Conversational Marketing in Egyptian Universities' Websites

Analytical Study of Websites and Consumers' Perceptions

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Introduction :

Conversational Marketing is considered a new form of interactive marketing in Egypt. As interactive marketing techniques have been replacing the traditional marketing communication strategies in the past decade, researchers are keen to better understand their functions and benefits. Conversational Marketing is defined as a method of engaging with website visitors and converting leads via dialogue-driven activities to actual sales. Since the ultimate objective of all marketing communication efforts is to create a dialogue, build trust and manage a long-term, two-way relationship between the consumer and the company, then conversational marketing proves a distinct method for companies to reach that objective[1].

With a variety of public, private and civic universities in Egypt, over one million students frequently visit the universities websites annually to gather information about the faculties, programs, certificates and fees to form an informed decision about their career paths. In this extremely competitive university education market, all the universities invested in the development of their websites to make them more interactive and engaging. This research aims to apply the dialogic theory of public relations to explore the Conversational Marketing techniques in Egyptian universities' websites and their role in building customer relationship. This study adopts two qualitative techniques to achieve its purposes. The first is a discourse analysis of a sample of twelve different Egyptian universities' websites to explore conversational marketing tools. The second qualitative technique is the focus groups with a sample of freshman students and their parents to assess their evaluation and perceptions of universities' websites and conversational tools.

1. Review of Literature:

The review of literature will cover the studies related to conversational marketing and the use of digital marketing of higher educational institutions (HEI) in addition to a brief description of the internet use and universities scene in Egypt.

1.1. Conversational marketing:

Conversational Marketing is defined as a method of engaging with web visitors and converting leads via dialogue-driven activities. The definition of conversational marketing insinuates that artificial intelligence tools have been added to the websites to transform them from boring, stagnant, one-way propaganda tool into a conversational, two-way, live communication tool between the organization or the brand and the customers.[2] The most common forms of conversational marketing are the chatbots, interactive games, puzzles, polls, calculations and many other advanced forms that require sophisticated use of artificial intelligence. [3] Experts describe the benefits of conversational marketing as follows:

"While Conversational Marketing is seen as a superset of system-based conversations focusing on brand and product awareness, customers being helped by the brand to understand what it is offered

to them, overcoming their issues or concerns, co-creating value and considering value-in-use as an important conversation to have at the right moment... The above mentioned conversation types are brought together by the Conversational Intelligence (Relationship Intelligence), considering information, knowledge and intelligence as foundational to each conversation."[4]

Marketing studies named the trends of future customer relationship management (CRM) to be the dominance of artificial intelligence in the planning and execution of marketing campaigns and the increasing demand for conversational experiences between customers and organizations[5]. According to Gartner Research Firm report[6] there is an increasing demand for conversational experiences, intense competition between companies to get the consumer attention to their websites, provide him with a smooth, fulfilling journey that will be concluded with a behavioral action and customer satisfaction. [7] Many scholars describe the post-digital future of the internet as the human, personal communication. The variety of internet sites have provided the consumers with countless number of attention-seeking sites that caused the decreasing span of attention and patience of the internet user. Studies indicate that consumers expect a personalized, fast, conversation with a human representative of the organization to answer his questions and care for his needs and wants[8].

A study conducted on 331 managers of companies in America and Asia in 2019 concluded that companies that apply conversational commerce through artificial intelligence with human resources to deliver interactive communication with customers succeed in achieving consumer loyalty, satisfaction and revenue as well as increasing the company's efficient access to new customers and their insights. The results of this study confirm that eighty percent of companies agree that customers increasingly expect relevant, personalized information in their journey and that the largest majority of customers are more impatient than ever before. [9] According to Shacklett, 2019:

"Digital advertising, a nearly $5 billion market in 2018, has typically been about driving potential customers to web pages, where they were presented with forms to fill out so that someone from the company could get back to them later. With today's on-demand consumers, later is already too late. Marketing in 2019 is quickly becoming all about now; consumers will not put up with waiting days, or even hours, to

get a response when they are looking to make a purchase or get more information about a product or service. That's why conversational advertising is quickly becoming so popular: It takes potential customers directly from an ad to a conversation in one click."[10]

1.2. **Digital marketing for higher educational institutions HEI:**

Many Scholars have researched why and how higher education institutions use digital marketing techniques. Some of the reasons relate to the increasingly competitive market of universities, the changing nature of university ownership and the rapidly changing technology, most valued by the new generation Z of students. Researchers propose that higher education marketing has to be viewed from a model of collaborative relationships, while other researchers suggest that a relationship marketing approach best fits institutions of higher education[11]. According to Kusumawati 2019 higher education has been transformed from the dependency of funding by government to the competitive markets. The transformation of higher education from the dependency on government funding to the competitive market indicates that universities have to compete for students in the recruitment markets[12]. Therefore, it is important for the universities to understand ways to attract students and how to market themselves. Scholars argue that digital marketing is very essential and becomes a mandatory for all HEIs including public university as it follows the habit of current generation which continuously changes along with the rapid development of technology. [13]

It has become a fact that universities in most of the countries are adopting innovative marketing communication techniques to survive in a very competitive local and global market.[14]   The role of innovative websites and interactive digital marketing solutions in student relationship management programs have been a crucial theme for higher education studies. According to Fierro et al, each institution is actively seeking to attract international students as part of their strategic internationalization plans and all welcome the opportunity to speak with students from outside of the country in which they are based.[15]

A study was conducted on students and university staff in Indonesia to measure the impact of digital marketing on the decision making process of students. The conclusions suggested that the university

marketing team applied digital marketing technology without actual understanding of its potentials and strategies and the outcome was disappointing. Students of the same study admitted that information obtained through digital marketing platforms helped them in decision making process, yet they wanted to get satisfactory service both from the point of view of web design, the information conveyed and other digital marketing tools.[16]

A 2021 study conducted on over two thousand American high school students revealed the following[17]:

- University website is number one source for the most searched information about programs, fees, scholarships and salary after graduation.

- Majority of students used chatbots, request information forms and video conferences to ask personalized questions and speak to admission counselors, since some of the websites were difficult to navigate and did not provide easy access to the desired information. 42% of students used live chat and 80% of them found live chat helpful.

- The majority of students said that a campus visit is a crucial factor in the selection process and 73 percent of students said they would be willing to video call with an admissions counselor before a campus visit.

- Two-third of students said that their parents are involved in their college search.

Although social media was the last source of information the majority of students resorted to while selecting their college, they used social media to watch short videos about students' life, activities, campus tours and dorms. The data analysis of several studies shows that future students rank the social media last in a list of information channels that influence their choice of a study and university. Field experience suggests that the approach to social media channels as communication tools must be different from the traditional mass media. The focus must be on two-way communication, including dialog and engagement rather than the use of social media as one-way advertising platforms[18]. Studies confirmed that Conversational marketing for higher education institutions means engaging with current and prospective students via real-time conversations. This style of marketing builds trust with the student through personalized communication and removes friction from the admissions process.[19]

1.3. **The Egyptian Scene**

This section of the review of literature aims at scanning the scene and statistics of internet usage in Egypt, especially for higher education purposes, in addition to highlighting the reality of universities in Egypt. According to official reports of 2020, over 57 million of the 102.7 million Egyptians are internet users and there are over 47 million social media users in Egypt[20]. With this growth of the internet users in Egypt in 2021, reports indicated that over 30% of internet users in Egypt use the internet to get information from official websites, while over 90% of them use it to interact through social networks and emails. There is an increasing dependence among Egyptians on internet information and data for the purposes of gathering information, education, electronic financial transactions comparison shopping and e-commerce [21].

Egyptian official reports of 2015 indicated that 73% of internet users in Egypt are tertiary students which include university students and post graduate students. The survey was conducted on 676 faculties; 1,513 professors; 4,974 students in Egypt in 2012 and it concluded that 94.4 % of faculties surveyed used the internet as well as over 97% of professors and 90% of students used the internet. All faculties using internet sent and received e-mails in 2012, followed by training students, employees and academic staff (68%) and acquiring information on goods and services (65%) [22]. Since these statistics are nine years old, the researcher expects them to have increased tremendously due to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and the corresponding global and national lockdown during 2020 that forced all educational institutions to own and activate the online teaching and learning channels. The current purposes of Egyptians' use of the internet must have become related to teaching and learning activities in addition to the usual heavy social media use for entertainment and communication with friends, but the researcher could not find recent official statistics regarding description of the digital society in Egypt in 2021.

As for the universities in Egypt, Ministry of Higher Education declared that in 2021 the number of public universities reached 27 public university offering 442 programs, in addition to 26 private universities, five civic universities and four branches of international

universities in the New Capital[23]. The business of education has been an extremely profitable investment in Egypt in the past thirty years, whether it is in private language or international schools, or for private, foreign, and civic universities. According to official reports, over 800 thousand Egyptian high school students joined the universities this year [24]. The reports indicate that over 80% of those students join public universities, while an average of 18% of those students join private, foreign or civic universities. Those 800 thousand students and their parents depend on universities' websites as the main source of credible information to learn and compare options of undergraduate education. This research aims at examining the conversational marketing techniques used in the Egyptian universities' websites and its effects on creating a dialogue between Egyptian universities' and their potential freshman students.

With the growth of the internet users in Egypt that reached over 59.1 million in 2021, millions of Egyptian students and their parents frequently visit universities' websites to search for information about universities, programs, educational system and fees as soon as the students enter their senior year in high school. In Egypt, students and parents engage in online and offline conversations about ask many questions about the available universities, faculties, programs, entry requirements, fees, educational system, the degree of difficulty, the accreditation of the university certificate, etc.

Consumer experience has been the dominant variable to describe the current era of marketing activities. Getting the consumer attention has become a challenge for all marketers as the consumer attention is being divided among so many options and the Egyptian consumer has become more demanding, less patient, criticizing, commenting and hard to satisfy, just like the global consumers around the world. Although Conversational Marketing techniques on websites appeared globally since 2011, it is still in its introductory stage in the Egyptian digital sphere and rarely used by businesses in Egypt in general and by educational institutions in particular.

This research will identify the unique features of conversational marketing, its definition, benefits and tools. The empirical study will investigate how the universities in Egypt use conversational marketing in customer relationship management programs. This is a descriptive qualitative study that will focus on the applications of conversational

marketing in Egypt through discourse analysis of sample websites and focus groups with university students and their parents to better understand scope of stakeholder-university relationship in Egypt.

2. Research objectives and questions:

This research aims at identifying the presence and forms of conversational marketing in a sample of the websites of Egyptian universities through qualitative discourse analysis of websites' content and conversational techniques. The researcher investigated the implication of the absence or presence of such techniques on freshman students and their parents. The researcher conducted three focus groups on a purposive sample of freshman students, who joined the three examined types of universities this academic year (FG1), the fathers of those students (FG2) and the mothers of the same students (FG3). The purpose of the focus groups is to examine the students' and parents' evaluation of the universities' websites, their sources of information about universities, and to explore the effect of use of conversational marketing on building customer relationship (CR). The research questions that should cover the angles of this study are:

RQ1: What are the forms of conversational marketing available in universities' websites?

RQ2: What are the features of Egyptian universities' sample websites?

RQ3: How do parents and students evaluate the Egyptian universities' websites?

3. Theoretical framework, methodology and procedures:

This descriptive research examines the dialogic theory of public relations and its applications in conversational marketing in the websites of a sample of universities in Egypt. The dialogic theory is about relationship building and maintaining. The organization does not control the communication, whether it is one-way or two-way, and does not serve its own interest, but rather builds a strong dialogue between itself and the publics[25]. The dialogic theory focuses on the interest of the current and potential customers. According to Kent:

"Dialogic communicators are committed to engaging in challenging and meaningful interaction and need to receive training in dialogic theory and technique in order to use dialogue effectively."[26]

The key elements of the dialogic theory include risk, mutuality, propinquity, empathy, and commitment. Although every feature of dialogue is not necessary or present in every dialogic interaction at all times, the more features of dialogue that are present, the stronger the dialogic bond will be. This research will focus on propinquity and commitment as drivers of engagement with a university.

Population and sampling:

Egypt has been witnessing major growth in the number of universities in the past decade. The expansion in opening private universities and the recent law that allowed branches of international universities to open in the new capital, made it difficult for the researcher to select the sample for this research. There are now four branches of international universities in Egypt, but the researcher excluded them from this study, because their websites belong to the foreign university.

The population of universities in Egypt include 27 public universities, 26 private universities, five civic (community) universities and four branches of international universities in the New Capital[27]. From this population the researcher selected a purposive sample of twelve universities to be the subject of this study. The researcher selected the largest public universities according to the number of students and programs to represent the public universities. Since the enrollment in the public universities is possible only through a strict centralized governmental coordination organization, the researcher found no need to analyze more public universities websites, since they are not competing in the market of universities.

The competing types of universities are the private and civic ones. Accordingly, the researcher selected six private universities in Cairo, Giza and Alexandria to examine the conversational marketing techniques and dialogic features of their websites. Similar to the private universities that offer expensive educational services, three civic universities' websites were subjected to analysis and evaluation, in search for conversational marketing tools and dialogic features. The researcher conducted qualitative discourse analysis of twelve websites divided as follows: three public universities, six private universities and three civic universities in Egypt during November 2021 to analyze the dialogic, conversational and various interactive features of those websites. (Table No. 1)

Table (1) Population and Sample Websites of Egyptian Universities

Type Population	Sample	Website
Public Universities 27	Cairo University	https://cu.edu.eg/Home
	Ain Shams University	https://www.asu.edu./eg
	Helwan University	http://www.helwan.edu.eg/?page_lang=en&34878=id
Private Universities 26	Pharos University PUA	https://www.pua.edu./eg
	Modern University for Arts and Sciences, MSA	https://msa.edu.eg//msauniversity
	Misr International University, MIU	https://miuegypt.edu./eg
	British University in Egypt, BUE	/https://www.bue.edu.eg
	Ahram. Canadian University, ACU	/https://acu.edu.eg
	Misr University for Science and Technology, MUST	/https://must.edu.eg
Civic Universities 5	Nile University NU	/https://nu.edu.eg
	Galala University GU	https://www.gu.edu./eg
	King Salman International University, KSIU	/https://ksiu.edu.eg

To measure the awareness of conversational marketing tools and the consumers' perceptions of the websites of Egyptian universities, the researcher steered three focus groups with a purposive sample of freshman students and their parents to assess the students' and

parents' evaluation of the universities' websites and how it affected the relationship between them as customers and the university. (Focus groups participants' characteristics Table No. (2)

Table No. 2: Focus Groups Participants' Characteristics

	FG1 : 8 freshman Students	FG 2 : 5 Fathers of FG1 students	FG 3 : 8 Mothers of FG1 Students
Gender	2 Males, 6 Females	Males	Females
Age	17 – 19	45-55	38-48
High School Education	2 American, 6 Thanaweya Amma, private Language Schools	2 public schools, 3 private school	8 private language school
University Type	1 Public, 6 private, 1 civic	5 Public Universities	2 AUC, 6 Public Universities

4. Results:

RQ1: What are the forms of conversational marketing available in sample universities' websites?

The best engaging interactive feature to create a real dialogue with students, was manifest in the civic Nile University (NU) website, as it offered students an **interactive game** to help them determine the best career path that best suits their personalities and interests. The researcher played the game and it was very engaging and entertaining at the same time. Such interactive game fulfills the elements of mutuality, propinquity and empathy of the dialogic theory. This game is engaging and meets the need of undecided high school students regarding the choice of their study.

Messenger Chatbot that allow for a direct dialogue between the university and the visitors were manifest in two websites only; the website of one private university, namely MSA and one civic university,

Galala University (GU). This is an excellent choice of the most widespread interactive feature of Facebook, which is the most popular social media platform in Egypt with over 45 million Egyptian users[28]. In addition to the Chatbot, MSA provided the best example of the use of conversational marketing by offering all the information regarding the fees for each faculty and a personalized, **interactive calculator** of the fees after the students enter their personal data and scores. This is a really engaging dialogic feature that offers a personalized dialogue between the website visitors and the university.

GU Civic University also used two methods of conversational marketing techniques. The first one is the interactive messenger chatbot to create direct dialogue between the university and the website visitors; especially as visiting the campus will be difficult for its remote place in Suez governorate. The second conversational technique applied in GU website is the **video conference** option as a tool to create dialogue with the website visitors.

All the other universities websites that were analyzed by the researcher had the 'contact us' section, email and phone numbers, frequently asked questions links, which are considered means of communication between the website visitors and the university, but these are means of delayed response and cannot be considered conversational marketing tools. Such links do not reflect the propinquity element of the dialogic theory.

RQ 2: What are the features of Egyptian universities' sample websites?

According to a relatively recent empirical study about the guidelines of successful university websites[29], they must be simple, easy to navigate, informative about programs, courses and fees as well as interactive with links for current and potential students. She highlighted the importance of live, genuine pictures that reflect the university values, not stock ones of smiling students. Sherwin highlighted the necessity of easy-to-use applications and the updated news.

Henceforth, the researcher used the above-mentioned criteria in the assessment of the features of the websites of Egyptian universities. The analysis of the sample websites indicated that all universities in Egypt dedicate a lot of efforts to the strategic development of the websites and acknowledge the importance of websites as the first

source of information about the university. The researcher discovered many positive features like the ranking status, news, hyperlinks to e-learning platforms and links to provide personalized information for the students.   According to previous studies[30], information about programs and courses, fees and scholarships, and future jobs are the most important information students and parents look for in a university website. So the researcher concentrated the analysis on these variables.

 - Among the sample of the three public universities, Ain Shams university website included many working links for students, academic staff, administrative staff, graduate studies, alumni, and for visitors in both Arabic and English, which indicated the high level of sophistication of this smart website services. Ain Shams university website had very interesting interactive smart applications for various students' services including schedules of courses, exam schedules, courses results…. etc., which are considered a dialogic feature. Nevertheless, these features are limited to current students only as login is required to access all these information, so they are meant to serve current customers, but exclude potential customers. Ain Shams website was the only one with updated news and working video links.   All sample public universities' websites were bilingual (in English and Arabic) and were informative with dozens of news, pictures and videos. All of them included a section reprinting articles from traditional media coverage of the university news. This section was exclusive in public universities websites only and did not appear in the websites of private and civic universities.

   Cairo University was the only website to provide a catalogue for the fees of non-Egyptian students in all the faculties. None of the three universities provided any other information about fees of undergraduate or postgraduate programs. Cairo and Helwan universities' websites did not provide details about the courses of the academic programs, the credit-hours programs nor their fees.

 - The analysis of the websites of the six private universities indicated the use of advanced features of virtual tours, electronic applications, academic calendars and focus of news on students' life and achievements rather than the professors. Regarding detailed information about the courses MIU and Pharos University provided details about the courses and the programs. ACU was the only university that mentioned the

career jobs after graduation, which many students search for to learn about future jobs to be able to weigh their options.

As the availability on the fees data on the website is considered a major element in the decision-making process, the researcher realized that MSA website carried the details about the fees as well as the conversational marketing interactive calculator. MIU and BUE websites also provided much needed details about fees, payment methods and discounts in addition to many other smart links for their current students, i.e. log-in with the university email is required to access this information. All websites of the sample private universities presented the content in English only, except MUST and Pharos, which delivered the content in both English and Arabic languages just like the public universities.

Frequently asked questions were traced in the websites of two private universities. Although it cannot be considered conversational dialogue, it should compile the questions and answers of the website visitors. The analysis of this tool showed that very basic questions are placed on that link for promotional purposes with no contribution to the creation of a real dialogue between the consumers and the university.

- Civic universities' sample includes Nile University NU, and the most–recent Galala and King Salman International universities websites. NU website is the best in terms of inclusion of two conversational marketing tools; namely the interactive personality-study game and the messenger chatbot. The NU website includes detailed information about the courses and the fees in addition to a unique section on the website for parents, which was not evident in the other sample websites of this study.

GU website has a unique feature of offering detailed information about the different high school certificates and the corresponding percentage required for each faculty. The website also includes details about the fees and educational scholarships. GU website is sophisticated with numerous hyperlinks, but with very few news, as the university is only one-year-old. GU used two conversational marketing tools; the messenger chatbot and video conference option.

KSIU website on the other hand is not easy to navigate to find information. When the researcher visited it for analysis last November, it was very primitive, with no substantial information regarding

academic programs.   When the researcher revisited the site in December, she found considerable development and more information about academic programs. It is still lacking most-needed information about the fees and courses. Nevertheless, fatal strategic marketing mistakes were spotted in the KSIU website, which are placing tender announcements on the website to rent the cafeterias of the three campuses, and presenting videos of empty, deserted campuses and classrooms.   The tender announcement indicates that this website is not targeting students and that there are no cafeterias on campus. The spacious, empty, deserted campuses would drive students away, as students prefer bigger university communities.

RQ3: How do parents and students evaluate the Egyptian universities' websites?

The researcher conducted three focus groups on a purposive sample of freshman students, who joined the three examined types of universities this academic year (FG1), the fathers of those students (FG2) and the mothers of the same students (FG3). The purpose of the focus groups is to examine the students' and parents' evaluation of the universities' websites and to explore the effect of use of conversational marketing on building customer relationship (CR).

FG1 results: The students stated that they rely completely on social media platforms to gather information about any university. They all agreed that universities' websites are too complicated for them and they feel they are done to address grown-ups. They do not even trust the universities' social media accounts to get credible evaluation of the university and help them in the choice process. A female student in a private university said:

"The social media accounts of any university look very much like the website, very formal and dull.   We know that universities use them for marketing and control its content, not for real interaction with students. Universities also delete negative comments, which mean that they are too weak to refute the negative comments."

All of them trusted the reviews, advice and recommendations of their Facebook friends as the most credible, honest source of information regarding universities' study and examination systems, degree of difficulty, attendance policy, quality education and value of its certificate.   The respondents also named special groups on

Facebook that have thousands of members and followers who provide detailed advice for high school students about each university, faculty, types of courses, degree of difficulty, attendance policy and even staff evaluation information like university society groups, university zone, university sarcasm, IGCSE university guide, university students 2021 group and many more.

Two respondents said that a pre-planned visit by their school to a private university earlier this year made them willing to join that university and they convinced their parents and they visited the website after the visit.

When asked about any important information the students look for on university website, they all laughed and one female respondent said:

"The only news from the universities' website that goes viral is the star and date of the welcome party, but this applies to private universities only."

All the female respondents indicated that welcome parties are a crucial factor for bragging about, social media stories and they create trends among young Egyptians.

FG2 included only five fathers of FG1 freshman students, as three fathers refused to participate in this study. All fathers praised the efforts done by universities to update their websites and include the most important information. They agreed that websites are the most credible source of information about the universities in Egypt. The respondents in this focus group gave formal, prepackaged positive responses about universities' websites. When shown examples of conversational marketing techniques, they commented that they were very good features, but they did not realize their existence on the website, nor used them. This indicates that they did not visit the universities' websites or at least did not pay close attention to its content and tools.

When asked about their role in the university selection process, they stated that they leave this task to the mothers, as the mothers have more time to visit the different universities and ask about detailed information, while the fathers are busy at work. The fathers highlighted that they are the ones who pay the fees for the applications and tests and later the university fees. Only one father mentioned that he accompanied his daughter in her visits to three private universities and to Cairo University to help her see for herself and guide her

through the admission process. The fathers of the two male freshman students indicated that their sons refuse to take any of the parents to visit universities and they do that with their brothers or friends. One respondent said:

"Our boys consider it shameful to allow any of us to go with them to visit universities as this is considered a childish gesture that hurts their ego as young men."

FG3 mothers of the freshman students agreed that the process of selecting universities for their sons and daughters was difficult, confusing and exhausting. All mothers had visited the universities' websites and they voiced their anger and discontent with the websites, especially those of private universities. Their main reason of discontent was the use of English language only in most of websites, which was very disturbing and offending to the FG participants, they called it arrogance and alienating of most Egyptian parents. One of the mothers said:

"The universities are in Egypt and they are for Egyptians, therefore the websites must have an Arabic translation and easy to understand language instead of the sophisticated academic jargon they use and we don't understand."

Another mother mentioned that her daughter has an American diploma, so her English is very good, yet she could not understand much of the program descriptions, mission, vision and other stuff on the websites of the universities. When asked to evaluate the universities' websites and shown examples of conversational marketing techniques, they commented that they did not realize their existence on the website, nor used them.

A participant added that she spent months calling the hotlines of universities to ask questions about entry requirements, fees and scholarships as this information was not available online. The majority of the FG participants confirmed that they did the same process of calling in addition to regular visits to most universities as many of them were not responding to calls and did not provide financial information by phone. The mothers accompanied their daughters to visit the different universities, while the mothers of male students were not allowed by their sons to accompany them during the application procedure.

When asked about the sources of information about the universities

that help in finalizing the search and selection process, all the respondents that they do not trust the websites, nor the social media accounts of the universities, but they trust only an objective assessment from an academic friend or relative. The mothers clarified that they call friends or relatives, who work as academic staff members in a university, to take their honest opinion regarding the comparison between different universities and the pros and cons of each. This third party reference usually occurs after the grades of Thanaweyya Amma are out. This year all the efforts of early admission were in vain as the success percentages of Thanweyya Amma were very low. The participants in this focus group confirmed that having an acquaintance working in the suggested university is a plus that helps them to choose that university. A participant said:

"It is always helpful in Egypt to know someone who is working in the University of my son or daughter to help and guide them through the academic and administrative procedures and support them, if they face any problem."

The other mothers agreed that universities are a miniature of Egyptian organizations, where the 'wasta' or acquaintance with an internal person, can provide you with certain privileges or at least facilitate to be listened to and to have your problems solved.

One mother stated that the school of her daughter held a number of presentations from different universities at school as well as actual planned visits to universities, which helped the girl to choose her university and convince the parents. She added that her daughter chose the university that she visited during her senior school year and many of her school mates chose that university, mainly because they had face-to-face meetings with the registrar and asked all the questions in addition to real campus tour before the lockdown.

The majority of the participants said that the eldest son or daughter is the one who needs most of their efforts and deep involvement in the search for his/her university. But with the second son or daughter, the parents usually recommend the same university of the older sibling and usually the parents become less involved. The mothers agreed that the younger siblings trust their older brothers or sister to help them with the selection of the university than the parents.

The researcher discovered that none of the FG participants' realized, nor used the conversational marketing techniques on the universities'

websites. All students and parents agreed that they prefer face-to-face conversation with a registrar member to be able to ask specific questions and they get very annoyed, when the university representatives tell them: "visit the website and you will find all the answers to your questions." Most mothers confirmed that some private universities' registrar staff are rude, impatient, judgmental, and have an arrogant attitude towards the students and the parents. The students agreed that face-to-face meetings with helpful staff and a real, not virtual, campus tour helped them decide the university they want to join. The researcher acknowledges that the qualitative research tool cannot provide a generalization about this issue and further examination through a quantitative method with a considerably large, representative sample is required to determine the answer to this research question.

5 . Discussion and conclusion:

This research applied the dialogic theory of public relations to the study of conversational marketing techniques of a sample of twelve Egyptian universities websites. Through discourse analysis the researcher discovered advanced application of dialogic AI in three websites of private and civic universities' websites, which used interactive games, chatbots, fee calculators and video conference options. These interactive tools adhere to the elements of propinquity and empathy as they allow the personalization of quick response to the website visitors through tailored AI messages to each visitor. A two-way dialogue takes place on the website through the conversational marketing tools, permitting the mutuality between the organization and the site visitors.

The research results confirmed that private universities are the keenest to provide websites' visitors with complete information about courses, career jobs and fees in addition to advanced interactive links for their current students. The analysis of a sample of twelve different Egyptian universities' websites revealed the application of advanced features to the websites of public, private and civic universities like 'contact us', FAQs, and links to the social media accounts of the universities. NU provided the ideal model of an interactive, dialogic, informative and engaging university website that addresses the needs and wants of both students and parents. Nevertheless, the researcher discovered several strategic communication mistakes in the sample websites, like missing

essential information about programs, fees and career jobs in addition to B2B announcements on a university website that should primarily be addressing current and potential students. The focus groups with freshman students and their parents indicated that campus visits, face-to-face meetings and objective advice from an acquaintance academic consultant are the determining factors in the university selection. The human personal communication seemed to be much more important to the Egyptian students and parents than the conversational AI tools on the university websites. Further examination through a quantitative method with a considerably large, representative sample is required to determine the effect of conversational marketing tools in websites on building and maintaining customer relationship between students and higher education organizations.

6 . Recommendations:

Egyptian universities need to make the first step towards using AI to create a fruitful dialogue between their websites and the website visitors, especially the students.   In order to do so, each university should get its website analyzed and properly evaluated by a third party to learn about the deficiencies of the website in terms of ease of navigation, completeness of much needed information, efficiency and timeliness of response, creation of effective dialogue, conversational tools, user experience and satisfaction.   Based on the results of this research and other studies [31], it is highly recommended for Egyptian universities to apply the following guidelines to their websites and marketing communication strategies:

- Provide all the information about programs, courses and most importantly fees and scholarship options in both Arabic and English that answer financial and procedural questions. Organize communications across channels like website, social media, and mobile apps to provide quick access to fees, scholarships, graduate outcomes, application information and future jobs after graduation.

- Conversational marketing tools are essential like an interactive fee calculator, which is much needed in Egypt. Universities need to add an interactive AI chatbot, that can create a 24/7 fast interaction with the website visitors, gather first-hand information about the interests of the visitors to provide more personalized answers. Universities abroad offer another conversational tool, which is Information Request

Forms (IRF) or interactive Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) that can be filled by typing or through voice-commands. An expert says[32]:

"Test the chatbots with real students before rolling out to make sure the answers is perceived as genuinely helpful and then carefully watch metrics about who engages them the most and their most-commonly asked questions."

-Universities in Egypt must give students easy ways to access the university directly. Communications should feature an invitation to get in touch and provide updated contact information to admissions counselors. If possible, facilitate email access to program chairs to connect students with questions about specific majors.

- If students interact with the university through conversational tools, there should be follow-up phone calls or video calls from specified educational counselors to offer guidance and support to the confused students and parents and positively influence the decision – making process. The calls can be concluded with a personalized email invitation with a specific date and time to allow human face-to-face positive connection between students and university staff.

- Address the parents and engage them as Egyptian parents have always been involved in their sons and daughters" college search and funding. Target parents early to build brand awareness, then keep engaging them throughout the process since they are not only in the position to influence their own student, but also to influence other parents.

- Focus on authentic virtual interactions by dedicating extra resources to virtual campus tours, web casts, livestreams, and digital community interactions as they are interesting to the students.

- Avoid the things that drive students away by making the website easy to find and navigate by keeping your SEO up to date and test the readability of your website. Website content is scanned more than read, so keep text to a minimum and prioritize the visual appeal of format and photos. Use Arabic language in addition to English to avoid the arrogance image of universities.

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