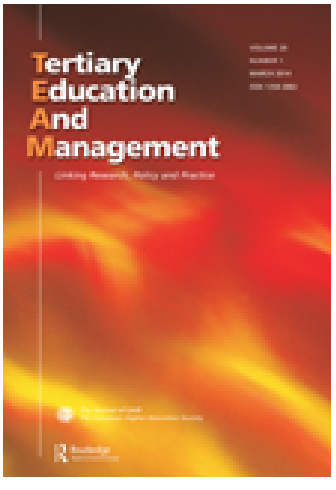

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Charles H. Bélanger[a], Suchita Bali[b] & Bernard Longden[c]
[a] Commerce, Laurentian University, Ottawa, ON, Canada
[b] Commerce, Laurentian University, Sudbury, ON, Canada
[c] Higher Education Policy, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK
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How Canadian universities use social media to brand themselves

Charles H. Bélanger[a]*, Suchita Bali[b] and Bernard Longden[c]

[a]*Commerce, Laurentian University, Ottawa, ON, Canada;* [b]*Commerce, Laurentian University, Sudbury, ON, Canada;* [c]*Higher Education Policy, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK*

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This paper explores social media marketing strategies applied by Canadian universities as a tool for institutional branding, recruitment and engagement of home and international students. The target sample involves the total population of Canadian university-status institutions (N = 106). Qualitative data were collected from two major social networking websites, *Facebook* and *Twitter*, over the span of six months to provide a comprehensive picture. Additionally, student enrolment data were compiled with the purpose of associating social media implementation with fluctuations of student enrolment. Results reveal that the *Twitter* platform is generally much more popular to carry conversations, but that *Facebook* remains the preferred website for university-initiated postings; most of these university-led postings, whether on *Twitter* or *Facebook,* relate to campus/student news and events. Findings point to institutions as only one of many message generators, while students and a host of third parties have become the dominant ones.

Keywords: social media; institutional branding; student engagement; student recruitment

Introduction

Post-secondary institutions have increasingly engaged in branding activities in order to sustain a position in a highly competitive and saturated higher education market (Whisman, 2011). With the purpose of maintaining and enlarging their desired market position, educational institutions have adopted corporate-like branding techniques that involve redesigned logos, catchy taglines, appealing advertising campaigns, brochures, etc. (Williams & Omar, 2013). Along with the more traditional branding efforts, higher education institutions are also embracing other innovative marketing avenues, such as *social media.* Research shows that most North American universities and colleges are actively involved in some sort of social networking platform to promote their marketing position (Barnes & Lescault, 2011). Research evidence suggests that many European tertiary education institutions are introducing social media strategies as a means of promoting their offerings and services, with the prime objective of increasing their market segment, be it students, research grants, philanthropic donations or other performance-enhancing outcomes (Asderaki & Maragos, 2012). Similar efforts of 'marketisation' are also occurring in Australia and New Zealand (Raciti, 2010)

Research shows that, for prospective students, peer-to-peer comments play an important role in the decision-making process. The increasing popularity and global reach of

*Corresponding author. Email: charles5@magma.ca

social media make it a suitable candidate for institutional branding and recruitment of students (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011); however, incorporating social media with existing branding strategies is challenging. This study provides an in-depth exploration into the way Canadian universities are engaging faculty and students (former, current and prospective) to create relevant online influence towards building a desirable institutional brand. Although this case study is within a Canadian university context, it is highly probable that many open-market higher education systems across the globe are experiencing similar developments.

Review of literature

Social media and social media marketing

Evolution of *social media* and *social media marketing* ties back to the increasing ease of availability of the Internet and rapid development of Web 2.0. Research indicates that the Internet is a primary source of information for consumers all around the world (Bayraktaroglu & Aykol, 2008). Advancement of Web 2.0 has made it possible for consumers to stay connected to the Internet and social media through their mobile devices (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Trends e-Magazine, 2009).

Social media can be defined as a web platform that enables an individual to create and maintain a public or semi-public profile. Users have the ability to selectively connect to other users based on their personal interests (Boyd & Ellison, n.d.). Social media technologies have empowered consumers to share their opinions about brands and products, creating significant online word-of-mouth. On the other hand, social media marketing could be defined as a kind of online advertising, which targets consumers based on the cultural context of social communities through virtual worlds, social networks, social news sites and social opinion-sharing sites, in order to meet branding and communication objectives (Tuten, 2008).

Changing consumer behaviour

Social media, which are more or less comparable to virtual communities, are established with the recruitment of friends and family; therefore, consumers engaging in such environments have, to a large extent, already built-in trust (Backstorm, Huttenlocker, Lan, & Kleingberg, 2006). As a result, online word-of-mouth generated through these social media platforms is widely and easily accepted by consumers because they are viewed as unbiased, reliable and trustworthy (Bayraktaroglu & Aykol, 2008). Research shows that online word-of-mouth has greater impact on consumer behaviour than other traditional marketing means, such as printed advertisements; word-of-mouth advertising is persuasive since advertising amounts to creating relationships (Roberts, 2004). Xia, Chunling, and Yujie (2012) explain social media as an 'unconventional channel' that is a significant part of consumer product research and greatly influences consumer behaviour. Opinions and discussions initiated by consumers through social media have a substantial impact on brand image and, therefore, cannot be overlooked by marketing professionals. Similar inferences could also be drawn in the context of higher education systems.

Traditional marketing vs. social media marketing

Social media have gained contagious proportions with more users subscribing to social networks (Wigmo & Wikström, 2010). As the popularity of social media reaches new

heights, organisations are realising that presence on social networks and connectivity are the key elements in marketing and cannot be disregarded (Geho & Dangelo, 2012). Consumers are placing their trust in online word-of-mouth created through social media platforms, which is the foremost reason why marketing professionals are considering new ways of communication with consumers through social media (Grainger, 2010; Pollack, 2009). This two-way dialogue approach is more likely to be the way of communicating with consumers in the coming years.

Institutional branding

As public higher education institutions are considered as not-for-profit organizations, labelling students as 'customers' for institutional branding and marketing purposes has raised much debate in the higher education sector. However, this norm has been challenged in the past two decades. Since the early 1990s, the higher education market has become highly competitive, domestically as well as internationally. Universities were able to counteract the new market forces primarily by differentiating and re-positioning themselves in the global arena (Whisman, 2011). In order to achieve the required differentiation, *branding* became part of the institutional vernacular, even though most institutions played the part without really understanding its true meaning and particularly its stringent requirements (Bélanger, Syed, & Mount, 2007; Kizilbash, 2011).

Although the private sector could not survive without a proven marketing practice such as branding, institutions took some time to warm to this concept; when they did, it was not without some controversy. Universities' approach to considering students as 'customers', implementing business-oriented marketing approaches and using vocabulary such as products, educational property, user payments and commercialization, has left critics debating this trend as inappropriate for higher education systems (Durkin & McKenna, 2011). Faculty in particular have entertained suspicions toward corporate-like strategies (Chapleo, 2010; Whisman, 2008). In spite of all the arguments, higher education systems continue to engage themselves actively in the branding process.

Williams and Omar (2013) have summarized the principal justifications behind higher education branding, which include declining enrolments, decreasing retention, overall competition, enhancing overall brand and prestige, increasing financial resources, honouring a philanthropic donor and mission alignment. Statistics show that in the European, North American and Australasian markets, baby boomers' children have been applying in droves to universities and colleges; this supply source is expected to decline significantly as this cohort of already well-educated consumers advances in age and the number of applicants from the current generation decreases (Raciti, 2010; Whisman, 2008). Institutional branding has provided a way for post-secondary organizations to redesign their image and create a sense of 'brand community' (Balmer & Liao, 2007). Universities and colleges are constantly taking initiatives to reach out to domestic, as well as international, markets. Research indicates that there are several factors making the recruitment of international students necessary. These factors include increasing global student mobility, reduction in university funding and lack of government-backed recruitment campaigns (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Sison & Brennan, 2012). These motives have driven universities to take action and follow a more business-oriented path.

In the midst of high competition and saturated options, universities started taking 'quick-fix' marketing approaches that were more aligned with traditional means in the hope of controlling their image (Whisman, 2008). The foremost objective was to brand

core values and impact the way they were perceived by the target audience, namely students (Chapleo, Carrillo Durán, & Díaz, 2011). In an effort to gain a competitive advantage, students were now regarded as customers; however, this new direction seemed to be somewhat at odds with the educational set-up that is provided by universities (Durkin & McKenna, 2011).

Although institutional branding has become a global trend, there are still many challenges that confront universities and colleges. Williams and Omar (2013) imply that universities face a number of obstructions, such as satisfying the needs of diverse stakeholders, current internal structures, institutional resistance to change, wide range of programmes and majors, sub-branding by schools/majors/facilities, information gap between choice factors identified by students and higher education publications, and change in institutional leadership. Universities often face difficulty in communicating the need for branding to multiple stakeholders, because they might not have the same understanding as stakeholders involved in a corporate business set-up. Another fundamental challenge related to institutional branding is 'internal resistance', where not all stakeholders support planned directions. Despite the slew of factors standing in the way of institutional branding, most institutions see it as a necessary evil (Whisman, 2008).

Post-secondary establishments have been implementing institutional branding for over two decades, but there are still a few essential areas that are being ignored. Whisman (2008, 2011) suggests that one of the biggest oversights by higher education marketing professionals has been the failure to embrace an inside-out approach to brand development. The author argues that, even though universities seem to borrow branding techniques from the corporate world, they often overlook one of the key elements, that is, to buy-in important internal members, such as faculties, staff members, alumni, etc. So far, universities have been focusing on the external audiences and external messages, forgetting that they need to bring all the internal members on board during the brand-building process.

Williams and Omar (2013) further advise that higher education institutions must view faculty members as central elements that give universities 'soul'. Therefore, involving faculty in the process of brand building is vital. Furthermore, supporting similar arguments, Whisman (2011) suggests that universities must take current students, parents and alumni as the insignia of brands. After all, they are the ones who are bringing universities' core values to the forefront. Hence, they are quite capable of taking a position as 'brand ambassadors'.

Students' perspective

Nowadays, students demonstrate strong purchasing power, as compared to previous generations. This suggests that universities need to manage their brands with a solid understanding of students' needs and perceptions. Research indicates that students' perception of a higher education brand is comparative to the brand of competitors (Ivy, 2001). Notably, when institutions are over-emphasizing strengths emerging from the often-controversial 'journalistic/commercial' public rankings, students' sense of expectations is more likely to be unrealistically inflated based on that information. Nonetheless, there are other aspects besides 'university rankings' that are more important to students. A Canadian report (Steele, 2008) indicates that students' choices of higher education institutions are more likely guided by emotional drivers. Usually, universities try to position themselves as – *student-centred, offering academic excellence and world-class research.* Based on this study, such positioning overlooks 'real' factors on which

students actually base their decisions: the following are five categories used by Canadian students to classify Canadian universities:

- Elite schools ('dream' schools, well endowed, famous and wealthy alumni and alumnae)
- Outcome schools (co-operative programs/internships and better after-graduation job guarantee)
- Campus schools (attractive campuses with abundant residential/social/extra-curricular activities)
- Nurturing schools (smaller class sizes – 'friendly & homely'/just-in-time student development) and
- Commodity schools (back-up/unique offerings schools).

This particular categorization suggests that there is a substantial difference between universities' brand positioning and students' brand perception.

A US-based study (Rogers & Croke, 2012) involving college-bound high school students reinforces the familiarity of younger generations with mobile technologies. Findings show that 71% visit schools' websites using their phone and 38% use social media as a valuable resource when deciding where to enrol. This study also reveals that students find getting in touch with admissions counsellors, followed by current students, during their decision-making process are key communication moments in using social media. Data from this particular report further suggest that universities need to use an inside-out approach, where faculty, staff and current students are working in harmony as brand ambassadors.

Social media in higher education

Over the past few years, social media have managed to grasp the attention of higher education institutions as a mean to connect with students. Statistics indicate that almost all market-driven tertiary education institutions in the world are actively involved in some type of social media marketing activities (Asderaki & Maragos, 2012; Barnes & Lescault, 2011; Raciti, 2010). Universities and colleges are realizing distinctive and cost-effective ways through such web platforms to reach out to international markets for recruitment opportunities (Choudaha & Kono, 2012).

Hayes, Ruschman, and Walker (2009) explain that, during the pre-Internet era, higher education systems had a great deal of control over the message. Before the widespread usage of the Internet and social media, post-secondary institutions initiated conversations with prospective students via *viewbooks* (also referred to as prospectuses, containing university information and used for promotional purposes), *prospect letters* (promotional letters sent to prospective students) and *high school visits*. They were able to maintain control over the information through emails and 'passive websites'; however, with social media on the rise, it is getting harder for these institutions to stay in control. Therefore, the best way for them is to be a part of social media, which is where the target audience resides. Some of the major potential benefits illustrated by the authors are open communication between students and post-secondary schools, up-to-the-minute updates and student engagement.

Universities perceive the prime use of social media is for marketing and delivering information about the institution to the students. The second most important use is to strengthen student-to-student interaction, student engagement and involvement in

campus life. Thirdly, social media are used to promote development/alumni connections, enhance student social life/interaction, build campus community and foster student learning and academic outcomes (Davis, Deli-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Gonzalez Canche, n.d.).

Linvill, McGee, and Hicks (2012) conducted a content analysis study to reveal the way colleges and universities are using *Twitter* as a communication tool. Data were collected from 133 US universities and colleges and, in total, 1130 tweets were analysed over a period of 10 days. Eighty-nine percent of *Twitter* data were directed towards general audiences, with only 5% directed to prospective students and 6% towards current students. Thirty percent of *Twitter* feeds contained dialogic loop features or posts/tweets that encouraged audiences to engage in discussions. This study showed that higher education institutions are using *Twitter* mainly as a news feed for the general population, with limited student engagement content.

Purpose and research objectives of this study

Post-secondary institutions are increasingly adopting social media sites to sustain a highly competitive marketplace and to implement their brand-building goals. However, it is important to examine more closely how these establishments position themselves among their peers and vis-à-vis their current and prospective clientele. This study aims to uncover the most common social media strategies implemented by Canadian universities to engage main stakeholders on two most popular social media platforms – *Facebook* and *Twitter*.

This paper attempts to address the following research objectives:

- What are the most common social media practices and strategies implemented by Canadian universities?
- How are universities using social networking websites to engage current students and involve former and prospective students?
- What type of conversations and discussions do universities mainly initiate?
- How much of an impact, if any, does universities' social media presence have on the number of students enroling each year in Canadian universities?

Research methodology

The research methodology adopted for this paper involves a census of all Canadian universities (N = 106). Rich social media data collected from all Canadian universities' official *Facebook* and *Twitter* accounts were central to the research design. The collection covered a period of six months ranging from the beginning of August 2012 to the end of January 2013. This time span provided social media data that covered one full semester and, therefore, was able to capture the social media usage in a real-time coverage. In order to fully understand the social media strategies and usage, users were associated with distinctive user groups. The user groups included *universities* (official university profiles), *current students, prospective domestic students, prospective international students, faculty and staff,* and *third-party organizations*. Third parties are either individuals, communities, private companies or other entities generally not associated with institutions but gravitating around various causes, issues, promotions, etc.

It was also crucial to analyse the type of conversations that were being carried out on these social media platforms. Social media posts were categorized based on the topic and interest that were addressed by the various users. Such categories included – *campus news, campus events, faculty and staff related posts, student engagement, student inquiries* and *promotional posts.* This kind of data classification addressed key subjects, such as *type of conversations being carried out on social media platforms, how well the universities are engaging faculty, staff and students, level of student involvement on social media in relation to the universities,* etc. Qualitative data were used to disclose the social media strategies employed by Canadian universities to engage students in order to portray themselves with specific characteristics.

One of the research objectives was to find out whether social media had any impact on student enrolment. To this effect, two years of pre-social media enrolment data (2008 and 2009) were *t*-tested for statistical significance against two years of post-social media enrolment data (2011 and 2012). Generally speaking, the year 2010 was the period when social media platforms became prevalent.

Results

Social media data collected from *Facebook* and *Twitter* were treated slightly differently because of the nature of the two social media websites. *Facebook* allows the users to maintain a detailed personal profile, which makes it easier to categorize the user in a particular group. On the contrary, *Twitter* offers a limited personal profile, making it harder to identify a user and categorize them in a particular user group. Table 1 sets out total conversations analysed for both social media websites and classified against user-group and conversation types. Almost 62,000 conversations over the span of six months were examined and categorized to capture a global picture of social media strategies and student/faculty/staff involvement.

Additionally, Table 1 reveals that most of the university-initiated posts on both *Facebook* and *Twitter* include information related to campus news/events/announcements and to students. Universities are the main *Facebook* post initiators (68.5%) while other user groups initiate the rest of the time (31.5%). Among the other *Facebook* user groups, third parties initiate 53.7% of the time. As previously mentioned, this category is overwhelmingly peripheral at best to core campus business. This indicates that current students of whatever status have a negligible level of engagement with institutions on *Facebook.* Numbers confirm the heavy use of re-tweets (37.3%) as the favoured way of sharing someone else's tweet with followers.

Table 2 provides descriptive statistics relating to social media usage. For example, the first row from Table 2, *University-Initiated Conversations – Minimum = 1* implies that a minimum total conversation for a university was 1 in total, all four broken down categories confounded; *Maximum = 223* represents the maximum number of posts by a university across categories; *Mean = 107.40* refers to the average number of posts for all universities; and *Std. Deviation = 49.79* refers to the dispersion of data in relation to the mean. It can be concluded that posts for *campus events* and *faculty & staff* have the least amount of deviation from the mean, which implies that universities have a more homogeneous number of posts related to these two topics. However, the rest of the categories under university-initiated conversations have somewhat larger standard deviations, which 'hints' at some of the strategies currently being adopted by Canadian universities. These will be fully discussed in the next section. Finally, row C – *Total*

Table 1. Data collected from *Facebook* and *Twitter*.

Facebook data			
Locus of initiation		Number of posts/ tweets	Relative %
University-initiated posts 68.5%	Campus news & announcements	3382	31.8
	Events related	2242	21.1
	Faculty & staff	639	6.0
	Student engagement	3759	35.4
	Other	611	5.8
	Sub-total	10,633	100%
Other user group-initiated posts 31.5%	Current students	1037	21.2
	Student inquiry	*181*	*17.5*
	Student-to-student	*449*	*43.3*
	Feedback/Complaints	*270*	*26.0*
	Other	*137*	*13.2*
	(Sub-total – Current students)	1037	100%
	Prospective domestic students	287	5.9
	Prospective international students	453	9.3
	Third party organizations	2627	53.7
	Other	486	9.9
	Sub-total	4890	100%
Total Facebook posts	15,523		
Twitter data			
Conversations – Q & A		7354	15.9
Faculty & staff		1379	3.0
Campus related		10,501	22.7
Events related		2438	5.3
Students related		7207	15.6
Re-tweets		17,296	37.3
Other		180	0.4
Total tweets		46,355	100%
Overall total of posts and tweets		61,878	100%

Conversations by Parties A & B – combines university and other user group-initiated posts and follows the same rationale as explained for the first row of the table.

Quantitative pre-social media and post-social media enrolment data are not discussed further because no statistically conclusive evidence was found to substantiate the implementation effect of social media on student enrolment numbers. We conclude that enrolment trends are influenced by many internal and external forces, social media being only one of them.

Analysis and discussion of results

Social media usage

Based on the level of social media usage, universities are divided into three levels of activities – *very active*, *average* and *below average.* Level of activities for universities was based on the mean number of Facebook and Twitter posts; *very active* status belongs to the universities with posts above mean, *average* status is for the universities

Table 2. Descriptive statistics on social media institutional activities.[a]

Facebook statistics	Minimum[b]	Maximum[b]	Mean	Std. deviation
A. University-initiated conversations	1	223	107.40	49.79
Campus news	0	108	33.82	21.33
Campus events	1	69	22.65	14.91
Faculty & staff	0	56	6.45	9.34
Students related	0	145	37.97	30.64
B. Other user group-initiated conversations	1	143	58.93	39.11
Current students	0	69	12.49	12.66
Prospective domestic students	0	20	3.46	4.61
Prospective international students	0	70	5.46	9.67
Third-party organizations	1	114	31.65	25.53
C. Total conversations by all parties (A & B)	2	323	149.27	80.81
Twitter statistics				
Faculty & staff related	0	68	14.83	68
Questions & answers	0	760	81.01	127.67
Campus related	1	848	112.91	124.93
Campus events	0	182	26.22	33.71
Student engagement	0	386	77.49	86.15
Re-tweets	0	942	185.98	238.81
Total tweets[c]	1	2054	498.44	474.57

Notes: [a]The numbers in this table are not meant to add up since they overlap categories.
[b]Minimum is the smallest value for 'a' university and Maximum is the largest, all categories confounded. A value of 0 indicates no university had a corresponding post for that particular category.
[c]Number of tweets is not meant to add up since they overlap categories.

with total posts closer to mean and *below average* status fits the universities with total posts below mean. On *Facebook*, around 24% of the universities qualified for the *very active* category and nearly 23% belonged to the *below average* category, leaving 53% in the middle bracket. As far as the use of *Twitter* is concerned, approximately 38% of universities displayed *very active* involvement and almost 27% were *below average*. This difference in the intensity of social media usage is contrasted in the *Minimum* and *Maximum* number of posts/tweets tallied in Table 2. For example, the lowest number of *Facebook* posts for a particular university is 2 over the span of six months, while it is 223 for another university. The average number of posts for *Facebook* and *Twitter* are 149.27 and 498.44, respectively. This shows that for every *Facebook* post, there are three times more activities on *Twitter*.

Universities that are maintaining a *very active* social media profile could quite possibly be ahead in the game with a wider range of advantages. Undeniably, the more the universities post on social media platforms, the better their possibility of reaching out to a broader audience, both locally and globally. However, higher number of posts does not necessarily guarantee student engagement; content quality plays an important role in carrying out an effective social interaction. A case in point is a simple post by University X – *Wishing our students, faculty, staff, alumni and friends a Happy New Year. All the best to you in 2013*, which received over 421 likes on *Facebook*. On the contrary, a news-like post by the same university, such as, *University X and Germany's Y Society enter $$ clean energy partnership to advance zero-emission vehicles and wind energy* received only 19 likes. Therefore, a conclusion could be drawn from this discussion that universities need to maintain a balance between posts that foster social interaction and posts that might not attract larger audiences or be emotional drivers of engagement. On

the other hand, universities with *below average* posts/tweets might be missing out by limiting their initiatives on social media platforms. Firstly, student involvement would be at the lowest and, secondly, they could be misconstrued as being on social media for the 'sake of it'. Therefore, when it comes to social media, it is important to stay active and keep the audience well engaged.

One of the reasons why universities use more *Twitter* postings, when compared to *Facebook* posts, could be attributed to *Twitter* posts being limited to only 140 characters, which makes it perfect for live feeds. This study discovered that universities use *Twitter* for posting tweets from a live event, such as convocations, university games, etc. For example, one university tweeted *Getting ready for ABC Conversations. Follow along with* [#EventName]. This way the followers can simply follow *#EventName* to get the live feed from an event. Such live feeds can dramatically increase the number of total tweets accumulated for universities. Another factor contributing to the higher number of tweets could be ascribed to the ease with which different user groups can initiate conversations with a university. On *Twitter*, an individual can start communication by simply adding *@UniversityTwitterAccount* to their post; on the other hand, in order to contact universities on *Facebook* a person has to physically visit their official *Facebook* page. These factors could be the reasons resulting in fluctuating use of the two social media platforms; however, further research is required to confirm this inference.

Common social media strategies implemented by Canadian universities

One of the most common social media strategies includes universities promoting dedicated social media profiles (other than official profiles) targeting a specific group, such as alumni and alumnae, various departments, sports teams, etc. Even though universities seem to maintain multiple social media profiles, official pages serving numerous purposes remain the most popular approach. Along with this, most of the universities have official accounts on other social media platforms, such as *YouTube, Flickr, Instagram,* etc. Such social media platforms are dedicated to media sharing (vs. content sharing) of pictures and videos.

Based on the type of conversations and intended target audience base, qualitative data analysis illustrated two major types of social media strategies implemented by universities – *campus news feed* and *student–university interaction*. Universities engaging in *campus news feed* strategy mostly posted information related to campus news, announcements and reminders. In this case, it seems that universities are using social media as a means to communicate information with stakeholders such as students, parents, alumni/alumnae, the community, etc. Posts under this strategy are directed towards a general audience with little or no two-way social interaction, which more or less could be compared to a traditional broadcasting marketing approach. On the other hand, *student–university interaction* strategy focuses on posting content targeting a particular user group that urges discussions on social media platforms. Such an approach not only allows various user groups to take part in social interactions, but also provides a stage where they can play a role of brand ambassadors.

The *campus news feed* strategy seems to be the most frequently exploited in around 50% of the Canadian universities. On the other hand, a little over 28% of universities seem to have implemented a *student–university interaction* approach. Lastly, just over 14% of the Canadian universities are implementing a hybrid approach, by maintaining a balance between both campus-related posts and student interaction posts. For example, University Y posted an announcement on *Facebook* – 'The University remains open

today. Exams will run as scheduled. We will continue to monitor the weather throughout the day and will provide updates as soon as possible. Please travel safely' – which received 47 likes. The same university posted 'Hello spring! You took a while to get here, but boy are we glad that you have arrived', which received over 306 likes. This example illustrates how conversation content can receive different responses from students.

Additionally, over 27% of the universities showcased work, research areas and accomplishments of faculty. Universities that fit into the *Elite Schools* definition (Steele, 2008) appear to be showcasing their faculty's research work and achievement extensively. Display of faculty and research areas helps universities to achieve the *academic excellence* characteristic of institutional branding. 'Researchers at the University Z have created a working model of the human brain. (Yes, you read that correctly.)' is a perfect example of how elite schools showcase academic excellence. Based on the Steele report, such branding is more likely to attract students who would want to be a part of prestigious schools to attain desired social status and engage with other similarly book-smart students.

As far as the other schools are concerned, universities displaying a lot of events on social media could very well fit into the profile of *Campus Schools*, with abundant campus events to draw students looking for a great university experience. There is much similarity of content for schools that could exhibit distinct characteristics in terms of experience and mission. Another interesting finding is that universities in smaller cities seemed to be closely knit with the community by being more personal and specific. For example, University W addresses students only by their first names, which gives the post a personal touch – '[First Name] making candy apples for this evening's community meeting!'

Social media conversations

Social media thrives on group interactions, which leads to one question – what kind of interactions are happening on social media in the context of higher education? What information do different user groups share through universities' official social media profiles? In order to answer these questions, we need to scrutinize the quality of conversations.

Referring to Table 2, it is quite evident that after a university itself, an official *Facebook* page is mostly used by third-party organizations/individuals that are not a part of the university. Over 53% of the non-university-initiated posts belonged to third parties, which clearly is an impressive number. Most of the social media posts by third parties were promotional, targeting specifically university students. As far as the students are concerned, current students initiated a little over 20% of the total conversations. These posts were further categorized as *student inquiry, student-to-student conversations* and *student feedback/complaint*. Student-to-student conversations consisted of around 43% of the total posts, followed by student feedback with a little over 26% and finally student inquiries totaling around 17%.

Student-to-student conversations were initiated by current students targeting other fellow students, such as 'Selling new condition Physical Geography 5th Canadian Edition Strahler. Current GEOG 112 and 114 textbook. $100. Send me a message'. Such conversations suggest that students are using universities' official social media profiles to connect to fellow students, which does not seem to provide much contribution towards institutional branding. An example of a positive *student feedback/complaint* is the comment, 'Excellent professors and T.A. for the most part. The Open Scholarship

Program Paid my tuition for 8 semesters in a row. Thank-you. I am giving back via donations'. This definitely makes a positive contribution towards brand building.

Here are two examples demonstrating the other end of the spectrum, i.e. negative comments. This example shows how differently universities can handle such comments. The first comment is a plain negative comment where a student is not satisfied with class schedule: 'The author thanks you for f*****g up my last semester, making it impossible for me to graduate'; the same university had another post related to a similar issue: 'Give me some courses half online and half in class I'll be really happy'. In both cases, there was no response from the university.

On the other hand, another university had a complaint from someone unable to get through to one of the departments: 'I called [department] twice but can't get through, I spoke to someone else and they connected me to [department], but no one picked up'. In this case, the university responded immediately and apologized to the student before providing them with contact information. In turn, the student replied back, thanking for responding quickly. Such effort from this university left the student satisfied; on the contrary, the former example left a negative impact on the university's brand where the students are left unanswered. This example demonstrates how social media could be used as a communication tool for customer service. Choosing not to respond to a negative comment could result in hurting an institution's brand, as it could be perceived as a university not caring for its students.

Less than 15% of the posts belonged to prospective students (both domestic and international), mostly inquiring about admission processes. International students (with over 9% of posts) are using *Facebook* more than domestic prospective students. This solidifies the argument that social media websites have a global appeal that could be extremely beneficial when connecting with international students.

Institutional branding through social media has similar characteristics to any another marketing campaign that a university might undertake. One of the major differences between the two is that, with social media marketing, universities have limited control over the conversations. However, it is possible for universities to cruise through user-generated content by promoting positive feedback and mending negative feedback. In the final analysis, just like any other marketing campaign, the baseline goal for social media marketing remains the same – to build a positive brand that attracts a larger number of customers, students in this case.

Through this research, it became apparent that some of the universities are able to communicate their brand effectively. For example, *elite universities* or dream schools have profiles that speak *academic excellence* through research projects currently being undertaken by faculty and research students. These universities also tend to be the most popular among international students. Higher university rankings for *elite schools* could also be one of the major factors contributing towards their strong brand image. How is it that a university can successfully communicate its brand through their social media profiles? The audience should be a focal point; it is important for universities to communicate what their target consumers want to hear. But, most importantly, it is essential for the universities to be more aware of their own brand positioning in the market, i.e. how they are different from and better than their competitors. If a university fits into the *outcome school* definition, then it needs to clearly communicate its co-op/internship offerings by highlighting alumni's achievement in their workplace and current students' experiences through co-op programmes. On the other hand, if a university espouses a *nurturing school* profile, then it needs to communicate the benefits of smaller classes and the way it can enhance a student's experience and development. Such an outcome

could be achieved through promoting an image where the university is perceived as a community with students an integral part.

Implications

Among the many purposes for which universities are using social media as a tool to brand their image, the dominant one is undoubtedly to compete for prospective students in domestic and international markets. Barnes and Lescault (2011) define the millennial generation as the 'always connected generation' because of their deep involvement with technology. This 'always connected generation' poses a considerable challenge to higher education systems which have been used to doing business according to their conventional rules and pace. It is one thing to realize that social media must be part and parcel of the ultimate survival strategy kit for higher education institutions, it is quite another to use social media in effective and coherent ways to reach out to this new generation.

A first implication relates to the handling of university social networking accounts. Social media involvement requires a personal touch; therefore, it is important to know whether the personal touch is rooted in an individual or a well-established marketing strategy or policy. It would be critical for post-secondary institutions to have a proper social media marketing strategy in place for obvious reasons. Firstly, having a social media marketing strategy would allow the universities to keep social media accounts easily transferable between different employees, as opposed to being dependent on an individual's discretion. Secondly, it would also help a university to keep its social media efforts aligned with other running marketing campaigns.

A second implication addresses the issue of universities maintaining multiple *Facebook* and *Twitter* accounts. Is this a desirable practice? Having multiple accounts could result in a situation where conversations contributing towards institutional branding are happening on accounts other than the official social media profile. Such practice increases the likelihood of having messages heading in different directions, which could end up being contradictory with the university's original overall marketing plan. A possible way of handling this issue is by *sharing* or *re-tweeting* such effective posts, and making sure that they appear on the official account.

A third implication notes that current students are using *Twitter* more than *Facebook* for posting their comments, which definitely provide up-to-the-minute information about issues. On the other hand, *Facebook* remains the preferred choice of prospective students around the world. This raises the question of whether integrating conversations between these two platforms would benefit higher education institutions as well as current and prospective students in any way.

A fourth implication focuses on the topic of 'being active' on the social media scene. There is no doubt that it is important to stay proactive on social media in terms of both posting information and responding to inquiries/comments. However, does it mean that brand popularity depends upon the level of 'being active?' Is there a possibility for a university to be tagged as a *spammer* if they post too much unattractive content or narrative? It is quite probable that students might not be interested in disengaging content that might lead them to unsubscribe from social media profiles. Such a situation without doubt would likely be detrimental. Nonetheless, universities need to find ways to keep their main audience engaged through social media in order to fulfill institutional branding goals.

A fifth implication reinforces the argument that social media tools provide cost-effective potential for higher education institutions to spread their 'gospel' to external

audiences, and particularly international recruits. Social media are generally perceived as operating in *trustworthy* networks. Institutions have an opportunity to appeal to emotions rather than grandiose schemes to portray their best image across the world. Selection decisions are highly influenced by families and friends.

The sixth implication is not new but has become ever more crucial. The buy-in and engagement of all stakeholders on campus, and not the least faculty, have to be sought by executive management, since the message is not controlled any more by central administration. Anybody can tweet and re-tweet in any direction they want with virtually total impunity; if faculty in particular are not in sync and bought-in with current branding directions, they can do serious damage to an institution without much consequence to themselves.

Last but not least, post-secondary institutions have to understand that their traditional branding methods – from the top down to control the message – have limited effectiveness. The new market economy is led by peer-to-peer communications at the grass roots level. Press rankings of institutions may still have some impact on some stakeholders, but the fundamental rule of marketing, '*always brand from the consumers*', is taking its full meaning in a social media environment.

Conclusions

The increasing popularity of social media, coupled with the importance of institutional branding, has motivated Canadian universities to venture out on social media marketing. Approximately one-quarter of Canadian universities are maintaining a low-key social media profile by not offering the desired engagement level. On the other hand, the top 30% of universities are not only being *very active* on social media, but are also emphasizing high-quality posts that encourage social interaction with various user groups. In this case, by having embedded social media in their branding frameworks, they seem to be the front-runners in the social media marketing race.

In the pursuit of institutional 'marketisation', it would be advantageous for universities to consider students as not only customers but also brand ambassadors. In social media set-up, current and former students offer great potential through their personal social networks. Student engagement, in terms of *likes, tweets* and *re-tweets,* is key to increasing the range of audiences, both nationally and internationally. Therefore, quality of posts/conversations plays a substantial role in attaining desirable results through social media marketing.

It is not enough to maintain a bare-minimum 'existence' on social networking profiles. Social media requires a constant and engaged commitment, where universities have the important role of providing an open communication channel to the other user groups. It is harmful for a university to have no social media presence, but it could equally be harmful to be on social media with a profile that is reflected as 'just for the sake of it'.

This study presented preliminary research on social media in institutional branding. The very reason that the qualitative data collected for this study were directly obtained from the social media profiles led to a few limitations. The first limitation included no involvement from the universities. In the future, it would be beneficial to conduct surveys or case studies addressing specific social media strategy objectives to better understand their points of view. Additionally, it would also reveal how well universities are able to align their marketing strategy with social media marketing strategy. Another restriction was posed due to the limited access to users' profiles on *Facebook*. While

categorizing the data, it became difficult at times to identify whether a user was a current/former student, because personal information is not revealed to the public. Working with universities and conducting surveys with current students and alumni could address this issue. Nevertheless, this study is expected to provide a basis for further research in the field of institutional branding and social media marketing.

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