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The role of Twitter in conversations with students in UK universities – current and prospective

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Abstract: This study examines how Twitter can be used as an effective strategic marketing and communications tool for modern universities. The literature concerned with the changing face of higher education including the idea that marketisation and the concept of the student as consumer. It is argued that modern UK universities have not yet fully adapted to the new context of higher education in order to sustain their position as educational world leaders. The study investigates opportunities for the development of a bespoke marketing solution that strengthens the values of higher education while boosting prospects for continuing growth for individual institutions.

Through netnographic investigation in three modern universities and comparison with three service industry organisations, the current use of Twitter is investigated. In developing a better understanding of the current use of this channel, and exploring the potential based on observation of successful interaction, it is revealed that the university feeds use Twitter as a push advertising promotional tool, while the comparison feeds demonstrate its use as a social engagement tool generating regular community interactions. The study concludes with a proposed theoretical framework for using Twitter as a key tool for a more effective approach to marketing designed for universities.

Keywords*: Social Media, Twitter, Higher Education, Netnographic.*

Introduction

UK universities have become more marketing focussed because of the challenges they face through reductions in government funding, higher student fees, increased numbers of institutions and technological advances (Universities UK, 2013b; Freeman & Thomas, 2005; Conway et al., 1994; Dooley et al., 2012; Lomas, 2004). UK universities increasingly behave like traditional businesses (McMillan & Cheney, 1996) competing in a marketplace. Marketing has thus become integral to the recruitment process of universities (Szekeres, 2010; Naude & Ivy, 1999) and, in particular, modern universities.

The market positioning and characteristics of modern universities have led to different approaches to the recruitment process (Smith et al., 1995; Ali-Choudhury et al., 2009). Pre-1992 institutions maintain a focus on status, reputation and research excellence as their core marketing messages, while modern institutions adopt a more 'aggressive' approach (Naude & Ivy, 1999) offering flexible modes of study and promising career opportunities, along with

introducing industry and vocational experience alongside courses. In combination with these push-tactics, promotional offers around UCAS tariff adjustments and monetary discounts to draw new interest are common practices drawn from traditional business strategy.

While the 'students as consumers' metaphor has been around for a number of years (Stark, 1975; Pain, 1986; Snare, 1997) it continues to be debated as a controversial approach to how higher education should be marketed (Levin, 2005, Freeman & Thomas, 2005; Naidoo et al., 2011; Smith, 2011). Molesworth et al. (2009) express concerns that the value of a degree is only measured by the financial or career success of the graduate, and that higher education institutions are assessed on revenue (Molesworth et al., 2009:280) with advances in knowledge seen as a commodity.

However, higher education institutions in the UK show some reticence in marketing their courses. This lack of promotion of universities can be attributed to a lack of focus on developing bespoke strategies based on the specific service they provide (Durkin et al., 2012; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). It is clear that a new approach is needed towards marketing universities.

This study aims to discover how Twitter can be used as an effective strategic marketing and communications tool for modern universities. To achieve this aim, this paper reviews current literature on marketing practices in higher education and in service industries; investigates through primary research the way modern universities currently use Twitter and how current and prospective students interact with these institutions; discusses the findings to extend the existing arguments within the discourse on university marketing, and concludes by offering a conceptual framework for best practice

University Marketing

When potential students are in the process of making a choice of which university to attend they are influenced by a number of factors which often includes social media. In this section the current research on the influence of Twitter on this process is reviewed.

Once a student is enrolled, the delivery of the service is likely to be over several years creating a "membership relationship" as cited by Mazzerol (1998:164) from Lovelock's 1983 work. A commitment of this nature involves a substantial decision making process. Drawing on Chapman's (1986) framework, Maringe (2006:468) outlines the basic stages in the decision making process students go through in selecting their university: pre-search, search, application, choice and registration (Maringe, 2006:468), however in understanding the full student journey, retention beyond registration must also be considered. Alumni of the university may continue to invest in their favoured institution long after their graduation, through donations, sponsorship and legacy gifts.

Developments in technology and communications mean universities find themselves dealing with more sceptical audiences with increased power not only to seek information for themselves, but to create content for others. As Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2011:10) observe, potential students are increasingly resistant to push tactics and with their regular use of social media are changing the processes of university choice. Hayes et al. (2009) outline evidence of a link between prospects accessing a social network being utilised by the university and their likelihood to apply, but observation of the power of social media in other markets (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Kirtis & Karahan, 2011; Thackeray et al., 2008; Hanna et al., 2011) suggests that these tools are much more powerful than the current literature around university course choice implies.

Network strategy and co-creation

At a basic level a higher education institution is a service provider, albeit a specialist one. It is not a new concept that service marketing focuses heavily on developing relationships with customers (Gronroos, 1978; Edgett & Parkinson, 1993), however, more recent studies are moving away from the approach of segmenting and targeting and towards that of network focussed strategies. The strength of this re-structured approach to marketing, and the fact that it opens opportunities to embrace leading modern marketing theories has led to the proposal that service marketing can be applied across the spectrum of tangible and intangible products. Service logic (Lusch & Vargo, 2004; Lusch et al., 2007) is gathering wide acceptance as the new dominant logic in marketing strategy (Vargo & Lusch, 2008; Gummeson, 2008; Ballantyne & Varey, 2008). Building from traditionally accepted customer centric views, it outlines that in today's world, where consumers are empowered to make more informed decisions and share their own views in a public arena, organisations must adjust their understanding of the relationship with the consumer. It is no longer a B2C process, but as Gummerson and Mele (2010:182) neatly express it, we must now consider a B2C/C2B and even C2C framework. If the aim of marketing is, "creating, communicating and delivering and exchanging offerings that have value for customers," (AMA, 2014) we must understand how that value is achieved. In service logic, value is created through joint input from the provider and the consumer, often termed co-creation of value (Gummesson & Mele, 2010; Gronroos & Ravald, 2011).

In recent decades business managers have been uncovering more means by which they can involve consumers in the production of service processes. The experience is co-created, and it is this experience that becomes the value (Prahalad, 2004). Higher education institutions are already ahead of this trend as students contribute to the development of their own education and to knowledge as a whole. "Production is the process of making the resources customers integrate in their consumption or usage processes. Value creation is the process of creating value-in-use out of such resources." (Gronroos & Ravald, 2011:7). Universities are currently trying to create that value through promises of higher paid jobs and better career prospects, rather than focussing on the value that the educational process itself offers, along with the benefits of becoming a part of the institution's community. Gronroos and Ravald (2011:8) go on to say that the perceived value does not come from the product or service itself, but rather the positive consequences gained as a result. So, the current perception is that value is created in having a degree, not in the process of being educated. By re-focussing and developing a mutual understanding with prospective, current and past students about the depth of value an education can hold, universities may begin to realign their offer to the value in the process of education itself.

The importance of brand

For the purpose of this research, the context of, "a brand as part of our lives, where its personality represents a promise and a set of values that are supported by benefits, features and functions," (Richards et al., 1998) is accepted. As Klein (2009:161) demonstrates, current marketing demands creating an idea and attaching that idea to everything a company does in the public eye. Any encounter with a brand, regardless of whether it is led by the consumer or the supplier, adds to the formation of the brand in that consumer's mind (Keller, 2003:596). It is therefore important to be a part of the conversations that take place, and ideally generate the environment which cultivates these conversations, to ensure that the desired opinions are being formed. The reactive marketing techniques that many institutions have adopted, applied with a fragmented and ad-hoc approach, makes achieving a brand synergy impossible. As, "the drive for short term goals merely pushes marketers to actions that erode the brand equity," (Richards et al., 1998:49) buy-in from academics and staff within the institution is paramount to the success of brand development.

Aggarwal (2004), applying a psychological context to brand marketing, begins to explore the potential that humans can relate to brands in similar ways to how they relate to other humans. Later research develops the idea that if brands are perceived as more human, they may reach into the social world (Aggarwal & McGill, 2011), thus creating the potential for humans to interact with brands at a social level. There has also been some investigation of the effects of developing emotional connections to brand in a higher education setting (Durkin et al., 2012). Creating such strong bonds with the university brand would be beneficial not only in converting prospects to applicants, but also in developing their relationship with the institution leading to a higher degree of contribution to their own experiences and, in Molesworth et al.'s (2009) terms, a 'being' approach to education.

By focussing on social interaction, a brand community can be developed allowing free-flowing interactions between institutions and prospective, current and past students. In principle, the university can extend their physical campus and the belonging that accompanies it to an online world, where outsiders are invited to join the community and develop connections within the brand encouraging a long-standing affiliation. Through this engagement, institutions would be actively involved in conversations with their market.

Real-time conversations through Twitter

Universities need to embrace social marketing through current technology, and ensure the nature of each platform being used is considered, rather than applying traditional marketing methods to new channels. A recent study by Kobus et al. (2013) shows 96% of university students in their university own at least one mobile IT device (Kobus et al., 2013:29), a statistic that is likely to be representative of most universities in developed countries. Social media channels are developing at a staggering rate, particularly in the younger generations, as outlined by Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2012:3).

Twitter allows organisations to become involved in online conversations that are taking place within their industry and about their business which, when used well, offers a higher degree of control over their brand portrayal and public reputation (Xifra & Grau, 2010; Foley, 2009; Hwang, 2012). Twitter allows individuals to voice opinions publically (Johnson, 2012) and as such can be used as a customer service tool, responding to comments and complaints instantly. It also offers the unusual facility of providing a channel that communicates one-to-many, but also one-to-one (Burton & Soboleva, 2011) and that can be used to communicate publically or privately.

Twitter differs from other popular platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram due to the openness with which it can be used and the real-time nature of conversations. Arguably the most impacting feature of Twitter is its ability to facilitate word-of-mouth publicity (Zhang et al., 2011). Traditionally word-of-mouth publicity has been widely underestimated in marketing theory (Gummesson & Mele, 2010:189). The growing use of social media has created a higher profile for what is now recognised as one of the most effective means of marketing. It has been proposed that, "[word of mouth] affects the majority of all purchase decisions," (Kozinets et al., 2010) thus emphasising the importance for businesses to be involved in managing this process, but equally raising caution as to the potential negative power when undesirable word-of-mouth builds (Burgess, 2013).

Constantinides and Zinck Stagno's (2011) investigation into how prospective students are using social media reveals that the majority of interactions on these platforms is to view content from other sources, such as information or visual content (photos and videos). A much smaller percentage of users contribute their own content (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011:21). This indicates that in order to create a socially engaging environment, the focus should be on producing interesting and highly visual content, rather than pursuing user-

generated content. Thus, the current literature on the role of Twitter in university choice shows that Twitter can play a significant role.

Method

To explore the current role of Twitter in the conversation between modern universities and current/prospective students three university Twitter feeds were analysed over a period of one month, and compared with three feeds from other service providing organisations. The following section discusses how data were collected through an online ethnographic approach, and presents how samples were elicited for in-depth analysis to gain insight into the interactions occurring on Twitter.

This study examines the subjective motivation for university choice created in the context of social media and, therefore, an interpretivist approach is appropriate. The particular channel investigated is Twitter, and through interaction with the feeds managed by the institutions being studied, data was collected via observation of the players' actions within that context. Twitter facilitates short written posts of 140 characters or less which are publically published with options to target the post at a particular person or group. As such the social actions that occur are created through language use, with supporting context of images, videos and emotion markers specific to computer-mediated communications (Wetherell et al., 2001:94).

It is the social interactions between the participants that will allow insight into the construction of relationships, bonds and brand affiliations that form the focal point. Questions surrounding validity and rigour in qualitative analysis have been debated for many years (Seale, 1999; Hammersley, 1992). Traditional parameters used within quantitative analysis such as ensuring results are generalizable, consistent to allow for replication of investigations and not obscured by the opinions or views of the researcher, are more difficult to demonstrate in social research as the very nature of the subject being investigated does not lend itself to the same levels of control. Attempting to apply a parallel framework is inappropriate (Pratt, 2008) as human nature cannot be understood within such restricted conditions. Guba and Lincoln (1994:106) argue that qualitative methods necessitate the stripping of context from data to ensure results are not influenced by context. This removal of context limits the degree to which results can be generalised, as, "outcomes can be properly applied only in similarly truncated or contextually stripped situations," (Guba & Lincoln, 1994:106). We must, therefore, accept that to gain fuller understanding of social interaction, and in this case online social interaction, a bespoke methodology is required.

Data collection

An account was created on Twitter and a profile developed, clearly stating the research nature of the account and the intention to conduct an observational study in order to comply with ethical conditions of social research. This observation feed (OF) was used to monitor six selected feeds for a period of one month. Three of the chosen feeds are managed by modern universities and three managed by organisations in the service industry with which comparison could be drawn.

The aim was to gain insight into how those feeds were used by the organisations running them, and in turn how followers receive, react to and interact with the information in real-time. This approach enabled insight into the communities developing around these channels from a peer viewpoint and an understanding of what members experience. Every tweet within this period from the feeds being investigated was downloaded and recorded as a text file and as a word processing file that supported images to record the visual appearance. Where reactions and conversation developed as a result of a post the responses are also recorded.

These measures ensured the context of posts was captured and any visual content was not neglected in analysis. The resulting quantity of data collated is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Initial data count

Twitter feed	Number of observed conversations
UF1	195
UF2	161
UF3	192
CF1	425
CF2	131
CF3	421
Total	**1525**

Data sample

The universities chosen met the following criteria in order to be relevant to the study:

- modern universities (i.e. university status gained post-1992),
- central Twitter feed linked from university home page and portrayed as the official feed for the university,
- Twitter feed in regular use (minimum one post per week) for more than one year.

From the institutions that met these criteria, a convenience sample of three London-based institutions of similar geographical location were selected as the final choice for analysis. For basis of comparison, three other feeds were selected for investigation from service providers that are not universities. These feeds met the following criteria:

- UK based service industry organisation with a focus on education or knowledge,
- central Twitter feed linked from company website and portrayed as the official feed for the company,
- Twitter feed in regular use for more than one year.

Geographical location was again used to select a convenience sample of three organisations based in London. The criteria for these feeds were decided to reflect related characteristics with the university feeds so parallels and comparisons were relevant within the field of education and could contribute understanding of the use of Twitter within service-related marketing. To protect the anonymity of the organisations being studied, each was assigned a pseudonym of either 'university feed' (UF) or 'comparison feed' (CF) and was assigned number one, two or three to distinguish between them.

For initial categorisation, each tweet was recorded as an entry in a spreadsheet, with details included about the content of the tweet, the amount and type of response or interaction it received. A post that received no interaction was assigned level 0, a post that had been marked as a favourite by at least one player, but received no other interaction was assigned level 1. If a post had been retweeted it was assigned level 2 and finally any post that had attracted a direct response or comment from another user was labelled level 3. Data for each feed was sorted according to the level of interaction and a representative sample of 100 tweets selected for deeper analysis reflecting the quantity of each level of interaction that occurred across the month. The resulting sample comprised 600 tweets, with a total of 1692 utterances and 886 participants in the conversations observed.

Data analysis

The chosen methodology for this study is netnography. While being a relatively new method, netnography resolves many of the traditional problems with ethnographic research and as such has been met with positive acclaim (Sandlin, 2007; Langer & Beckham, 2005; Jawecki & Fuller, 2008). Traditional ethnographic research seeks to understand human behaviour through integrating with social or cultural groups and observing from within. One of the highly cited problems with this is the impact of the presence of the researcher (LeCompte, 1987). A netnographic study allows for peer-level observation of natural interactions with no involvement or risk of contaminating data. However, in order to remain as close to traditional ethnographic research as possible, Kozinets (2010:75) recommends prolonged engagement with the communities being studied, including engagement and interaction with the members.

It is important to note here that particularly in the business use of Twitter more than one person may be behind the feed, thus complicating attempts to understand the actor behind the posts. However, the question this study seeks to address does not require knowledge of the people, but of the interaction itself. The posts on Twitter are in themselves social actions and as such create the social context within which the community forms. Therefore, through thematic analysis of the utterances posted within each feed, both by the central feed itself and followers posting 'at' the feed, an understanding of the social context and community is developed. This analytic approach, "consists of contextualizing the meaning of the exchange and interaction in ever-widening circles of social significance," (Kozinets, 2010:133) allowing insight into how universities are using/could potentially develop use of their Twitter feed to build social communities within the university brand.

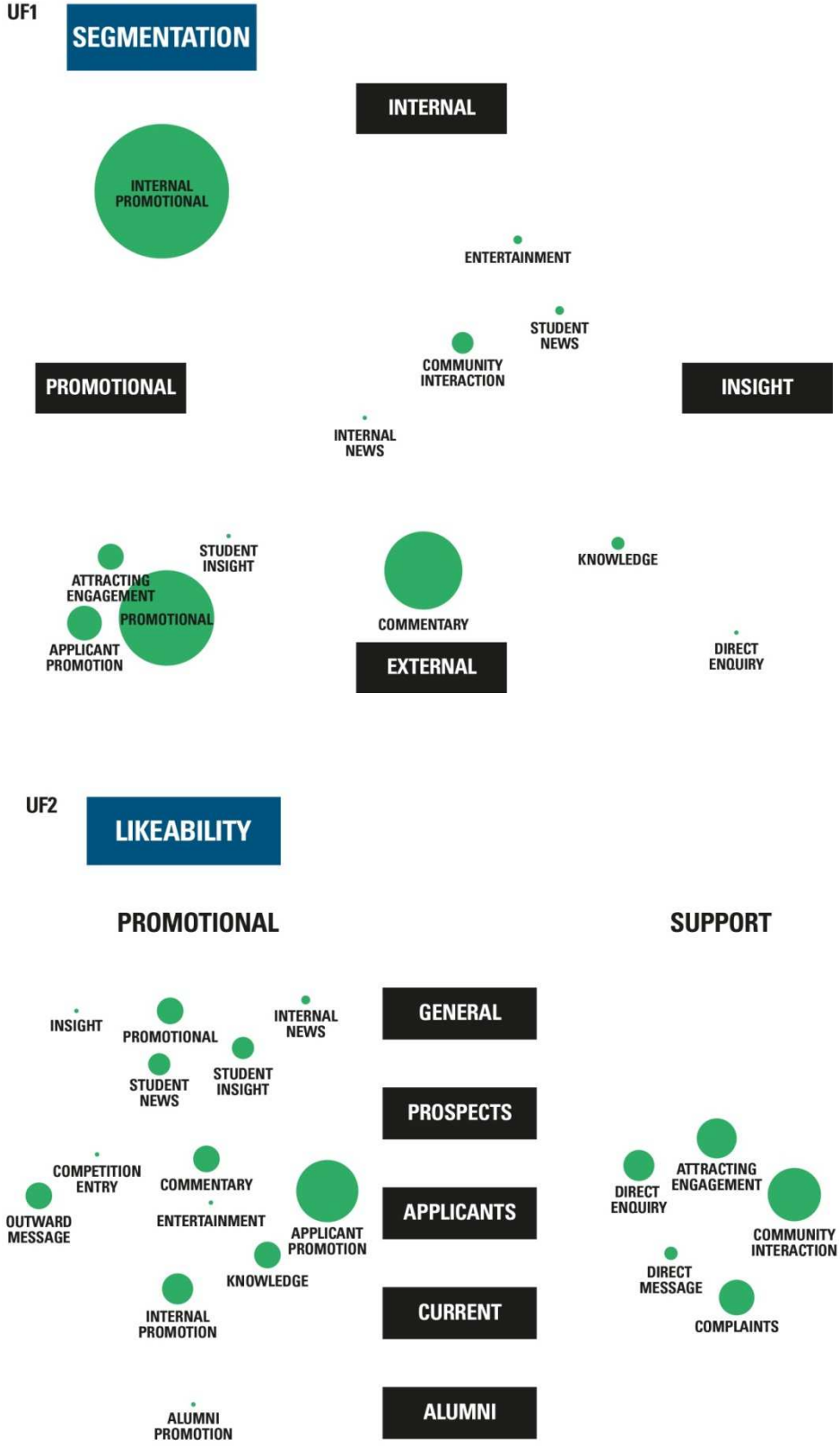
Because the quantity of elicited data was relatively small, and conversations generated through utterances of a maximum 140 characters, computer-assisted analysis was not necessary for reducing the risk of, "distance from the data," (Kozinets, 2010:129) or over-categorisation leading to a loss of theorising and hermeneutic thought. As noted by Richards (2005:93), "software is not reflecting on the meaning of your text," and for a study of this nature remaining close to the data enables insight into the motivations behind the posts and the feel of the community.

The following sections examine the data, first from the three university feeds (UF1, UF2 and UF3), followed by exploration of the comparison feeds (CF1, CF2 and CF3). The results from each are then compared.

Data from the university feeds

The dominant themes emerging from the UF1 Twitter feed were an internal versus external focus and a tendency to concentrate either on building insight into the university or promote events and activities happening there. This conflict of intentions demonstratesd an overarching theme of segmentation – aiming messages to be relevant to different people at different times.UF2 had as its main theme the creation of an approachable, friendly personality behind the feed, leading to an overarching theme of likeability. UF3 shaped the feed as existing solely for the purpose of putting messages out that the institution wished to convey, at times appearing boastful. This built a sense of arrogance or ego around the feed and increased social distance between it and its followers, adopting an authoritative stance. This contrasted heavily with UF2, where the tone and use of the feed demonstrated a desire to reduce social distance and encourage interaction with followers.

Figure 1: UF emerging themes



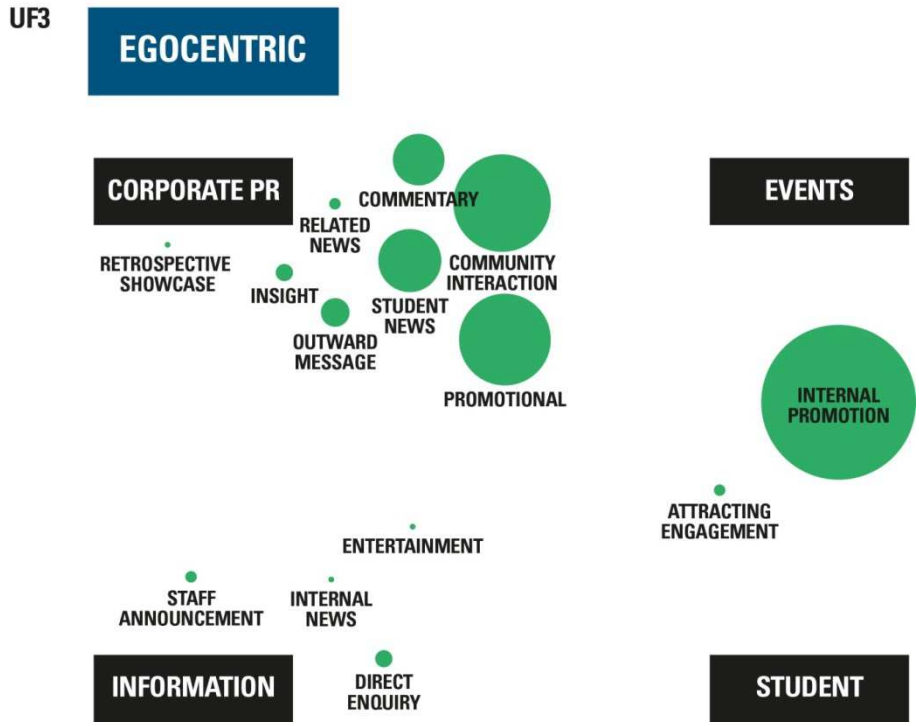


Figure 1 shows the themes which emerged from the analysis of the university feeds. The core themes of segmentation, likeability and egocentricity clearly demonstrate the differences in each university feed and central values of the social context they create. Common patterns emerging demonstrate a strong use of promotional messaging, a tendency to target specific audiences and inconsistency both in tone of voice and the role of the feed. Each feed appears to be designed for short-term interaction, where relevance is limited to specific criteria such as attendance of an event or a student's current status within the higher education system. There are frequent instances of repetition of content, both in text and in imagery indicating a formulaic approach and creating a feel of limited variety of content. There was very little evidence of Twitter being used as a social tool in the context of any of the university feeds, with no demonstration of connections forming between followers. There were also very limited instances of posts within a primary intention of offering knowledge and entertainment, indicating dominant motives were gaining something from followers rather than offering a forum for social activity and enjoyment.

Academic years have a distinct cycle, with different priorities for marketing teams at different times of year. Therefore, in studying feeds for only one month, care must be taken not to generalise the findings to the core use of the feed across a full year. However, the data suggest that all three of the institutions studied focus strongly on the activities occurring at that particular point, with little content offered that would be relevant throughout the year.

Data from the comparison feeds

In the comparison feeds showed a different mix of themes and a different mode of engagement generally.

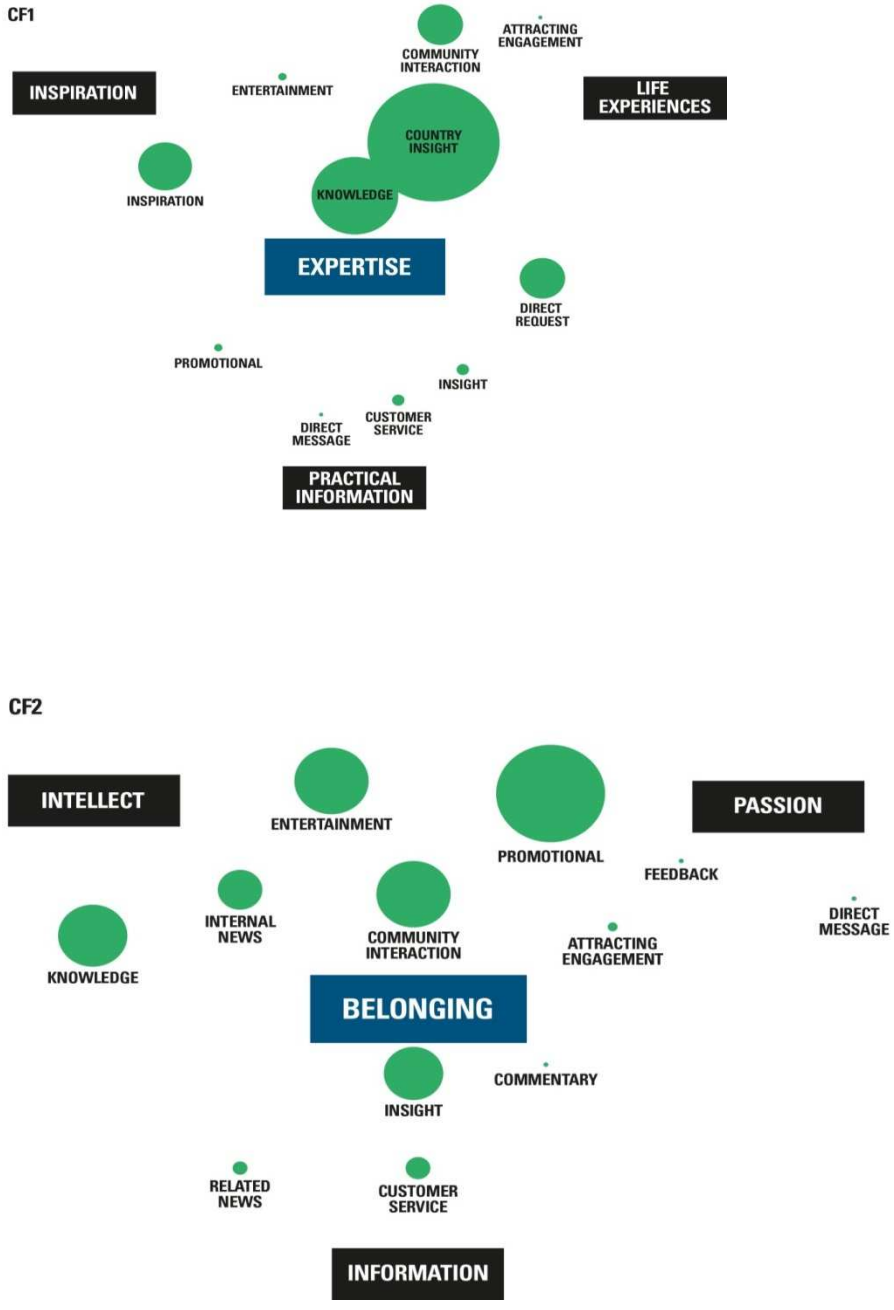
The tone of voice of CF1 appeared to be at peer level with followers, however, a sense of authority was created through the levels of expertise and knowledge conveyed within the feed. There was a clear feeling of respect for the knowledge and insight conveyed, demonstrating trust in the expertise behind the feed. Evidence of a social community was apparent: interactions take place between followers, facilitated by the central feed. Follower to follower advice was frequently offered and compliments on posted content and conversational interactions were also common, in response to a posted photo: Wow,

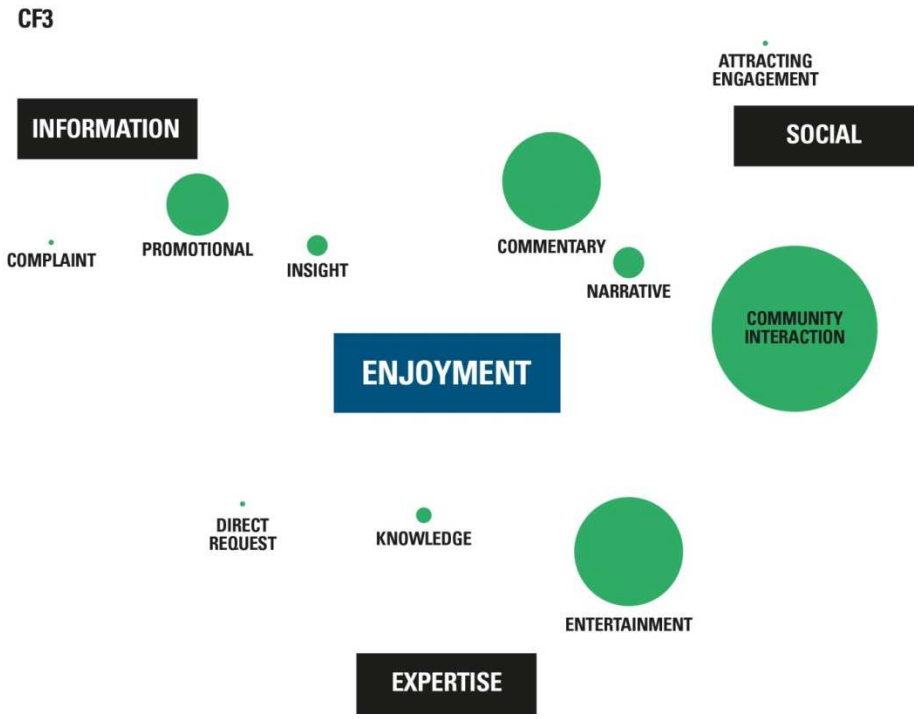
breathtaking! The resulting environment was highly supportive and welcoming with strong themes of shared experiences, information and inspiration emerging. Figure 2 offers a representation of how these themes surround a core theme of expertise that ran throughout the feed.

Figure 2 reveals central themes of intellect, passion and information with a core sense of belonging for CF2. A membership aspect was clear within the feed, and the strength of the Twitter-based community was enhanced through this demonstration of being a part of, or desiring to be a part of, the organisation.

In CF3, we again saw an emerging theme of intention to inform, along with a strong social aspect and a large number of utterances stemming from expertise or desire to gain expertise. The central pattern across the feed as a whole was a sense of enjoyment and fun, demonstrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: CF emerging themes





All of the comparison feeds demonstrated a high level of community activity: interaction between members, content sharing and comments or responses to posts. The evidence suggests this was achieved through offering knowledge, entertainment and expertise, adding value to what the feed had to offer. The focus of each feed is clear and patterns were far more apparent than with the UFs.

CF2 and CF3 both used feeds as promotional tools in a similar manner to universities, with directives for action or framing tweets to imply action was required. There appeared to be more positivity from the community in line with promotional tweets in the CFs, which could have indicated a more forgiving audience due to general enjoyment of the feed and a higher tolerance for promotional posts due to lower frequency in comparison to entertaining content or perhaps a higher degree of relevance.

The distinction between entertainment and knowledge was subtle across the three comparison feeds. There was a clear distinction between the core values of expertise in CF1, belonging and community in CF2 and enjoyment in CF3.

Comparing the university and comparison feed themes

Community interaction and promotion were the key areas where all feeds demonstrated some intent. Universities are clearly more directed at niche audiences while the comparison feeds offer content potentially relevant to a much broader spectrum of followers. There was little evidence in any of the feeds of a specific customer service role; however, there were elements across both types of feed of offering practical information and answers to enquiries.

The most illuminating distinctions are found in the themes emerging from analysis and deeper investigation of the data. Each feed expressed a unique personality, which determined the social context of the feed and the nature of the interactions occurring within it. In the university feeds the low levels of interaction meant this personality was created mostly by the

institutions themselves, reflecting in the marketing focus of segmentation, likeability and ego. In the comparison feeds there was much more indication of social constructs occurring between, and as a result of, followers.

Discussion

This study set out to examine how Twitter is used as a strategic marketing and communications tool for modern universities. The Twitter feeds of three modern universities were monitored during the time of the year when students are deciding which university to attend and the Twitter feeds of three other organisations were also monitored for comparison purposes.

The findings demonstrate a degree of confusion in the role Twitter plays in the investigated universities. A lack of focus is uncovered, highlighted by the attempt to target specific audiences with push messaging tactics. All of the university feeds focus on an interest in the institution itself, rather than an interest in the subjects or knowledge available. This is reflective of the concern of Molesworth et al. (2009:277), that current marketing practices in universities emphasise value as possession of a degree, not in the experience of learning itself. There is no expression of expertise within the feeds, and any interactions surrounding exchange of information deliver practical knowledge such as application processes and event information. This approach generates a niche focus, making the feed largely irrelevant to anyone who is not already connected to the institution. The push marketing approach attempting to target specific audiences is reflective of the suggestion that universities are applying traditional marketing efforts inappropriately, rather than utilising modern channels in the manner they were intended and reinforces Naude & Ivy's (2009:130) assertion that modern universities adopt aggressive promotional tactics. There is a clear demonstration of ignorance to the fundamental design of Twitter as a social interaction tool, which can be seen from the way it is deployed as an advertising channel in the investigated examples.

Another commonality between the investigated university feeds is a tendency to focus on current events and specific periods of the academic cycle. This encourages a short-term interest in the feed, rather than the idealism discussed earlier of a lifelong relationship from prospect to alumni. From these observations it can be concluded that this investigation supports the theory that higher education marketing currently takes a traditional business rather than service-focussed approach (Maringe, 2005:571). Where non-promotional content is offered there is often an underlying intention leading back to the theme of promotion. There is some evidence of more interactive use, particularly from UF2 in running peer to peer question and answer sessions for applicants, but overall the thought behind these channels is clearly inside-out rather than a mutual creation of social context.

What can be learnt from the comparison feeds?

While all six investigated feeds used push marketing tactics at times, the overriding themes that emerged from the study of the comparison feeds were much more reflective of valuable content and social communities. Content is generally more focussed on knowledge and entertainment, with evidence of a co-created social environment between those running the core feed and those following it. While there is strong evidence of differing approaches from each feed, for example CF1 posting frequent, formulaic content and CF3 adopting a more conversational and narrative approach, all three based their posts on knowledge/expertise in their particular area. This demonstrated a degree of success in creating what might be termed a 'brand community', highlighted by Hatch and Schultz (2010:592) as a context that facilitates co-creation.

There was also evidence of interaction between a number of feeds from within the same institution, posting content around niche areas, then retweeted into the central feed to create a rounded, varied and interesting array of educational content. As all three comparison feeds demonstrated high levels of interaction and engagement, this adds weight to the discussion in section 2.2 that there is value in knowledge. This is a promising development in the argument that Twitter could be a core tool in realigning marketing practices within universities to focus on knowledge as the value-proposition rather than promoting the value of university as gaining a qualification.

The importance of brand

The themes that emerged from the analytic process in this study lend themselves to interesting parallels with brand values, demonstrating what is important to the institution, and how they are portraying themselves through this channel. In the case of the universities the themes represented a narrow focus of relating to those already affiliated with the university, as well as evidence of internal pride and exclusivity that discourages interaction from a wider audience. The comparison feeds had stronger cultural themes emerging, reflecting a clearer representation of the brand of the organisation. Table 2 summarises the themes from each type of feed, demonstrating this point.

Table 2: Summary of key themes in all observed feeds

Feed	**Themes**	**Feed**	**Themes**
UF1	Segmentation, promotional, insight	CF1	Expertise, inspiration, life experience
UF2	Likeability, promotional, support	CF2	Belonging, intellect, passion
UF3	Egocentric, corporate PR, events	CF3	Enjoyment, expertise, social

The higher levels of interaction from followers within the comparison feeds assist in the development of the brand. As Berthon et al. (2009:357 citing Pitt et al. 2006) point out, "brand meaning is not controlled by managers alone, but instead co-created through ongoing interactions among brand users". In this case, the interaction of members surrounding the organisation's Twitter feed generates a social construct that delivers a brand experience to those involved. UF3 in particular demonstrated attempts to control this through delivery of explicit PR statements and brand messages, which resulted in the emergence of an egocentric theme rather than the positivity and pride the messages attempted to convey. This example re-emphasises the importance of co-creation of value as discussed in section 2.2.

Co-creation of value

In their 2004 publication on 'Co-creation Experiences', Prahalad and Ramaswamy outline the need to set in place the, "building blocks of interactions," (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004:9) in order to begin moving towards a value co-creation system. Their proposed DART model outlines Dialogue, Access, Risk-benefits and Transparency as the foundation for co-creation of value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004:9). In light of this model, the results of the comparison feeds in this study demonstrate how Twitter lends itself to facilitation and support of this process. Dialogue is generated around areas of interest and is captured within

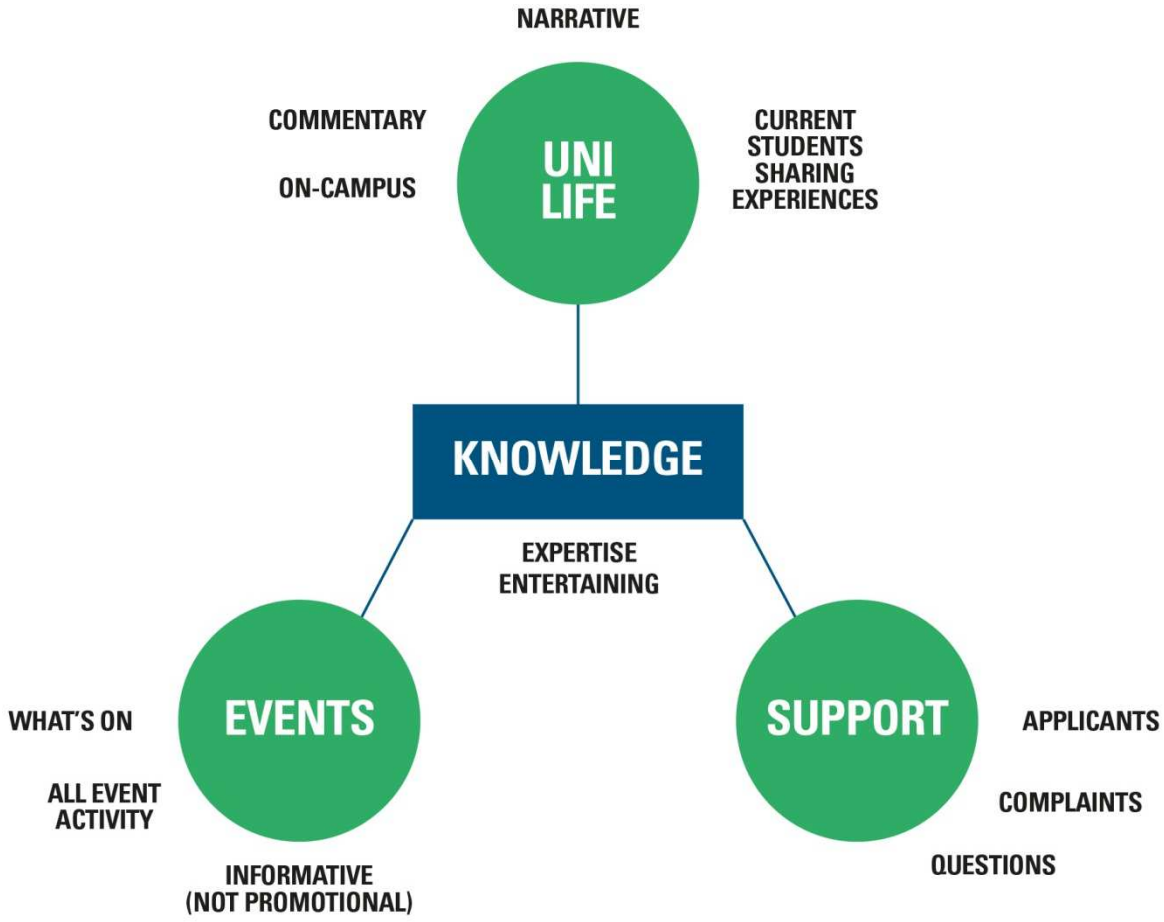
the branding framework created by the tone of voice, language use and structure of the social construct. As a public forum, accessibility is a central feature of the tool, and the instances of the 'insight' code demonstrate a willingness for transparency from these organisations, developing a trust relationship with those interacting. As Prahalad and Ramaswamy emphasise, facilitating these three factors allows for understanding of, "the risk-benefits of a course of action," (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004:9). If universities were to adopt an approach more in line with the comparison feeds, or even further down the line of a co-creation framework, the resulting online conversation could allow for assessment of risk-benefit surrounding the university, the course of action being the resulting choice to invest in the institution and choose to study there.

The university feeds demonstrate little evidence of co-creation of content, leading to the conclusion there is at present no context for co-creation of value through the experience of online interaction. Developing a social context around knowledge sharing, such as in the comparison feeds, would help present the core value of the universities as knowledge or learning, rather than focussing on the 'purchase' of a qualification. If co-creation of knowledge were extended to the online presence of the university, the expectation that self-learning and contribution is a part of the educational process would be reinforced throughout communications. In managing expectations in this way, universities would create the framework for a more positive experience.

A conceptual framework for modern university Twitter feeds

Hatch and Schultz (2010:592) summarise the considerations companies must make in enabling a brand community, stating it is important to, "consider the specific social structure they will use to provide access and set up dialogue with their consumers." (Hatch & Schultz, 2010:592). Drawing on what has been learnt from this investigation, this study concludes with a proposed structure for the use of Twitter by modern universities in creating an online environment that would encourage development of brand communities, support the core value of knowledge and lead to an online marketing logic based on co-creation (Figure 3). The framework is supported by the primary research conducted, encompassing the areas of importance that were evident in the university feeds. The structure is based on the thematic constructs that emerged from the comparison feeds, holding the primary value at the core and surrounding it with the focal areas that Twitter posts should fall within. In this framework however, the four areas would be individual feeds, each representing one core area of the university offer.

Figure 3: A conceptual framework for the use of Twitter by modern universities



The central feed is based on knowledge – a central element of the university. Tweets would be entirely based on sharing interesting, knowledge based content and draw content from the related feeds where relevant. Building this 'hub' of expertise strengthens the core value of the institution as knowledge, developing a reason for interaction from a broad market and reinforcing the notion that higher education is about developing education, not purchasing a degree course. The idea behind the framework is to create a network of related feeds that encourage interaction and focus on value co-creation, leading to long term relationships and an online brand community.

The subject areas for each secondary feed have been selected to encompass the areas most highlighted in the university feed analysis. This allows current students to interact in a social environment online that is specific to their affiliation with the university, whilst also offering prospective students a view of the social side of the institution and insight into the community they can become a part of. In line with service logic and theories surrounding co-creation marketing, the feeds would not target specific audiences with direct push marketing messages, but offer high value content through being a reliable source of information. By creating content specific to the purpose of the feed, each acts as a means to develop networks around shared interest. This approach offers community members the power to choose which information is relevant and interact with the areas that are of most value to them.

Conclusion

This study examines how Twitter can be used as an effective strategic marketing and communications tool for modern universities by analysing the Twitter feeds of three modern universities and comparing them with the Twitter feeds of three comparison organisations.

Through a netnographic investigation and thematic analysis, conclusions were drawn that these universities have adopted Twitter as an internal communications tool, and regularly use the feed as a traditional advertising channel. The comparison feeds offered insight into a more social and entertainment focus, demonstrating increased interaction and as such indicating higher readership of content than the universities are currently achieving.

As it is in the modern universities, Twitter takes the role of an internal push marketing and communications channel. The more comprehensive conclusion is that Twitter demonstrates the potential to be a central tool in developing networks of value co-creation, building not only the brand proposition of the institutions, but also generating possibilities for better understanding of the market, leading to possibilities for co-created course offerings, market-informed facility developments and online research forums and discussion groups.

There are a number of limitations to this study which suggest the need for further investigation. Firstly, time and resource constraints meant only six feeds could be observed for a period of one month. As observed by Lincoln and Guba (1986:75) contextual setting changes over time, thus a longitudinal approach allows for a richer understanding of the themes occurring within interaction. The nature of Twitter is that conversations are captured in real-time and stored as online archives that can be re-visited. It is recommended that further research would explore archival data to gain understanding of the feeds across a full academic year. The universities chosen were all modern universities in similar geographical locations, thus the findings are not generalisable to other categories of universities such as red brick or Russell group institutions. Similarly, conclusions cannot be drawn about universities situated in different parts of the UK or in a global context without further study into these institutions.

This study makes a contribution to the existing literature on the utility of social media for modern universities. It shows that at present modern universities have a limited conception of how Twitter may be used as a marketing tool and that they can learn from how the channel is used by other organisations.

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