

Chapter 9

Higher Education Marketing: A Study on the Impact of Social Media on Study Selection and University Choice

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ABSTRACT

The importance of the Internet as commercial platform is by now universally recognized, and businesses increasingly adopt online marketing channels at the cost of traditional ones. The social media, being second generation (Web 2.0) internet applications, allow interaction, one-to-one communication, customer engagement, and user generated content. The interest of higher education institutions in social media as part of the marketing toolkit is increasing, but little is known about the potential of these channels in higher education marketing strategies. Even less is known about the role of social media as influencers of future students in the choice of study and university. This article presents the results of a study identifying the role and importance of social media on the choice of future students for a study and university in comparison with the traditional university marketing channels in the Netherlands. The study identifies and describes three market segments among future students based on their use of the social media.

INTRODUCTION

Social media, a term describing a wide range of a new generation internet applications, has been the issue of intense debate and commercial interest. Central themes in this debate are the effects of the social media on human behavior (Barker, 2009; Kolbitsch & Maurer, 2006), their aptitude as educa-

tional environments (Augustsson, 2010; Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010), and their potential as marketing instruments (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Ghauri, Lutz, & Tesfom, 2003; Kim, Jeong, & Lee, 2010; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Spaulding, 2010). Press articles, research papers and special journal issues around the subject are increasing, yet little attention has so far been paid to

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the areas of behavioral analysis and classification of the social media users. While the social media movement is a relatively recent phenomenon the rate of adoption by both the public and businesses is staggering. According to a recent Pew Research Center report (Zickuhr, 2010) 83% of Americans between 18 and 33 years old are already users of Social Networking Sites (SNS). A study done by Statistics Netherlands (2011) showed that 91% of Dutch youths between 16 and 25 years old were active on SNS in 2010. Forrester Research (Young et al., 2007) predicted a fast growth of global commercial spending on social media technologies (43% increase per year) reaching \$ 4.6 billion in 2013. A study by JungleMinds (Koster & Van Gaalen, 2010) showed that 83% of Dutch businesses engaged in social media marketing and eMarketer (2010) estimated that 80% of the U.S. businesses with more than 100 employees will use social media tools for marketing purposes in 2011. This percentage will increase to 88% in 2012 in America, whilst in many countries in Europe and elsewhere the penetration of social media follows similar trends. It is obvious that the social media has attracted the interest of business strategists and is increasingly considered as part of the business marketing strategy.

Research in university recruitment has shown the potential of marketing when used by higher education institutions as a student recruitment tool (Gibbs, 2002; Helgesen, 2008; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). A key theme of research in this field is the marketing communication, where gaps between the information that potential students want and the information provided by universities in their traditional forms of communications have been identified (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). These gaps indicate room for improvement in the field of marketing communication for higher education. Engaging with social media as a higher education marketing tool is an attractive proposition, because of the positive business experience on the effects of social media marketing and the high

adoption rate of the social media by the younger generation (Boyd, 2008). Improved communications, customer engagement and increasing brand loyalty have been identified as outcomes of this form of marketing. It is reasonable to assume that engagement of social media applications as part of university marketing could contribute to increased enrolment numbers and help prospective students make better-informed decisions regarding their study choice and university selection. However, little is known about how future university students use the social media and what impact the social media have on the decision making process of future students regarding their choice for a study and university. In the Netherlands in particular, there are some initiatives by higher education institutions on social media. Nevertheless, there is little published research so far on this specific issue.

This study aims to provide information about the future university student market regarding their use of the social media. Such knowledge is important for the development or improvement of social media based marketing strategies complementing traditional recruitment strategies, in order to address the existing communication issues and improve student recruitment effectiveness. Three objectives will guide the study:

1. Describe the future student population in the Netherlands by identifying market segments based on their social media use,
2. Explore the influence of the social media on the choice of study and university in relation to traditional communication tools,
3. Explore the relation between factors influencing the choice of university and social media use.

This exploratory study based on a national survey attempts to develop a research methodology that can be easily duplicated in other national markets.

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