

Innovative Marketing Strategies For Higher Education Institutions: A Systematic Review On The Analysis Of Main Approaches And Best Practices

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ABSTRACT

The present research aimed to carry out a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to investigate the innovative marketing strategies used by Higher Education Institutions. As a collection method, 28 articles were selected from the Scopus and Web of Science databases. The period from 2012 to 2023 was defined for the temporal delimitation of this study. In theoretical and practical terms, there is a need for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to use innovative practices in marketing strategies and their relationship with the target audience, usually composed of new generations, with practices and behaviors different from previous ones, forcing an adaptation of language and communication that narrows the relationship between universities, generating greater empathy and attraction power. The main bibliometric aspects highlighted revealed that the most relevant author on the topic, in terms of the number of publications, is Soares JC. The most used research method was qualitative, with the application of questionnaires, and the countries that published the most on the topic were China and the United States, followed by Brazil and the United Arab Emirates. The systematic review revealed frequently discussed themes in the study, with emphasis on "management", "universities" and "Social Media", intrinsically linked to other topics such as "strategy", "higher education", "students", "Facebook", and "satisfaction". However, it became evident that there is a low number of scientific articles published in this area, highlighting the need for more research and actions to innovate the marketing strategies used by HEIs.

Key-word: Strategy; Innovation; Marketing.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of competitive advantages is increasingly associated with the ability to innovate, commercialize technology, and master technological knowledge. The educational service, particularly at the university level, is complex and is a consumption experience that goes beyond the completion of higher education. Technological advancement and increasing competition impose the need to attract and retain students (PERUTA; SHIELDS, 2019). There are different components that influence student satisfaction with the university (ARIZZI et al., 2020).

Thus, when addressing university marketing, it should be considered its involvement from the initial research phase, to allow the innovation process to be built together with industries and other sectors of interest (VERONEZE et al., 2017). Kiani and Laroche (2019) recognized that institutions must find ways to highlight the benefits of their products and ensure that these messages are conveyed to students.

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In this context, a new attitude of higher education institutions towards the community emerges as an option to understand and help reassess their roles comprehensively, encompassing both contributions to the economic progress and development of the country as well as to national innovation. Brand awareness and the institutional image of the university can attract and retain students, this association can lead to loyalty (GIRARD; PINAR, 2021; SWANI et al., 2021).

Although innovation is crucial for product development in the university context, there are often challenges in applying effective marketing strategies to drive the management of Higher Education Institutions. To this end, the question that motivates the article arises: What are the main approaches and best marketing practices that universities can adopt?

The general objective of this research is to conduct a systematic review of marketing strategies used in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), focusing on identifying the main practices adopted in this context. Consequently, we outline the specific objectives as follows: to analyze the main marketing strategies used by universities, based on the existing academic literature, identify the most effective approaches in market research for identifying opportunities in the university context, and finally, synthesize the best practices identified in the literature for the use of marketing strategies in the university context.

The proposed systematic review is justified by the fact that it contributes to the field of marketing in universities, providing a comprehensive synthesis of the approaches and best practices used. Understanding effective marketing strategies in this context is extremely important, as it allows universities to optimize their resources, establish strategic partnerships, and adopt innovative approaches to promote the creation and commercialization of products. Furthermore, this systematic review can benefit researchers, managers, and professionals in the educational field by providing valuable insights and practical guidance to enhance their marketing strategies.

This article is composed of five sections, in addition to this introduction. The following sections provide theoretical considerations on marketing for universities, as well as innovative practices and marketing strategies. The subsequent section contemplates the methodology and data sources. The results of the research with the Systematic Literature Review are analyzed, and the article concludes with the final considerations.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this segment, the theoretical foundations of the article will be addressed, thereby presenting the role of marketing for universities, as well as their innovation practices.

MARKETING FOR UNIVERSITIES

Currently, communication through the internet is seen as more effective than conventional media in various dimensions. It contributes to controlling and expanding a company's market share. Moreover, it is employed as a more powerful decisive factor for achieving success in communication (BESSEAH et al., 2017).

Marketing focuses its efforts on meeting the desires and demands of consumers (SOARES et al., 2019). Student satisfaction is an immediate response that arises from the evaluation of educational experiences they have in the short term (KANWAR; SANJEEVA, 2022). Marketing plays a significant role in increasing brand recognition (Priilaid et al., 2017). Therefore, higher education institutions have dedicated efforts to developing and promoting the recognition of their brand in various ways, implementing relevant tactics to enhance the reputation and operational positioning of their educational units (LOMER; PAPATSIBA; NAIDOO, 2016).

The marketing strategies employed by educational institutions generally share similarities with social marketing and service marketing, since the higher education market is impacted by the advancement of social demands (FILIP, 2012). The products specifically related to HEIs are their educational services, research projects, courses, and other programs (SARQUIS et al., 2020).

INNOVATIVE MARKETING PRACTICES FOR UNIVERSITIES

In their theory, innovation is the engine and driving force for company growth, capable of effecting structural changes in the economy due to the inherent process of creative destruction (MORAIS et al., 2022). Furthermore, product innovation is defined as the process of designing, creating, and launching new products for a company, market, and/or the world (VICENZI et al., 2020).

It is therefore highlighted that success in product innovation reflects the company's ability to compete in the market (VICENZI, et al., 2020). While we conceptualize innovation and highlight its importance, we also emphasize the ensemble of its action linked to marketing. According to Kotler (2022), the goal of commercial marketing is to sell products that satisfy customer needs profitably, without judging the legitimacy of those needs.

Together with the concepts presented so far, it is important to highlight - as mentioned by Koc (2006) - that the Higher Education market, especially at the beginning of the 21st century, has pressured private education institutions to seek and adopt more pragmatic and innovative marketing strategies.

Current trends in the development of technological education include the gradual involvement of artificial intelligence and its inclusion in preliminary curricula, active formation of the digital learning environment for the next generation, enhancement of the security of cloud environments, student and teacher data, and the process of data exchange with other organizations, suppliers, and governments (EDUCAUSE, 2020). Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) primarily use tools such as online advertising, public relations, sales promotion, direct marketing, and sales management (HINSON, 2020).

It is important to note that technological advancements have generated a significant stream of research which considers that organizations aim to develop communications and interactions with customers through social media (SOARES, et al., 2021). According to Soares (2021), the need to attract and retain students, in line with the characteristic of Higher Education Institution (HEI) students being digital natives, has made social media more prevalent and ubiquitous.

Thus, considering the importance of interactivity in the educational sector, Soares (2021) emphasizes that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should strategically address Social Media Marketing in order to leverage the characteristics of social media and encourage student interaction. Consequently, post-interactivity evokes a positive emotion in the student, which leads to further interactivity with the HEI.

III. MATERIAL AND METHODS

In order to analyze the main marketing strategies used by universities, based on the existing academic literature, the research was conducted through a systematic literature review. The research seeks, according to Gil (2017), in terms of objectives, to carry out an exploratory study, aiming to gain a closer understanding of the issue by trying to explain it through a bibliographic survey of the problem researched using a bibliometric method. With the goal of understanding, analyzing, and evaluating the current literature on innovative marketing strategies for universities, a systematic literature review (SLR) on the topic was conducted.

SOURCE OF PRIMARY STUDY COLLECTION.

The research was conducted in three stages. In the first stage, keywords were selected for use in the search for scientific articles, which were: educational marketing, marketing strategy, innovation, university, higher education, strategy, and communication. In the second stage, these keywords were used to identify and access publications in the database of journals from CAPES (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel), with the search string being: Web of Science and Scopus. At this stage, 188 articles from the Web of Science and 41 from Scopus were identified for the period from 2012 to 2023."

DEFINITION OF KEYWORDS AND SEARCH STRING

The keywords used in this SLR emerged from the research problem presented in the first section of this study.

ALL=((("educational marketing") AND ("marketing strategy") AND ("Innovation") AND ("university") OR ("higher education") AND ("Strategy") AND ("communication")))

It should be noted that, in all cases, the terms used in the formulation of the search string were translated into English, and their results can be seen in Table 1.

TABLE 1 – Search String and number of articles on July 8, 2023.

| Search | Base | String de Busca | Number of Articles |
|-----------|--------|---|--------------------|
| 1ª Search | WoS | ALL=((("educational marketing") AND ("marketing strategy") AND ("Innovation") AND ("university") OR ("higher education") AND ("Strategy") AND ("communication"))) | 188 |
| 2ª Search | Scopus | ALL ("educational marketing" AND "marketing strategy" AND "innovation" AND "university" OR "higher education" AND "strategy" AND "communication") AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "BUSI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "SOCT")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "Inglês")) | 41 |

Source: by the authors (2023).

Some inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, which were predefined in the existing menus in the Web of Science and Scopus databases. The following filters were taken into account: Only articles, documents in the English language, limited to subjects related to (Management Telecommunications Education & Educational

Research) as per the WOS filters, and subjects related to entrepreneurship and business as per the Scopus filters, thus totaling 188 documents presented in the Web of Science and 41 articles searched in the Scopus database, resulting in a total of 229 documents.

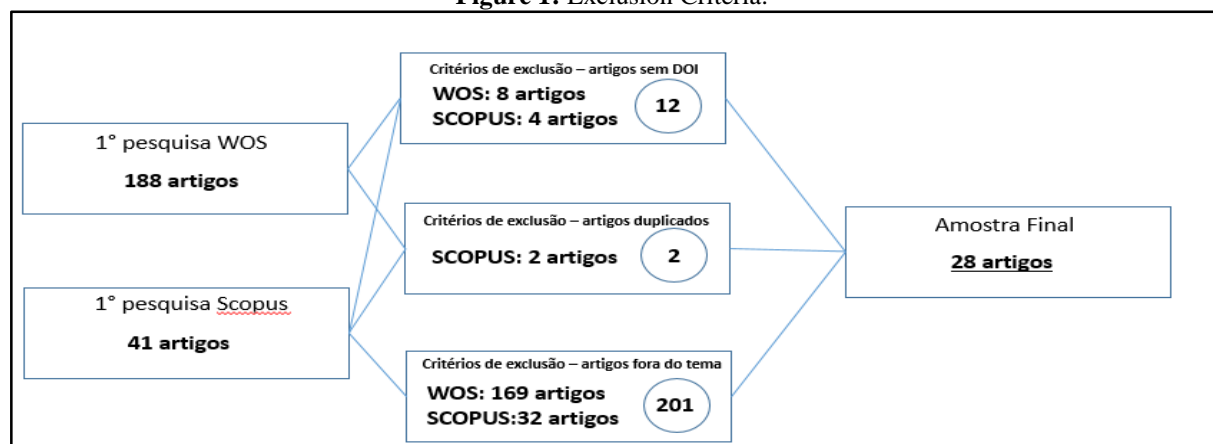
Subsequently, a temporal cut-off was considered, which was restricted to the limits of the Web of Science journal database, from the oldest to the most recent at the moment of information extraction, according to the defined selection criteria for the corpus.

INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA FOR THE ARTICLES

After data tabulation, the third stage was characterized by the exclusion of articles that did not have a DOI (Digital Object Identifier), which totaled 12 articles, with 8 from the Web of Science and 4 from Scopus. Subsequently, duplicate articles were excluded, totaling 2 articles from the Scopus database. With the same purpose of filtering the studies, the abstracts of the 215 scientific articles were read, and those that were not related to the search terms were excluded. At the end of the applied filters, 28 articles were selected for full reading, as presented below in Figure 1."

O processo de seleção pode ter várias fases. Em um primeiro momento, a seleção pode considerar apenas a leitura dos títulos dos documentos encontrados. Em um segundo momento, pode-se considerar a leitura dos resumos dos documentos encontrados. E em um terceiro momento, pode-se realizar uma análise crítica geral dos documentos encontrados, onde serão observados a coerência do estudo, qualidade metodológica, resultados alcançados, conclusão, financiamento do estudo etc. (GALVÃO; RICARTE, 2020)

Figure 1: Exclusion Criteria.



Source: by the authors, 2023.

IV. ANALYSIS RESULTS

ALIGNMENT OF ARTICLE ABSTRACTS WITH THE RESEARCH THEME

At this stage of the systematic literature review, it was possible to verify the adherence of the content to be explored. Initially, the abstracts, titles, and keywords of the articles were evaluated. Subsequently, it was observed whether the content described in the abstracts pertained to the themes of educational marketing, marketing strategy, and innovation.

After a thorough reading of the abstracts, it was concluded that the articles that will make up the Final Corpus amount to a total of 28 articles that simultaneously address the researched theme.

SCIENTIFIC PRODUCTION INDICATORS OF THE CORPUS

For data analysis, the bibliometric package: Rstudio was used in conjunction with the Bibliometrix program, which provided the results that will be presented next. As can be seen in Table 1, below, the sample period was from 2012 to 2023, containing 22 journals and 28 articles, with an annual growth rate of 0%. Across the entire final corpus, there were 82 authors, with 5 of these having sole authorship, and with a co-authorship percentage totaling 28.57%. The identified keywords amounted to 108, and the number of references was 1,690.

Table 2 - Scientific Production Indicators of the Corpus.

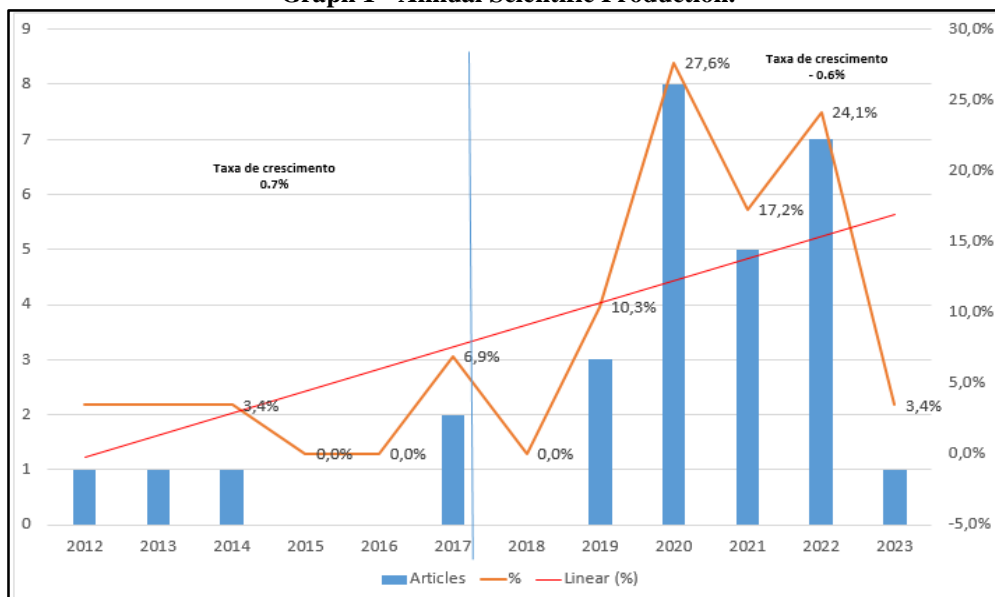
| | | | |
|--|--|--|---|
| Intervalo de tempo 2012:2023 | Fontes 22 | Documentos 28 | Taxa de crescimento anual 0% |
| Autores 82 | Autores de documentos de autoria única 5 | Coautoria Internacional 28,57% | Co-autores por documento 3.11 |
| Palavras-chave do autor (DE) 103 | Referências 1690 | Idade Média do Documento 3.04 | Média de citações por documento 6.286 |

Source: by the authors, 2023.

ANNUAL SCIENTIFIC PRODUCTION RESULTS

This section aims to assess the main indicators of the scientific and temporal production of the corpus as evidenced in Graph 1 below:

Graph 1 - Annual Scientific Production.



Source: by the authors, 2023.

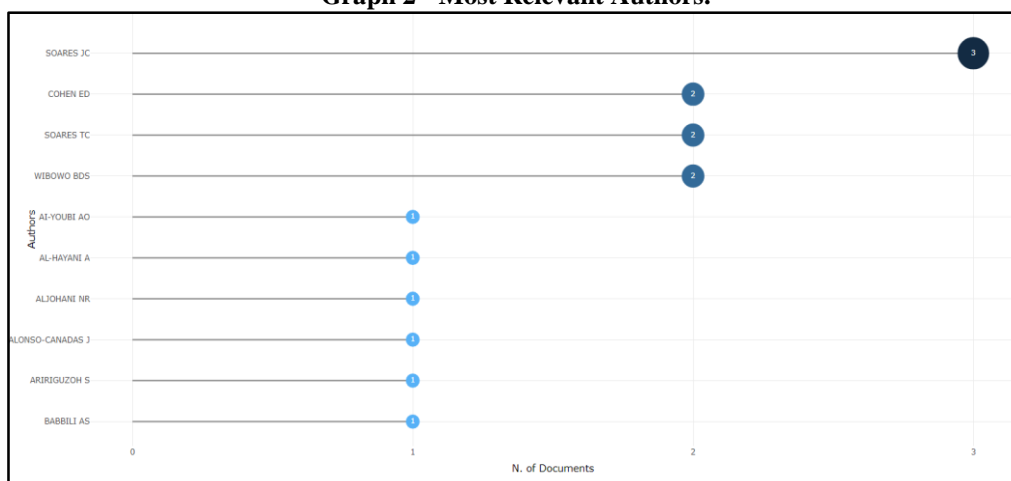
This graph shows a notable fluctuation in the rate of increase in scientific production over the period between 2012 and 2017, maintaining a modest level of 0.7%. Of these years, 2017 stood out, in which the production reached its peak, totaling 2 articles, making it the year of highest productivity in this sample context.

On the other hand, in the interval covered by the years 2018 to 2023, the growth rate experienced a significant reduction, reaching -0.6%. Although the absolute number of productions increased considerably in this period, it is important to mention that there was a decline in the number of authorships in the year 2023, which may have contributed to the overall decrease in the growth rate.

AUTHORSHIP RESULTS

In order to discover how many authors were involved and also to highlight those who stood out the most over the analyzed period, we created the graph below:

Graph 2 - Most Relevant Authors.



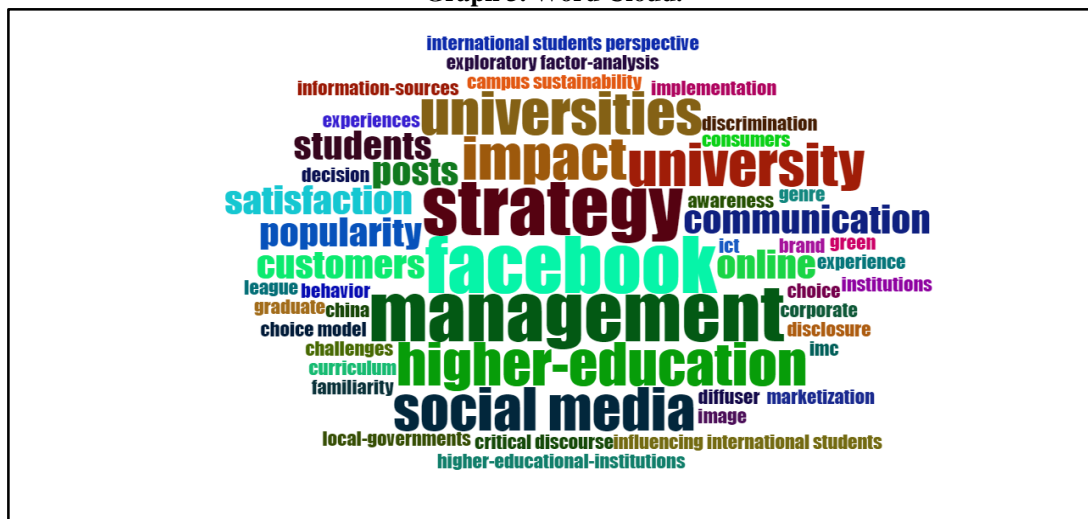
Source: by the authors, 2023.

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF BIBLIOMETRIC INDICATORS

With the objective of providing a quick and intuitive view of the most relevant terms present in the study, a word cloud was created. Also known as 'Word Cloud' in English, it not only offers an intuitive view but also allows the highlighting of keywords. Figure 1 illustrates a graphical representation of a word cloud derived from the keywords present in the articles of the systematic review. This cloud was created using the Bibliometrix software.

The word cloud adopts a circular format, and the size of the words indicates the frequency with which each was used in the indexing of the articles. The most prominent words in the cloud are 'administration,' 'universities,' 'higher education,' 'strategy,' 'social media,' 'facebook,' 'impact,' 'communication,' and 'satisfaction.' These were the most frequent and relevant words in the analyzed articles.

Graph 3. Word Cloud.

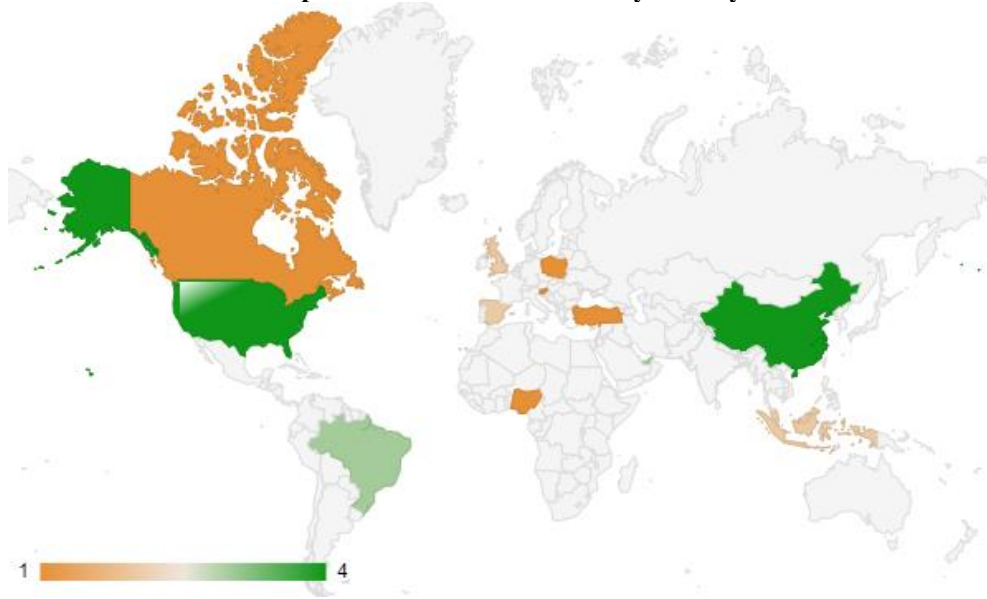


Source: by the authors, 2023.

SCIENTIFIC PRODUCTION BY COUNTRY

With the aim of identifying which countries had the most scientific productions, a graph was created from the data obtained in the content extraction of the sample of 28 articles from the final corpus, which can be observed in detail below in Graph 4.

Graph 4 - Scientific Production by country.



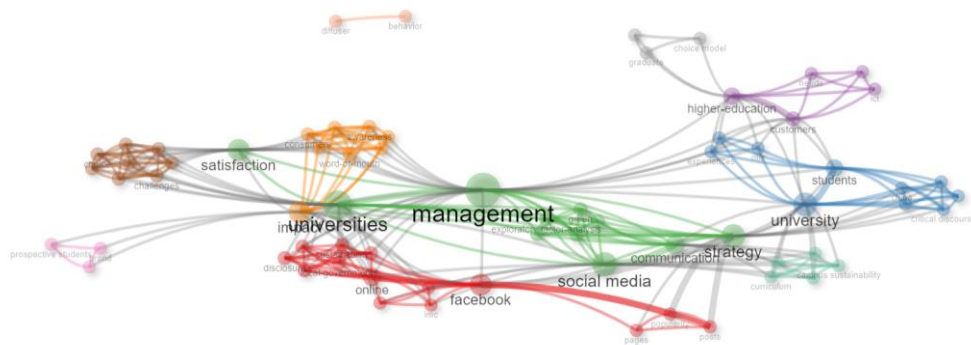
Source: by the authors, 2023.

From 2019 to 2023, China and the United States led the scientific production, with four works each. Following closely, Brazil and the United Arab Emirates stood out, with three works each. Other countries, such as Spain, Indonesia, the United Kingdom, and Malaysia, contributed with two articles each. Finally, there was one work from each country, including Canada, Slovenia, England, Nigeria, Poland, and Turkey. It was a period with a lot of research happening around the world.

THEMATIC MAP

In order to facilitate the synthesis, interpretation of data, and communication of the results of the studies acquired in the final research corpus, a thematic map was created, which can be seen below in Figure 5. The purpose of a thematic map in a systematic review is to facilitate the synthesis, interpretation, and communication of the results of the included studies, helping readers to have an overview of the research field in question.

Graph 5- Thematic Map.



Source: by the authors, 2023.

In Graph 5, we present a visualization of the main themes addressed in our study, with emphasis on the keywords 'management,' 'universities,' and 'Social Media.' These themes are intrinsically connected to other relevant topics such as 'strategy,' 'higher education,' 'students,' 'Facebook,' and 'satisfaction.' We observe that all these themes are of utmost importance for the scope and objective of our research. We seek to understand the fundamental strategies employed by universities and higher education institutions. Moreover, we delve into the discussion of innovation in the context of the virtual environment, particularly on social media platforms, such as Facebook. This not only impacts the functioning of organizations but also plays an essential role in customer satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

In this segment, the main contributions observed in the selected publications are discussed, addressing the role of innovation in marketing and its distribution in the university context. Educational services, like other services, have unique characteristics that present peculiar marketing challenges. The marketing function identifies market forces and optimizes them for profitability (ARIRIGUZO, 2020). For Kuzior, Grebski, and Grebski (2021), it is important to note that universities, like economic entities, must now use marketing instruments to compete effectively in the educational market.

This has led HEIs to seek strategies to attract attention and improve communication with consumers, and the growing penetration of social media increases the importance of engagement and brand recognition among the target audience (SOARES, LIMONGI, and COHEN, 2021). Universities must use all available marketing mix instruments, including relationship marketing, alongside skilled communication of the educational offering in the educational market (KUZIOR; GREBSKI; GREBSKI, 2021).

Higher education has responded to the current digital demand by adapting its marketing communication strategies to the Internet. According to the analysis of recent studies, HEIs have had to focus on online communication strategies to become successful. Despite global trends for the online promotion of institutions providing educational services, these strategies vary at the micro level (KISIOLEK; KARVY; OALKIV, 2021).

The focus in the analyzed articles is on 'social media,' intrinsically linked to Facebook. This platform is part of the marketing planning; however, what is noticed is the lack of strategies and innovations to be implemented. It is important to emphasize that social media have become increasingly relevant in organizational communication strategies. And, considering the management of levels of (in) visibility, we can affirm that 'invisibility in these environments consists of not being visible to the public, being hidden, being in secret' (SILVA; BALDISSERA, 2021). Furthermore, as the authors highlight, beyond the simple absence, we must pay attention to the fact that audiences press organizations to make their presence felt, and organizations, consequently, need to be present to declare their existence and carry out their transactions.

In addition, the studies analyzed reveal concern in the use of "green marketing." According to Fuchs et al.; (2020), the implementation of green marketing strategies is essential to accelerate the promotion of sustainable development in university programs and activities. The specific work of marketing is favored when organizations achieve significant results. Broad publicity through marketing can drive new projects, initiatives, and sustainable partnerships. Thus, it is expected to consolidate green strategies based on strategic plans, which demonstrate the necessary practices to develop interventions in universities and society and, consequently, to develop and export a true sustainability strategy allowing the analysis and adaptation of HEIs to marketing practices.

It is also highlighted that administrative implications arise for universities. Among them, how it is possible to attract international students, emphasizing components of institutional branding via online and offline through marketing communication tools. International students are concerned with the campus culture (whether it is safe or not), the physical infrastructure of the university, the library, and the resources made available to students (COLLINS; SIMSEK et al., 2022).

Highlighted among the articles generated in this systematic review are the five most cited: (1) 'Academic Visual Identity of Higher Education Institutions: A Multimodal Communication through Pictorial Representations', Wu, YQ; Cheong, CYM; (2) 'Attitudes and perceptions of sustainable marketing in higher education - designing a measurement instrument', Meštrović, D., et. al.; (3) 'China's higher education branding: Study in China as an emerging national brand', Hong, M.; Hardy, I.; (4) 'Choosing a Higher Education destination: Marketing of where, why and how?', Collins, A. et. al. and (5) 'Construction and Optimization of Higher Education Management System Based on Internet Video Online Technology', Liu, J. et. al., all written between the years 2021 and 2022. One point of interest is the countries with the highest number of publications, being China and the United States, with a total of four publications in the period from 2012 to 2023.

The results of this Systematic Literature Review reinforce the arguments of Siedschlag et al.; (2022) that the adoption of social media by society has led organizations - and here we highlight Universities - to adopt technological tools to disseminate important organizational information to their stakeholders. On the other hand, the need for constant updating of these strategies and best practices is also emphasized.

V. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to conduct a comprehensive systematic review of the marketing strategies used in universities. Out of 229 articles selected from two databases, 28 were analyzed. It was found, through this Systematic Literature Review, that HEIs are seeking strategies to attract attention and improve communication with their consumers, through social media.

In order to answer the research problem 'what are the main approaches and best marketing practices that universities can adopt', it was possible to verify that the greatest highlights are (1) Facebook and (2) social media. Both are included in what we consider to be platforms used in digital marketing. Not coincidentally, but as a consequence of such strategies employed, the 'experience' of the client – in this case the university students – is also a highlight in the analyzed articles.

It is also highlighted, as a result of strategies employed in social media and digital platforms, the use of visual resources in building brand identity and as a way to disseminate information to the target audience through the web. The use of social media by HEIs is an important tool for brand recognition and has great potential for engagement and reaching a new audience.

It is important to emphasize that the development of the systematic review consists of the identification, mapping, and analysis of relevant research found, based on the problem and objectives previously defined and presented. The year with the highest concentration of research was 2017, with a total of 2 scientific articles, making it the year of greatest productivity in this context. Additionally, the most prominent words in the exposed articles were 'administration,' 'universities,' 'higher education,' 'strategy,' 'social media,' 'Facebook,' 'impact,' 'communication,' and 'satisfaction.' In this way, it is possible to demonstrate the relationship between the theme and the object of study.

Upon analyzing potential limitations, it was observed that there has been a low number of studies on the topic in recent years. Therefore, future research could explore new marketing strategies that are being implemented within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This would allow for the refinement of these practices and, consequently, the growth of the Institutions. Therefore, given the presented scenario, future research could encompass marketing strategies for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), as well as contribute to the innovation and development of strategies that involve the online experience of the audience.

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