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Social Media for International Students Outreach
Lessons from Scandinavia

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Abstract

Social media have been around for over a decade and many institutions have incorporated them into their communication strategies for some time now. However, despite numerous studies on social media in the US universities, there is a wide knowledge gap regarding the use of these communication platforms in the European higher education sphere, with only a handful of studies in the UK and Netherlands. This research project aimed to fill this gap by surveying the use of social media for international student outreach at higher education institutions in Scandinavia. Using a mixed-methods research design and a digital ethnography methodological approach, I collected and analyzed 45 self-completion online questionnaires and five semi-structured interviews with the universities' communications staff. The results provided with a detailed image of the social media practices at the surveyed institutions, with particular emphasis on the channels used, the institutional costs and benefits and best practice advice for similar institutions. This study brings original contributions to the knowledge in two separate fields wed by globalization: social media communications and international higher education. The implications of the findings go beyond the initial research goal and indicate important internal institutional changes in connection with wider global processes and market realities.

Keywords: Europe, globalization, higher education, international students, marketing and recruitment, Scandinavia, social media.

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Introduction

Thesis Inspiration

Given the purpose of this master degree project to study media and communication within the larger context of globalization, it is of great interest to do so by looking at the ways in which internationalized higher education institutions (IHEIs) communicate to and engage with their global audiences. It is thus quite natural for this investigation to be done on social media, the new communication platforms with the widest reach and greatest preference with universities' primary audiences, the students. This scholarly interest is amplified by the author's recent one-year professional experience working as a Marketing and Recruiting Specialist for International Programs at a higher education institution in Chicago.

Research Goal

Social Media for International Students Outreach. Lessons from Scandinavia looked to uncover the ways in which social media are used to market, recruit and engage with international students at HEIs in Scandinavia. A relatively new research methodology based on digital ethnography was used to answer the research questions by surveying communication officers and interviewing external relations staff at select universities to delve into their strategy. The hope was to achieve a better understanding of how selected universities perform in terms of social media presence and engagement and if they can constitute examples of best practices for similar institutions across the European region. This exploratory research project aimed to fill a knowledge gap that exists when it comes to the use of social media in the European university sphere in general and for outreach of international students in particular.

Research Questions

RQ 1: How are social media platforms used by IHEIs?

RQ 1a: Is the social media presence part of internationalization policies and comprehensive communication strategies?

RQ 1b: What are the main social media platforms used?

RQ 1c: Which regional social media platforms are used?

RQ 2: What are the costs and benefits of using social media?

RQ 2a: What resources are needed to maintain the social media presence?

RQ 2b: Are there tangible measurements of the impact of social media efforts?

RQ 2c: What are the advantages and challenges of having a social media presence?

RQ 3: Does the Scandinavian experience provide with models of best practices for similar European institutions?

Motivation

The study focused on surveying the social media state of affairs and practices at Scandinavian universities offering international degree programs and courses. There are various reasons behind this choice of region. As it will be shown in the ‘Existing Research’ chapter, there is a knowledge gap regarding the use of social media for higher education communication in Europe, while research on international student outreach via social media is virtually non-existent. This circumstance provides with rich and exciting research topics. Below I explain the reasons behind the choice of Scandinavian IHEIs as subjects in this study.

Firstly, in terms of populations, these are relatively small countries. Politically, they could be considered small nations, with limited influence on the global stage and thus less prominence in the imaginaire of people worldwide. With smaller higher education system capabilities, these countries are nonetheless home to many research intensive universities with world recognition. Also, even though these universities enjoy a high prestige in the area and in the European region, their institutional brands are virtually unknown to the general public on the global arena. At the same time, a handful (five to be exact) of these HEIs are consistently ranked among the best universities in the world (QS University Rankings, 2014) and have a long tradition of international engagements.

Secondly, these institutions are very interesting study subjects due to the unusual lack of tuition fees for EU/EEA students. Recently some of these countries have introduced tuition fees for non-EU/EEA students. Both of these factors complicate the picture rather drastically, especially in terms of the target audiences these institutions cater to. Unlike their Anglophone counterparts, Scandinavian universities attract a more diverse audience. Whereas the Anglophone countries rely mainly on students from Asia, Swedish universities, for example, attract students from diverse markets, with almost half of international students in Sweden coming from Europe. Thus these institutions cater to diverse audiences and are expected to employ strategies and communication platforms accordingly. Also, Nordic universities are in the top of HEIs hosting ERASMUS participants (EUXTRA, 2010), attracting large numbers of exchange students next to the degree seeking students. At the same time, there is a consistent number of Scandinavian students pursuing studies abroad, but within the region, which makes for a greater mix of student pool diversity.

Thirdly, the rationale for this choice of topic and subjects is to go beyond the ‘usual suspects’ – institutions and countries which are studied more often due to the language spoken and their political influence. It is no doubt easier for countries such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany to both attract international students and constitute subjects of study. This is on one hand, due to their status as traditional hosts of prestigious university education and on the other, due to the prevalence of their languages as international languages of communication. Thus, one of the main criteria that motivated the choice is that the surveyed universities are from non-English/French/German speaking countries. The language of communication is a strong deterrent for students deciding to study abroad and even though the surveyed universities have a wide variety of programs and courses taught in English, they are in a weaker position in the international higher education market.

Overview

The structure of the thesis is as follows. In order to give a context to this research project, I start with a Media Globalization and Higher Education chapter to introduce the debate around these timely topics and how they are connected. The Theoretical Frame chapter establishes the main concepts used in this study from a theoretical and analytical standpoint. The Existing Research chapter gives an overview of the prior studies of social media use in international student engagement and will address the knowledge gap identified by the author. The Methodology chapter explains the research strategy, design and methods used. The Results chapter presents the findings of the study. In the Discussion chapter the implications of the results are discussed, linking them back to the existing research and theoretical considerations, while also discussing the implications of the findings and making some suggestions for further research. Finally, a Conclusions chapter brings this thesis to a close.

Media Globalization and Higher Education

Globalization

Globalization is, perhaps, one of the most contested concepts of our times, with scholars from various disciplines debating its evolution, effects, whether it is a new phenomenon and if it is even actually happening. One possible classification of the globalization theorists is to situate them in three different camps, according to their attitude towards it: from total embrace, to rejection, to a more balanced approach. As Rantanen (Rantanen, 2005, p. 5) puts it: the hyperglobalizers have proclaimed the end of the nation-state, the skeptics think of globalization as of a myth when in fact we are living in an era of heightened national economies and the transformationalists view globalization as a central force driving social political and economic changes that are reshaping the modern societies and the world order. Whichever the case may be, globalization is, arguably, one of the core concepts used by sociologists to explain the postmodern living experience (Devereux, 2003, p. 29).

While definitions and the authors that debate globalization abound, in the context of this thesis, one particular definition is relevant: “globalization refers to the growing interconnectedness of different parts of the world, a process which gives rise to complex forms of interactions and interdependency” (Giddens, 1990, p. 64). This is a vague enough conceptualization, while it gives an idea of the complexities of this highly debated phenomenon.

Media Globalization

Of particular interest to social scientists is the debate around the ‘marriage’ between globalization and media. Scholars from various disciplines have written extensively on the topic, with much interest coming from communication studies and cultural studies. Early authors, such as the widely acknowledged media scholar Marshall McLuhan, talked about the importance of the medium in the dissemination of the message and about ‘global village’ before globalization was even theorized as such

(Rantanen, 2005, p. 25). His exaggerated proclamation, in the second half of the 20th century, of the victory brought about by modern technology and mass media over the distance and space, has been criticized later on by many authors and the criticism still holds when analyzing the so-called ‘democratizing’ impact of new forms of media which appeared long after McLuhan’s death. This aspect will be discussed further in the theoretical chapter of the thesis.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to exhaust the various approaches and critiques of media and globalization; however, it is useful to discuss some prominent aspects. One of the approaches stemming from cultural studies vilifies the role of globalization and its “significant other”, as some call media (Lule, 2012, p. 5), arguing that it is a mere Americanization and commodification of media and culture at a global scale. This approach can be seen throughout the literature with varying names such as cultural or capitalist imperialism of the western civilization (Devereux, 2003, pp. 31-32). A rather moderate approach, favored by some authors (Lawrence, Wartella, Whitney, & Wise, 2006, p. 444) comes from the prominent cultural studies scholar, Stuart Hall. He talks in terms of hybridization rather than homogenization of culture, as a result of globalization. According to him, the commonality of globalization is that every culture is more of a hybrid, shaped by different power struggles and historical contexts (Hall, 1991). In a related debate space, Appadurai argues that seeing globalization, culture and media in terms of homogenization versus heterogenization is rather simplistic. Instead, he argues this is a complex matter given the various ways in which metropolis forces are being indigenized in its peripheries (Appadurai, 2008, p. 32). One other way to look at the globalization of media is through the convergence of old and new media together with organizations and structures (Devereux, 2003, p. 28), which are in constant interaction, and thus, in a constant re-shaping process.

Despite opposing views on globalization, many authors tend to agree that globalization and media are deeply related aspects of the human history: “the flip sides of the same coin” (Appadurai, 2008, p. 3), partners throughout human history

(Lule, 2012, p. 5), each other's enablers (Siochru, 2004, p. 2). This perspective is particularly relevant as modern human interactions become increasingly mediated. During the era of television dominance this was experienced through what McLuhan called electronic mass media, while after the turn of the millennium this is increasingly true of the so-called new or internet media. Rantanen summarized this occurrence as follows: "one of the most salient features of modern communication is that it takes place at a global scale while one of the most salient features of globalization is that it is increasingly mediated" (Rantanen, 2005, p. 8).

Perhaps one of the loudest criticisms of globalization comes from the political realm. In a Marxist key, Chomsky warned rather early on in the debate that media globalization will lead to less diversity and that new media with global reach will profit mainly the few that control them (Chomsky, 1996). As time has passed, more authors denounce the failure of the global village materialization as well due to commercial interests' takeover of educational ones (Croteau, Hoynes, & Milan, 2012, p. 329). Just as disappointed with the unfulfilled promise of new media and its capitalist features is Jack Lule, almost two decades after Chomsky's pessimistic prediction. He invokes the government and corporate power over new media as a weakness which globalization only proliferates (Lule, 2012, p. 114). Lule uses a strong metaphor to assess the way in which McLuhan's global village materialized - "a village of Babel: a dark, divided, unequal and ugly place. It is a village degraded by human vanity, hubris and greed. Instead of overcoming it, people have recreated Babel" (Lule, 2012, pp. 9-10).

This points leads us to the last critique of media globalization discussed in this chapter: the so-called digital divide. This divide refers to the access or lack thereof and thus the ability to reap the benefits of media globalization as it is lauded by its supporters. According to Devereux, the ability to participate in the wired world is not a given, but rather determined by socio-economic factors worldwide (Devereux, 2003, p. 41), thus claiming universal victory of media globalization is an overstatement at least. This aspect has been particularly criticized by authors in the

developing countries, which have been slower to experience media globalization as its perceived in the western world (Kirk & Bolanle, 2011).

Globalization and Higher Education

An area of human activity particularly relevant in the context of globalization is the internationalization of higher education. As the world is shrinking, individuals are more mobile, interconnectedness expands and new media become increasingly accessible, topics such as migration, demographic and social mobility and higher education are more intensely studied and connected to one another. From a pragmatic point of view, it is noteworthy to mention the value of the international higher education market. According to the latest available data, the market value in the top destination countries is as follows in USD: US – 24bln (NAFSA, 2013), UK – 18bln, Australia – 17bln; Canada – 6.5bln (Forbes India, 2011).

Some authors argue that it is easy to see the effects of globalization on higher education by looking at the proliferation and expansion of universities everywhere in the world, especially in the second half of the 20th century. Prior to that, higher education was a prerogative of the elites; currently it represents a whole economic sector that, in many ways, is yet another actor in a free market economy (Brada, 2012, p. 65). It is perhaps a paradox then that the same phenomenon that facilitated the expansion of higher education to its current state is also seen as one of the most important challenges faced today by the universities (Scott, 2000, p. 3). Because of higher education's traditional identification with national culture, globalization could be seen as a threat by many institutions. The impact of communication and technology, coupled with the emergence of global research networks, supplement the list of challenges facing universities that can easily be attributed or related to globalization (Scott, 2000, pp. 5-6).

Internationalization of higher education institutions (HEIs) can be viewed both as caused and facilitated by, but also as an organically developed facet of globalization. It is true today that virtually all large traditional universities around the world are

internationalized to a certain extent, while newer institutions are also catching up to this trend. The morality, ethics and various challenges of higher education internationalization are beyond the scope of this thesis, yet it is important to note the somewhat commercially driven feature of this latest round of university internationalization. While some argue that in the Middle Ages universities might have been more international than today due to lack of border regulations and Latin being a lingua franca (Ennew & Greenway, 2012, p. 1), internationalization, as understood nowadays refers to a large extent to the increasing numbers of student mobility and students taking entire degree courses in countries other than the one of origin. Latest available data shows the number of international students to be at 4.5 million and growing fast (OECD, 2013, p. 304).

One of the most dynamic and interesting regions to study internationalization of higher education is, no doubt, the European Union/EEA, due to its large student population, diversity and multitude of educational institutions and the increased cooperation and harmonization of structures and legislations across the region. The significance of this process was fully recognized and prioritized in 2000, when the Lisbon Strategy set the goal to make the European Union “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustaining growth with more and better jobs, and greater social cohesion by 2010” (Council of the European Union, 2000). To this goal, the EU has employed various initiatives and extensive financial resources. The most successful exchange scheme in the world to date is the ERASMUS Program (European Commission, 2012, p. 3), with its most recent reiteration in the form of the ERASMUS+ and Horizons 2020 funding schemes (European Commission, 2013).

This chapter introduced the debate on the complexities of the globalization processes and the connections between globalization, higher education institutions and media and communication. The following chapter provides the theoretical frame on which the current discussions on social media stand.

Theoretical Frame

This chapter discusses the main concepts with which this project operates from theoretical and analytical standpoints. Although there are few media scholars who have theorized social media, I believe their work to be indispensable in carrying out this research project. Social media together with marketing and branding via social media will be discussed below, as these concepts are the center of this research endeavor. However, given the relative novelty of social media as communication tools, it is useful to begin this theoretical discussion by introducing the concept of diffusion of innovations.

Diffusion of Innovations

Everett M. Rogers is the most prominent scholar of diffusion of innovations and below I briefly introduce some of the most relevant concepts from his theoretical framework. According to the author (Rogers E. M., 2003, p. 5), the diffusion of innovations is a process of social change by which information about an innovation is communicated through certain channels within a time frame between members of a social system, thus the meaning of innovation emerges through a process of social construction. Mass media play a central role in the initial stages of innovation providing with awareness, while interpersonal communication is essential in the later persuasion stage (Rogers, Singhal, & Quinlan, 2008, p. 429). Internet has played an important role in the last few decades by increasing the speed of innovation adoption (Rogers E. M., 2003, p. 18).

In terms of adopters, five categories are distinguished: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards (Rogers E. M., 2003, p. 22). Innovators are a very small minority of a total population of a social system and they have a shorter innovation-decision period, while at the other end, laggards have the longest period of innovation-decision (Rogers E. M., 2003, pp. 214-215). Given that this study will focus on organizations as units of analysis, it is useful to mention that large organization tend to be more innovative than smaller ones (Rogers E. M., 2003, p.

408). Another valuable concept is the so called Needs Paradox, which states that those who need innovation most, adopt it last (Rogers E. M., 2003, pp. 295-296). These concepts are quite useful for the discussion in connection with the empirical findings of this study therefore I will return to them later.

Social Media (Mesia?)

Despite their young age, the fast proliferation of social media has drawn as much enthusiasm as criticism from users, scholars and the business sector. Similarly to how globalization was met with enthusiasm, skepticism and transformational urge, the emergence and rise of social media have caused reactions from one extreme to the other. The reactions and attitudes toward social media can be classified in three categories: enthusiastic adopters, cautious adopters and denialists. Adopters can be found in all disciplines, with most enthusiastic ones coming from the corporate sector. This is not surprising given that companies constantly look for new ways to expand their customer base and increase their profits, especially the numerous new businesses that actually focus on delivering products and services directly related to social media platforms. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to develop this topic further or to analyze the arguments of the denialists thus the following section will discuss mainly how the cautious or should we call them, critical, authors have theorized social media.

An early definition states that “social media refers to the interaction of people and to the creation, sharing, exchanging and commenting of contents in virtual communities and networks” (Ahlqvist, Back, Halonen, & Heinonen, 2008, p. 13). In other words, social media emerge from the interaction of people and communities who share created content on the foundations of the Web 2.0 technology and ideology. There is nothing controversial here. On the contrary, at its inception, social media were met with great enthusiasm.

Perhaps the most positive assessment of new and social media revolutions comes from the author of media convergence theory. Jenkins holds that new and old media

are in a process of convergence resulting in a convergence culture due “to top-down corporate-driven process and bottom-up consumer-driven process” (Jenkins & Deuze, 2008, p. 6). This theory appeared in the context of the new media debate in the mid 2000s, however, he holds on to this view when he discusses social media, as can be found in a later publication (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Some authors go further, suggesting that the convergence of media will eventually lead to digital and internet media encompassing all previously existing media (Holmes, 2009, p. 686). Jenkins emphasizes the complexity of the consumer relationship with popular culture production which in the new media context led to more diversity and the emergence of a participatory culture and rejects the criticism of the power of media owners (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 247-248). The problem with this approach is that it exaggerates what Jenkins calls the ‘democratization of media’, over-evaluating the power of the consumers.

Political and Economic Critiques

On the other side of the spectrum, the critical analysts of social media are preoccupied with a variety of topics. User-owner relationship, exploitation, empowerment, control, profit, privacy, digital culture and sociality are some of the most prominent topics discussed. From a political perspective, the most critical author is Fuchs. He combines critical theory and critical political economy theory, providing perhaps the harshest analysis of social media thus far (Fuchs, 2014, p. 24). His critical socio-political perspective engages with a variety of media authors, creating a Marxist critique of social media (Fuchs, 2014, p. 13). In the user-owner relationship he denounces the exploitation of the user by the social media platforms owners (Fuchs, 2014, p. 14). He connects this dynamic with the capitalist strategy of what he calls ‘outsourcing of work’ to consumers. Given the unpaid nature of this work, the exploitative position of the owners is beyond doubt (Fuchs, 2014, p. 111). The users, certainly benefit from social media by gaining social and cultural capital in Bourdieu’s terms, however, the owners capitalize in high economic gains which users

are not part of (Fuchs, 2014, p. 114). He even goes as far as to call companies such as Google, Apple and Facebook the contemporary ‘slavemasters’, gaining enormous profits by using conflict minerals, talented software engineers and the unpaid labor of users (Fuchs, 2014, p. 121). Despite its alarmist take, Fuchs’s work is certainly eye-opening and very valuable to scholars as much as to average social media users due to its comprehensive and uncompromising analysis. This is not a singular criticism in the literature. On a less aggressive tone, the issue of user labor exploitation by owners is discussed in other works (Ahlqvist, Back, Halonen, & Heinonen, 2008, p. 19), (Miller, 2011), (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013), (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013), (Dijck, 2013).

What Fuchs labels as crass exploitation, van Dijck refers to as the ‘golden eggs of social media’ hatched from the complex relationship between users and owners where users are given social capital while owners gain economic capital (Dijck, 2013, p. 16). In her innovative analytical model, van Dijck dissects the issues of technology, content, users, ownership governance, and business models of the social media. Less politically-engaged, she is equally critical as Fuchs, especially on matters of social media control, privacy and surveillance, standardization of the social practice, and the promised empowerment of users.

Connective Media Ecosystem

Among the most significant ideas proposed by van Dijck is how social media platforms should be called. She suggests the more correct term to be ‘connective media’ (Dijck, 2013, pp. 13-14), (Dijck, 2013, p. 111). While connectedness refers to human interactions, she asserts that social media platforms actually shape contemporary human sociality through the increased use of automated technologies and coding algorithms. She observes that within a span of a decade there has been a shift from networked communication to platformed sociality and from Jenkins’s participatory culture to a connectivity culture (Dijck, 2013, pp. 4-5). Additionally she calls Jenkins’s convergence culture theory, with its positive view on social media

power to enable democratization, overly idealistic. The commercialization of social media proves the early optimism to be overstated (Dijck, 2013, pp. 10-11).

Another valuable scheme from van Dijck's analysis is her classification of social media platforms. Each platform is a micro-system and all of them combined form the ecosystem of connective media. This ecosystem nourishes and is nourished by social and cultural norms that evolve simultaneously, while at the same time each micro-system is sensitive to the changes in other parts of the ecosystem (Dijck, 2013, p. 21). Her taxonomy of social media is as follows: a) social networking sites (SNSs): Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+, Foursquare; b) user generated content (UCG): Youtube, Flickr, MySpace, Wikipedia; c) trading and marketing sites (TMS): Amazon, Ebay, Groupon, Craigslist; d) play and game sites (PGS): Angry Birds, Farmville. While this is a suitable classification, other authors propose slightly different ones. Cheal proposes a functional classification: a) blogs, b) microblogs, c) wikis, d) chat and video conferencing, e) location sharing, f) image and video sharing, g) SNSs, and h) virtual worlds (Cheal, 2012, p. 22). An earlier categorization is as follows: a) collaborative projects, b) blogs, c) content communities, d) SNSs, e) virtual game worlds, f) virtual social worlds (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). These variations in taxonomy are relevant because, despite revealing different conceptualizations by scholars, they also confirm van Dijck's assertion about the frictionless exchangeability between platforms, which blurs the lines separating them (Dijck, 2013, p. 111) and furthers the process of standardization of content (Dijck, 2013, p. 35).

Speaking of functionality, it is useful to also present the functional blocks of social media: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationship, reputation and groups (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011, pp. 243-247). Although they will not be developed in this section, they will be discussed in connection to the results of this study.

Moral Critiques

Among the political, economic and social critiques of social media platforms, van Dijck formulates a somewhat moral critique when she identifies social media principles of operation and values: popularity and the star system borrowed from old media, hierarchical ranking of users' power, neutrality, quick growth, large traffic and fast turnovers (Dijck, 2013, pp. 158-159). Four major players, Facebook, Google, Apple and Amazon, dominate the connectivity ecosystem and their principles of operation facilitate the vertical integration of these media, despite their varying ideological premises (Dijck, 2013, pp. 163-165). The picture that emerges is thus clearly less optimistic and positive as thought during social media infancy and rather problematic on a variety of issues. Possibly the most contentious of these issues is the much aspired empowerment of users. The potential empowerment of social media is a double-edged sword: participation versus exploitation for commercial gain (Dijck, 2013, p. 159). In the debate between control and freedom and between exploitation and empowerment, other authors have also noted the certain ambivalence and ambiguity reported by van Dijck: social media is neither entirely empowering nor controlling, but often both (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013, pp. 3-7). However, these authors identify the entire issue of the empowerment narrative as stemming from the libertarian ideal of American politics, which has a defining influence on the Anglophonic evolution of social media (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013, p. 22).

At the same time, Hinton and Hjorth indicate that addiction and dependency to social media as a much more alarming phenomenon than the limited empowerment they facilitate. The dependency subjects users to control and manipulation in the age of information society, where you are counted, sorted and organized into groups that can be matched with products and processed to generate profits (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013, p. 24).

The commoditization of relationships on social media platforms identified by van Dijck is seen as a commoditization of the users themselves, as Siva Vaidhyathan

puts it: “the users of Google are not consumers of it, but rather its products” (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013, p. 29). In other words, this is the user-as-a-commodity market (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013, p. 29). Along the same lines, Fuchs used Marx’s definition of value to show how the value of the time spent by users on social media translates into more data, which translates into more value, which finally translates into profit for the owners (Fuchs, 2014, p. 115). The issue of time spent on social media platforms, leads back to what Hinton and Hjorth signal as the problematic of the unequal relationship of user dependency on the ecosystem of connectivity. Assessing the real value of social media, van Dijck bluntly rejects the much celebrated value of the user generated content: content in itself has no value, but the combination of content, metadata, behavioral and profiling data makes the resource of connectivity indispensable for the analysts and marketers (Dijck, 2013, p. 162).

Sociological Perspectives

Less political and economical in his analysis, Miller proposes a rather sociological approach to understanding social media and its complexities. The main topics in his discussion are: online identity creation, community, relationships and networks, and presence. The gaps between the online and offline identities narrow in the social media culture. The self representing profile of individuals is created from a mix of online and offline friends and contacts and visual images, suggesting the increased image-oriented character of the social media (Miller, 2011, p. 172). This occurs just as relationships and community building online and offline become more intertwined. Miller points to the inconclusive results of studies assessing the degree to which the increased number of online contacts and interactions decreases the number of contacts and interaction in the offline world. Rather, it has been observed that social media are an integral part in the maintenance of offline contacts (Miller, 2011, p. 196). This has been particularly studied in the context of international students coping in their new environment. A study conducted in the US concluded that international students benefit from using SNSs which facilitate the acquisition of online bridging

capital with their American peers. These findings are significant because they prove a clear benefit of using social media in Putnam's framework of bridging and bonding social capital (Lin, Peng, Kim, Kim, & LaRose, 2012, pp. 433-435).

Subsequently, once connections are established in the SNSs, the crucial challenge for the users is to maintain the presence. Due to the a-spatial context of social media, communication online is essential to the maintenance of contacts and networks. In other words, in a world of constant mobility and change, social presence in physical absence is one of the major challenges of individuals and their networks (Miller, 2011, p. 202). Thus "the overriding point of the networking profile is to reach out and sustain network linkages through the maintenance of a continuous social presence" (Miller, 2011, p. 203).

Miller's continued focus on SNSs identifies the prevalence of the phatic function of communication: SNSs are less about content and more about connections and networks. This form of communication allows maintaining a presence and having this presence acknowledged by others in the network (Miller, 2011, p. 204). The imperative of presence on SNSs can also be expanded in the context of theory of weak ties. SNSs are ideal to maintaining weak and strong ties, by exercising the phatic function. This assertion is supported by a study on American college students' preferences in interpersonal relationships communication, which concluded that SNSs are the preferred medium during the initiation stage of relationships. SNSs were identified as the first medium appropriate for students to meet and interact in the university environment (Yang, Brown, & Braun, 2014, p. 5). These examples suggest the emergence of a digital culture increasingly reliant on the production of phatic intimacy that prioritizes connection and acknowledgement over content and dialogue. SNSs certainly help produce a sense of presence and belonging in world of constant uncertainty (Miller, 2011, p. 205).

These finding are however not unproblematic. From a globalization standpoint, on the other side of the globe, a Japanese sociology blog questions the enthusiasm of spreading social media. The caution it suggests is to assess whether there is true

globalization of social media or if it is simply globalization of Facebook which transports and inserts western values around the world (Moorehead, 2013). These are certainly valid concerns, especially considering the scarcity of research on regional social media, as well as of user and audience almost everywhere outside the western sphere. It will thus be interesting to discuss the findings of this research project with regards to this aspect of regional versus global social media.

Social Media Marketing

The pervasive nature of social media platforms is perhaps most obvious in the business practices, especially affecting the marketing and branding of organizations. These two activities are, certainly intertwined. According to the latest available data, there has been an increase in social customer care, with customers all over the world asking for assistance via social media more frequently (Nielsen, 2012). This shift in behavior can easily be observed when visiting social media pages of higher education institutions, particularly in the applications and admissions periods. At a quick glance on the timeline of these pages, one can find numerous messages and inquiries from students. The surprising fact noticed during such a glance on Lund University's official Facebook page in the January-February 2014 period, is the timely 'student care' the institution provides there. Browsing the page, it was easy to see how quick and responsive the social media managers are in this particular instance. It could then be speculated that universities are increasingly adapting to these new communications tools and practices, much like the corporate world. This is happening in conjunction with word of mouth reaching more audiences, making consumers hyper-informed about their options (Nielsen, 2012). It is thus not surprising that HEIs are responsive to new market practices and are behaving more like commercial enterprises do.

One possible approach to theorizing about social media marketing is game theory. This theory essentially holds that when two self interested parties with opposing interests cannot achieve their goals by acting unilaterally, they will play by the rules of the game to a certain extent (Anderson, 2010, p. 7). In the case of higher education

marketing, the two parties are, of course, the institution's marketers and the prospective students. Anderson proposes an evolutionary approach to social media marketing (SMM), showing that it has not appeared over night but rather through the convergence of various forces in the previous few decades. The way we see SMM today is however as a tectonic shift in the landscape (Anderson, 2010, pp. 7-8). The shift is largely due to the changes in the dynamic of customer versus marketer. SMM seriously undermines and questions traditional marketing, with increased power shifts towards the customers. The interesting evolution here is that advertising, which acted as the middle man between marketer and consumer is becoming less relevant, thus making the game to be played between two actors only. The game at this moment is radically in favor of the consumer (Anderson, 2010, pp. 40-41). According to Anderson, this is the first time when marketers and consumers can truly engage in collaboration in shaping the identity of the brands due to the increasingly decentralized set of networked perceptions and feedback mechanisms (Anderson, 2010, p. 141). Does this sound overly optimistic? Does it remind of similar earlier accounts of branding, new media, and recently social media? I connect these ideas with the discussions in the branding literature.

Branding

The debate on the power and role of branding is certainly best entertained by two equally renowned authors. On one side, Naomi Klein started this debate with a very critical analysis from social and political perspectives and has come close to demonizing the corporations and their powerful brands in the way they developed throughout the 90s of the last century. In response, the practitioner, Wally Olins, completely rejects Klein's claims. His economical perspective emphasizes the all-mighty customer/consumer's power over the life and death of brands. Klein's assertion is that brands' power over the customers comes from the emotional ties the latter make with these brands and that consumers perceive brands more as an experience than as products alone (Klein, 2005, p. 20). This feature of brands is

perhaps among the most important ones for a HEI: they are not selling physical products or commodities, but career and life choices, experience and lifestyle. Why is branding relevant in international higher education? Because, like any other activity performed by a university, branding is just as competitive since these institutions have to compete with each other on a global scale for highly informed and to an extent, empowered, audience. Essentially, Klein's condemnation of brands is that they are artificial and fluff things that make people purchase products by making them buy into the stories, images and values these brands project. The weakness in her account is that, though rightfully critical, she does not really find any positive applications to brands and Olins compensates for that.

Olins's portrayal of the all-mighty customer (Olins, 2003, p. 9) is clearly an exaggeration or at least it was at the time of writing in early 2000s and based on the examples of brands formed in the 90s. The emergence of social media platforms has certainly changed the landscape, as Anderson reports (Anderson, 2010, pp. 60-62), but it remains to be seen if mass social media audiences are actually as empowered as these authors suggest.

As Olins insists, "the brand itself is neither good nor bad; it is how we use it that makes it significant" (Olins, 2003, p. 11). This leads us to the connection between brand identity and personal identity. As both Klein and Olins show, association with brands are increasingly reflected in individual's projection of their own identity. "A brand represents clarity, consistency, membership and this is what enables humans to define themselves in today's world. Brands therefore represent identity" (Olins, 2003, p. 27). In the HEI context this is certainly easy to find, especially in the US where students proudly wear clothes with the logo of the prestigious universities they attend and alumni wearing university-branded clothing (t-shirts, sweatshirts, caps, etc) from graduation on. This practice is certainly as related to identity as it is with a status and an emotional connection with one's alma mater. This practice however is nearly inexistent in Europe and it would be very interesting to look into why that is the case in another research project, though.

Among Olins's ode-like discourse about brands and corporations, a few concepts emerge which are relevant for internationalized HEIs. Country of origin (COO) can be of tremendous help to a brand due to the affiliations with particular national features. "The best and most successful brands can capitalize on their product origins and national characteristics, expressing wide range of emotions. They have great emotional content and inspire loyalty" (Olins, 2003, p. 19). This is true of prestigious American and English universities, but how do other nations' higher education systems, such as the Scandinavian, fare in this regard? Hopefully some clarification will emerge from this research project. Other authors concur with Olins in this regard, pointing out that COO only applies to some select products and services (Kampf & Lindberg-Repo, 2011, p. 10). HEIs are precisely in the list of select brands which would greatly benefit from associating their identity with their countries of origin.

This in turn leads to an evaluation of a country's own branding. What Olins calls nation branding is essential to a successful affiliation of a university brand with its COO. Successful nation branding and successful brands associated with powerful COO are in a rather mutually beneficial relationship. A successful brand is a national asset (Olins, 2003, p. 169), just as a successful nation brand is advantageous to a brand, especially in higher education. For small and less known countries from Scandinavia this is thus a double challenge which has to be tackled not only from the HEI side individually, but also collectively, at the national level.

Olins addresses the negative connotation the concept of branding has, especially for the higher education and NGO sectors, indicating that reputation management is probably more appropriate to use (Olins, 2003, p. 209). What Olins calls the 'third sector' (Olins, 2003, p. 245), is the ultimate frontier for brands. Although university reputation changes slowly, it is increasingly important to manage a HEI brand. It is perhaps not surprising that this most enthusiastic advocate of brands suggests that universities and non-profits will inevitably join the commercial enterprises in the business of seducing their audiences. According to Olins, this is not only necessary, but preferable because these organizations will improve and become more influential

by raising their brands (Olins, 2003, p. 247). Other authors seem to concur. While acknowledging that HEI branding is very different from the commercial sector, its benefits are undeniable: “an education brand is often symbolic to an institution’s academic reputation and the most significant benefit of branding is the focus it brings to an institution” (Gupta & Singh, 2010, pp. 46-47).

This section discussed the changes in the landscape and power relations between organizations and their audiences brought about by the emergence of social media platforms. Branding, marketing, social media and audiences’ position are undergoing significant shifts. It is perhaps best to approach this from a pragmatic position rather a partisan one, or as Anderson puts it: “social media is not a panacea for the fractures between brand goals and marketing vehicles. It is both an opportunity and threat for brands, and the outcome depends on how consumers exercise their new found authority in the branding arena and how marketers cultivate those brand relationships” (Anderson, 2010, p. 148).

Existing Research

The previous chapter discussed the theoretical concepts on which this project is built. This chapter explores the existing research into the applications of social media for higher education communications. Although social media platforms have been around for a decade, they are still under-researched within the media studies field. Moreover, unlike businesses and public institutions, universities appear to be slower in their adoption of these new communication channels (Peruta, Ryan, & Engelsman, 2013, p. 11). It is thus not surprising that the research in this area is scarce. However, with the mass adoption of popular social media platforms and social networking sites, especially in the last five years, higher education institutions are catching up with the trend and are increasing their social media presence.

The review of existing research on social media use in higher education has revealed some interesting findings, which will be summarized below. From source and interest standpoints, existing research can be classified first as stemming from media and education scholars, as well as institutional studies, and second as originating from the business and professional arenas. Given the massive audiences social media reach, it is not surprising they have become of tremendous interest to commercial organizations almost overnight.

Scholarly Research and Reports

Earliest research into the use of social media in higher education dates back to 2008, when US universities were surveyed on the use of such popular emerging platforms as Facebook, Youtube and Twitter (Kowalik, 2011, pp. 214-215). The available research spans over only five years and despite the rapid development of these media, from the attempt performed to find these studies, it is quite clear that scholars are still to catch up with studying his timely phenomenon.

However, over 30 interesting studies were found, focusing on various aspects of social media use in higher education. Some of the most investigated topics are: student use, conduct and behavior on social media in general (Towner & Munoz,

2011) and in university context in particular (McEwan, 2011), (Yang, Brown, & Braun, 2014) institutional presence and use (Merrill, 2011), (Griffiths & Wall, 2011), faculty adoption of social media for teaching (Tandros, 2011) and professional purposes (Retta, 2012), (Moran, Seaman, & Tinti-Kane, 2012), (Chamberlain & Lehman, 2011), student recruitment (Kuzma & Wright, 2013), (Pultz, 2013), (Constantinides & Stagno, 2013) and alumni engagement (Hussey, 2011), (Guhr, 2013), and platform-specific studies (McEwan, 2011), (Choudaha, Orosz, & Chang, 2012), (Uiversity Trends Report, 2013), (Uiversity Trends Report, 2013). As it can be observed from the publication dates, most studies were done in the last three years; this suggests an increased interest both from scholars and institutions themselves to study the opportunities, challenges and impact of social media on higher education.

The more prominent and relevant studies for the purpose of this thesis will be briefly discussed below. A study conducted across three regions and nine English-speaking countries on the social media use by universities confirmed the dominance of Facebook as preferred platform (Kuzma & Wright, 2013). Although this study is an important addition to the previous existing research focused only on the US and the western world, by adding three countries from non-western regions, it only complements the picture with one of the many missing pieces.

Perhaps one of the most prominent studies is the one conducted by Nicolle Merrill. The merits of her study are twofold: a comprehensive survey on the use of social media for recruitment by US international education professionals and the proposal and implementation of a new research method, called digital ethnography (Merrill, 2011). The essence of this methodology is that it uses exclusively online channels to study virtual communities and phenomena (Merrill, 2011, pp. 28-29). Surveys, interviews and observations are performed in social media only to obtain an accurate view of the peculiar interaction occurring in this environment. The main limit of this study is, of course, the US-focus since the results complement prior knowledge in the same geographical area, leaving out the rest of the world, which is understudied as is.

Addressing this knowledge gap in the European context is the study of social media impact on university choice decision in Netherlands (Constantinides & Stagno, 2013). This seminal research confirms that European universities have little presence in social media and those that do, do so for educational purposes (Constantinides & Stagno, 2013, pp. 48-49). The results of this study indicate that while being beneficial to the overall information of prospective students, social media by no means replace the institutional websites and other traditional recruitment tools (Constantinides & Stagno, 2013, p. 47). Social media are thus complements to the more established recruitment tactics. This conclusion is supported by other writings (Kowalik, 2011, pp. 215-216) which emphasize the institutional website as the main marketing and recruitment tool, while social media are seen as efficient conduits to the official website.

Social media are being recognized ever more as marketing and recruitment tools both by scholars and professionals, however, one of the main criticisms in the literature is that most universities lack any coherent strategy to use them (Constantinides & Stagno, 2013, pp. 48-49), (Becker & Kolster, 2012). This is further confirmed in an internal communications document retrieved from Lund University's website which admits to lacking a social media strategy, while some university entities are using them to some extent and the leadership is actually encouraging its staff to use them more (Lund University Corporate Communications, 2010, pp. 1, 6). Given that this document dates back to 2010, it is expected that a strategy be present at the time when this research project will also include Lund.

Another contentious issue emerging from the research literature is the lack of proper impact measurement and evaluation of social media effectiveness for student outreach. Supporting the Dutch study mentioned above (Constantinides & Stagno, 2013, p. 42), the highly visible professionals in the field admit that "there is a serious lack of proven practices on what works and what does not. Social media is cost-effective and easy to start, but building momentum and measuring the cost of human resources and time can be challenging" (Choudaha, 2013, p. 11).

Professional Perspectives

Commercially-originated accounts of the miracles performed by social media abound on the internet, which posed a real challenge when selecting relevant material from the virtually endless result hits provided by the search engines. One has to be very skeptical and careful when assessing the reliability and relevance of such materials, considering these platforms are so new and under-researched, constantly evolving and new ones appearing every day. Countless websites and blogs can be found that preach the value of social media in marketing, branding and communications in general and higher education in particular while offering their ‘professional and experienced’ services to those seeking social media enlightenment. Precisely because of that, this section will briefly mention a handful of sources pertinent to the higher education field.

A survey of marketing professionals in the UK (Shaw, 2013) showed that they do not see social media an answer to recruitment challenges, while on the other side; students perceived that universities do not exploit the full potential of their social media for recruitment purposes. This contradiction shows the current need for assessing and adjusting of marketing imperatives with social media opportunities. Another study from the UK (Head, 2013) points that well established universities perform better than the majority in social media presence and the author insists that universities do not take advantage of the opportunities available to them.

This situation is perhaps explained by the lack of social media strategy at these institutions. Professionals in the field tend to agree with the results discussed above by scholarly research in that the major challenge of university outreach of international students is the lack of a coherent social media strategy. As several studies have shown (Meacham, 2012), (Vineburgh, 2013), in most cases university staff do not have a strategy on social media, which is also related to the fact that staff lack training. Additionally, the issue of impact measurement is of major concern (Taza, 2013), (Meacham, 2012).

Worth mentioning are also two new developments in international student recruiting. First is the use of student competitions in specific target countries, as already practiced by some Swedish universities in the last few years (Stockholm University, 2012). Second is the emergence of career-oriented platform LinkedIn for marketing and recruitment purposes, as a result of the newly introduced University Pages (Sears, 2013). It remains to be seen how these emergent platforms gain traction in the coming years.

Knowledge Gap

Having reviewed the research literature, various knowledge gaps have emerged, as it became clear that many aspects of international student recruitment, particularly in Europe, remain largely virgin territories. The few existent studies were done in Western Europe but neither of them expressly addressed the issue of international students. My hope is that this research project will bring a substantial contribution in the study of social media outreach for international students, through the survey of selected universities. The particular value of this project is that it focuses on the non-English speaking countries, which are not traditionally perceived as top destinations and whose universities do not have globally known brands. Consequently, they face increased challenges in marketing and recruitment of international students due to their rather marginal position and for reasons explained earlier in the motivation section. Additionally, although these countries do not charge EU citizens tuition fees, two of them recently introduced quite high fees for the non-EU students. This latest development is thus expected to further amplify the challenges of communications and marketing professionals. This aspect will also be explored in the analysis chapter.

Methodology

Research Strategy and Design

The research strategy of this project falls in between quantitative and qualitative. While most of the research questions posed can be answered through quantitative methods, it would be useful to better understand the issue at hand by supporting the quantitative findings with some qualitative data. A somewhat new strategy, using mixed-methods has become more popular within social sciences in the last few decades (Bryman, 2008, p. 603). Apart from providing better understanding of the studied phenomenon, a mixed methods approach offers the potential to increase confidence in the findings (Bryman, 2008, p. 624). This is certainly not a negligible potential benefit considering the exploratory nature of this project.

In order to carry out the research strategy, multiple cases (universities) have been surveyed, thus the most suitable design is what Bryman calls 'cross-sectional research design' (Bryman, 2008, p. 44). This involves the collection of data on more than one case at a single point in time. The resulted body of quantitative data was then examined to detect patterns of association (Bryman, 2008, p. 44).

Methods

The two methods used in this project are online self-completion questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The self completion questionnaire is the method intended to collect the quantitative data. With this method, the surveyed participants, in our case the international education staff of the universities, have completed the answers for the designed list of questions themselves. The advantages of this method are: low cost of administration, short time frame, lack of interviewer effects and variability and convenience for the respondents. There are some disadvantages to using this method, including limited number of questions, inability to collect additional data, risk of missing data and lower response rates (Bryman, 2008, pp. 218-219).

The semi-structured interview is a qualitative method which allows greater flexibility in data gathering (Bryman, 2008, p. 436). This method was most suitable for this project because it increased the ability to gain insights into how university staff, from directors to marketing specialists, view social media, their benefits, and drawbacks. Additionally, given the limitations mentioned above about the self-administered questionnaire, I believe the interviews helped further explore some of the issues emerged from the initial survey results.

The new but essential element at the foundation of the methodology in this study is what some scholars have called ‘digital ethnography’. Also referred to as ethnography of the internet or virtual ethnography (Bryman, 2008, pp. 629-636), digital ethnography essentially involves traditional ethnographical methods, but with data being collected via the internet and potentially with the internet as object of study. As Merrill showed in her study, digital ethnography is an emergent approach in the analysis of virtual communities that can be successfully used to understand usage patterns and behaviors on social media platforms (Merrill, 2011, p. 28). This methodology has been used successfully before in business settings, while in social sciences research, this method is not yet ‘mainstream’ (Merrill, 2011, p. 30).

Murthy is a strong advocate for mainstreaming the use of digital ethnography within social sciences, pointing to the time and cost effectiveness of online questionnaires for example (Murthy, 2008, p. 842). By suggesting a variety of online services available for conducting such digital ethnographic research, Murthy indeed makes the case for the suitability and convenience of this approach, particularly in studies that attempt to reach international participants (Murthy, 2008, pp. 844-845). Hine concurs with this reasoning, pointing to the richness and diversity of the populations that can be reached through the use of new media technologies (Hine, 2005, p. 1).

The self-administered questionnaire was designed and administered through the online survey service Survey Monkey. Despite the relative novelty of using such digital instruments, there are some advantages to this method: low costs, fast response, more attractive and flexible formats, no geographical constraints, and better

responses to open-ended questions. At the same time, some disadvantages include: lack of motivation of the respondents, confidentiality concerns and the possibility of multiple replies (Bryman, 2008, p. 653). The interviews were conducted in person and via Skype. The sessions were recorded with the interviewees' permission and were transcribed afterwards by me.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was most suitable for this study because it is a non-probability form of sampling, where the researcher samples cases in a strategic way so as to make them relevant to the research questions posed (Bryman, 2008, pp. 415-416). This sampling form is mostly used in qualitative ethnographical studies and was chosen because, to a certain degree, this project looks to understand the HEIs communicators in their environment.

In order to compile a complete list of target universities, I searched for institutions with English-taught courses in each country, resulting in a total number of 110 HEIs. I then performed a search through their websites and looked for their social media profiles. While all 110 universities have a section of their websites dedicated to international students, only 51 (46%) have social media profiles dedicated to international audiences and 27 (25%) of them publish content in both English and the local language on their official pages, which results in a mixed social media profile. This leaves an approximate 29% of them either with monolingual national profiles or limited English language content, which was difficult to identify from scanning their profiles and pages. Thus I considered these 78 institutions or 71% of the total initially identified as the most relevant for the survey.

This consideration is supported by the statistics on enrolled students, which typically are distributed in large proportions among the biggest institutions in each country. According to various official documents, usually, a handful of top universities attract the largest chunk of the international student population, while the rest are spread in smaller numbers across all universities in each national system. In 2011/2012, for

example, over 30% of all international students in Sweden were enrolled at Lund, Uppsala and KTH (Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2013, p. 39). Thus our assumption was that of the total 110 HEIs teaching in English, most relevant would probably be limited to about a third of the total number of institutions.

The strategy needed to insure the collection of data required pro-active and time-intensive targeting of the respondents. A database was created with contacts from the selected HEIs. Official social media profiles and websites of universities were scanned for the most appropriate channel to place the questionnaire on the screens of the communications specialists, including: emailing, messaging and posting inquiries on the Facebook fan pages, and tweeting. This pro-active approach was necessary due to the time restraints imposed on this project. By targeting the correct individuals, I hoped to increase the response rate of the survey.

Delimitations

The scope of this study is limited to the HEIs located in Scandinavia, including: Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland and excluding Iceland. The survey link was available for three weeks from March 10 to March 31, 2014. The interviews were conducted during March 12 to March 28, 2014. This was done to insure a timely and relevant data gathering process.

Results and Analysis

General remarks

Data gathering was performed using simultaneously both research methods throughout the month of March 2014. The main data gathering tool, the self-administered questionnaire, contained 12 close-ended mandatory questions with space for comments, 5 open-ended questions, and last 3 non-mandatory questions asked for the institution's identity, respondents' contact information and final remarks. In order to track the interest in the questionnaire, I used the URL shortener service Bitly. This web service converts long URL links into shorter ones. Additionally, it allows tracking the number of clicks, the referrers and their country of origin and has proven useful in following the progress of the data gathering.¹

The questionnaire was sent to the targeted staff on March 10 via email, Facebook message or Twitter tweet. A reminder was sent on March 17 via the same channels and a last reminder on March 24. The link was accessed 98 times in total at the end of the allotted period. The first and second rounds resulted in most responses collected. The total number of collected responses was 45 completed questionnaires of a total target population of 78 IHEIs, resulting in a 58% response rate. Of the 45 institutions, 27 self-identified in the questionnaire by answering one of the open and non-mandatory questions which asked for the name of the institution. Throughout the process of collecting the questionnaire responses, I contacted the staff who provided their contact information and asked for an interview. Five interviews were conducted in total: two of them in person; other three were conducted via Skype. One interviewee was from a Norwegian institution and the other four were from Swedish universities. Interviews helped explain and expand on the data gathered by the questionnaire while also providing extensive institutional context information.

¹ <https://bitly.com/>

Research Question 1: How are social media platforms used?

The first operational question of the Research Question 1, RQ 1a, asked: Is the social media presence part of internationalization policies and comprehensive communication strategies? The answer is yes and no. 78% of the IHEIs have an internationalization policy and 62% of them have a marketing and recruiting strategy for international students. It is useful to remind at this point that two of the surveyed countries, Norway and Finland still provide free higher education regardless of the country of origin, while Sweden and Denmark charge tuition fees from the non-EU/EEA students. As it emerged from interviews, for the IHEIs in countries still providing tuition-free studies, marketing and recruiting of international students is not a great challenge.

Context and background data gathered from the interviews provides some clarification. The staff from Sweden pointed out that prior to the introduction of tuition fees in 2011, marketing was an unknown concept in the Swedish university administration and the adjustment to the new policy entailed changes at various levels within the organization: “The first thing that was a challenge was internally because no one in the university had really thought about marketing as a concept before and it has traditionally been a dirty word. So that required to try to instigate a new mindset in the university.” It is possible then to suggest that these percentages are due to respondents from the two countries which do not charge tuition fees and have not been confronted with the challenge of having to “sell” their education to international audiences. This might also be in line with previous study results (Constantinides & Stagno, 2013, pp. 48-49), (Becker & Kolster, 2012), which found a lack of a coherent strategy for the use of social media for higher education marketing in Europe.

The role of social media platforms in the overall marketing and recruiting efforts varies, as can be seen in the chart below. Social media platforms play a central role in student recruiting for only 24% of the respondents, while the vast majority, over 62%, use it as a complementary tool to other more prominent or traditional methods. This

confirms previous studies which found social media to be complementary to the more established recruitment tools (Constantinides & Stagno, 2013, p. 47).

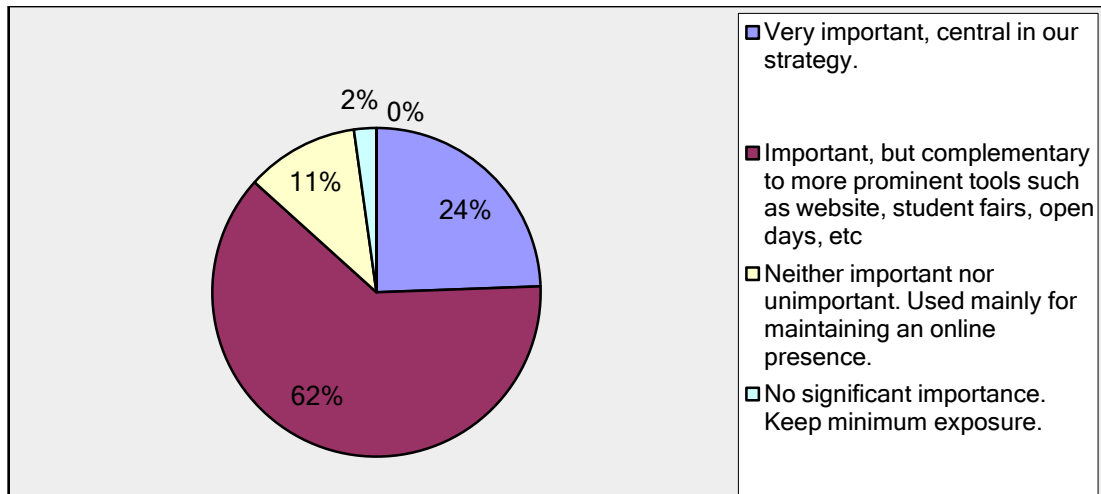


Figure 1. The role of social media in marketing and recruiting

RQ 1b: What are the main social media platforms used?

It is, perhaps, no surprise that Facebook dominates all the other social media platforms. With 100% of institutions present on Facebook, this study confirmed numerous previous reports (Kuzma & Wright, 2013), which found Facebook to be the number one social media channel. Its ubiquity is no longer noteworthy. YouTube came in second with 73% and LinkedIn placed third with 67%. Twitter is used by almost 64% and Instagram is used by over 51%. These five platforms are the most popular. At the lower end of the spectrum were found: Flickr with over 18%, Google+ with 13% and Pinterest with a little over 2%. Additionally there were one mention each of Vimeo and Snapchat in the comments section of the questionnaire.

This image is both surprising and not. On the one hand, we see that older platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have strengthened their position in the social media ecosystem. On the other hand we see new comers such as LinkedIn and Instagram have gained more ground, the latter at the expense of the older Flickr. YouTube's second position is somewhat expected. This content sharing platform is relatively convenient and easy to use and is one of the most accessed websites in the

world. Any institution benefits from having even one English language presentation video, despite not having a dedicated social media profile for its international audiences.

The rise of LinkedIn to the third position is the surprise in this part of the study. Introduced less than a year ago (Allen, 2013), University Pages have been adopted very quickly by two thirds of the IHEIs. Apart from their natural appeal for alumni engagement activities, the new pages have a variety of functions that make them very suitable for prospective students as well. As LinkedIn becomes more popular as a platform, more students are using it, even during their undergraduate cycle. Given that the vast majority of international student recruitment in the Scandinavian region is focused on master students, it makes sense for universities to funnel more marketing efforts on this social media platform because their prospective students are expected to be there too. This finding also confirms one of the emerging trends we discussed in the literature review section (Sears, 2013), where the author argued for the increased relevance of LinkedIn for marketing and recruitment purposes.

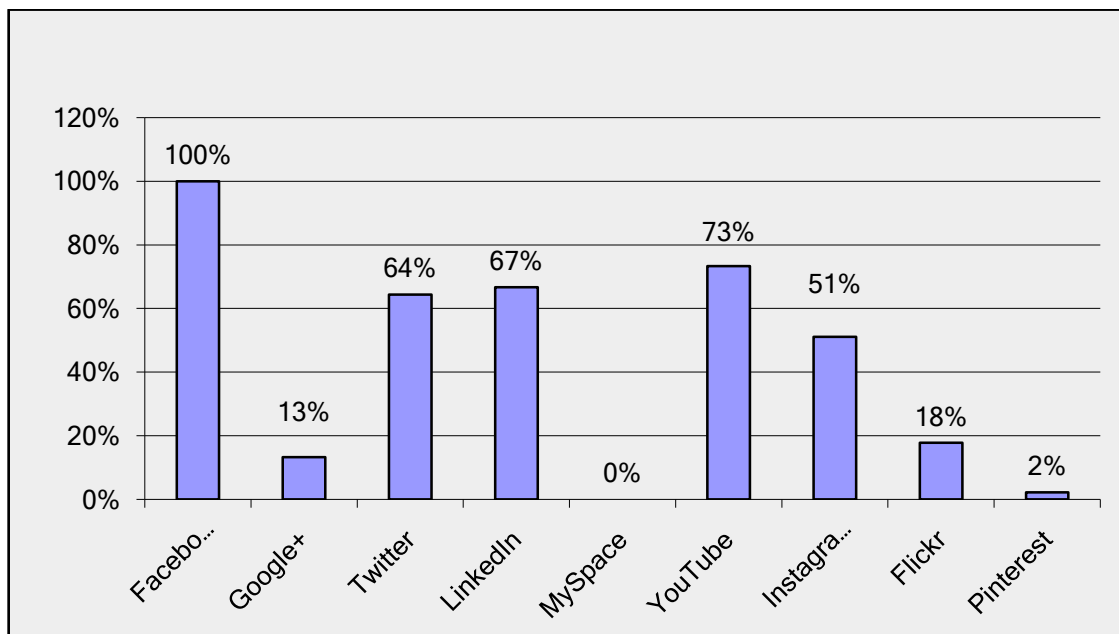


Figure 2. Social media platforms used

RQ 1c: Which regional social media platforms are used?

When it comes to regional social media, the picture is more complicated. 58% of the institutions do not have profiles on any non-western social media platforms, 27% are present on Sina Weibo, over 24% on Renren, over 18% on Youku, 7% on V Kontakte, while a little over 2% are present on Badoo, Qzone and Orkut. The prevalence of Chinese language channels indicates a continued focus of marketing and recruitment on this market. However, the high percentage of institutions that do not have any presence on these forums indicates that many universities are still catching up to the trends and do not have the will or the capacity to engage on a truly global scale with their audiences. It is well-known that Chinese and Indian markets generate the most international students in virtually all western destination countries. However, as I discuss below, the time and manpower resources available to IHEIs are limited. Additionally, having a presence on any of the most popular regional platforms requires expertise that perhaps most universities do not possess at the moment.

Two of the Swedish universities whose staff I interviewed are examples of institutions that have the will and resources to engage on the regional social media platforms. One of these institutions has one staff member that manages the social media platforms in the Chinese sphere with the aid of a Chinese student currently enrolled at the university. This staff member is fluent in the language and has a vast experience of working in the region. The second institution has a more interesting case. They hired one of their former master students initially in a project to develop their presence in China. Since then, this person has started her own company and provides social media services to this and other universities. This example illustrates a viable solution for those universities who do not have in-house manpower to engage with audiences such as the Chinese prospective students, should such need arise more prominently. Another example emerged from the questionnaire applies to institutions who have local recruiting agents. One of the respondents indicated that, indeed, while they do not have social media profiles on regional platforms, their local agents use social media to market and recruit students.

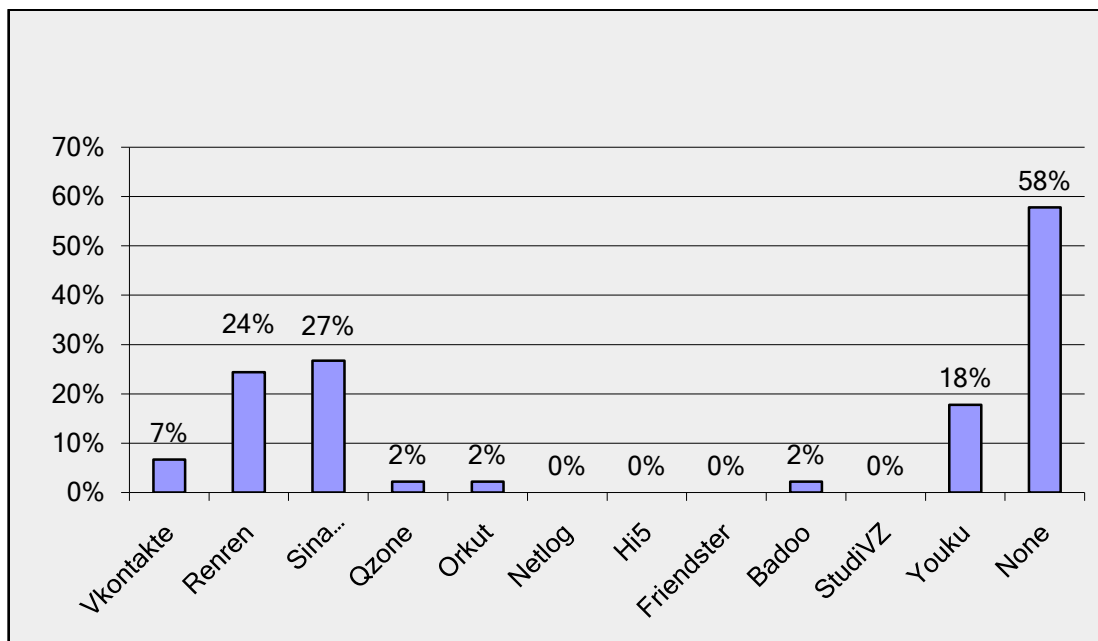


Figure 3. Regional social media channels used

In addition to providing a picture of the current social media ecosystem at the Scandinavian universities, this study also revealed some of the trends in higher education marketing communication. As I discussed above, LinkedIn is in the top three social media platforms. It is very likely to predict that universities will increase their presence on the platform even further. Interviewees especially emphasized the increasing attention to LinkedIn. Several of them mentioned that despite having a profile and presence of this platform, they have not used it to its full capacity and that it is something they are currently exploring in the “pipeline”: “We can do a lot more on LinkedIn and that’s something we are looking into now”.

Another innovative tool used especially by some Swedish universities are the student competitions, which I briefly mentioned in the literature review section as a possible trend. One of the institutions is indeed looking at increasing the number of such competitions. Their newest example is a project which links a master program offered by the institution with the Corporate Social Responsibility department of a major Swedish company, the results of which will be applied in a developing country, from where these master students are recruited. Such original projects are certainly very

attractive for perspective students due to their tridimensional focus on study, industry connection and development project in their country of origin. It is an interesting example to follow.

Another interesting fact the study revealed is that many institutions admit to still be playing catch up to the ever-growing social media sphere, thus they do not necessarily look to explore new channels, but rather work on improving their engagement on the ones they currently use. Of the questionnaire respondents, 18 indicated they are exploring at least one new platform. The most mentioned ones are as follows: Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Google+, Sina Weibo, Twitter, Pinterest, Wechat, and Renren. This in turn suggests that already strong presences on LinkedIn and Instagram will further solidify, while profiles on the emergent platforms such as Google+, Snapchat, and the Chinese platforms will continue to increase. The hottest new addition to the higher education social media communications could become Snapchat, as it has been recently reported to have grown in usage by college officials in the US (Waxman, 2014).

While many HEIs are still catching up, some are critically assessing their results so far: “We’ve been behind in social media even though we’ve been very successful”. Several of them have also indicated that they are “very conscious we need to think about the next step”. It is somewhat amusing to see that while so many institutions are far from mastering social media, some are already exploring moving into new platforms and looking for “the next big thing”. Interestingly enough, one of the interviewees explained that their recruiting strategy defines the methods they use to reach certain communication goals, not necessarily specific platforms: “Our communication goals are not tied to any specific channel so we can easily change when Facebook disappears, for example, which it no doubt will eventually.” I will pick up this point later, when I discuss the challenges and threats that social media pose for IHEIs.

Looking at the main motivations for engaging in social media outreach is a good way to understand the ways in which higher education communications professionals

understand the value of social media and gives a direct insight into their communication goals. The Figure 4 presents the answers choices to a question which asked for the top reasons social media are used in international outreach and/or recruiting. Some of the most cited reasons are: reaching and conversing with prospective students, raising the institutional brand, increasing traffic to the website, promoting events, and the low costs involved. Other reasons invoked included: conversion of admitted students into enrolled students, gathering people around shared interests and topics, and offering good services and great brand experience. While this snapshot it useful at this stage of the analysis, it is related to other equally important aspects, therefore I will come back to this aspect in when I discuss the advantages and challenges social media pose for higher education institutions and, later, in the best practices section.

Answer Choices	Responses
Reach prospective students	86.7%
The low cost of these channels	46.7%
Start conversations with prospective students	57.8%
Create an online university community	26.7%
Embrace new communication tools	31.1%
Reach a wider/more diverse target audience	28.9%
Promote upcoming events and activities	40.0%
Create and increase your university brand awareness	75.6%
Increase traffic to your university website	64.4%
Everyone else is doing it, we cannot stay behind.	6.7%

Figure 4. Top reasons for using social media

Research Question 2: What are the costs and benefits of using social media?

RQ 2a: What resources are needed to maintain the social media presence?

The resources needed to maintain the social media presence mainly revolve around staff, time, and money. The amount of time spent on maintaining social media

fluctuates greatly depending on the application cycle: busiest periods are November-January and March-April which are the applications and admissions periods, respectively. Almost one third (29%) of institutions spend between 5-10 hours weekly on social media; while 20% indicated they spend over 10 hours. This means almost 50% of the universities spend considerable time resources to manage their social media presence. These numbers are however conservative estimates, as some have indicated in their comments that “it’s probably more than 20 hours but who’s counting?”

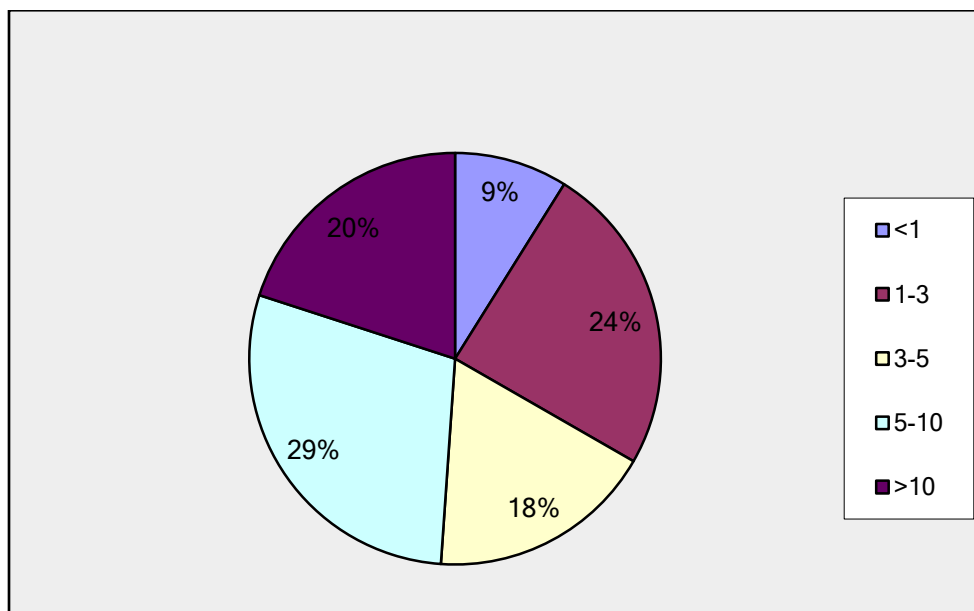


Figure 5. Hours dedicated weekly to social media management

Social media are managed by relatively small teams, as 78% of respondents indicated their team to be formed of 1-3 people. Another 18% indicated between 3-5 people are engaged in social media presence, while the remaining indicated having more than 5 persons involved. It is also interesting to see which organizational department is responsible for social media outreach: Communications 80%, International Office 36%, Marketing 33%, and External Relations 13%. The organizational structure varies, as does the shared responsibility for this task.

The prevalence of smaller teams has various explanations: the scope of the HEI, time and manpower resources available. At one of the institutions the social media team was built gradually, as the university increased its engagement over time and hired more staff to meet the needs. Currently 5 staff members work on social media tasks at this university. Another institution employs 2.5 persons for social media, two of them working mainly on administering the Facebook page and the half focusing on Twitter. During the interview, the communications specialist explained “we’re very control freakish so it’s just the two of us”. This team of two works closely together in the same office and they juggle the various tasks as they come along without any formal division of labor, structured plan of activities or pre-established types of answers.

The administrators of the social media profiles have to be highly knowledgeable because of the level of data with which such a profile operates. When asked about the possibility of hiring an intern to help manage that, the staff emphasized the need for a high level of expertise: “We can never have a casual person. It has to be someone who has the knowledge. That reflects the sort of level of service we are trying to give.” A similar caution was expressed by another institution’s staff who explained that each new member of the team is always thoroughly trained and that the “staff goes to seminars, conferences and workshops several times a year to get some more ideas.” For example, they recently hired a new person to work on Weibo and this involved intense discussions and considerations to insure this social media presence was in line with the university’s brand: “We are very careful about conveying to her what image we would like to project from our university on Chinese social media.” Another way to keep the staff limited is to delegate some of the content gathering to individual faculties and programs. This appears to work well at the Norwegian institution. One staff member manages all the social media profiles but most of the content he publishes comes from across the institution.

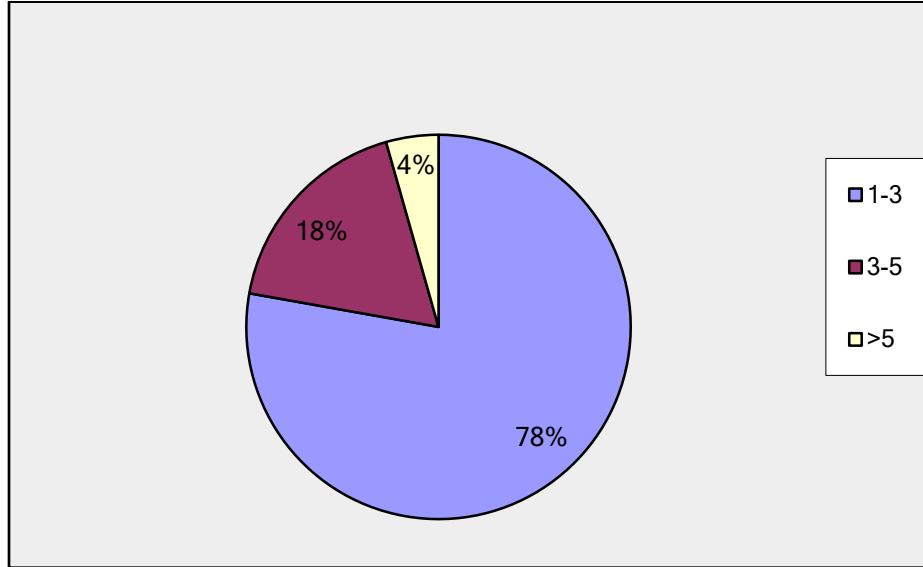


Figure 6. Staff members working on social media presence

RQ 2b: Are there tangible measurements of the impact of social media efforts?

As I discussed in the literature review, one of the most contentious issues emerged from the scholarly and professional reports is the issue of measuring the impact of social media on student outreach (Constantinides & Stagno, 2013, p. 42), (Choudaha, 2013, p. 11), (Taza, 2013), (Meacham, 2012). However, this study has found that most IHEIs are using a variety of measurement tools, most of which are built into the functioning of the platforms themselves or are services provided by third-party web applications. As it can be seen in the chart below, only 13% of institutions do not have any measurement tools, while the others use a combination of Facebook (75%), Google (64%), own website (39%), and Twitter (23%) analytics. These tools are offered by the social media platforms and, as these numbers show, the communications staff are relatively satisfied with the sort of evaluation they produce. Additionally, the following analytical tools and services are also used: overview through HootSuite, LinkedIn statistics, SocialMention, application and enrollment statistics. These are mostly quantitative tools.

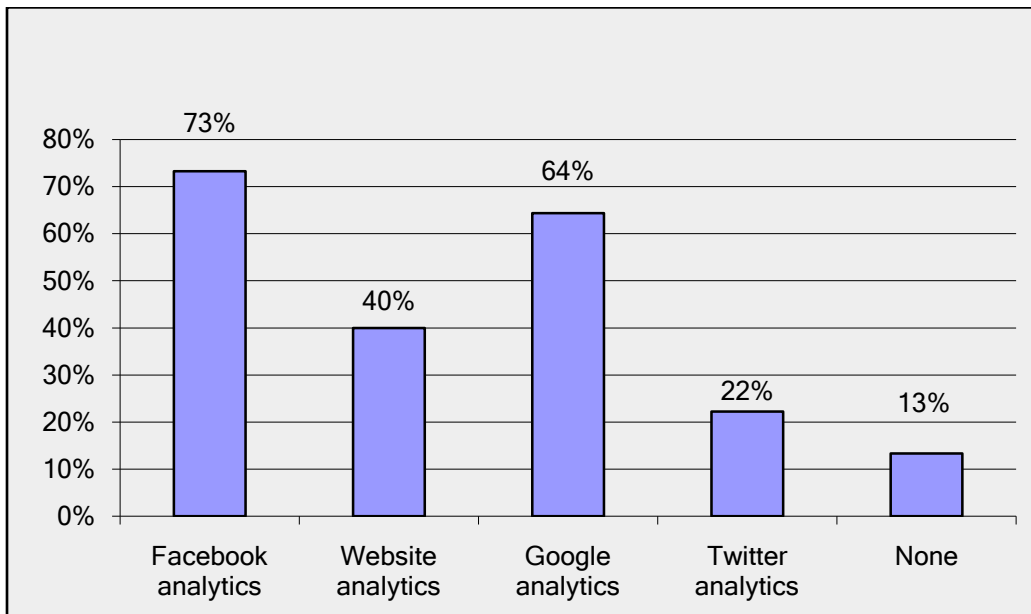


Figure 7. Analytical tools used for impact measurement

What is still missing is an analytical attribution model that could track the online interactions between students and universities and how that converts into increased recruitment numbers. As all of the interviewees admitted, it is indeed hard to pinpoint or give credit to a specific channel, but they are working around that to find model that work for each institution individually. For example, one of the communications specialists mentioned something they call “conversion rate” which is the number of admitted students who enroll at the university. In order to influence this conversion rate, communication becomes essential in the admissions results period, when students are making final decisions. This interviewee assessed: “What I can see at our institution is that the conversion rate is larger than at any other university in Sweden and the only thing we do differently is social media. There seems to be a lead here.” Another interviewee emphasized the conversations and the engagement levels. Inside the team, they follow the content they publish and how that engages students in conversations and dialogues between them and the institution and among students themselves. These are essential components to measuring the impact qualitatively.

Student reactions and feedback in terms of likes, comments and shares on individual posts is also very important. However, the issue of measuring the impact of social media in concrete scientific terms is not necessarily something staff feel they need to do: “Marketing is not rocket science and it cannot be reduced to numbers so you really need that combination of numbers and gut feeling that you get from experience. So our evaluation is based on analytics and gut feeling”.

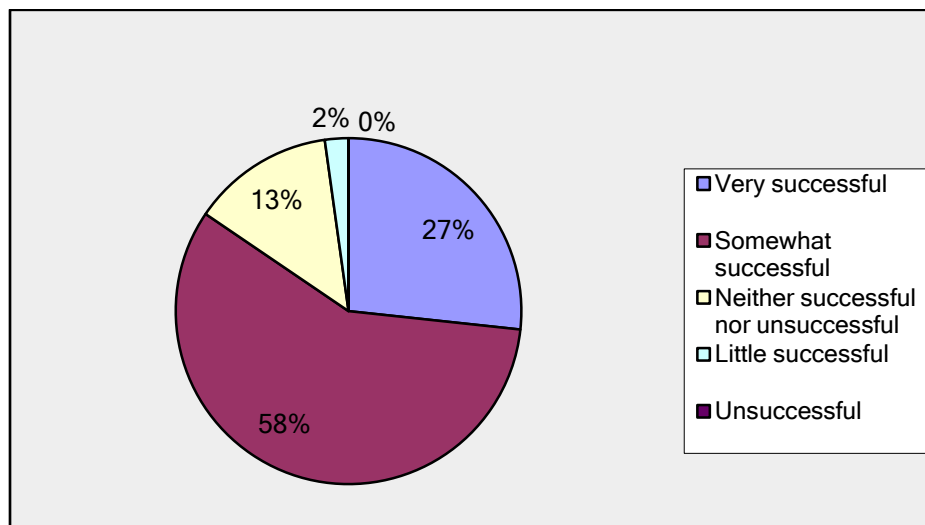


Figure 8. Overall success of social media efforts

As Figure 8 illustrates, 27% of IHEIs are very successful in their social media presence and another 58% are somewhat successful, while only 13% have a neutral assessment. Somewhat surprisingly, only one institution indicated having little success, which could indicate that the majority of these organizations have embraced social media to a larger extent and that they are managing to, at least, not create negative perceptions of their institutions. Unfortunately, the results of this study resemble the situation reported in a UK study from last year. As the author concluded (Head, 2013), well established universities perform better than the majority and, sadly, in the Scandinavian countries, too many universities do not take advantage of the wide communication opportunities social media offer. One of the interviewees noted that, perhaps slower, but this situation is likely to change: “There are some universities that don’t even have a Facebook page in English, but they are starting to

realize the importance of that.” It is my hope that studies like this one will help activate some of these institutions’ latent plans into full action and successful implementation.

RQ 2c: What are the advantages and challenges of having a social media presence?

To answer this question, I included two open-ended non-mandatory questions in the self-administered questionnaire. On the question about advantages, 37 respondents answered, while the question about challenges and threats gathered 36 answers. The idea here was to really have the staff speak with their own words without giving them pre-formatted answer options. Below I present their responses in the form of a table listing the most quoted answers in the order of their popularity among respondents. For the purpose of presenting them in this paper, I reworded or shortened some of these answers without changing the meaning. The numbers in parenthesis show how many times the item appeared in the responses. First, let us take a look at the main advantages of using social media for international student outreach.

Ease of reach and access (14)
Access to wider/ global audiences (14)
Brand awareness (9)
Dialogue/ two-way communication (7)
Visibility (5)
Be where our students are (6)
Speed (4)
Cost-effective marketing (4)
Good impact measurement tools (3)
Good market insight/ learning from the conversations (3)
Communicate what the school offers (3)
Being a modern university (2)
Marketing mix (2)

Increase traffic to the website (2)
Good communication platform (2)
Building relations and trust with all stakeholders (1)
Have students' appreciation (1)

Figure 9. Main advantages of using social media

As it can be observed, many of these experienced advantages coincide with what respondents initially indicated as their top reasons for using social media. This suggests there is a close match between what the institutions expect and want from social media and what the presence on these platforms actually achieves for them. Therefore, the most important and beneficial aspects on which social media have had a direct impact for the IHEIs are: providing an easy and fast way to reach prospective students from a global pool, raising the institutional brand and visibility, and fostering mutually beneficial dialogues and conversations between universities and students.

One aspect where Facebook has been most relevant for some institutions is improving the dialogue between the applicants and their universities of choice. Because it allows for timely and long conversations, some communications staff rely on Facebook to help guide their applicants through the application process: “Most importantly it’s valuable for the students and from our perspective we’re here to help them make a successful application and actually have a chance at being admitted.” This sort of activities is greatly appreciated by the students throughout their application, admission and enrollment process. I followed the pages of some universities at the end of March when the admission results for Sweden were published. The reactions from students were very positive and all of them expressed gratitude for the support received via Facebook from the international staff at the university. So much so that one of them wrote: “... University should triple your salary! Your help has been invaluable to me and others throughout this time.”

Another way in which social media proves crucial is by allowing for timely and relevant intelligence gathering, which the international staff use internally to learn

from insights and respond to the issues that arise: “We find Facebook to be super successful for us internally. We learn so much from it; we understand what the issues are; we understand the key student concerns. We use this information to adjust our communication and our marketing. It’s absolutely fabulous and it’s right there for us.” This institution uses this particular platform constantly to keep the conversations going and the students engaged with the university. Facebook’s central role in the higher education social media ecosystem is undeniable: “It’s important to say that it’s the single most important communication tool we have. It’s so effective.” and “It’s just incredible! Frankly, we are amazed at how successful it is.”

The second table (Figure 10) illustrates the threats and challenges that IHEIs encounter when managing their social media communication. As we saw above, social media accounts are managed by small teams of 1-3 people in most cases and more than half of the surveyed institutions spend above 5 hours per week on maintaining social media. Therefore it should not be surprising that the three most important challenges social media pose revolve around the issues of time-intensiveness and manpower required for an efficient communication. Constant changes in platforms, their rules and costs and the continued fragmentation of social media are also major concerns for universities which are forced to operate in a constantly evolving communication eco-system, which requires a lot of institutional resources to keep up with.

Not enough time/ manpower (10)
Resource-intensive content maintenance and update (9)
Constant changes of platforms, rules, costs & educating staff (7)
Platform fragmentation (7)
Losing control over the information (3)
Paid likes and irrelevant advertising (2)
Cultural differences (1)
Need to filter information (1)
Potential racist comments or other inappropriate content (1)

Multiple campuses (1)
Lack of knowledge about the social media use in other countries (1)
Remaining neutral while engaging in the social interaction (1)
Need to give fast and simplistic answers (1)
Handle unhappy people (1)
Negative campaigns against the institutions (1)
Juggling 2 languages on the same page (1)

Figure 10. Main threats and challenges social media pose

From the interviewees it was clear that one of the main fears and concerns regarding the loss of control over the information and the potential inappropriate content published by users is largely exaggerated. Each of the staff members I interviewed had one example of some sort of instance when a comment or post by users had to be removed, but those were exceptional cases: “In three years there was one offensive comment and we deleted it”; “We never had problems with students. I know everyone was nervous when we first started out, but you just have to role with the punches. The risk is so small compared to the outcome.”

It has been pointed out several times by the questionnaire respondents and interviewees that constant changes in the structure and functionality of platforms affect their usability and the staff’s capacity to operate with them for student outreach purposes. One of the interviewees criticized Facebook’s constant changes for the worse. When their page started, visitors’ posts and comments had the same prominence as the content published by the institution, which provided with a great toolbox for interaction, long conversations and genuine dialogue. However, for a while, posts by visitors appear in a box on the side and that is detrimental for the kind of engagement this institution seeks to create with the students: “Unfortunately Facebook has taken a direction I don’t really like because it doesn’t offer that great interaction between a page and its fun as it used to. Facebook pages are not as friendly for proper dialogue anymore.” Another interviewee complained about the way the mobile version of Facebook was limited for a while and had little

resemblance with the web version, which affected the ever-growing number of students who use their smartphones as primary means to access social media: “There have been changes over the last couple of years we’ve been furious at.”

More recently, another development is likely to start posing an important challenge to IHEIs. Facebook has announced it will be introducing payment schemes for the brands that have Facebook pages in order to increase reach and engagement with their audiences (Delo, 2013), (Luckerson, 2014). This change will most likely affect HEIs that have relied heavily on this platform. Given the current quasi-universal dominance of Facebook, this change is alarming to the institutions that have enjoyed the benefits of its services so far at no cost: “It looks like the free lunch is over. I guess soon we will have to pay for all our content to get out there.” Another interviewee emphasized even more the potential implications of this could be very serious: “That’s not good news for us. It’s not good news for anyone. To date we have never used any paid campaigns on social media so for us it’s a real tragedy because we are using it as a genuine communication tool. We’re not trying to push ourselves onto people; we’re just here, available.” While there has not been any clear information from Facebook with regards to possible payments schemes, international staff are keeping their eyes open and suggesting that paying to continue to use this platform efficiently might very well be an option: “We don’t want to pay for content. But Facebook is a very important channel for us so of course we will have to adapt.” However, communicators are not just waiting idly by for this imminent change to happen. As I discussed earlier about the trends, many of them are already looking for alternatives, “the next step”, the “next big thing”: “We are already looking for people’s input in what other forms of communication we should be using because Facebook’ isn’t going to stay forever, let’s face it.”

These constant changes in platforms’ functionality and the proliferation of segmentation are determining chances in the social media ecosystem that are consistent with some of van Dijck’s criticisms discussed in the theoretical chapter: the commercialization and the standardization of the social practice (Dijck, 2013).

Following the examples of the first successful platforms, many new ones are created almost every day. Their main purpose is to go from startups to successful media companies. The financial incentive is undoubtedly the single most important factor driving the social media market. Google with its package of paid web services such as AdWords and AdSense has been operating for a long time and has been open about its advertising-based business model. Facebook however, has started offering paid advertising services later. The latest push for mandatory payment to maintain brand pages could cause many users to leave the network because commercial content will become more dominant over other types of content. For the university pages this is very worrisome. One of the interviewees noticed that her personal Facebook account has become less relevant lately and that there is a growing sense that many users are turning off their Facebook because of these constant changes: “I don’t really get the feeds from the people I am actually interested in. If this happens with the fan page, it’s a disaster for us.”

In the context of these latest discussions international communicators are having lately, it is remarkable that some institutions are so far behind in terms of social media engagement. Some have not even entered the race; they are part of the 29% of IHEIs which do not have a dedicated international social media page. I have interviewed one international staff member from such an institution, a medium-sized Swedish university. The international staff member complained: “We are probably the only university in Sweden that doesn’t have a Facebook page in English and there are many reasons for this, although the main two are approval and time”. The reality is that his institution is definitely not the only one, as I have explained above. “One of the reasons there has been a reluctance to start this, aside from staffing issues is how to deal with potential racist comments or other discussions that are not in line with our philosophy as an institution.”

This sort of concern, while valid, is perhaps exaggerated, especially when we consider the examples of typical challenges universities face in their social media communication. There was only one mention of such perceived threat and from the

interviews it became apparent that these concerns simply have not materialized. Cases like this are curious and indicate that perhaps more work needs to be done internally to instigate change and to embrace new communications tools. While over two thirds of the IHEIs have been engaged in social media for several years, the rest of them are still somewhere in the back. As one can see from the analysis thus far, some of the leading institutions are already past the social media hype, are very knowledgeable and on the lookout for the next development. And while this occurs, it may so happen that the laggard universities will have skipped an entire era in the history of communications before they catch up with the rest.

Research Question 3: Does the Scandinavian experience provide with models of best practices?

Despite the various levels of success achieved by the Scandinavian universities, this study has found that many of them have managed to master social media to their best advantage and can teach a few lessons to those lagging behind. Following I present some of the most important best practices I found.

Do it professionally and intentionally

Universities should have dedicated professional staff to manage their social media communication efficiently. While for most of the communicators social media activities are not a full-time job, it does take a trained and knowledgeable professional to achieve success. Additionally, having dedicated staff members increases the chances to perform better on social media.

Another advice is to stay away from external consultants and to employ internal staff to insure the institution's voice and values are communicated properly. Each university is different and comes with its own institutional culture which is best expressed by one of its own. In addition, because social media are so fragmented, presence on each channel requires very fine tuning in order to convey the institutional message accurately to the wider audiences.

A third point is that everyone should become more social media savvy and to use social media in personal life, otherwise it is hard to keep up with the constant changes. A few of the institutions even mentioned holding workshops and training more staff and faculty members to use social media in daily life and professional activities. There are many exciting things happening in any institution and involving those doing the cool stuff is one way to inspire and gain the students' attention. One example is using Twitter for disseminating research. Students are happier to hear directly from their professor or read their blog about their newest scientific breakthrough than to read a congratulatory message from the press office.

Listen more than you speak

“Social media is not another information channel; it's about dialogue. Listen more than you speak; a lot of universities still don't get that.” This is perhaps one of the most important takeaways for the IHEIs and a specific recommendation that will change the way social media for students outreach is done presently. As we saw above when I discussed the advantages of social media, a great deal of insights emerges from the conversations occurring in the online community. That is why, it is essential that universities pay close attention to the conversations students are having on their social media channels and adjust their communications based on those insights.

It is crucial to keep the social media open and available so allow students to comment, post and start conversations and engage with them. Answer their concerns, give feedback and participate in the sort of fun things they are doing online. They appreciate that. This is essential to creating and maintaining close relationships to the students and future alumni: “The students are not only talking to us but also between themselves and that's how we built a relationship. That is the key to social media: getting the dialogue going.”

Universities should not be doing all the talking and posting; on the contrary, there should be a couple of times more students posts per each institutional post. Social

media pages are not press release bins so limit the institutional posting to the essential and provide student with the space to create a university community on your “wall”.

Do it only if you mean it and only have social media presence if you can invest time and energy in it. If it is not something the institution has the appropriate resources for, it is best to not have it at all. Students need to see consistency and only posting sporadic news on your page will make a potentially active audience to have to turn to other forums.

Always put the students and their needs first. Your social media should be talking about the things that are relevant to students, not to you. Following an agenda on Facebook is not something that will attract students to your page.

Involve your current students in some of the social media. One example is using an official university Twitter account that documents student life. Some institutions keep such accounts and rotate between volunteers who tweet about their student life to followers around the world. This first-hand account is invaluable for prospective students so this is a good channel to use.

Respond quickly and be spontaneous with your content

For many students, social media is the first source for all kinds of information. If they chose to contact your institution via this channel, they expect a timely answer. Best policy is a 24 hour reply or not more than 48 hours. Once students see from earlier interactions that their inquiries are being answered in a timely manner, they will know this is a suitable channel to clarify their concerns.

Keep content fresh and updated. This makes your page an interesting place to ‘hang out’ and students will start to perceive you as one of their friends.

Be spontaneous in the content you post. Having a plan posting schedule is boring and students sense that. It is always best to go with things happening today, without trying to look too serious. Social media is a place to also have fun and students will ‘dig’ a cool university.

Be transparent

This is an essential point. Students need to know who they are talking to. So show the person behind the brand. Be transparent with who is running the forum. Always sign your posts and replies. This personalized approach also helps build a stronger relationship with the students.

Use clear language

Many of the IHEIs' prospective students are not native English speakers. Mixing languages confuses them. The same goes for combining British with American English in your documentation. The best way to go is to use a clear and consistent language throughout your communications so that everyone is on the same page.

Do not fear social media. Embrace it.

This is especially directed to those institutions still doubting the benefits of social media. As the discussion on benefits showed, any perceived risks are likely to be smaller than the actual positive outcomes. In a way, there is a trial and error approach to social media. When they initially entered social media, most of the communicators did not really know what these channels are about or what they are good for, but they learned as they went along. One example is a Swedish university which in the first year of being on social media had about 700 likes on their Facebook page and now, three years later, they boast over 40000 likes and a vibrant online student community. Therefore be open to try but also be ready for mistakes: "We are having fun and we always learn something new. Social media is not rocket science and it's okay to fail. You need to be okay with failing so you can try and see how it works. Sometimes it just backfires or it doesn't work at all. That's fine, you'll learn something. Even if it's been around for a while, there are no clear dos and don'ts so there is much more to be learned."

Whichever channel you prefer or works best for your institution, always stay informed on latest trends. Read the industry blogs and magazines. Another way to stay connected to the best practices is, of course, to be in contact with the colleagues

from other institutions both inside the country and from abroad and share experiences with fellow professionals.

Other remarks: social media or social care?

One of the most striking findings of this study is that the number one social media platform and one of the few that allows for lengthy conversations and feedback, Facebook, is increasingly becoming a customer service central. As I discussed above, international communicators favor this particular platforms because of its multi-functionality and quasi-universal reach. One interesting aspect is that Facebook, which started as a cool space to hang out online with friends, tends to serve a more practical function lately. Perhaps it is because it has matured from the early new-born days; perhaps it is because its current direction is driven by corporate profit interests or, maybe, it is a natural evolution and its users have found a way to incorporate Facebook into their lives for pragmatic purposes. Whatever the case may be, it is fair to say that some social media, such as Facebook, are not spaces for genuine community building and conversations anymore, but rather a space for people to voice their questions, anger and complains and get quicker answers from their favorite brands. As I discussed in the theoretical section, since 2012, there has been an increase in what is called social customer care. This usually applies to consumer brands and companies in the services industry. Facebook has become just as necessary as the phone service and the online chat for such companies in order to keep up with their customers' needs.

From the interviews I conducted, it has very much been the case that Facebook serves as a customer service platform for the IHEIs, thus confirming the assumption that universities are adapting new practices and are resembling commercial enterprises. The peak times of the year in the university calendar are the applications and admissions periods. That is when HEIs have to act more like service-providing companies and have to satisfy their customers' needs, if they are to insure meeting

the recruitment targets and staying competitive in the global higher education market economy.

As Anderson inferred (Anderson, 2010), in the social media marketing game, the consumer has the advantage; at least for the moment. Several of the international communicators interviewed have framed their roles within their institutions in terms of providing superior service to their student customers. One of the universities, for example, has one person employed full-time to answer prospective students' inquiries via all kinds of online channels, from emails to social media to chat. The entire job description of this person is to answer in a timely and professional manner all possible student inquiries regarding program offerings, applications and admissions. The reasoning behind this is simple: if the institution invests so many resources into attracting perspective students to consider them as a study choice, it is only natural that this be followed up and through with support services which eventually will determine students to pick this particular institution over another.

When asked if post-2011 international students have become customers to Swedish universities, one international communicator answered this way: "It's harsh and I feel uncomfortable, but being wholeheartedly frank, yes. But I wouldn't dare say that to the university." Once international students started paying relatively high fees, marketing Swedish higher education became a true challenge and one of these challenges was offering a new type of support for the prospective students, which, fortunately or not, was solved by the way of providing customer support service via social media. While admitting that selling and marketing higher education is a very challenging and delicate enterprise, the communicator explained: "Essentially we have a product and a customer and the service component is very important. Service is absolutely number one."

Another way to approach and explain this need to provide high quality services to the international students is through a brand management perspective. As the communications specialist continued: "We're making a promise in regards to our brand and the educational offer so it's important that this continues throughout a

student's experience with the university." This philosophy makes a lot of sense, especially when connected with Olins's prediction that higher education institutions are the last frontier of the brands' expansion. He held that educational institutions would become more influential and improve as a result if they managed to raise their institutional brand (Olins, 2003). And while most brands sell tangible, physical products, universities do not. At most, they sell the promise of an enriching academic experience, a life and identity-changing experience that will eventually lead to acquiring a dream job. Consequently universities have to master the art of seducing their international students and social media communications are an indispensable part of this process.

Discussion

From the initial research phases of this project, it became apparent that from a diffusion of innovation of social media communications perspective, internationalized higher education institutions in the Scandinavian region neatly fall into the adopter categories distinguished by Rogers. This is also consistent with the classification discussed in the theoretical literature, where the authors and practitioners are divided across the spectrum from one extreme to the other. While the denialists or, should we say critics, of social media overly positive hype such as Fuchs, van Dijck and Morozov are mainly preoccupied with the negative consequences in terms of personal privacy, political action, societal change, and exploitation, the IHEIs which have not yet adopted social media for international outreach (almost one third of them) seem to have other reasons. Whether it is because of fear of losing control over communication or lack of resources, it could be generalized that it is mainly internal shortcomings that are stopping these institutions from modernizing.

For a visualization of this cultural division as it is currently in the four countries studied, I connected the division of social media profiles based on their audience with the innovation adopter categories. I do not have enough information for a five-category division; however, three categories are sufficient for the purpose of this analysis. The IHEIs with dedicated international profiles are the innovators and early adopters, the mixed profiles pile matches early and late majority category; the laggards are those IHEIs with no international profile. Figure 11 shows this division.

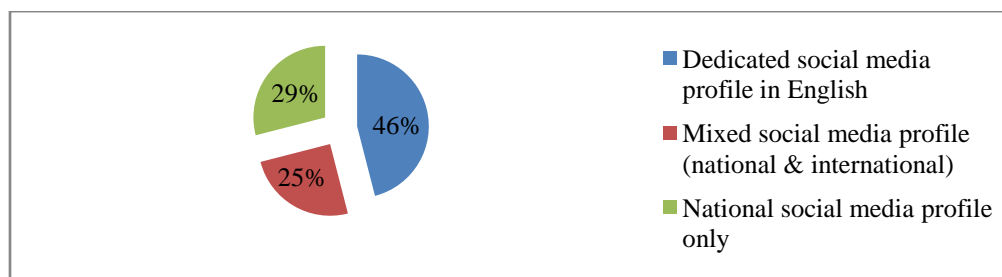


Figure 11. Distribution of social media profiles by audience

Despite about a third of the region's IHEIs lagging behind in terms of international social media outreach, more than half of them are relatively well adjusted to the new communications eco-system and have been successful in their marketing and recruitment via social media. Since the most successful IHEIs social media innovators are mainly the larger and well-established institutions in the region, the results of this study are consistent with previous studies regarding social media use in higher education in the UK and Rogers's findings that larger institutions are better innovators than smaller ones. At the same time, Rogers's Need Paradox can also be observed. The smaller institutions, which do not possess the same physical outreach resources big universities have, could benefit greatly from engaging virtually their international audiences on social media, but they are not doing so yet.

As I discussed in the theoretical chapter, globalization and the proliferation of new communications technologies have been a boon for the higher education systems around the world, while at the same time posing various risks and challenges. In the context of the finding of this study, it is fair to concur with Brada's assessment of HEIs being another sector of the free market economy (Brada, 2012). The relatively high number of IHEIs which have not yet adopted social media in their international outreach indicates that communication in a globalized context is indeed a challenge. As Scott pointed out (Scott, 2000), similar to many other institutions, the Scandinavian universities may be struggling to adapt to playing according to the new global higher education market rules.

Presently, two main factors are contributing to forcing IHEIs in Scandinavia to behave more like global commercial enterprises. For Sweden and Denmark in particular, it is the paradigm change which introduced tuition fees for international students. As one of the interviewees explained: "When we first learned about the tuition fees, the first major challenge was internally because no one in the university had really thought about marketing as a concept before and it has traditionally been a dirty word. So that required to try to instigate a new mindset in the university". As this international communicator explained, several years after this change, many in

the higher education sphere are still in denial about it and believe it is morally wrong, while most have accepted and adapted to this new work paradigm. In order for these universities to be globally competitive, they had to revisit their program offerings, create and improve these offerings to enhance the quality of their “product”. This is an ongoing process and it required a lot of education of the university staff and faculty on the importance of creating marketable products. “It’s a big culture shift for the university”. Perhaps this much-needed culture shift is what is holding the laggard institutions back and what explains the success of those early adopters of new global communications platforms such as social media.

Why is the paradigm of students as customers so contentious in these countries? First of all, it is because it is a totally and radically new way to see higher education, its costs and value and the overall function in society. Second, it is the internal dilemmas this situation causes for these institutions. There are two components of this: adapting university program offerings according to the market demand and providing students support services according to international standards. This quote from one of the international communicators illustrates how problematic this issue is: “We’re looking for customers. And I think it’s very easy for some universities to prostitute themselves just for what’s in demand because it’s a revenue source. But this isn’t a good long-term strategy. Our dilemma is how much should we look at what’s in demand and how much should we try to provide that.” This shows the internal conversation is ongoing and that changes are happening at different pace across the education sector. It is essential to keep in mind that, whatever the motivations may be in individual circumstances, it is clear that the latest round of internationalization in Scandinavia is driven by the international student recruitment fever. While the policy and ethical implications of that are very complex, they go beyond the scope of this thesis.

The second and most recent challenge, again, has to do with the economic component. As Facebook announced it will be introducing fees for maintaining brand pages, the IHEIs relying on it for the bulk of their social media communications will

have to go a step further in their attempt to adapt to the global market economy. This is a smaller, perhaps, yet another significant cultural shift.

Having said that, it is relevant to point out that some of the institutions at the forefront of the social media engagement (the innovators) are not idly waiting for these changes in the media eco-system to hit them, instead they are constantly looking to find new ways to engage with their global audience. Fuchs is one of the authors who perhaps more insistently emphasized the need to look for alternatives, not just in terms of social media engagement, but internet and our digital lives in general. Similarly to some authors' concerns regarding users' addiction to social media (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013), my concern is the over dependence on social media for institutional communications purposes. Therefore, while we celebrate and praise the innovator institutions as early beneficiaries of social media, it is important to caution on the potential dangers of over reliance on these channels and to recommend looking for alternatives and a balanced communications strategy.

Throughout the analysis chapter we saw that the most important functioning blocks of social media, as defined by Kietzmann et al (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011), are identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationship and reputation. Higher education institutions have an online identity on social media which reflects their offline identity as organizations. This identity is carefully crafted to mirror the organizational mission and values, while at the same time being modern enough to attract its young audience of prospective students. The identity of an IHEI is closely linked with its reputation, which has to be managed through virtual means only, as prospective students from across the globe are unlikely to be able to visit its physical location. This places even more responsibility on the international communicators and illustrates the increased reliance on online communication to convey the institutional perspectives to the wider audiences. On their social media profiles these institutions maintain various degrees of presence and engage in

dialogue and conversations with the prospective students to satisfy their needs as such arise.

Facebook's philosophy to make the world more open and connected because that will positively impact on everyone's life. So sharing is caring, as they say. But for IHEIs sharing is not essential just in the way of content that is published by them and shared and re-shared by their fans. It is also essential in the way that all the things shared on its pages eventually lead to the formation of online relationships, networks and communities of stakeholders, in the sense that Miller discussed them (Miller, 2011). Once a social media presence is established, it requires constant maintenance to facilitate relation and community building. Consistency is therefore crucial in retaining the weak ties that such media help create and preserve.

Another aspect worth mentioning is that, despite shortcomings, social media have empowered both the institutions and the students in their communications and outreach activities. Considering the global scale of operations of the IHEIs and the global reach of certain social media platforms, these platforms represent perhaps the best tools available so far to tackle the various communications challenges from an outreach and recruitment standpoint. User empowerment is a topic that permeates not only social media debate, but also discussions about internet freedom, online citizen activism and branding literature. In the case in point, it could be stated that, so far, IHEIs' engagement with prospective students via social media has largely benefited and empowered both sides equally and should be recognized as a positive contribution to international communication.

However, we saw that Facebook and other western-bred social media platforms dominate in the international outreach of universities. Most IHEIs are not using any regional social media and whichever the reasons for this may be, it is useful to keep in mind what Moorehead (Moorehead, 2013) cautioned to be the globalization of Facebook rather than the globalization of social media and the potential democratization they bring about. Given that more than half of IHEIs have not

engaged with some of their largest applicant pools on their native social media channels, e.g. Chinese platforms, it is difficult to speak of a truly globally-inclusive social media communications. Thus, a way to look at higher education social media communications in the context of globalization processes is to view it as work in progress with an optimistic expectation that change and improvements are underway as well to bridge the digital divides in various aspects. So far, however, IHEIs are still part of the global village of Babel, as Lule decried the marriage between globalization and new media.

An interesting fact pointed out by the international communicators interviewed was how differently social media profiles of the universities in case are managed by the national and international communications teams. It would thus be interesting to take this research further to look at the ways in which social media functioning blocks for example, such as image, identity and reputation, are managed differently by each team. Are there any discrepancies between the institutional projections for the national versus the international audiences? How do different institutional image projections, i.e., brand promise, influence national versus international students' educational experience?

The aspect which this thesis has not touched upon is the students' perceptions of their social media interactions with the IHEIs. Thus building on this study, further research could look into how international students' perception of the brand promise is fulfilled upon arrival to their university of choice. Another interesting aspect to study is to look at how and if the conversation, interactions and communities created in the application and admissions stage via social media translate into offline relations and networks on campus after international students start their studies. Thus looking at whether international student outreach via social media really fosters community building or only provides a temporal, short-lived communication service for each new incoming class of students. One last piece of research curiosity is to look at how social media supports alumni services and communications.

Conclusions

This research project's goal was to uncover the ways in which IHEIs from Scandinavia use social media in their international students outreach activities. Three main research questions, with six sub-questions were asked to operationalize the research objectives of the project. Given the original nature of this thesis topic, its findings contribute with new data to the existent body of knowledge in two separate fields: social media communication and international higher education.

The first research question asked how are social media used by IHEIs, with respect to the existence of an institutional strategy, the main platforms used and the engagement with regional social media channels. The study has found that the vast majority, 78% of IHEIs, have an internationalization policy and 62% of them have an institutional marketing and recruitment strategy, which includes social media. Of the total number of institutions with international programming, only 46% have a dedicated social media profile in English for their international audiences, while another 25% use a mixed English and local language profile and 29% do not have English language pages or content altogether.

Facebook is the number one social media platform with 100% presence, followed by Youtube with 73%, LinkedIn with 67%, Twitter with 64% and Instagram with 51%. The study also confirmed LinkedIn as the platform with most growth over the last six month period and with the most potential to increase its importance even more within the social media eco-system. Alarmingly, 58% of the surveyed institutions do not have any presence on the regional social media, such as the Chinese ones, for example. The platforms with most IHEIs presence are Sina Weibo 27%, Renren 24%, Youku 18% and Vkontakte 7%. Some of the main reasons universities use social media in their international students outreach is to reach and converse with prospective students, raise the institutional brand, increase website traffic and promote events and activities.

The second research question asked about the costs and benefits of using social media, with regards to financial, time and staff resources, measurements of impact

and the advantages and challenges posed by social media. Approximately half of the surveyed institutions spend more than 5 hours weekly on social media management and 78% have teams of 1-3 persons managing the social media profiles. Social media communications activities are shared between the International Office, Communications, Marketing and External Relations. Only 14% of the institutions do not have clear measurement tools, while the rest use a combination of the analytics tools available from the social media platforms functionality: Facebook 75%, Google 64%, website 39 and Twitter 23%. Additional qualitative engagement and attribution tools are tailored by institutions themselves and vary accordingly across the sector. The overall success of social media is evident as 27% declare themselves very successful and 58% somewhat successful in their international outreach efforts.

In a long list of advantages, the most cited ones are: ease of reach and access to the global pool of prospective students, raising the institutional brand and visibility and taking advantage of the forum to create dialogues and conversations with the students. Among the threats and challenges social media pose to IHEIs, communicators are troubled by constant changes in platforms and their functionality, further segmentation of social media, and the near future prospect of paying for so far free platforms.

Many of the HEIs surveyed offer a great deal of positive examples of social media outreach and some of the most prominent institutions do indeed serve as models of best practices for their local as well as regional and global counterparts. Some of the most important best practices can be summarized as follows: intentionality and professionalism, prioritization of student engagement and contributions over own desire to use media as release only channels, prompt responses, spontaneity of posted content, transparency, clear language across all institutional communications, embrace of social media and other communication innovations.

Scandinavian IHEIs have benefited greatly from their social media presence, especially in the aftermath of the introduction of tuition fees for non-EU students and initial decline in applications. In a mutually beneficial way, the innovator institutions

have managed to reap the most benefits and enjoy a great deal from their social media activities, particularly with regards to reaching wider audiences, providing a better student support service and increasing their institutional brand awareness, while also using the insights gained from social media to instigate internal change and adjust communications priorities.

Perhaps the most important contribution of this project is that of filling a knowledge gap on the use of social media for university communications in the European region in general and for the purpose of international student outreach in particular. The findings of the study help illuminate on the many aspects involved in the social media strategies and implementation, as well as the context and individual country circumstances facilitating these developments.

From communication and globalization studies theoretical points of view, perhaps the most relevant findings are connected to the transformation of certain social media, e.g. Facebook from genuine conversation tools to customer-centered social care instruments, used primarily to answer student concerns similar to the way commercial enterprises service their large customer base in order to fulfill their brand promise. Additionally, the prevalence of a handful of western-based platforms with a limited regional platform engagement denotes an uneven process of social media maturity and preference for Silicon Valley-born tools over regional developments.

From a higher education and globalization points of view, the most important takeaway is that Scandinavian universities, especially those charging tuition fees, have taken the road of transforming higher education from a public good to a private/commercial actor in a global market economy. The use of social media and the internal changes are symptomatic of internal organizational transformations either caused or accelerated by the deeper integration into the global higher education market and the very profitable business of international student services.

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Social Media Outreach for International Students

*1. Does your institution have an internationalization policy?

- Yes No N/A

*2. Does your institution have a marketing and recruitment strategy of international students?

- Yes No N/A

*3. What is the role of social media platforms in your marketing and recruiting efforts?

- Very important, central in our strategy.
- Important, but complementary to more prominent tools such as website, student fairs, open days, etc
- Neither important nor unimportant. Used mainly for maintaining an online presence.
- No significant importance. Keep minimum exposure.
- Insignificant.

*4. What are top 5 reasons you use social media in your international outreach and/or online recruiting?

- Reach prospective students
- The low cost of these channels
- Start conversations with prospective students
- Create an online university community
- Embrace new communication tools
- Reach a wider/more diverse target audience
- Promote upcoming events and activities
- Create and increase your university brand awareness
- Increase traffic to your university website
- Everyone else is doing it, we cannot stay behind.
- None of the above

Other (please specify)

Social Media Outreach for International Students

*5. Which social media platforms do you use? Check all that apply.

Facebook

YouTube

Google+

Instagram

Twitter

Flickr

LinkedIn

Pinterest

MySpace

Other (please specify)

*6. What regional/ non-western social media channels do you use? Check all that apply.

Vkontakte

Orkut

Badoo

Renren

Netlog

StudiVZ

Sina Weibo

Hi5

Youku

Qzone

Friendster

None

Other (please specify)

*7. Which department in your institution is responsible for planning and implementing the social media presence? Check multiple options if necessary.

International Office

Communications

Marketing

Outreach

External Relations

Other (please specify)

Social Media Outreach for International Students

*8. How many staff members work on maintaining your social media presence?

- 1-3
- 3-5
- >5

Other (please specify)

*9. How many hours in total does your department/ team dedicate to social media management weekly?

- <1
- 1-3
- 3-5
- 5-10
- >10

Other (please specify)

*10. Which measurement tools do you use to evaluate the impact of your social media presence? Check all that apply.

- Facebook analytics
- Website analytics
- Google analytics
- Twitter analytics
- None

Other (please specify)

Social Media Outreach for International Students

***11. On which of the following aspects has your social media presence had the most impact? Check all that apply.**

- Increase in student engagement and conversations.
- Formation of a vibrant social media community.
- Increase in recruiting directly or indirectly linked to social media campaigns.
- Increase in your university brand awareness.
- None

Other (please specify)

***12. What are the main advantages of having a social media presence?**

***13. What are the threats or challenges you encounter in your social media presence?**

***14. How would you characterize the overall success/Return on Investment of your social media efforts?**

- Very successful
- Somewhat successful
- Neither successful nor unsuccessful
- Little successful
- Unsuccessful

15. Are you currently exploring/ planning on using new channels/platforms? If so, which ones?

16. Are you currently exploring/ planning on targeting/ entering new markets? If so, which ones?

Social Media Outreach for International Students

17. Can you comment on best practices or give advice to your colleagues in other universities?

18. Your institution's name

19. Other comments or remarks.

20. Can I contact you for further questions? If yes, please provide your contact information: name, email address and institution.

Appendix 2. Bitly link statistics of access

Where This Bitly Link Was Shared

 Facebook

9 clicks [▶](#)

 Twitter

1 click **1** tweet [▶](#)

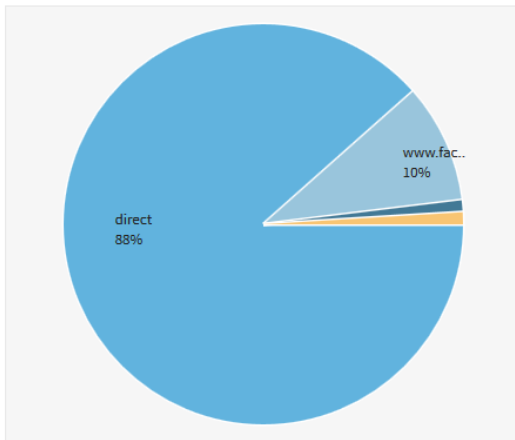
Other Sites

1 click [▶](#)

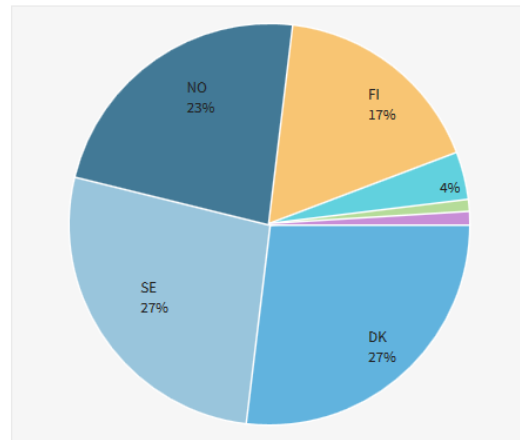
Unknown

90 clicks [▶](#)

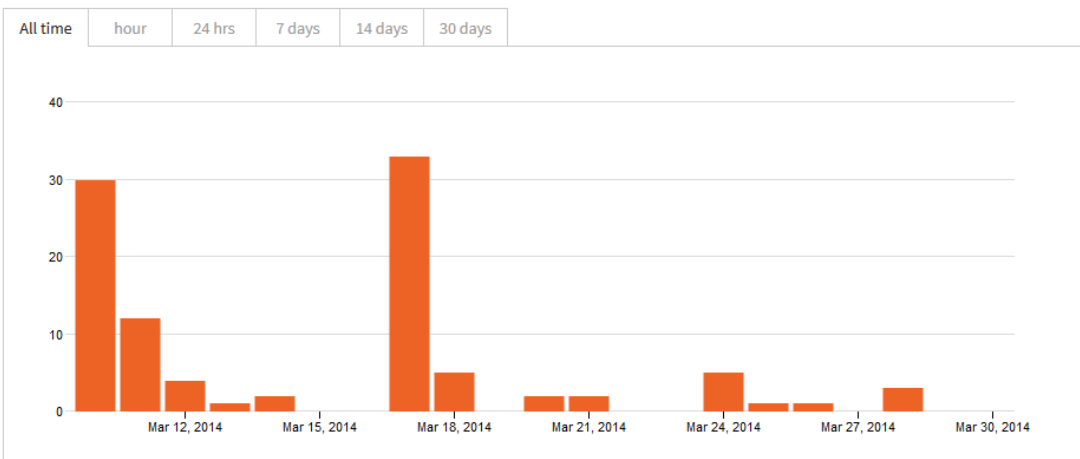
Referrers



Locations: 7 Countries



Clicks



Appendix 3. Tentative questions for the semi-structured staff interviews

RQ1: How are social media platforms used by IHEIs?

1. Does your institution have an internationalization policy? If so, could you elaborate on the importance of international student recruitment within this policy? Would you say this aspect is most prominent in the overall scheme? How many international students are typically enrolled at your institution?
2. For Sweden and Denmark: what has been the impact of introduction of fees on your communication strategy? How have you overcome the challenges this radical change of situation brought about?
3. Does your institution have a strategic communication and marketing plan regarding international student recruitment? If so, what is the role of social media channels in this strategy?
4. What are the audiences and regions/markets on which you focus most? Why?
5. When have you started using social media for international student outreach?
6. What are the main social media platforms that you use?
7. Do you have presence on any regional social media platforms? Please elaborate on the reasons.

RQ 2: What are the costs and benefits of using social media?

8. Who in your institution is responsible for planning and implementing the social media strategy? How much collaboration, if any, and between which departments exists in this sense?
9. How many staff members are involved in social media presence? How are these staff members trained for managing social media?
10. How much time is dedicated weekly to social media management?
11. How much money, if any, does it cost to maintain the social media presence?
12. How do you measure and evaluate the impact of social media on recruitment numbers?
13. How do you measure and evaluate the impact of social media on the overall outreach efforts?

RQ 3: Does the Scandinavian experience provide with models of best practices for similar European institutions?

Appendix 3. Tentative questions for the semi-structured staff interviews

14. Which strengths and weaknesses/opportunities and challenges have you had in managing the social media presence of your institution so far?
15. Would you say that, overall, your social media strategy is a success in increasing engagement with your audiences? Is it worthwhile in terms of ROI?
16. What are you looking forward to in terms of communication strategy? Any expansion, new channels, content, markets?
17. What would be your piece of advice/best practice suggestion to your colleagues in other universities?
18. Final thoughts.
- 19.