

# **Radicalising the Marketing of Higher Education: Learning from students-generated social media data**

## **Introduction**

The Higher Education (HE) environment is experiencing a period of great change. Changes to student tuition fees, the de-regulation of student number controls, questions around contact hours and value for money, and trends towards large-scale marketization and viewing the student as the consumer are to mention but a few (Tomlinson, 2016). First research efforts to investigate the consumerism phenomenon in the HE context (Bredo *et al.*, 1993; Connor *et al.*, 1999, Hesketh & Knight, 1999) explored the students' selection behavior towards HE institutions (HEIs). However, since 2005 academics (Naidu and Jamieson, 2005; Prokou, 2008; Sabri, 2011; Macfarlane, 2015) shifted their interest towards understanding the impact of consumerism on students' pedagogic engagement with HE, in particular their teaching and learning experiences. To maximise marketing opportunities HEIs are sought to understand and commit to continuous listening of students' conversations, in which true stories and illustrations of students' relationship with HEIs are revealed (Tomlinson, 2016). In doing so HEIs will optimized marketing impacts through business decision which are based on consumers' data (He et al., 2015).

Tomlinson (2016) highlights that HEIs put less emphasis on understanding how students form their relationships with HEIs. Undoubtedly 21<sup>st</sup> century students are active, digitally savvy choice-makers whose expectations, motives and experiences are socially constructed (Kandiko and Mawer 2013). Social media landscape, therefore, creates opportunities for HEIs to amplify psychological engagement with students and to increase influence impressions by following student(s)-to-student(s) conversations and stories (Ashley and Tuten, 2015). Extensive studies on social media in the HE sector have been conducted (Ngai et al., 2015) with primary focus on exploring the pedagogical value of social media in facilitating learning and supporting teaching practices (). Surprisingly, evidences of understanding how HEIs can utilise students-generated social media data for the HE marketing and branding purposes is underexplored.

This paper adopts a case study research method to illustrate how social media artefacts created by students in the form of dialogues and content can be analysed by the HEIs to listen, engage further and influence students' impressions and views.

## **Theoretical Background**

Recent changes in the HE context towards establishing quasi-public status of HEIs have forced the UK HEIs to reconsider their operational and strategic models and integrate market-driven business practices in order to remain competitive as well as maintain economic viability (Brown and Carasso, 2013; Shattock, 2011; Tomlinson, 2016). One of the recent developments within the market-driven business contexts involves effective leveraging of data and its analytics, which inform further business decisions (Chae, 2015). With the emergence of social media, individuals and consumers are documenting and sharing personal experiences as well as construct full representation of self-identities via living social media footprints on the web (Correa et al., 2010). Hence, social media, defined as technological platforms and channels which enable communication, exchange of data virtually between individuals, groups of individuals anywhere anytime (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2010), is paramount to brands and businesses connecting and interacting with their consumers (Murdough, 2009). Existing research (Hughes and Palen, 2009; Arias et al., 2014;

Inauen and Schoeneborn, 2014; Chae, 2015) reported that data created and shared through social media enables stock price and election predictions, effective crisis and brand management, as well as diffusion of information and monitoring of social influence impressions.

Undoubtedly 21<sup>st</sup> century students are active, digitally savvy choice-makers whose expectations, motives and experiences are socially constructed (Kandiko and Mawer 2013). Nevertheless the HE context is slower in recognising the value of social media for the HE marketing and branding purposes, with business decisions being underpinned by students-generated data.

So far social media use in the context of education has been investigated with the focus on adopting social media for teaching and learning purposes, where extensive studies have been conducted (Ngai et al., 2015). The pedagogical power of social media in enabling collaborative learning represent the main focus of existing research (Hussain, 2012; Kassens-Noor, 2012; Cao et al., 2013; Deng and Tavares, 2013). In addition, growing number of academic studies (Baird and Fisher, 2006; Pektaş and Gürel, 2014) demonstrates the value of social media in facilitating blended learning experiences, within which social media represents the context for delivering the HE. Despite numerous attempts to integrate social media in the delivery of HE, its use for the branding and marketing purposes is not explored or recognised by the HEIs. To the authors' knowledge no published study reports on experiences in listening and learning from students-generated social media data. This study, therefore, addresses this gap in the marketing and educational literature by presenting and analysing the case study that can raise HE marketers' interest and start academic conversations.

## **Method**

This study employed a case study method which investigates numeric and qualitative in nature data; therefore, adopting various methods of data analysis amongst which are netnography (Kozinets, 2010) and social media data analytics. Students-generated data is collected using the social media artefact, TIWIS Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/This-Is-Where-I-Study-351708698330262/>

The illustrative case: TIWIS stands for 'This Is Where I Study', which is a Bournemouth University-led collaborative journalism and marketing project. TIWIS is essentially a 'social journalism' artefact that caters to international students seeking to study in UK universities. TIWIS utilised social media and marketing expertise of Bournemouth University journalism and marketing staff and students to produce reportage that prospective foreign students can draw from. Anecdotal evidence in recent years identifies a gap: while there is plenty of 'official' information about UK universities, these do not always answer some fundamental questions. TIWIS has helped remedy this by allowing for a student-led production—essentially, encouraging students to create the kind of content they want. International students also highlight the value they place on 'word of mouth'. TIWIS addressed this by creating a dedicated place for relevant 'social recommendations' on aspects of HE/student life that is easily accessible and, importantly, socially shareable. BU students worked with teams from other institutions for content production. The BU journalism team was drawn from MA Multi-Media Journalism students and the marketing team drawn from MSc Marketing Management students. The ultimate intention of the TIWIS project was to create students-related and relevant content with intention to stimulate continuous students' conversations which will, firstly, benefit and improve experiences of international students studying in the

UK and, secondly, enable generation of students-generated data that can be analysed and underpin the UK marketing initiative as well as other business decisions.

Facebook metadata: Facebook is undoubtedly most popular and widely used social media site. Facebook technical capabilities enable users to create personal (personal accounts), social (groups and pages) and professional (brand and community pages) spaces (Debatin et al., 2009). To date Facebook has over 1.35 billion users making it the most populated social media site. Facebook users share, create and consume content of various formats, such as text, images, videos, audio including live-streamed audio and textual conversations (Smith et al., 2012). Hence, TIWIS has found its residence on Facebook which, given its popularity and usage statistics worldwide, which will maximise reach for the students-generated social media content. The following description illustrates the aim and focus of the TIWIS Facebook page:

*This page is for students looking to study in UK universities. All the stuff you wanted to know about student life in Britain, that REALLY cool, important, EXISTENTIAL stuff—well, that’s what we aim to publish here. Nightlife, best coffee houses, safe places to live; cost of lunch, part-time jobs, great picnic spots... If there’s anything you can’t find here, do ask, and we will try our darnedest to report on that. We? Who are ‘we’? And what is TIWIS, really? TIWIS stands for This Is Where I Study, and it is a Bournemouth University-led project, in partnership with the University of Sheffield. It is an experiment in ‘social journalism’, which we see as participatory, community-driven, highly shareable content produced explicitly for engagement on social media. We hope to produce journalism that will be of use to prospective students, particularly those from abroad. We hope to provide existing students an opportunity to play with new ways of storytelling, of exploring the potential of social media to create interesting narratives.*

Images represent main format of content for the TIWIS team of students. Images/photos are known best to provoke further conversations and stimulate users to generate and share own content (). Photo albums represented different themes/areas of interest for the target audience – international students studying in the UK. These themes derived from secondary and primary data analysis, which comprised interviews, and focus group conversations with international students as well social media analytics of popular among international students web search terms. The following themes were identified:

- Tales from Britain - collates tales of studentship in Great Britain: What is it to live here? How is it to study? What is expected of you? Voices from across UK;
- Best 4 places to go for a coffee on a cold day: Tips for best places to visit in terrible rainy British weather;
- Fantastic places: places to be visited around the UK;
- Scholarships: intended at prospective students who would like to learn about obtaining and applying for scholarships;
- Specific University-branded content: overview of the HEIs as well as experiential stories of students.

Each image within the album is accompanied by short story which reflects the essence of the image and allows students to engage with topics beyond selected themes, to name few, food, social life, love, learning, friendships etc.

Data Analysis: Based on formats of data generated by Facebook, the following three analytical steps were performed (adapted from Chae (2015)):

1. Descriptive analysis – Facebook data contain a large amount of information, including metadata (e.g., information on page fans) and posts, all of which are descriptive in nature, to name few, number of posts, types of content, distribution of different types of content, number of hashtags.
2. Content analysis – Facebook enables social dialogues, commentary using not only reaction and engagement-measuring tools (i.e. likes, shares etc.) but also using written communication and emoji symbols which are capturing the essence of social media conversations as well as represent the richest in nature data. Hence, qualitative data mining is critical to extract relevant and important data.
3. Network analysis – due to various formats of data sharable via Facebook, there are also various ways to measure engagement with the content as well as among fans/users, i.e. post reach, page reach, number of likes, number of shares, post clicks.

## **Results**

The TIWIS Facebook page itself is the primary platform for dissemination, given its value to the 300,000-plus international students looking at the UK. To date, the page has attracted more than 15,000 likes. From students’ perspective TIWIS led to the enhanced student experience of the BU students who were directly involved, as well as the students from collaborating universities. It has provided experiential and work-based learning for journalism and marketing students. Students were determined to create relevant content, and developed critical thinking skills in the process. From educators’ perspective, TIWIS enabled, firstly, professional development, which included both learning about different teaching approaches but also engaging with new media technologies, and, secondly, opportunities to engage listen to students-generated stories that indicate students’ interests as well illustrate students’ engagement and experiences with HE.

Table 1 illustrates main results of students-generated social media data analysis with a particular emphasis on findings which assist the marketing of HE.

<b><u>Type of Data Analysis</u></b>	<b><u>TIWIS metadata</u></b>	<b><u>Implications for the HE marketing</u></b>
<b><u>I. Descriptive analysis</u></b>	Images – average reach = 1,042 with on average 85 clicks per image and 19 comments per image post	Images are most popular type of content, which enable further commentary, interaction, and engagement with various themes. Hence, HEIs’ social media content is best to utilise image formats.
	Videos – average reach = 567 with on average 17 clicks and 7 comments per video post	
	Written posts – average reach = 327 on average per post and 7 clicks and 1 comment on average per post	
<b><u>II. Content analysis</u></b>	Main popular themes and conversations based on analysis of post with the highest reach (based on correlation between likes and clicks):	Cultural differences are highlighted as main subject of conversations among international students, which primarily indicate interest in the UK culture, unpleasant

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cultural differences in learning approaches</li> <li>- Cultural differences in lifestyle</li> <li>- Extra-curricular activities, i.e. sport, art, etc.</li> </ul>	<p>experiences with discovering differences as well as understanding what can be experienced beyond teaching and learning context. Overall analysis indicates important messages for these promoting and marketing the UK HE to international students – the need to portray the UK learning experience as journey which integrates all aspects of students’ lives, social, learning etc. Students are clearly making choices beyond simple focus on subjects, reputation of individual HEIs.</p>
<b><u>III. Network analysis</u></b>	Men vs woman = 77% of fans vs 23% of fans; however, woman are more inclined to comment and share the content (10% higher than man)	<p>It is important to create social media marketing content, which encourages shares to enable eWOM and further engagement with the content. This is due to social media being effective in maximising psychological engagement with the prospective students who are better to understand motives, needs and goals linked with HE from current students.</p>
	Average age group of fans – 18-24 with 46% of them liking the page (becoming the fan) based on content shared via their social circle of Facebook friends	
	Most fans engage with the post via means of likes (54 per post on average), followed by shares and comments (for both 3 on average per post).	

### **Conclusion**

The case study of TIWIS illustrates how in practice HEIs can learn from the students-generated social media content by performing three-step analysis of social media data. Most important implication for the HE marketers to leverage students-generated social media data is maximising psychological engagement with HE related experiences and hence increasing influence impressions. However, in doing so HEIs, following experiences of the market-driven businesses, need to collaborate with student(brand) personas who in authentic way can endorse their positive HE experiences and, therefore, increase social impressions. Learning from TIWIS, social endorsement can also have a group-based collaborative partnership where HEIs can collaborate with students with intention to create similar artefacts. In such manner HEIs ensure access to the content as well as enable collaborative work-based learning for

students who organise, participate and lead the management, distribution and creation of content. Kuh (2008) identified a variety of high-impact pedagogic strategies which adopt a culture around active learning. These strategies encourage student autonomy and embed a culture of working with students as partners; co-creating, co-designing and co-developing learning. The suggested programme will embed three of these strategies: Intellectual experiences, collaborative assignments and projects, and diversity/global learning. The TIWIS project contributed to unlocking the experience of staff and students by quickly creating a platform for collaboration and co-creation where previously, barriers may have prevented such developments from occurring. By promoting the autonomy of the international student, and increasing their capacity for it, students are better prepared for enhanced learning.

TIWIS case illustrates that nurturing, belonging and providing the appropriate tools for integration is crucial for international students to thrive. Adapting to western culture of learning is challenging and often very different to previous experiences as not all cultures work toward a linear logic. Many students get lost during this process or alternately search for 'harmony' rather than the search for truth which is so prevalent in western learning. Adjustment and adaptation for the international student is often a tricky process and HE is a journey of self-discovery. Developing and embedding a supportive and encouraging environment is crucial for the retention and wellbeing of the students, and international students in particular.

Overall TIWIS case study demonstrates the value in the HEIs adopting market-driven business practices and attempting to listen to and leverage students-generated social media content.

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