

***HOW TO LEVERAGE SOCIAL MEDIA TO COMMUNICATE WITH
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS TOWARD HIGH EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN
THE UK: A CASE OF NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY***

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Abstract

Whilst current research showed that social media communication tools are widely used in various domains, there is a gap in identifying how social media are used in the educational area and in higher education institutions particularly. This paper studies how UK higher educational institutions (HEIs) leverage social media to communicate with international students as they are the main customers in the HEIs market. Newcastle University was selected as the case to be studied within this subject. As Facebook is one of the most popular social media among the young in the UK, it was deemed representative for this study. In addition, Weibo was added for keeping the data integrity related to the target of international students. This study used thematic analysis (TA) research method to process the coding and themes setting for international students' comments in social networks. Newcastle University demonstrated efficient communication between with its international students on Facebook. In addition, the attitudes of International students were positive about the reputation and educational quality related posts.

Keywords: social media, marketing strategies, internationalisation of HE, thematic analysis

1. Introduction

The Internet is regarded as one of the most valuable reputation-building tools in the world (Bunting and Lipski, 2001). Nevertheless, there are still certain numbers of people without the ability to access to electricity, let alone the Internet. Multiple studies have shown that significant efforts to use social media, like Facebook, are made by businesses organisations as one of the communicational marketing strategies to increase the competition ability (Culnan et al., 2010; Gallagher and Ransbotham, 2010). For the educational sphere, higher educational institutions (HEIs) have changed their view on marketing-orientation model urged by this trend

(Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). Because students are the potential customers for marketing-orientated HEIs universities should try to meet the needs of those audiences. However, little is known about how HEIs leverage social media channels as a marketing strategy for international students. At the same time, social media privacy and other technical issues are present when it comes to using social media for marketing purposes (Lockyer and Patterson, 2008).

According to the data on higher education student enrolments in 2016 to 2017 in Figure 1 (HESA, 2018), Newcastle University has accepted 6395 international students which makes up around a quarter of the total enrolled students. This suggests that Newcastle University represents an appropriate setting for studying the use of social media for marketing purposes. In terms of selection of social media for this study, Facebook and Weibo were chosen because these are widely used by international students in HEIs. In addition, Weibo was chosen to focus on Chinese students as a significant part of the international cohort.

	UK ↑	Other European Union ↑	Non-European Union ↑	Not known ↑	Total ↑
Loughborough University	13,550	875	2,705	0	17,130
The Manchester Metropolitan University	30,620	1,075	1,315	0	33,010
The University of Manchester	26,985	2,595	10,910	0	40,490
Middlesex University	14,950	1,740	2,815	0	19,505
Newcastle University	18,585	1,205	5,190	0	24,980
Newman University	2,795	15	15	0	2,830
The University of Northampton	11,245	405	1,200	0	12,850

Figure 1 Source: Higher Education (HE) student enrolments by HE provider and domicile 2016/17 (HESA, 2018)

This paper examines how Newcastle University uses these two social media to communicate with international students as a recruitment marketing strategy and increase brand awareness in the global academic market.

1.1 Research questions

This paper first presents current research related to HEIs marketing and the use of social media. Then, it introduces the thematic analysis (TA) method used for collecting data that helped answer the following questions:

1. What types of posts on Facebook and Weibo are updated frequently by Newcastle University?
2. What types of comments are given frequently by international students?
3. What attitudes do international students have towards different types of posts that Newcastle University places on its Facebook and Weibo pages?

2. Literature Review

This section introduces the relevant studies that focused on the HEIs marketing strategies in social media to attract international students. It examines the two types of communicational styles in HEIs, the situation of overseas students in the UK HEIs and the characteristics of Facebook and Weibo as the two main selected social media platforms of this research.

2.1 HEIs marketing in the social media area

There is no sufficient literature and theoretical knowledge to provide the necessary background for a study of higher education institutions context and their use of social media. According to Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006), the data and findings in HEIs marketing research are disconnected, lacking relevant literature to explain the principle of their services for students and society. HEIs work differently from the conventional business models due to the diverse nature of the serves that concentrate on academic quality and achievements in scientific research (Gibbs, 2002; Anderson, 2008). However, some researchers disagree and

suggest that the conventional business model is also effectively used in higher educational institutions (Klassen, 2002; Helgesen, 2008), especially when facing ethical issues (Gibbs and Murphy, 2009). From the general marketing orientation, building long-term loyalty among customers is a positive and sustainable way of development (McAlexander and Koenig, 2001) whilst achieving customers' needs is the core part in the marketing activities (Andreasen, Kotler and Parker, 2008). However, the difference with conventional business models is that students are not just customers but also can be regarded as consumers in the HEIs marketing (Nicholls et al. 1995). From this perspective, the primary target audiences of HEIs include four groups: current students, new students, graduated students and alumni. The institutions should increase the loyalty of these target groups and try to maintain a positive long-term relationship with them.

Turning to the social media marketing of HEIs in the UK, it is a common phenomenon that target customers get the essential information from the universities' official website and build loyalty by engaging in activities posted on its social media platforms (Royo-Vela and Hünermund, 2016). This is how Newcastle University operates: its website gives links to its social media platforms to engage students in communication in a convenient way as shown in Figure 2.

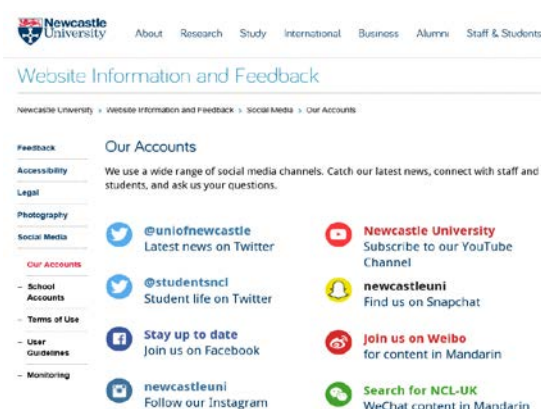


Figure 2: Source: The link of social media platforms shown on the Newcastle University website

Links to Facebook and Weibo used in this study were also acquired from this website. University's activity on social networks should improve its competitiveness in the global HEIs

markets without the funding support of the government (Jongbloed, 2003; Maringe, 2006). It is a driving force for the UK universities to engage with and expand their overseas students market for the sake of obtaining sufficient research resources and maintain a competitive position in the global education market. In other words, it is also a means of self-promotion for universities in response to economic pressure. Nevertheless, scholars object the marketization of HE as it undermines the quality of education and academic research (Anderson, 2008).

At the same time, social media, for example, Facebook, can enhance communication among students during their studies. However, research suggests that only a few students connect to the university's Facebook network (Madge, Meek, Wellens and Hooley, 2009). For this case study, the number of students at Newcastle University's Facebook network was reasonably high. However, most of them are local students. Overall, existing research does not demonstrate specific effects of social media on the recruitment of international in UK HEIs but are indeed widely used mainly for announcement purposes.

2.2 Internal and external communication in HEIs

Internal and external communication is important for promoting the academic level and market visibility of a HEI on a global level. Internal refers to communication between current students and academic staff, external communication has a broad scope that includes potential students and educational stakeholders (Avram, 2015). Both future and present students are crucial to communication as they are regarded as internal and external targets at the same time in the HEIs marketing development (Jongbloed et al., 2008). Several scholars said that creating a positive external communication environment could attract outstanding students and put some universities at an advantage in the global academic markets (Conway et al., 1994; Newson, 2004; Mainardes et al., 2010; Cardoso et al., 2011). In addition, the expectations of

those potential students could be achieved through the external communication processes (Schüller and Chalupský, 2011).

In sum, efficient internal and external communication can promote the universities' development to build a positive academic image for an effective recruitment strategy and a greater competitiveness within global HEIs markets. Newcastle University inevitably uses external and internal communication for achieving a competitive position in the global academic market.

2.3 Overseas students in the UK HEIs

Numbers of overseas students in the UK universities have increased dramatically since the 1990s. Figure 3 shows that employability is a key factor that influences learning the satisfaction of international students along with other criteria, such as course organisation and content, teaching ability and expertise of the academic staff.

Global ISB	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Employability	33%	36%	34%	34%	33%
Course organization	-	34%	33%	33%	33%
Course content	33%	34%	34%	34%	32%
Teaching ability	33%	33%	33%	33%	31%
Expertise of lectures	30%	31%	31%	30%	30%

Figure 3: Source: An overview of the top 5 most important elements in Learning Satisfaction over time (Nilsson and Ripmeester, 2016).

The latest report from the database of Universities UK International (UUKi) suggests that the main reasons for choosing UK universities over other European HEIs for international students include positive contacts, quality lectures, and good infrastructure (see Figure 4).

Undergraduate	Postgraduate (taught)	Postgraduate (research)	Rank	Undergraduate	Postgraduate (taught)	Postgraduate (research)
UK	UK	UK	1	Good contacts	Quality lectures	Laboratories
Germany	Netherlands	Australia	2	Course content	Course organisation	Research
Netherlands	USA	Germany	3	Course organisation	Good teachers	Employability
USA	Germany	USA	4	Quality lectures	Course content	Work experience
Australia	Canada	Canada	5	Good place to be	Employability	Formal welcome

Figure 4: Source: Top 5 reasons why international students choose the UK 2015-16 (University UK International, 2017).

From the perspective of international students, cultural diversity enhances the experiences of domestic students and promotes economic development locally and nationally. According to UUKi, international students positively affect the UK economy (see Figure 5): the total gross value that international students and their visitors produced in 2014-2015 make up £25.8 billion for the UK economy. Because of their positive economic impact, it is essential that universities guide international students and providing a positive intercultural adaptation environment for them by using social media.



Figure 5: Source: Export earnings generated by international students by UK region, 2014-15 (University UK International, 2017).

In addition, Chinese students are the largest group among overseas students as the British Council data suggests (see Figure 6) (HESA, 2018). For this reason, the Weibo social

network was selected for this study. At the same time, overseas students have become a target group over which universities compete as their tuition fees constitute the main fee income source for the UK HEIs that goes towards funding academic research and universities' infrastructure (Harris, 1995).

Country	2016-17	2015-16	2014-15	2013-14
China (PRC)	95,090	91,215	89,540	87,895
Malaysia	16,370	17,405	17,060	16,635
United States of America	17,580	17,115	16,865	16,485
India	16,550	16,745	18,320	19,750
Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region)	16,680	16,745	16,215	14,725
Nigeria	12,665	16,100	17,920	18,020
Saudi Arabia	8,065	8,570	8,595	9,060
Singapore	7,300	7,540	7,295	6,790
Thailand	6,175	6,095	6,240	6,340
Canada	5,915	5,980	6,075	6,350

Figure 6: Source: Overview of top ten Non-EU sending countries in the UK HEIs (HESA, 2018).

In sum, international students are the core customers in the HEIs market. For this reason, universities try to leverage social media sufficiently through posting relevant information on social networks to achieve better communication with them and to maintain a positive brand image of Newcastle University for customers' loyalty reinforcement.

2.4 Facebook, Weibo and the use of hashtags

This section presents the relevant characteristics of Facebook and Weibo. It is known that Facebook has attracted large numbers of real users (Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Cassidy, 2006). According to some previous surveys among college students in the United States, the majority of students prefer Facebook to other social media networks (Dahlstrom, Grunwald, de Boer and Vockley, 2011). Similarly, the most numerous group of Facebook users in the UK are young people (see Figure 7) (Mattis, 2018). For this reason, Facebook was selected for this study as a social network representative of student cohort in the UK HEIs.

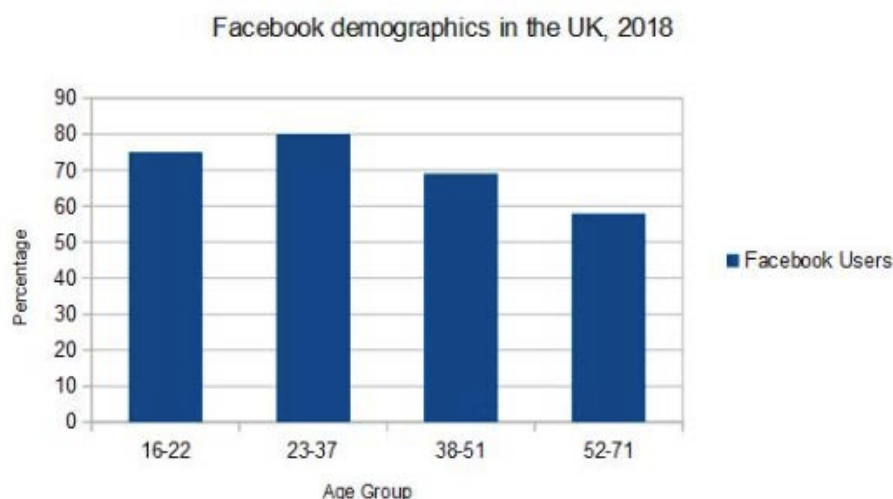


Figure 7: Source: Facebook demographics in the UK in 2018 (Mattis, 2018).

Various functions of Facebook promote cross-regional communication and building friendly relationships online. Indeed, user-to-user interaction is the main function of Facebook. In addition, recent data suggest that most people on Facebook are in the young age group which means they could be university students (Bumgarner, 2007; Mazman and Usluel, 2010). The friendship-building characteristics of Facebook have influenced the communication between Newcastle University and international students as findings of this study show.

Hashtag use on Facebook represents an innovating process of presenting and organising new information. Hashtag represents a # symbol with a keyword. It is usually used to announce or promote an event and to attract participants. In other words, if many people use the hashtag the posts can be aggregated into a frequent topic (Chang, 2010). For Newcastle University's Facebook posts, there are several hashtags used to engage the international students in conversation: for example, #MyNCLPics and #NCLgrad. The specific examples and analysis of hashtag use are discussed in the data analysis section.

Recent data showed that the monthly active users of Weibo reached 411 million in March 2018 (China Internet Watch, 2018). This trend might have motivated Newcastle University to launch the Weibo account for concentrating on potential Chinese students. Importantly, Facebook cannot be used in China due to government policies. Then, Weibo is an

appropriate channel for engaging with prospective Chinese students. The homepage of the University's Weibo page is displayed in Figure 8.



Figure 8: Source: The homepage of Newcastle University' official Weibo account (Newcastle University, 2018).

In sum, this section overviewed previous studies and understandings of HEIs marketing in the social media with a particular focus on international students. Based on this literature review is the research methodology that was designed to answer the research questions for this study.

3. Research Methodology

The macro methodology, or the so-called research onion, adopted for this study is shown in Figure 9 (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). It sets out foundations for conducting the research and provides guidance for interpreting research results (Johnson and Clark, 2006). This study was operated around the research aim and questions to explore how Newcastle University leverage Facebook and Weibo to communicate with international students.

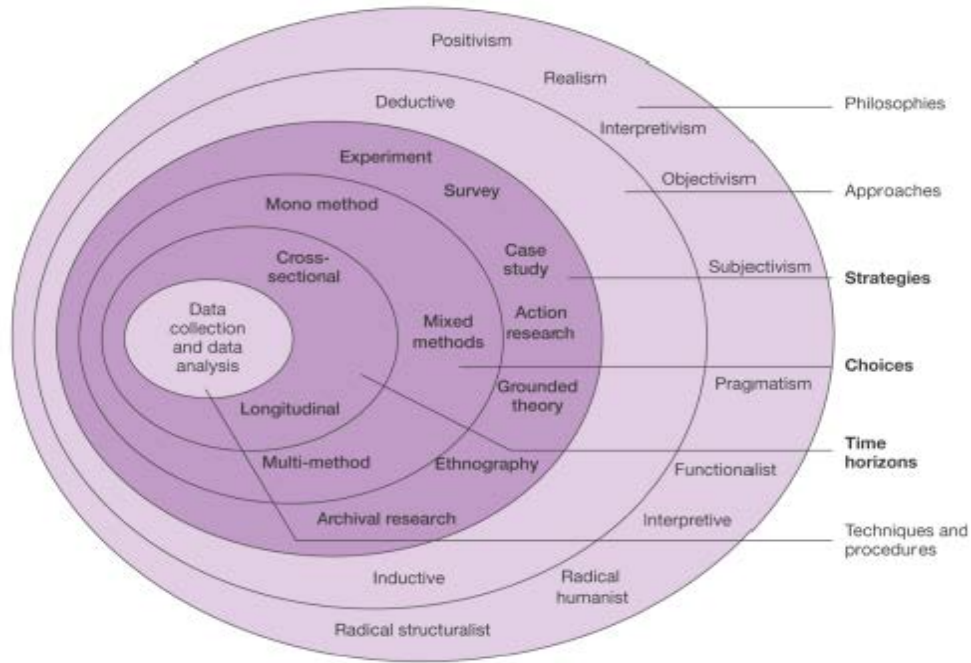


Figure 9: Source: *Research Onion* (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012)

3.1 Research Methods

In this study thematic analysis (TA) was used as a qualitative method to study the relevant posts and comments on Newcastle University's Facebook and Weibo pages. There are four stages of data analysis with TA: data realisation, data coding, theme setting and inspection (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In addition, a portion of data, language-based or visual data can be coded in two cycles. The first cycle serves to determine the basic function of the range of the data that varies from a single word to entire texts; in the second cycle, the analyst extracts those data (Saldaña, 2013). In this research, these two cycles were carried out during the data collection. Also, the coding process was carried out manually as the time and the size of the sample allowed it (Bosit, 2003). For this purpose, Microsoft Word was used to process the manual data preparation for coding. Later, Microsoft Excel was used to transform the data into a visual version for the convenience of the data analysis.

One advantage of TA is that it can be used for studying different types of research questions. This flexibility leads to high adaptability of the methodology with various characteristics of participants: for example, their views, insights and attitudes.

Figure 10 shows six stages of TA as reported in previous studies (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Ritchie et al., 2003; Thomas, 2006; Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2012). However, this is not a definite model as it has developed over time (Anzul et al., 2003; Bryman, 2016). Main categories and themes defined to code the data were taken from the relevant studies summarised in the literature section.

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Figure 10: Source: Phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

In sum, TA is a useful research method for obtaining adequate data for this proposed subject. The researcher would try to maximise the advantages and avoid the mistakes to improve the data consistency in the data collection process.

3.2 Research procedure

The research procedure for this study is summarised in Figure 11. The data was collected from Newcastle University's Facebook and Weibo pages. The total proposed number of selected posts were planned to control around 220 posts due to the limited research time. The number of selected international students' comments resulted from the number of comments under each post. For this reason, the number was uncertain until the end of data collection. For the dataset from Facebook, the posts published between March and July 2018

were collected. For the dataset from Weibo, posts published between February and March 2018 were collected.

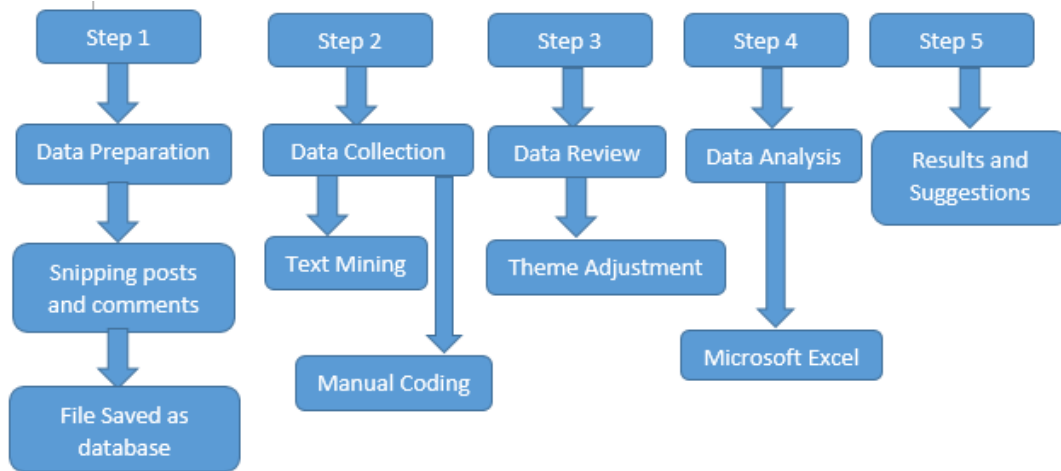


Figure 11: Source: The flowchart of this proposed research

To collect the data, the snipping tool was used to retrieve all the posts and international students' comments manually from Facebook and Weibo and saved into Microsoft Word files. Then, the text mining process was conducted to identify the contents of posts, and students' attitudes in the comments by coding data. Importantly, the text mining process was used to transform the data into a specific format, to classify and integrate the raw data into usable resources. Finally, data review and themes adjustment were necessary to guarantee the reliability and validity of this research.

3.3 Categories

The themes to categorise the data were taken from the seven categories on the official website of Newcastle University: Visions and Values, Reputation and Quality, University Structure, Campuses, Facilitates, Visit Newcastle and History of the University respectively (Newcastle University, 2018). Also, the four main factors mentioned in Section 2.3 were used as second-order categories. Importantly, these were used as the first order categories of this

research; the second order categories were settled depending on the coding results from the collected data.

4. Findings and Discussion

This session presents the findings related to the two main issues that relate to the posts on the University's Facebook and Weibo accounts, and the international students' response to these posts. The total number of posts was 211 and only the findings that help answer research questions are presented here.

4.1 Newcastle University' Posts on Facebook

The total of 171 posts was published by Newcastle University on Facebook from March to July. The representative posts for further analysis were selected based on the first order and second order categories. The results of TA on Facebook posts are summarised in Table 1. Clearly, posts related to governance, announcement and management posts in university structure category were updated frequently by Newcastle University; these made up around 32.75% of the total posts. Also, the hashtag #NCLgrad was also used in this type of posts to promote the attention of international students and announced information efficiently for them to add the post to the bulk of other university-related posts. At the same time, no posts related to travelling to Newcastle city were identified on Facebook. Figure 12 shows the breakdown and total percentages of posts as classified by themes.

Hashtag #MyNCLPics was used in the Newcastle city information posts to promote communication with international students, which made the posts occupied around 16% as the second significant part of the total. According to the first order category, the section of university structure held the most percentage with about 36% among the other seven main categories. This result was consistent with the results in Table 1. However, few posts about

employability and educational quality were posted by the university. This is surprising as employability is one of the main features that boosts satisfaction of international students with the chosen university.

1 st order Category	2 nd order Category	Post amount	Percentage (%)
Vision and Values	Societal problems research and students' achievements	23	13.45%
Reputation and Quality	Student experience and teaching quality	11	6.43%
	Research Excellence	14	8.19%
	Graduate Employability and Careers area	1	0.58%
	QS Stars	2	1.17%
University Structure	Governance, Announcement, and Management	56	32.75%
	Teaching, Research, and sports	6	3.51%
Campuses	Newcastle campus	11	6.43%
Facilities and Students	Campus Buildings	8	4.68%
	Student Life	10	5.85%
Visit Newcastle	Newcastle City Information	27	15.79%
	Travelling to Newcastle	0	0
History of the University	History of the University	2	1.17%
Total		171	100%

Table 1: Source: The results of Newcastle University' Facebook posts between March and July in 2018.

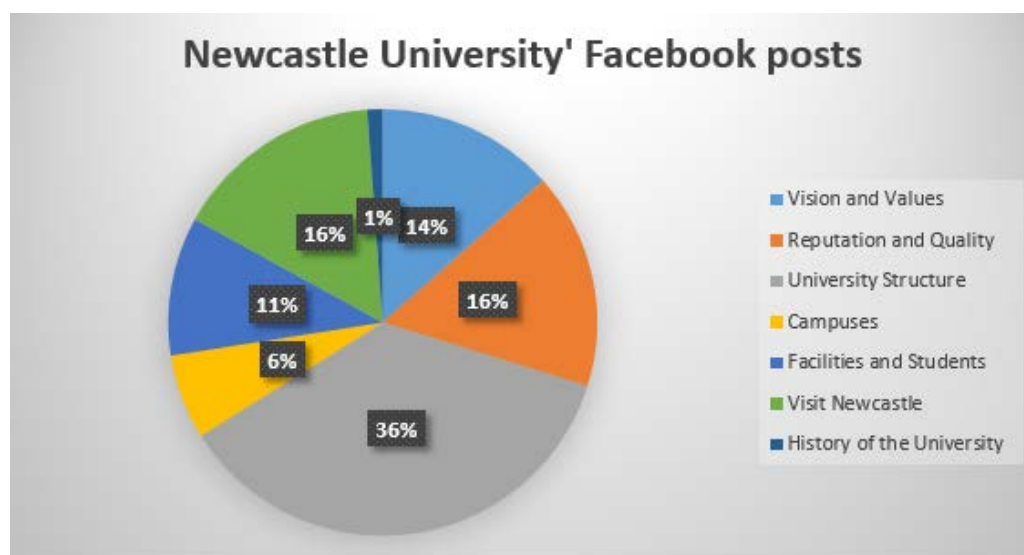


Figure 12: Source: Newcastle University' Facebook posts

According to the previous research findings, Newcastle University would be expected to share more careers development, educational resources and teaching quality content to attract the attention of international students. Also, the data from the figure and table above indicates that Newcastle University over-focuses on the structure of the university as the number of posts in this categories is the highest. Overall, the Facebook account might be used mainly as a tool for the announcement and for marketing among international students rather than for communication.

4.2 Newcastle University' Posts on Weibo

The data from Weibo is summarised in Table 2. The results from Weibo were similar with the results from Facebook. This can probably be explained by the same administrators that work on both networks. The posts about governance, announcement, and management occupied the largest proportion with 30% of the total 40 posts as shown in Figure 13. However, the amounts of student life posts were the second most frequent with 12.5% of the total, which was different in comparison to the analysis of Facebook posts. In this sample, the data shown that university mainly used Weibo as the marketing and publicity channel for Chinese students. In addition, it was a convenient communication method for gathering information about

Chinese students' views on the University's image and a tool to effectively communicate with the potential students from China.

1 st order Category	2 nd order Category	Post amount	Percentage (%)
Vision and Values	Societal problems research and students' achievements	2	5%
Reputation and Quality	Student experience and teaching quality	3	7.5%
	Research Excellence	0	0
	Graduate Employability and Careers area	3	7.5%
	Student Life	0	0
University Structure	Governance, Announcement, and Management	10	25%
	Teaching, Research, and sports	2	5%
Campuses	Newcastle campus	3	7.5%
Facilities and Students	Campus Buildings	3	7.5%
	Student Life	5	12.5%
Visit Newcastle	Newcastle City Information	6	15%
	Travelling to Newcastle	0	0
History of the University	History of the University	3	7.5%
Total		40	100%

Table 2: Source: The results of Newcastle University' Weibo posts between February and March in 2018

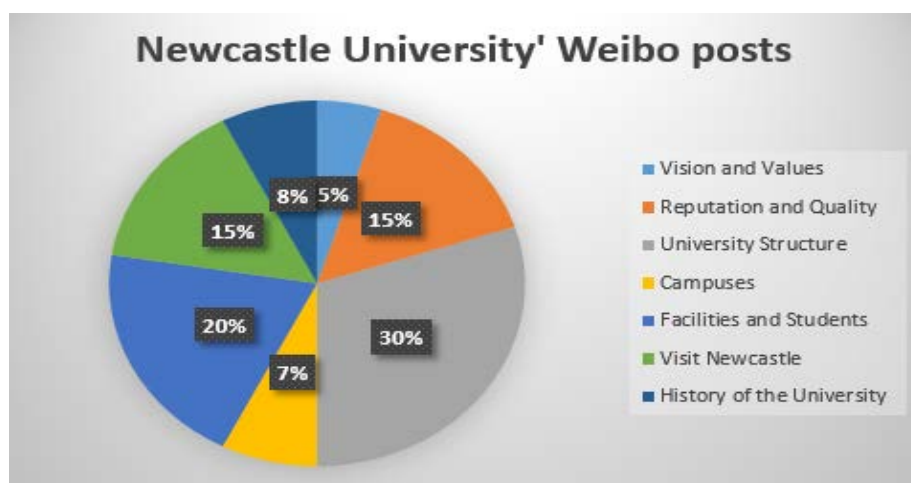


Figure 13: Source: Newcastle University' Weibo posts

4.3 Information about international students as reported in the comments

As the research is focused on international students, it is necessary to refer to their country of precedence.

According to the personal information provided on their Facebook pages, the majority of international students who engaged in commenting come from China and India (see Figure 14). The comments posted by students from the USA ranked the third among the total international students in this study.

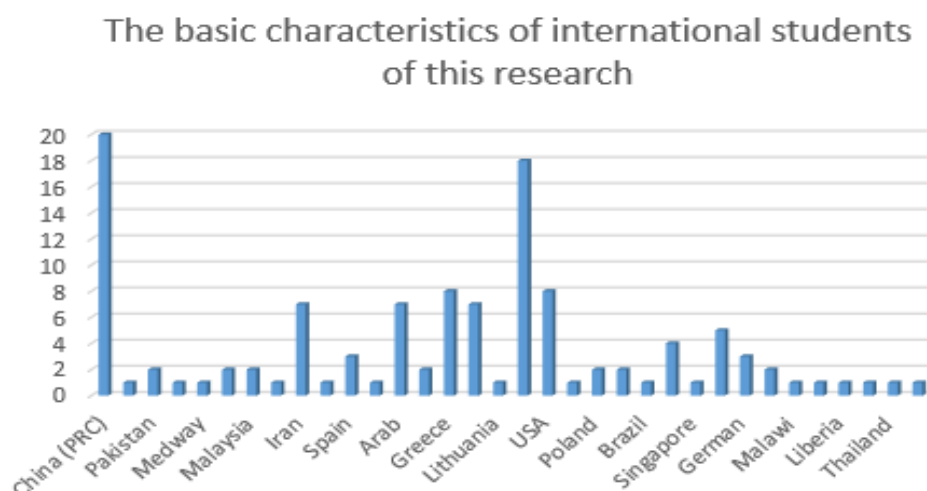


Figure 14: Source: The necessary information for international students based on the comments

The study has shown that Chinese students make up the largest group of the potential international students at Newcastle University. However, it was an unexpected result because

Facebook cannot be used in mainland China due to government policies. It is predicted that Chinese students can still own Facebook account when they are in China by using virtual private network (VPN) technology, which can help private network across a public network (Chen et al., 2000), and provide sufficient network resources for people although the restrictions are in place.

In addition, the comments' analysis shows that intercultural communication occurs between the host country's students and international students. International students need to use mainstream communication tools to adapt to the cultural situation of local students, for example, the social media preferences of local students. Thus, Facebook was regarded as a bridge to build the communication channel for promoting cultural integration and intercultural adaption for Chinese students. This might be the reason why Chinese students make up the largest part of international students' cohort on Newcastle University Facebook account. Regarding the University's efforts to integrate international students, it launched Weibo account for better communication with Chinese students, which also represents a cultural integration strategy by using social media within the HEIs marketing.

4.4 International students comments and their attitudes

The comments of international students were obtained from the Facebook posts and Weibo posts. There were 2262 comments about the Facebook posts from March to July. However, the comments given by international students only made up about 6% of the total. In addition, the comments were selected manually based on the topics related to university structure because these constitute the majority of Facebook and Weibo.

However, the results show that international students did not react frequently: just 18.7% of international students replied to university structure related posts. On the contrary, they were active on the reputation and education quality posts, which related to the ranking

information of the city and the university in particular. International also students responded frequently to the posts about the QS ranking of the university and campuses where they showed their pride in belonging to the university.

Meanwhile, students even referred to the application requirements in the comment section and the University replied to those queries. It is a breakthrough that social media is being used for HEIs marketing. In other words, communication is achieved between the university and international students by using social media, making efforts to avoid the single function of announcement and management that were mentioned before. Moreover, the majority of Chinese students also expressed positive attitudes on Weibo regarding their expectations to receive an offer from the University.

In this sample, the communication on social media appears to turn the direction from university-students interaction to students-students interaction both on Facebook or Weibo. As the purpose of this research was to study how Newcastle University uses social media to communicate with international students, the data showed that university-students interaction was rare despite university's efforts to use social media to attract and even recruit new international students by posting specific posts that target them.

A high frequency of student-to-student interaction took place on Facebook. According to Lin (2002) and Putnam (2004), Facebook can promote the social capital of people that can be traced in their social interactions. Students are likely to interact with other users on Facebook and contribute to the emotional resonance. Also, the friendship-building characteristics of Facebook motivated students to transmit messages to their friends, current international students, alumni or potential new students or to share the university's posts, the process also known as the word-of-mouth (WOM) communication or called electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) on social media platforms. Such publicity helps improve the brand image of Newcastle University as the WOM is considered the most reliable way of communication (Goldsmith and

Horowitz, 2006; Katz, Lazarsfeld and Roper, 2017). It is an assumption that potential target audience may be affected by the WOM from their Facebook friends and be motivated to choose Newcastle University. In sum, the influence of e-WOM among students on social media is hard to measure but Newcastle University might benefit from e-WOM and try to balance the different thematic categories of their posts both on Facebook and Weibo.

4.5 Comparative analysis

As the data was selected from Facebook and Weibo, it was necessary to compare these two social media platforms as they have different cultural backgrounds.

The first difference was that content management was different on Facebook and Weibo. For Weibo, the posts were directly related to the application and relevant details of the requirements for recruiting Chinese students as they are the main target of HEIs marketing. On the other hand, data from Facebook showed that recruitment intentions were implicit and additional information would only be sent to students upon request.

The second difference was that Weibo intended to add more content about important alumni that showed the history of the university as the publicity strategy for Chinese students. However, this rarely occurred on Facebook. The third difference was that the University incorporated references to the Chinese culture by mentioning, for example, Chinese New Year celebrations, China Town, and Chinese cuisine. Interestingly, Weibo page administrators gave their blessings through video posts. This was a unique characteristic of the Weibo page.

The last difference related to the proportion of posts on two social media platforms. Although the University structure-related posts constituted the largest part on both social media platforms, the second most frequent type of posts differed: for example, facilities and students life relation posts covered 20% of the total Weibo posts.

4.6 Summary

According to the findings, the three research questions can be answered with the results presented in the previous section. The posts about university structure were updated frequently by Newcastle University both on Facebook and Weibo, the proportion of announcements and management posts differed across the two. In addition, Newcastle University tended to use Weibo to contribute to the cultural integration of Chinese students to learn about their opinions on the university and to achieve effective communication with them. However, the two social media platforms were both mainly used for announcement purposes or as information distributing platforms. In addition, the main topic of university-to-student communication was around the application process.

The majority of international students showed positive attitudes towards the academic achievements and educational quality posts: for example, ranking information about university was the most frequently commented topic for international students. It is clear that some international students sent queries about the application process directly to the university and also asked about the city life and the university reputation. Meanwhile, the university communicated with these potential students on the social media for purposes of recruiting new students. Interestingly, the effects of e-WOM of students on social media could also contribute significantly to the promotion of the university.

Overall, both Facebook and Weibo can be regarded as a channel of intercultural communication between the university and international students.

5. Limitations

There are two main limitations of this study. The first one has to do with the sample size and the second one with limitations in terms of resources availability.

As for the sample limitation, the focus of this study was the international students that use Newcastle University's social media platforms. However, the identities of those

international students were identified by the researcher of this study only. The profile of those students' Facebook accounts was the single source available which could be unavailable if individuals used privacy protection measures to hide personal information. Although some students used their native language that vaguely points to international students' identity, it still questionable.

In addition, the number of international students might be insufficient because the selected social media tool, Facebook, is used frequently by local students. However, Weibo was used to balance the sample analysed. Nevertheless, the data of this study is skewed towards Chinese students and might not represent the whole international students' cohort thoughts and attitudes towards the university's posts.

Regarding the resource limitations of this research, the study did not include other social media platforms such as Instagram or WeChat, which could also be examined in further research.

6. Conclusion

Although only a few pieces of evidence could support this, it is gratifying to see that communication exists between the university and international students on social media. Data showed that Newcastle University attempts to improve the satisfaction of international students by posting on topics relevant to them such as academic achievements and educational quality issues and replies to their comments.

In conclusion, the research provided some evidence to answer the research questions by analysing a series of qualitative data. Nevertheless, the data showed that the university intended to use social media as the management and information distribution platform for international students. Although a number of posts showed University's intention to interact, their posts rarely focused on communication with students. Also, social media were mainly

used as a recruitment strategy for marketing among international students, which was expected as HEIs need to improve the competitiveness and build a positive brand image in the global academic market.

For this research, it is valuable that other UK HEIs can use it as a guideline for making better communication with their international students. It is suggested that Newcastle University publishes more detailed posts related to the topics relevant to international students such as teaching resources and information on employability. Furthermore, these should also focus on the relationship building and interaction with current students, graduated students, and alumni as they have a positive impact on WOM communication on social media.

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