when contacting them (Smith et al., 2020). Over 70% of University students consider their digital skills to be quite high (Kniaz & Chukhno, 2021), while some teachers might lack the skills mentioned above (Tuchyna et al., 2021). It's

worth noting that some studies strongly oppose using social media to achieve the educational goals of University students but encourage them to utilize the platforms to establish social and professional connections (Lacka et al., 2021). In the context of increasing individual responsibility among participants in the educational, higher education institutions are redefining their approaches to organizing education, emphasizing the student's personal development and tailoring the curricula to suit the learners' needs (Pohorielova, 2022). Thus, the way schools are presented and promoted must also be reevaluated.

Aim and tasks. This article explores how educational institutions can effectively utilize social media to enhance their visibility, attract potential students, and foster a vibrant online community that supports their educational mission. Given this, we define the following tasks: to analyze how social media platforms are being utilized by educational institutions, to explore potential challenges and ethical concerns concerning the topic, and to offer recommendations and best practices for educational institutions looking to enhance their social media presence and effectiveness in promotion.

Research methods. To fulfil the tasks of the research, the authors used analysis of relevant literature, surveys and questionnaires, and content analysis of social media pages. To explore students' experience of getting information via social networks, the authors designed and administered a questionnaire at H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University. It was completed by 159 Faculty of Foreign Philology students majoring in English, German, French and Chinese enrolled in the Bachelor's and

Master's programs. The data for the analysis was also retrieved from a survey among the same faculty's sophomore students (77 respondents) on their evaluation of the institution's promotion. The age and gender of the students were not considered. The authors adhered to ethical norms while conducting the survey.

Research results. Social media platforms offer a wide range of benefits for promoting educational institutions, including the ability to connect with a broader and more diverse audience (prospective students, parents, and international communities); to engage directly with this audience through comments, messages, and live events, fostering a sense of community and belonging; to gather immediate feedback from the followers; to build "brand" loyalty and trust among followers; to find new students by acquainting and advertising their programs and offers, and showing the buildings, classrooms and the way the educational process is organized.

The results of a survey conducted among the first-year students of the Faculty of Foreign Philology (Fig. 1) prove that the majority of respondents (41.6%) consider social networks to be one of the essential communication channels, and they use Internet resources to acquire information about the University and the educational programs. It's still true that recommendations from relatives (39%), school teachers (23.4%) and friends (23.4%) also take the leading positions in this matter. Quite surprising are the results that online and offline events (University welcoming days) are losing their popularity among potential students (9.1%). However, this way of promotion campaigns

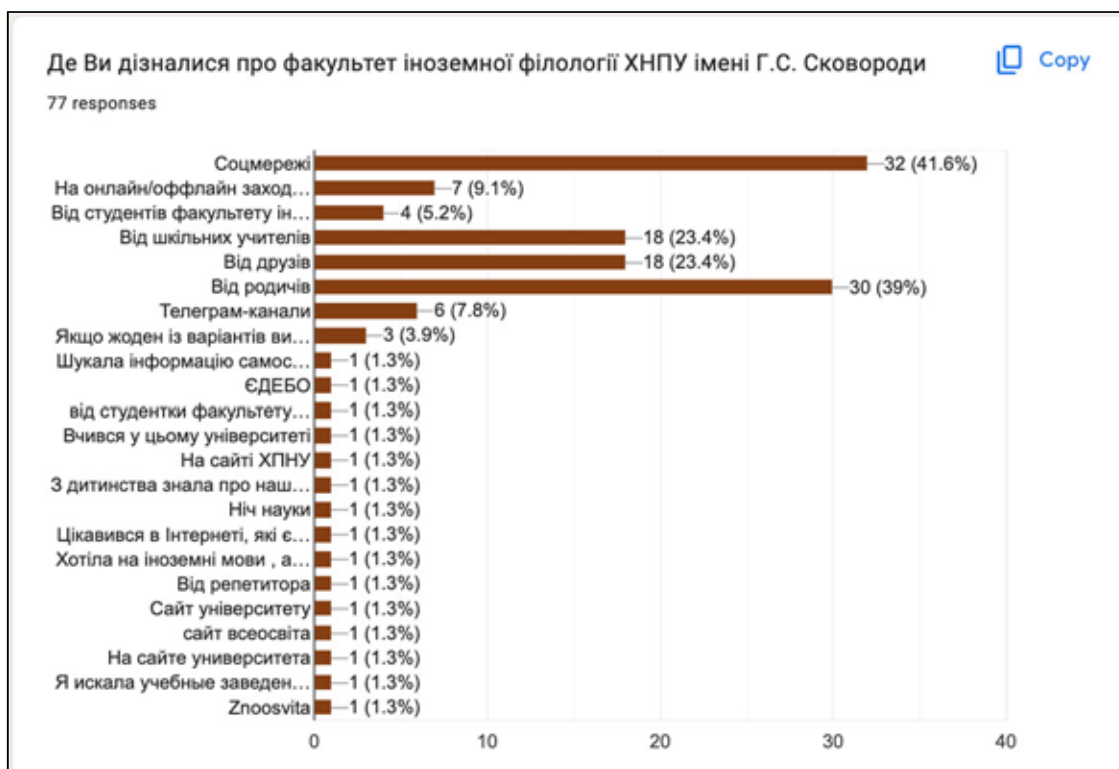


Fig. 1. The Results of a Survey Conducted among the First-year Students of the Faculty of Foreign Philology

has been vital for educational institutions for many years, proving that advertising a school has to be considered and a turn to social networks has to be taken.

To make social media work to build up the image of an institution, it's essential to choose the platforms that align with the target audience and promotion goals. Having analyzed the most popular social media platforms in Ukraine (Fig. 2) and around the world (Fig. 3) in the last 12 months, the authors have decided to explore the most popular social media applications, among which are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), TikTok, and LinkedIn (*Google Trends*, n.d.) for the purposes of educational institutions promotion.

The research results prove that Facebook is an outstanding leader among social networks both in Ukraine and worldwide. The platform has been on the market

for 20 years and has gained the support of followers as an excellent place for building a community, sharing updates, and promoting events and programs (Piranda et al., 2022). A university can create an official page of the institution and keep the page active by posting regular updates, including news about campus events, academic achievements, faculty introductions, and student activities. This does not only position an institution as an educational leader but also provides useful information to the audience. Managing a Facebook page also allows for creating events (e.g. welcoming days, virtual tours, webinars, and interactive lectures) to encourage potential students to explore the options of choosing a particular faculty or program for getting a degree. And with specific (non-free) marketing options, an institution can create ads targeting specific demographics, regions, and age groups.

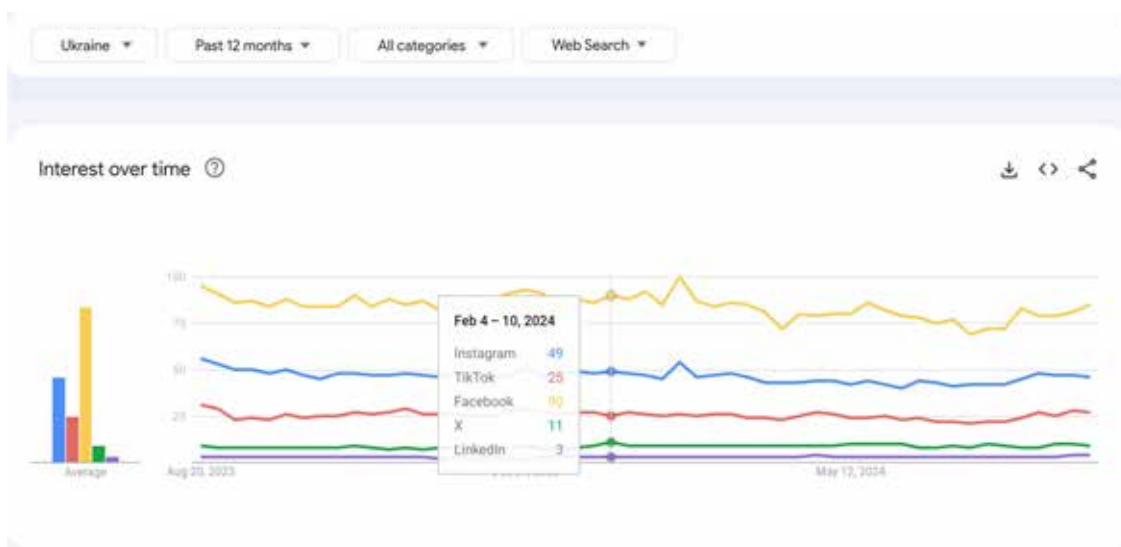


Fig. 2. Popularity Rates of Social Media Platforms in Ukraine (Source: Google Trends, n.d.)

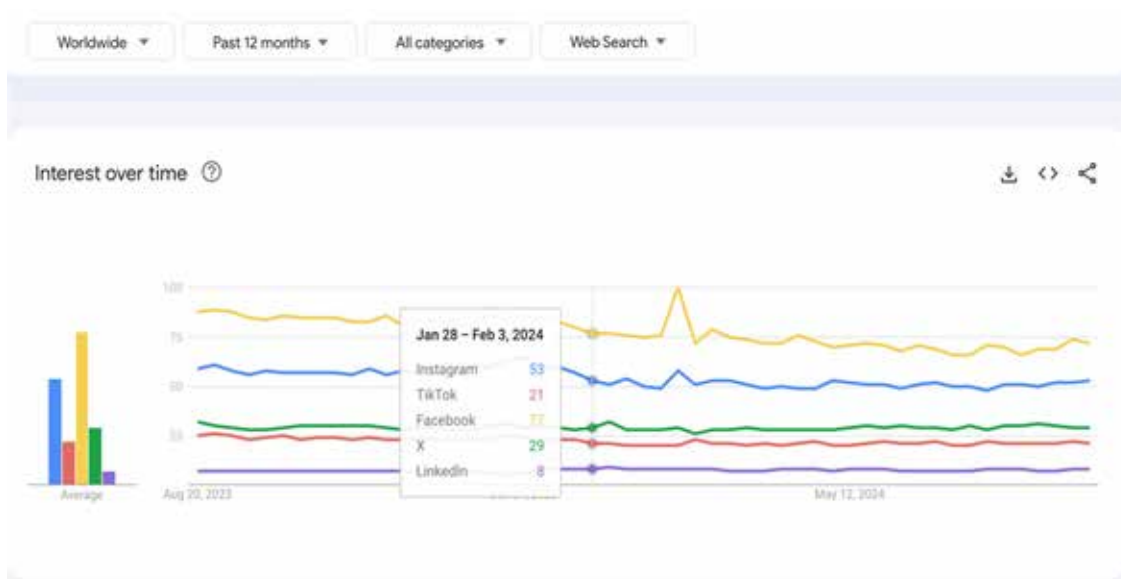


Fig. 3. Popularity Rates of Social Media Platforms Worldwide (Source: Google Trends, n.d.)

However, the fact that the most active users of Facebook (Fig. 4) tend to be in the 35–54 age range presents several potential drawbacks for educational institutions seeking to promote themselves, mainly if they are targeting the younger generation, such as high school students or young adults.

Instagram is another powerful platform for promoting educational institutions, particularly given its emphasis on visual content and engagement with younger generation. Being on the market for almost 15 years, the platform takes second place in popularity rates and is considered to be an amazing option for sharing visual content. Instagram has various tools that can be used for advertising and promotions that are both free and payable. Here, an educational institution can post brief and comprehensive information about the events that have taken place (Семен, 2022). Creating a professional Instagram profile with a clear username, an engaging bio, and some specific links, e.g. to an official website of the University or Faculty, and maintaining a consistent visual identity across posts can effectively promote the school’s programs, engage with its audience, and build a strong, visually appealing online presence. Instagram is a highly visual platform, making it ideal for showcasing the aesthetics of student life and educational events. High-quality images and videos tend to capture more attention and engagement, making any institution more memorable to prospective students. Instagram offers several compelling benefits for promoting educational institutions, particularly because a significant portion of its active users (more than 55%) is in the age range of 18–24 (Fig. 5), which aligns closely with prospective university students.

TikTok, being a rapidly growing and the “youngest” platform on the list, takes third place in the ratings. It is especially popular among younger audiences, making it an easy tool to reach out to potential students. The app

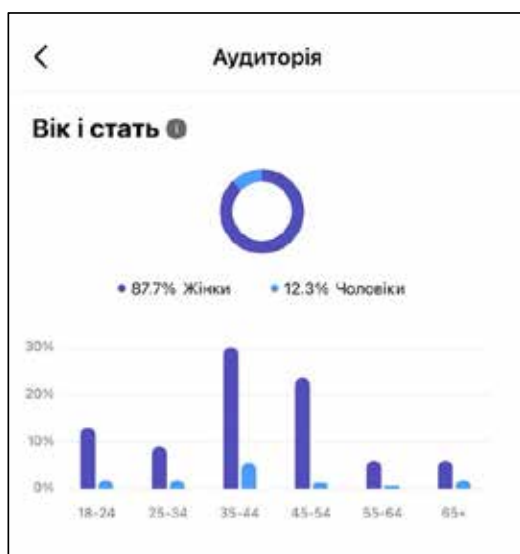


Fig. 4. The Target Age Group of Facebook Users Retrieved from the Faculty of Foreign Philology Page

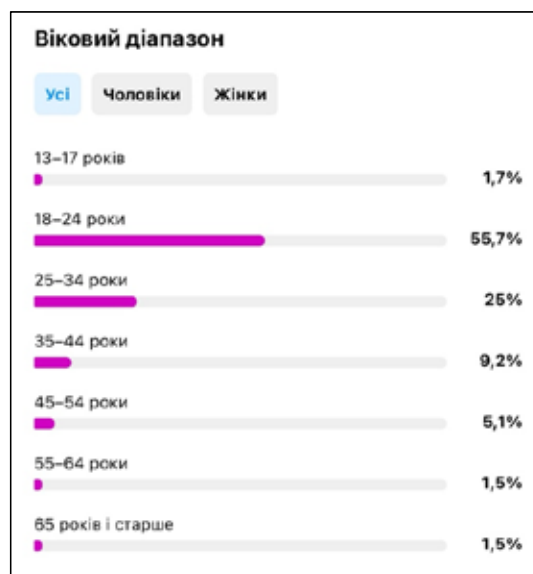


Fig. 5. The Target Age Group of Instagram Users Retrieved from the Faculty of Foreign Philology Page

allows aims at creative integration of information, titles, text, graphics, dance, sound syncing, lighting, and acting, allowing personal creators to elevate their message (McCashin & Murphy, 2022). TikTok’s algorithm is designed to promote content that engages viewers, regardless of the account size. This means even new or smaller accounts can achieve significant reach if their content engages and resonates with viewers. On the other hand, TikTok is notorious for sharing inappropriate content that can sometimes appear alongside an institution’s videos. This could harm reputation and mislead potential students.

As for Twitter (X) and LinkedIn, Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 prove that these two platforms are less popular than the above-mentioned apps. The first one is an effective platform for sharing news and announcements and engaging in conversations (Antonakaki et al., 2021). The second serves as an ideal platform for professional networking, connecting with potential employers and employees, and sharing career-related content and job opportunities (Brenner et al., 2020) (Healy et al., 2023). However, because Ukrainian users barely pay attention to these platforms, the authors consider them less effective for using for educational institutions’ promotions.

To effectively present an educational institution on social media, creating engaging and relevant content is essential. The survey results (Fig. 6) show that students are mostly interested in seeing various memes and jokes (82,4% of the respondents) and language quizzes (66%). A social media page can balance fun and educational content by listening to the audience’s preferences and promoting the values of an educational institution, making the followers anticipate what will happen next.

Page followers also find it quite beneficial to get access to posts (24,5%) and stories (22,6%) with helpful infor-

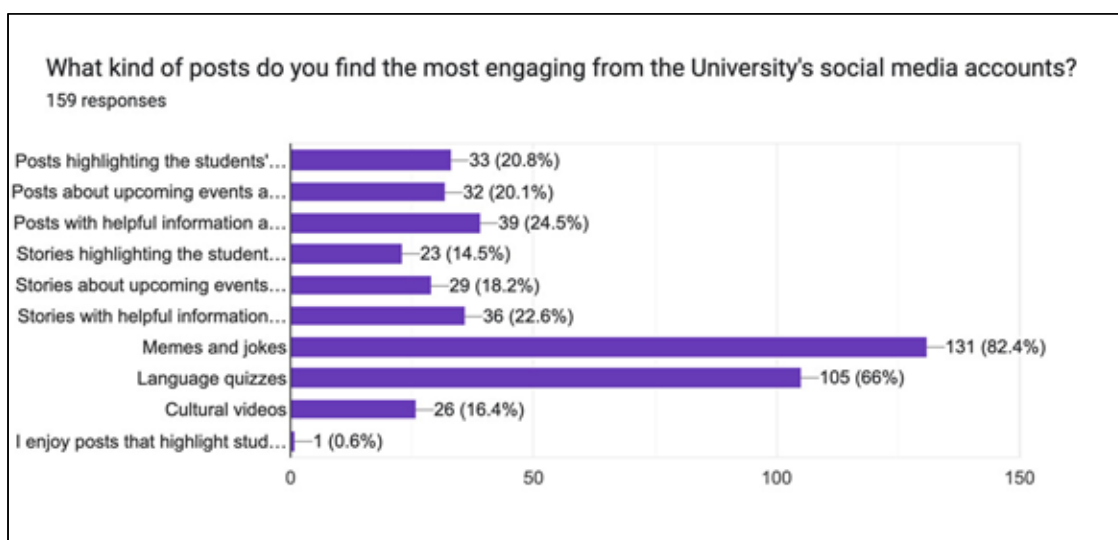


Fig. 6. The Results of the Survey on Social Media Posts Preferences

mation about academic programs and resources and posts about upcoming events and activities at the University/faculty (20,1%). It can be easily explained by the challenges of distance education and students' lack of resources to get news and announcements fast enough. 20,8% of the respondents expect to see posts highlighting the students' achievements and success stories, but only 14,5% are willing to get stories on the same topic. Quite surprisingly, only 16,4% of survey participants are curious to come across cultural videos, proving that the crucial part of using a social media page for promoting an educational institution is the balance of fun and useful content.

Successful social media promotion for educational institutions involves more than just content creation; it requires building an engaged and supportive community. Universities can achieve this by inviting students, faculty, and alumni to share their experiences, stories, and perspectives on social media, fostering a sense of belonging and involvement (Chung & Koo, 2015); monitoring social media channels and promptly responding to inquiries, comments, and feedback, demonstrating a commitment to open communication and engagement (Belk, 2013); organising fun and engaging contests, giveaways, or social media challenges to incentivise participation and strengthen the community's bond with the institution (Jahn & Kunz, 2012) and partner with student organisations and clubs to co-create content, promote events, and foster a sense of unity among students.

Discussion. Social networks offer many opportunities for educational institutions to promote themselves. By establishing a presence on social networks, engaging with potential and current students, sharing educational content, advertising, and collaborating with influencers, educational institutions can increase their visibility and attract more students.

The Internet contains unprecedented information about people's lifestyles, interests and values and, if used for marketing purposes, is aimed at providing customers with the redundant information they need to make a choice (Ярмо-

люк et al., 2020). The task of an educational institution here is to carefully analyse target audience preferences and create ideal conditions for them to choose a particular university for obtaining an academic degree. Moreover, the online community is quite eager to express their opinions about products and services, making it a free and easy-to-use instrument for getting feedback on the study programmes and achieving continuity of the educational process by using social networks as a permanent means of communication between the participants of the educational process.

Conclusions. Educational institutions have already realised that the active presence of a school on social media can be a decisive tool for achieving results in the process of promoting the institution. Today, social media is a very effective and promising communication tool that should be used in integration with traditional means of communication activities of higher education institutions. Social media is crucial for educational institutions, offering avenues to bolster their presence, interact with students, and establish a robust brand image. Universities can attract potential students and fortify their reputation by tactically selecting suitable social media platforms, crafting captivating content, and nurturing a vibrant community. As social media continues to evolve and new trends and technologies appear, educational institutions must remain agile and adaptive, embracing emerging challenges.

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СОЦІАЛЬНІ МЕРЕЖІ ЯК ІНСТРУМЕНТ ПОПУЛЯРИЗАЦІЇ ЗАКЛАДІВ ОСВІТИ

У статті досліджується, як заклади освіти можуть ефективно використовувати соціальні мережі для підвищення своєї впізнаваності, залучення потенційних студентів та створення онлайн-спільноти, яка підтримує їх освітню місію. Автори досліджують соціальні медіа як інструмент для представлення університетів громадськості та залучення підписників, які поділяють цінності та освітні цілі закладу. Проаналізувавши найпопулярніші соціальні медіа в Україні та світі, автори доводять, що Facebook є визначним лідером серед соціальних медіа-додатків, хоча віковий діапазон його підписників до уваги не береться. З іншого боку, якщо заклад освіти зацікавлений у залученні цільової аудиторії 18–30 років, важливо звернути увагу на використання таких платформ, як Instagram. Опитування, проведене серед студентів Харківського національного педагогічного університету імені Г.С. Сковороди, які навчаються на бакалаврських та магістерських програмах, доводить, що соціальні мережі сьогодні є одним з найпотужніших інструментів просування товарів та послуг на ринку. Завдання закладу освіти ретельно проаналізувати вподобання цільової аудиторії та створити ідеальні умови для того, щоб вона обрала саме цей університет для здобуття ступеня. Оскільки соціальні медіа продовжують розвиватися, з'являються нові тренди та технології, заклади освіти повинні залишатися гнучкими та адаптивними, приймаючи виклики, що виникають.

Ключові слова: соціальні мережі, популяризація закладів освіти, вища освіта, комунікація, цільова аудиторія, підписники.

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