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CONTENT MARKETING IN ONLINE LEARNING PROGRAMS: A RESEARCH ON EU-FUNDED 'E-PROFMAN' PROJECT

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Abstract

Online learning composes an important potential for today's knowledge-based economy because it is independent from time & location, has a learner centered and cost effective approach and it connects different profiles of learners. Promotion of online learning programs via e-marketing strategies in order to attract participants is vital. At this point, content marketing offers new opportunities for improving the promotion process of online learning programs in an atmosphere where individuals spend important amounts of time on the internet as consumers of digital content. Content marketing aims to answer the questions of target audience clearly and establish empathy by providing individuals with useful, relevant and reachable content. Understanding of content marketing is based on pull-marketing-techniques. This means that within the context of a content marketing activity, the message of a brand or commercial establishment is not forcefully spread via methods such as advertising. Within this framework, the study aims to develop an understanding of usage of content marketing in promotion activities of online learning programs that have participants from multiple countries. In order to realize this purpose, visitor behaviors on e-Profman's (an European Union-funded international online learning program) website was analyzed by using Google Analytics data. Based on the results, it is possible to state that promoting an online education program by sharing content about it on other websites is the most efficient way to pull visitors to the program's application website. However, findings point out that the most engaging visitors are attracted through content shared on social networks. Data analysis revealed that content about lecturers of the program is the most consumed one by potential applicants. Within the scope of research, it is also observed that differences of country of origins play an important role when it comes to navigating the program's website and finalizing the application process.

Keywords: *Online Learning, Content Marketing, Digital Communication*

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ÇEVİRİMİÇİ ÖĞRENME PROGRAMLARINDA İÇERİK PAZARLAMA: AB-DESTEKLİ “E-PROFMAN PROJESİ” ÜZERİNE BİR ARAŞTIRMA

Öz

Çevrimiçi öğrenme günümüz bilgi temelli ekonomisi için önemli bir potansiyel oluşturmaktadır. Çünkü çevrimiçi öğrenme zaman ve mekandan bağımsız, öğrenci temelli ve uygun maliyetli bir yaklaşıma sahiptir ve farklı profildeki öğrencileri bir araya getirebilmek adına fırsatlar sunmaktadır. Katılımcıların ilgisini çekmek üzere çevrimiçi öğrenme programlarının elektronik pazarlama stratejileriyle tanıtılması hayati önem taşımaktadır. Bu noktada içerik pazarlama, bireylerin dijital içerik tüketicileri olarak internette önemli miktarda vakit geçirdiği bir atmosferde, çevrimiçi öğrenme programlarının promosyonunu geliştirmek üzere yeni fırsatlar sunmaktadır. İçerik pazarlama hedef kitlenin sorularını açık bir şekilde yanıtlamayı ve bireylere faydalı, ilgili ve erişilebilir içerik sunarak empati yaratmayı hedeflemektedir. İçerik pazarlamanın düşünsel boyutu hedef kitleyi çekmeye yönelik bir pazarlama anlayışı üzerine kuruludur. Bu durum bir içerik pazarlama faaliyeti bağlamında marka veya kurumun mesajının reklam gibi yöntemlerle zorunlu bir şekilde dağıtılmasının söz konusu olmadığı anlamına gelmektedir. Bu çerçevede, çalışma farklı ülkelerden katılımcılara sahip olan çevrimiçi öğrenme programlarının tanıtım faaliyetlerinde içerik pazarlamanın etkin kullanımı noktasında bir anlayış geliştirmeyi hedeflemektedir. Bu amacı gerçekleştirmek üzere Avrupa Birliği tarafından fonlanmış uluslararası bir çevrimiçi öğrenme programı olan e-PROFMAN’ın web sitesindeki ziyaretçi davranışları Google Analytics verisi kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Sonuçlar, başka web sitelerinde çevrimiçi eğitim programı hakkında içerik paylaşmanın çevrimiçi öğrenme programının başvuru sayfasına ziyaretçi çekmenin en etkili yolu olduğuna işaret etmektedir. Diğer yandan, etkileşimin en yüksek seviyede etkileşimde bulunan ziyaretçilerin sosyal ağlarda paylaşılan içeriklerden yönlendiği gözlemlenmektedir. Veri analizi programda ders veren kişiler hakkındaki içeriklerin en fazla tüketilen içerik olduğuna işaret etmektedir. Araştırma kapsamında, web sitesinde gezinmek ve başvuru sürecini tamamlamak noktasında ziyaretçilerin geldiği ülkelerdeki farklılığın önemli bir rol oynadığı gözlemlenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çevrimiçi Öğrenme, İçerik Pazarlama, Dijital İletişim

Introduction

As a result of developments in communication technologies during the information era individuals have been receiving an important amount of brand messages from different establishments via various channels. Regarding this, individuals are not likely to engage with a brand message as before. Considering the rise in branded messages and decline in engagement, content marketing presents new opportunities for establishments to engage with their target audience in this branded message cacophony.

According to Content Marketing Institute (N.D.), “content marketing is a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly-defined audience and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action.” At this point, profitable action should not be interpreted as only sale; it can be described as increasing awareness or visibility, strengthening engagement and gaining new members. Real needs of individuals are the priority of philosophy and practice of content marketing and it aims to establish empathy. It is a strategy to attain success through clearing question marks in individuals’ minds. In the process of content marketing, being aware of the needs of individuals and reaching these individuals through right channels with satisfying content have vital role for creating empathy and engagement with individuals.

As mentioned above, the most important steps of content marketing are having knowledge on target audience and determining the communication channels in order to deliver your message. And digital tools are providing new opportunities in order to understand how individuals behave on the internet.

The evolution of technology, several educational institutions and many course offers of these institutions have given rise to concepts of distance learning, online learning or e-learning. Apart from traditional learning methods, they provide an opportunity to engage online with classmates around the world without need to travel and participants require to be more self-motivated despite the distance. E-learning also requires to be promoted like other learning methods. Although the term content marketing sounds too marketing-oriented, it is possible to use this communication technique within the framework of promotion of an e-learning program because practice of content marketing can easily be integrated with e-learning program in order to attract more students and engage with existing ones. On the assumption that candidates who are interested in e-learning programs spend more time on the internet, content marketing by using digital tools can be also a good way to attract them. The multifaceted nature of content marketing serves for promotion of e-learning programs in terms of understanding audience, formulating a promotion strategy, choosing right channels and creating an interaction with potential applicants of the program.

Within the scope of the study, e-Profman is chosen as a sample. E-Profman is a distance learning program for professional development in innovative management, leadership and strategic communication. It aims to create an integrated virtual campus of three higher education institutions from Macedonia, Slovenia and Turkey. The purpose of this program is enabling participants to meet the need of a dynamic, fast-changing and fluctuated environment and to study with a practice-oriented curriculum in an international manner.

During the promotion process of e-Profman, several content marketing tools were used to attract the audience. Content, features, aims and application conditions of the program were announced via program's website, social media platforms, a couple of magazines and newspapers and websites of three institutions.

Within the context of the study, an understanding has been developed on efficient channels in order to pull applicants via content marketing, features of content created for promotion purposes and content consumption behaviors of potential applicants based on their country of origin. The data obtained from Google Analytics is analyzed in order to clarify research questions. For this purpose, firstly content marketing and the nature of online learning programs as a form of distance education was explained. Soon after, crossing points of content marketing practices and e-learning programs were identified. Finally, results and discussion were presented as the last part of the current study.

1. Literature Review

It is possible to state that following section consists of two parts. First part contains background information on content marketing and online learning. Second part provides information on crossing points of content marketing and online learning.

1.1. Content Marketing

Content marketing has a consumer-centric marketing philosophy that started to increase its importance in today's digitally transformed world because digitalization liberated the content publication process and publishing platforms have been allowing anyone who has a computer, smartphone and internet connection to establish a blog, be member of an online social network and create content. Consequently, the amount of the content directed to individuals has skyrocketed.

The rise in the amount of content caused a downfall when it came to the attention-gap of the individuals consuming the content. Average media consumption of an average

person on a daily basis is calculated as 100.500 words and 34 gigabytes (Bohn and Short, 2012, p. 980). Considering the amount of messages that individuals deal with, it is possible to state that they are less likely to engage with branded content. It is possible to explain this with the term “content shock”, which can be defined as “exponentially increasing volumes of content intersect our limited human capacity to consume it in a situation where content supply is exponentially exploding while content demand is flat” (Schaefer, 2014). At this point, the perspective of content marketing might be beneficial in order to increase efficiency of communication process of brands because the perspective of content marketing has differences compared to other online promotion techniques.

Understanding of content marketing is based on pull-techniques instead of push-techniques. This means that within the context of a content marketing activity, the message of a brand or commercial establishment is not forcefully spread via methods such as advertising. On the contrary, content marketing is a method based on creating high quality and relevant content for target audience and optimize the content in order to make it more visible for individuals in target audience in case the information is needed. This perspective allows creating brand awareness, loyalty and trust. It also presents a huge potential to educate consumers about the product & service proposed and create a word-of-mouth. Content marketing also considers content consumption patterns of individuals in the target audience. The format and circulation channels of the content are determined based on the content consumption patterns of potential readers in order to increase the efficiency.

Content marketing is a practice that has deep roots in history. It is possible to encounter content marketing practices in the late 19th century. Furrow Magazine can be stated as one of the first examples of content marketing practices. It publishes content about agriculture that is helpful for its target audience. Furrow Magazine was first published in 1895 and its circulation increased to 4 million consumers in 1912, and today it has reached to 2 million readers globally (Gardiner, 2013). Micheline, the tire brand, and Jell-o, the gelatin dessert brand, are other historical icons for content marketing (Moon, 2013). However, they used conventional methods in order to reach to their target audience. Today, content marketing is a digital-oriented strategy.

In order to define content marketing, it is necessary to describe the notion of valuable content. Jefferson and Tanton (2013, p. 23) define valuable content as follows:

“Valuable content is supercharged content. It is content with a bigger purpose, useful information created for a particular audience, content that hits the mark. By valuable content, we mean the words, knowledge and information you choose to shape and share for your clients and customers: content that educates, helps or inspires them; content they appreciate.”

Several definition for content marketing is proposed. However, the definition proposed by Content Marketing Institute (N.D.) significantly overlaps with the framework of this study. According to Content Marketing Institute (N.D.), content marketing can be defined as follows “Content marketing is a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly-defined audience and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action.”

In addition to that, Rose and Pulizzi (as cited in Holliman and Rowley, 2014, p. 272) stated that content marketing is a strategy focused on the creation of a valuable experience. At this point, it is possible to indicate that content marketing is a strategy that can be used in order to inform and educate consumers and increase the efficiency level of intangible assets of a brand, service or product by providing content. On the other hand,

Lieb (2012, p. 1) states that “It’s being there when consumers need you and seek you out with relevant, educational, helpful, compelling, engaging and sometimes entertaining information.” This sentence indicates to vitality of content within communication practices.

Lieb (2012, p. 2) illustrates the benefits of content marketing as content marketing aids in brand recognition, trust, authority, credibility, loyalty and authenticity. In addition to this, content marketing helps to make customers more educated and informed.

Based on the proposed concepts, content marketing can be illustrated as a strategic, relevant and helpful content production and dissemination for attracting and retaining the consumers and transform their behaviors into profitable action. Profitable action does not necessarily mean sale, tangible or intangible type of values that can be created via content marketing efforts.

Content marketing process has basically three different steps: creating content, distributing the content and measuring the success. However, within the framework of content marketing, three enormously important elements influence the success of digital content marketing process and heavily affect its efficiency. These elements can be listed as follows:

1. Developing an understanding on target audience,
2. Format and qualification of content,
3. Distribution channels of content.

As it is narrated above, content marketing is a consumer-centric pull marketing strategy. This approach makes understanding the perspective of consumers, prospective consumers and individuals who are in target audience is an obligation in order to execute content marketing process successfully. Developing an understanding on target audience influences the success of remaining steps of the content marketing process because only when a proper knowledge is developed on target audience, qualified content can be created or proper distribution channels for this content can be identified. Economic situation, demographic information, education level and country of origin are some of the parameters to develop an understanding on target audience.

Format and qualification of content are vital determinants to execute a successful content marketing activity. Format can be described as by which means message of brand will be delivered (e.g. text, sound, visuals etc.) to target audience. Format of the content has enormous important in content marketing process; it is decided based on the features of target audience and it has visible effect on efficiently delivering message to individuals. On the other hand, qualification of content is another enormously important element of content marketing process. It basically means how harmonious the format is with the message and the channel where content is distributed. For instance, trying to distribute a text material on Instagram decreases the level of quality of content because it is a visual content sharing platform.

Lastly, format and content of the content must be overlapping with the distribution channel. In addition to this, profile of the target audience is another determinant of the content distribution channel. Features of the target audience determine the distribution channels and they can vary from search engines to social networks. According to Duggan (2015), on social media, major age group among online adults who use LinkedIn is 30-49 while it is 18-29 on Facebook. Another piece of data indicates that more black users exist on Instagram than Pinterest. On the other hand, there are more women on Pinterest than

Instagram. This data proves that different distribution channels allow reaching different consumer profiles.

1.2. Online Learning as a Form of Distance Education

The world faces technological disruptions via radical innovations and tries to adapt system changes in every field. As Schwab (2016, p. 6) puts it in the blurb of his book, these changes are expressed as “the evidence of dramatic change is all around us and it’s happening at exponential speed”. This period of dramatic changes, referred to as Industry 4.0, has created digital transformation in everything related to human and organizations. It also affects educational systems by transforming existing learning and teaching forms. This transformation requires enhancing new learning approaches such as cooperative learning, learning with robots, simulation based learning, online learning, e-learning, etc. by educational institutions (Schuster et al., 2016, p. 1-2). On the basis of knowledge-based economy, knowledge workers need these types of learning that are faster, more technology-oriented, more virtual and more accessible. Over the past decade, a large number of distance education programs have revealed to meet the need, maintain a competitive edge and create various learning opportunities against conventional learning in an international and diverse manner.

It is difficult to distinguish distance learning styles from each other definitely. Terms such as distance learning, e-learning, web-based learning, online learning, etc. are defined and used differently by some researchers; on the other hand, according to some of them, these terms are substituted by each other. Although there is no consistency in separating definitions of distance learning, e-learning and online learning, it is possible to catch common points.

Based on the definition of United States Distance Learning Association (N.D), distance learning is ‘the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction’. Distance learning differs from traditional learning in terms of instructional materials, characteristics of instructor and learner, pedagogical methods, difference in times and places.

Jolliffe, Ritter and Stevens (2012, p. 33) explain successful distance learning events such as text-based learning materials, intensive study schools and tutorials, instructional support, the organization, assessment tasks, learning event design and materials development teams. On the other hand, Salmon (2004, p. 11) suggests a model presenting the five-stage framework and e-tivities such as access and motivation, online socialization, information exchange, knowledge construction and development. As it is seen, there is not only one best approach to gain success in distance education.

According to Conrad (2006, p. 23), distance learning has started to evolve to describe other forms of learning such as virtual learning, e-learning, online learning, online collaborative learning, web-based learning, technology mediating learning, etc. Based on this view, we can assume distance learning as an umbrella over other types of technology-based learning. In a similar way, online learning and e-learning are mostly seen as interchangeable terms under this assumption.

On the other hand, some authors use e-learning terms instead of online learning or consider e-learning as a type of online learning (Triacca et al., 2004, p. 4399). According to Ellis (2004), e-learning covers not only content and instructional methods delivered via Internet or Intranet, but also interactive TV, satellite broadcast, etc. Henry (2001, p. 251) states that there are three key elements of e-learning: content, technology and services. Content is characterized by knowledge, classroom and published content. Technology

includes technology infrastructure, learning content management systems (LCMS), learning management systems (LMS) and learning technologies. The element of services involves consulting, support, design and build activities.

While conceptualizing online learning, which is studied in the current paper, it is needed to identify three key components: whether learning activity served as a replacement for or an enhancement to traditional learning, the type of learning experience and synchronization (Means et al., 2009, p. 3). By using these components, an online learning program can be described as replacement or enhancement activity, supported by didactic, active or interactive learning and categorized as synchronous or asynchronous. If online learning program is designed as a mixture of them, we can say that it is based on blended learning.

The most common advantage of online learning is being learner-centered and self-paced (Zhang, et al., 2004, p. 76). This serves to improve learners' self-learning abilities and introvert attitude. Quite extrovert learners tend to be unsuccessful in online learning because they need to get immediate feedback and motivated by face-to-face communication. The other advantage of online learning is time and location flexibility. Online learning allows for no time zones for learners and location and distance are not an issue (Ally, 2008, p. 5). This enables people to access learning materials any time by using Internet. Online learning also enables learners to complete online courses while working on their job. Conceptualizing of learning is another advantage of online learning. In terms of instructors, materials can be changed/improved and tutoring and motivating learners can be done at any time and from anywhere. In addition to this, other advantages are being cost-effective and more accessible, providing archival capacity for knowledge reuse and sharing (Zhang et al., 2004, p. 76) and offering collaborative learning environment by linking each learner with physically dispersed experts and peers (Zhang et al., 2006, p. 17).

There are some disadvantages of online learning as well. In online learning, instructors spend more time to prepare teaching materials rather than conventional one. They are expected to prepare a mixture of learning materials (text, video, simulation, scenario based materials, case, etc.) and provide tutorial help. Instructors may have trouble in restricting instructional approaches and providing immediate feedback in the context of online learning. Learners may lose their motivation and have problems in integrating into the online program.

In addition to disadvantages mentioned above, if a virtual mentor does not follow multimedia-integration, just-in-time knowledge acquisition, interactivity, self-directivity and flexibility principles (Zhang et al., 2004, p. 77), online learning process is likely to fail.

As online learning platforms become widespread, users have many options and become more selective. Coursera, Udemy, Moodle, edX, UMass Online are some of the best-known online learning platforms apart from educational institutions. Online learning activities become subject to multidisciplinary projects supported by various institutions, too. As an example of these projects, e-Profman, an international project supported by European Union, is a distance learning program for professional development in innovative management, leadership and strategic communication. It aims to create an integrated virtual campus of three higher education institutions from Macedonia, Slovenia and Turkey. The purpose of this program is to enable the participants to meet the need of dynamic, fast-changing and fluctuated environment and to study with a practice-oriented curriculum in an international manner free of charge.

1.3. Content Marketing in Online Learning Programs

Institutions have different approaches regarding marketing processes and budgeting as designing their online education programs. Setting up marketing goals and strategies and planning communication activities especially promotion activities differ from online learning program providers (Schiffman, 2005, p. 153). For example, institutional mission is one of the key indicators that shape all actions for marketing.

Granitz and Greene (2003, p. 19 - 20) collected e-marketing strategic themes for online distance learning from various sources such as e-marketing textbooks, e-commerce articles, e-marketing managers, etc. They sorted e-marketing strategies as personalization and customization, community, disintermediation, reintermediation, consumer tracking, enhanced customer service and mixing bricks and clicks. In addition to this, according to Anderson and Elloumi (2008, p. 18), the final step before the service is marketing while designing strategically a value chain system on online learning. This covers the production of the program's calendar and other brochures and materials promoting the program and its content.

Online programs supported by non-profit organizations like e-Profman have limited budget for marketing and quite little opportunities for promotion activities. For small and non-profit organizations, it is challenging to compete with large for-profit educational organizations (Gallatin, 2009, p. 1275). They should create a level of excitement to gain the potential candidates for their online programs. In addition to this, they need to survive in the technology-oriented environment by implementing different promotion activities. It is hard to maintain consistently promotional campaigns for projects funded by European Union too. Although these projects have experts and budget to design promotional activities, there are still some points to be explored to gain more understanding and to overcome problems about the main frame.

At this point, perspective and practice of content marketing might be the solution because every element of an e-learning program might be transformed into informative content. Source of content marketing material within the purpose wanted to be achieved can be students, lecturers, course materials, etc. As stated by Lieb (2012, p. 1), the main purpose of content marketing is "being there when consumers need you and seek you out with relevant, educational, helpful, compelling, engaging and sometimes entertaining information" and different components of an e-learning system might be the answer to different prospective questions. Content marketing can be a cost-effective solution in order to overcome budget scarcity for promotion activities of e-learning programs. With this manner, content marketing can play an important role in announcing e-learning programs and democratization of information on the web. However, it is vital to have data on content consumption habits of target audience and produce content having the right message tone under the light of knowledge gained through these data.

For this purpose, the current study aims to explore the returns of promotion activities of e-Profman online program based on how visitors access the e-Profman Project website and what their behaviors are in this website. Under the light of these data, the study aims to propose a roadmap on how an effective content marketing strategy can be developed for online learning programs.

2. Research

In following section, the approach of study is explained and research questions were answered as result of data analysis process.

2.1. Approach

In this paper, explorative research perspective is adapted and Google Analytics data were used to explore how visitors accessed the e-Profman Project website and how they behaved on this website. The data set contains data from the promotion period of e-Profman that took three months. Promotional campaign documents of e-Profman were published in many channels such as social media networks (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.), popular newspapers and magazines, websites of leading universities, student newspapers of the universities and they were announced by posters in several campuses of the universities, student centers, etc.

Under the light of the data acquired from Google Analytics, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Which channels directed more visitors?
2. Which channels directed more engaging visitors?
3. Which pages of the website were more engaging for students?
4. What are the main content consuming behaviors of different countries?

2.2. Findings

The following findings were reached as result of the categorization and analysis process of the data retrieved from Google Analytics. The numbers indicate the sum of unique visitors and returning visitors.

RQ1. Which channels directed more visitors?

Table 1. Number of Visitors Directed by Different Channels

Channel	First Month	Second Month	Third Month	Overall
Social Networks	250	533	58	841
Search Engines	12	225	186	423
Referral Websites	31	932	142	1105
Direct Visitors	129	1043	289	1461

Note: Channels are categorized based on the data obtained from Google Analytics.

During the promotion process, it is seen that most of the visitors reached website of the program directly. When it comes to digital source of traffic, social media directs most of the visitors to the program's website. It is indicated that visits via social networks became prominent on the first month of PR campaign including first announcement of e-Profman online learning program. On the basis of the current study's findings, the lowest visitor sending channel is the search engines. The reason for this may be explained by the fact that e-Profman is the first online learning program that combines the concepts of innovation, strategic communication and leadership. Therefore, people who search something new on the Internet may not search specifically the direct content of e-Profman;

they access the information mostly through social networks, referral websites and the direct website.

On the contrary, there are many direct visitors than the other channels in the second monthly period because of the enrollment process required to enter the e-Profman website. This period is the knowledge intensive period for potential participants of the program since the website presents an information package including the structure, learning management system, course contents, lecturers' bio, etc.

The number of social network visits shows a decrease obviously in the third monthly period. This period comprises involving the program, getting information about the program, communicating with program coordinator and lecturers, etc. This result can be seen reasonable because direct web sites and search engines become more useful as the online learning program is announced for a while.

Table 2. Number of Visitors Directed by Social Networks

Channel	First Month	Second Month	Third Month	Overall
Facebook	202	433	36	671
Twitter	46	93	18	157
LinkedIn	5	7	2	14
Instagram	-	2	1	3
Reddit	-	2	3	5
StackExchange	-	2	-	2
YouTube	-	1	-	1

The results show that the most used channel is still Facebook although other social media networks are becoming widespread among young users. Here we may comment on this result through Facebook's strong role about sharing knowledge fast and announcing every kind of events among the users. Additionally, this result means that young users prefer to use their Facebook accounts to follow the events in which they are interested. On the basis of the sample of the current study, we can say that Facebook is used the most commonly to get new information about something.

After Facebook, the most popular channel directing students is Twitter; however, the number of visiting is almost one fifth of Facebook's. Even though Twitter is getting popular as a social media network to follow people, institutions, news, events, etc., the current study indicates that potential online learners access information on events through Facebook rather than Twitter. As a final result about channels that are directing visitors, as expected, LinkedIn, Instagram, Reddit, Stack Exchange and YouTube channels are visited very few times.

Table 3. Number of Visitors Directed by Referral Websites

Channel	First Month	Second Month	Third Month	Overall
istanbul.edu.tr	19	361	9	389
iletisim.istanbul.edu.tr	-	88	16	104
stipendii.mon.gov.mk	-	92	13	105
fakulteta.doba.si	-	84	7	91
vs.edu.mk	3	70	15	88
outlook.live.com	-	48	27	75
doba.hr	-	55	11	66
inovativnost.mk	-	42	-	42
akademisyenler.org	-	39	3	42

Note: Table contains top ten traffic referring websites

The main page of Istanbul University (IU) has the highest level in terms of traffic referral. This result is not surprising because IU is the most crowded institution in comparison with the other two institutions (DOBA and SCPR) and most of the number of applications to e-Profman were from IU. Yet we did not allow this situation to affect the application procedures and accepted equal number of students/young professionals from each institutions. In addition to IU's main page, communication faculty of IU is the second visited website by potential online learners. The third one is stipendii.mon.gov.mk website from Macedonia and the fourth one is DOBA faculty.

RQ2. Which channels directed more engaging visitors?

Table 4. Engagement Level of Visitors Based on Directing Platforms

Channel	First Month	Second Month	Third Month
Social Networks	61,19%	51,95%	30,61%
Search Engines	15,38%	27,91%	37,10%
Referral Websites	47,06%	41,62%	36,30%
Direct Visitors	41,05%	45,93%	48,68%

Note: Engagement is calculated based on bounce rate (lower is more engaging)

Based on the results, it is possible to state that search engines referred the most engaging visitors. When it comes to social networks, it is possible to indicate that engagement ratio of the visitors who were referred by social networks is increasing in the course of time because bounce rate decreased to 30,61% from 61,19%. This might have been caused by the nature of membership to digital social networks. For, once a person has become part of a group or page of an education program on social network, the tendency to consume information or follow news from this page might increase.

Although search engines send the most engaging visitors, it can be understood from the table that engagement rate of the visitors has decreased in time. This might have been caused by people who consumed most of the content on website in every passing day and they search and look at only the page they need to check then leave the website.

Engagement rate of the visitors who were referred by a referral website has increased in time. At this point, it is hard to provide a reason for explaining this situation.

Lastly, bounce rate of the visitors who directly reached website has increased. This means that engagement rate has decreased in time. This might have been caused by the people whose information about the program increased; and they only visited the pages that they needed and left the web page faster than they left at the beginning of the promotion period.

RQ3. Which pages of the website were more engaging for students?

Table 5. Engagement Level of Pages on Program Website

Link	Type of Page
/lecturers2/39-jj	Lecturer Bio
/index.php	Mainpage
/lb	Main Lecturer Biography Page
/unique	Value Proposition
/online-1/courses/61-using-research-the-workplace	Course
/sjpr	Page Dedicated to One of Partner Institution
/why-blended-learning	Value Proposition
/qir	Value Proposition
/c/82-hoca-ismi	Visual Course Material
/lecturers2/75-hoca-ismi	Lecturer Bio

Note: The most engaging pages are calculated based on bounce rate and the time spent on the page; test pages are not considered.

Without discussing differences in nationalities of students, firstly the most engaging pages are identified. According to the results, it is seen that people search for lecturers' resumes to decide whether to apply for e-Profman or not. This result shows that potential online learners are curious about the quality of lecturers in the program. It also surprisingly points out that course contents remain in the background rather than lecturers' bio.

RQ4. What are the main content consuming behaviors between different countries?

Table 6. Content Consuming Behaviors of Different Countries

Macedonia	Slovenia	Turkey
Main Page	Main Page	Main Page
Team	Team	Apply Now
Apply Now	Curriculum	Team
Lecturers	Call for Enrollment	Curriculum
Curriculum	Structure	About
Call for Enrollment	Online Learning	Online Learning
Structure	Student Camp	About Us
About	About	Lecturers
SJPR (detail page of partner institution)	Apply Now	Call for Enrollment
Online Learning	Lecturer Profile (Nataša Ritonija)	Lecturer Profile (Ayşegül Özbebek)

Note: Test pages are eliminated

Table 7. Content Consuming Behaviors of Different Countries

Macedonia	Slovenia	Turkey
Main Page	Main Page	Main Page
Apply Now	Structure	Apply Now
Curriculum	Apply Now	Call for Enrollment
Learning	Curriculum	Curriculum
Team	Team	Online Learning
Structure	Call for Enrollment	Team
About	Course Page	About
Call for Enrollment	Online Learning	Application Submission
Application Submission	About	Structure
Video Information on program	Lecturers	Erasmus

Note: Test pages are eliminated

Table 8. Content Consuming Behaviors of Different Countries

Macedonia	Slovenia	Turkey
Main Page	Main Page	Main Page
Registration List	Registration List	Registration List
Registration Form	Registration Form	Registration Form
Course Page	Apply Now	Apply Now
Course Page	Curriculum	Curriculum
Course Page	Course Page	Course Page
Course Page	Student Camp	Student Camp
Curriculum	Course Page	Course Page
Course Page	Team	Team
Course Page	Course Page	Course Page

Note: Test pages are eliminated

Results indicate that students heavily visited the Main Page in the first month of the promotion process. This situation might have been caused due to link of the main page being quite visible in promotion materials and search engine result pages. When differences between countries observed, it is possible to state that visitors from Turkey directly continued with application page. However, visitors from Macedonia and Slovenia tended towards pages about lecturers and pages that contain information on education program.

In the second month of the promotion process, similar to the first month, the main page of the website was the most visited page again. Visitors from Turkey and Macedonia continued their journey on the website with application page in the second month. Content consuming pattern of visitors from Slovenia showed infinitesimal difference. Firstly, they visited the structure page and then went to the application page. This tendency to visit the application page can be explained with visitors' being satisfied with knowledge they got in the first month of the promotion process; and they directly started the application process.

In third month, the main page attracted the highest number of visitors again. Soon after, regardless of the countries of visitors, they visited registration list and registration form pages. In the next phase, visitors delved into pages that provide detailed information on education process from course list to student camp. These pages are generally about education and lecturing process. Additionally, they are more relevant to visitors who applied and decided to be part of the program.

Conclusion and Discussion

As the need for online learning programs increases, practitioners will require more experience on how to promote them and carry the promotion process successfully. Within this context, this study proves that content marketing opens new horizons to promote an online learning program through different digital channels. One of the important tools at the promotion process is the use of social networks because the most engaged visitors are directed via social networks, they are user-friendly and free of charge. In addition, they provide technical infrastructure to create interaction in order to clarify question marks of the potential applicants. The results of this study present some clues regarding how promotional process of online learning programs can be managed. This may be useful for practitioners and researchers who are interested in the field of public relations and especially content marketing.

Based on the results, providing potential applicants with satisfactory information on lecturers and value proposition of the program are vital. However, distributing this content through third party websites composes the most important part of the promotion activities. At this point, considering the findings, distributing lecturer information and value proposition through social networks and referral websites might be an option to conduct promotion activities by using content marketing.

For practitioners of online learning programs, it is possible to state that this kind of studies can help them to improve promotional campaigns for programs. As a field of study, designing online learning programs is prominent for individual educators or institutions. The process of creating online learning programs has many difficulties in regard to curriculum, course materials, course learning outcomes, teaching and learning methods, selection of lecturers, performance criteria, program competency, etc. Studies like the current study may lead potential studies about improving new online learning programs in terms of knowing key points while creating an online learning program.

On the other hand, it is not possible to ignore the importance of online learners' country of origin regarding what they expect from the content of an online learning program and what they want to know about it. An educator or institution should consider the country of origin and digital content consumption patterns for potential learners while designing the website of an online learning program. On the basis of this consideration, the promotion process should be planned and implemented by making strategic use of content marketing.

To understand distance learning program candidates is vital for online learning program designers. This study shows that online visiting and searching trends of candidates differ according to their country origin. Therefore, program designers should consider country differences, online searching behaviors and think about the promotion process.

All in all, recently it is obvious that researches about open, distributed and online learning show an increase. This increase provides a basis for related academic journals, workshops, work groups, projects, institutions from private sector, special departments of universities, network associations, etc. All of them contribute to the online learning world to develop through their competencies.

Genişletilmiş Özet

Teknolojinin evrimi, çeşitli eğitim kurumları ve bu kurumların sunduğu eğitim fırsatları uzaktan öğrenme, çevrimiçi öğrenme veya e-öğrenme konseptlerine hız kazandırdı. Geleneksel öğrenim yöntemlerinden ayrı olarak, bu tipteki eğitimler seyahat gerekliliği olmadan dünyanın farklı bölgelerinden sınıf arkadaşlarıyla çevrimiçi etkileşim fırsatları sunmakta ve uzaklığa rağmen öğrencilerin kendilerini motive etmesini gerektirmektedir. Bu çalışma kapsamında mercek altına alınan çevrimiçi öğrenmeyi kavramsallaştırırken üç temel bileşene işaret etmek önemlidir: 1) öğrenme aktivitesinin geleneksel öğrenimin yerine veya geleneksel öğrenime bir geliştirme olarak konumu; 2) öğrenme deneyiminin türü ve 3) senkronizasyon (Means vd., 2009, s. 3). Bu bileşenler kullanılarak bir çevrimiçi öğrenme programı didaktik, aktif ve interaktif öğrenme ile desteklenerek ikame veya geliştirme faaliyeti olarak betimlenebilir ve senkronize/asenkronize olarak kategorize edilebilir. Eğer çevrimiçi öğrenme programı bunların bir karması olarak tasarlandıysa, bu karma eğitim olarak tanımlanabilir.

E-öğrenme de diğer öğrenme yöntemleri gibi tanıtılmalıdır. İçerik pazarlama terimi kulağa fazlaca pazarlama yönelimli geliyor olsa dahi bu iletişim tekniğini bir E-öğrenme programının tanıtımını gerçekleştirmek üzere kullanmak mümkündür. Çünkü, içerik pazarlama pratiği daha fazla öğrencinin dikkatini çekmek ve mevcut öğrencilerle etkileşim kurmak üzere E-öğrenme programlarına kolayca entegre edilebilir.

Content Marketing Institute (T.Y.) içerik pazarlamayı “değerli, ilgili ve tutarlı içeriği, açıkça tanımlanmış bir kitlenin ilgisini çekmek ve muhafaza etmek; kâr edilebilir bir tüketici davranışı yaratmak üzere üretmeye ve dağıtmaya odaklanan bir pazarlama stratejisi” olarak tanımlamaktadır. Bu noktada kâr elde edilebilir müşteri davranışı sadece satış olarak yorumlanmamalıdır. Kâr elde edilebilir tüketici davranışının kapsamı farkındalık veya görünürlüğü artırmaktan, etkileşim yaratmak ve yeni üyeler kazanmaya (örneğin e-posta listesine) kadar farklılık göstermektedir.

Bu çalışma kapsamında e-Profman programı örneklem olarak seçilmiştir. E-Profman yenilikçi yönetim, liderlik ve stratejik iletişimde profesyonel gelişimi hedefleyen Avrupa Birliği destekli bir uzaktan öğretim programıdır. Program Makedonya, Slovenya ve Türkiye’den üç kurumu içeren sanal bir kampüs oluşturmayı hedeflemiştir. Programın amacı katılımcıları dinamik, hızlı-değişen ve inişli-çıkışlı bir ortamın ihtiyaçlarını karşılama noktasında donanımlı kılmak ve pratik-temelli bir ders içeriğini uluslararası bir bağlamda öğrenmelerini sağlamaktır.

Çalışma bağlamında içerik pazarlama kullanılarak programa katılımcı çekmek üzere kullanılacak kanallar, tanıtım amaçlı yaratılan içeriğin özellikleri ve potansiyel katılımcıların ülkelerine göre içerik tüketim davranışları üzerine bir anlayış geliştirilecektir. Bu çalışma, takip eden araştırma sorularını cevaplayarak, uzaktan öğretim programlarının tanıtım noktasında içerik pazarlamanın nasıl katkı sunabileceğine ışık tutmayı amaçlamaktadır.

1. Hangi kanal daha fazla ziyaretçi yönlendirmektedir?
2. Hangi kanal daha etkileşimli ziyaretçi yönlendirmektedir?
3. Program web sitesinin hangi sayfası öğrencilerden daha fazla etkileşim almaktadır?
4. Farklı ülkelerin ana içerik tüketim davranışları nedir?

Tanıtım sürecinde program web sitesine ziyaretçilerin çoğunun doğrudan ulaştığı gözlemlenmiştir. Ziyaretçi trafiğinin dijital kaynağı incelendiğinde sosyal medya

kanallarının ziyaretçi web sitesine en fazla ziyaretçiyi gönderdiği anlaşılmaktadır. Programı tanıtmak üzere gerçekleştirilen halkla ilişkiler kampanyasının, e-Profman çevrimiçi öğrenim programının ilk kez duyurulmasını da kapsayan, ilk ayında sosyal ağlardan program web sitesine yönlenen ziyaretçi trafiğinin öne çıktığı belirlenmiştir. Mevcut çalışma program web sitesine en az ziyaretçi gönderen kanalın arama motorları olduğuna işaret etmektedir.

Sonuçlar, en çok kullanılan kanalın Facebook olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu noktada Facebook'ta hızlı bilgi paylaşımı ve her türlü etkinliği kullanıcılar arasında duyurma konusundaki güçlü potansiyelinin rol oynadığı yorumu gerçekleştirilebilir. Mevcut çalışmanın örnekleme dayanarak, Facebook'un bir konu hakkında yeni bilgi almak için yaygın bir şekilde kullanıldığını belirtmek mümkündür. Facebook'tan sonra öğrencileri yönlendiren en popüler kanal Twitter olmuştur; ancak yönlendirilen ziyaretçi sayısı Facebook'un neredeyse beşte biri kadardır. İstanbul Üniversitesi (İÜ) web sitesinin ana sayfası trafik yönlendirme açısından en üst düzeydedir. Bu sonuç şaşırtıcı değildir, çünkü İÜ diğer iki kuruma (DOBA ve SCPR) göre daha fazla öğrenciye sahiptir ve e-Profman programına en fazla başvuru İÜ'den yapılmıştır. Ancak bu durumun başvuru sürecini etkilememiş ve her kurumdan eşit sayıda öğrenci/genç profesyonel programa kabul edilmiştir.

Çalışmanın sonuçları göz önünde bulundurularak arama motorlarının etkileşimi en fazla olan ziyaretçileri yönlendirdiğini belirtmek mümkündür. Her ne kadar arama motorları etkileşimi en fazla olan ziyaretçileri yönlendirse de, tablodan ziyaretçilerin etkileşim oranlarının zaman içinde düştüğü anlaşılmaktadır. Bunun nedeni, her geçen gün web sitesindeki içeriğin çoğunu tüketen ve sadece kontrol etmesi gereken sayfaya bakıp siteden ayrılan ziyaretçiler olabilir. Sosyal ağlar tarafından yönlendirilen ziyaretçilerin etkileşim oranlarının zaman içinde arttığını, hemen çıkma oranının %61,19'dan %30,61'e düştüğünü belirtmek mümkündür. Bu durumun dijital sosyal ağlara üyeliğin doğasından kaynaklandığı yorumunu yapmak mümkündür. Çünkü bir kişi sosyal ağlarda bir eğitim programının bir grubuna veya sayfasına üye olduktan sonra bu sayfadan bilgi tüketme veya haber takip etme eğilimi artabilir.

Öte yandan, çevrimiçi programa kaydolmayı düşünen öğrencilerin ülkelerinin önemini, program içeriğinden ne bekledikleri ve bu konuda ne bilmek istedikleri konusunda, göz ardı etmek mümkün değildir. Bir eğitimci veya kurum, bir çevrimiçi öğrenme programının web sitesini tasarlarlarken, potansiyel öğrencilerin ülkesini ve bu bağlamda dijital içerik tüketim örüntülerini dikkate almalıdır. Bu düşünceden hareketle, içerik pazarlamasından stratejik olarak yararlanılarak tanıtım süreci planlanmalı ve uygulanmalıdır.

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Araştırmacı Katkı Oranı: Araştırmacılar çalışmaya eşit oranda katkı sunmuştur.

Destekleyen Kurum/Kuruluşlar: Herhangi bir kurum/kuruluştan destek alınmamıştır.

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