Article

Understanding the Role of Social Media on Prospective Local and International Students' Selection of University

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Abstract: Universities globally utilise social media platforms to disseminate information to prospective students. However there's a scarcity of research regarding the role of social media in promoting universities as international education hubs, especially in Asia. This study aims to investigate the impact of social media in promoting Asian universities, focusing on the preferences and behaviours of prospective undergraduate students from Malaysia and Indonesia. A qualitative research approach was employed, involving the recruitment of 12 undergraduate students from both countries. Data collection was conducted through online, in-depth, and semi-structured interviews. The majority of participants rely on social media platforms to gather information about potential universities and courses, citing ease of navigation and appeal compared to traditional websites and other platforms. However, universities demonstrate a lack of engagement with users, hindering the acquisition of comprehensive information about the institution. These findings offer valuable insights for universities to understand the information and social media elements that prospective students commonly seek on social media platforms. Additionally, they provide guidance on effective strategies for engaging with and recruiting students. Ultimately, this research may assist universities in better promoting themselves as international education institutions, particularly in the Asian context.

Keywords: Education; international; promotion; social media; universities

Introduction

In an increasingly competitive global market, social media has been an important tool for universities to disseminate targeted information to the public, establish brand awareness, and build relationships with prospective international students (Motta & Barbosa, 2018; Quijada et al., 2021). Thousands of universities across the globe are continuously finding themselves competing with one another to promote their brands and activities as well as recruit highly motivated prospective students through social media (Motta & Barbosa, 2018). This is because a university's online presence reflects its ranking, quality, and image (Irfan et al., 2018). Often, prospective students are attracted to institutions that are visible and, more importantly, whose information is easily accessible. Furthermore, the decision to select an institution is generally influenced by a number of "push and pull" factors that drive students to leave their home countries to pursue an education abroad (Banjong & Olson, 2016). In more recent research, it was found that social networking sites like Facebook, owned by universities, act as a forum or platform for parents and students to learn more about

universities and, at the same time, encourage the enrolment process of these higher education institutions because social media like Facebook or even Twitter are considered both social media and social networking tools used to engage with the public (Irfan et. al, 2018). Hence, social media is used to communicate these strengths to the relevant audiences.

Past research reveals that social media plays an important role in education as a conduit for delivering knowledge in teaching and learning as well as a tool to promote the higher education institution itself (e.g., Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Veletsianos et al., 2017). However, the focus within the literature has mainly looked at Western universities such as the United States (Kimmons, Veletsianos & Woodward, 2017; Shields & Peruta, 2018), United Kingdom (Yu, Foroudi & Gupta, 2019), Canada (Bélanger, Bali & Longden, 2014; Veletsianos et al., 2017) and Australia (Palmer, 2013). As a result, relatively little is known about how Southeast Asian universities use social media to promote their universities. Not many universities are able to maintain their position in global rankings and as preferred higher education providers. Therefore, being visible to the public is as important as being comprehensive. With limited resources, scarce funds, and budget cuts, universities have no choice but to lean on technology to aid in reaching out to various stakeholder groups. Social media helps create visibility and awareness; thus, this study will look at the role of social media for promotional activities in higher education institutions, mainly in Malaysia and Indonesia.

The current research addresses these gaps and explores how and why social media is important in helping promote higher education institutions, especially in Asian countries, to global audiences. More specifically, we sought to answer the following questions: 1) Why are social media platforms important in promoting higher education institutions locally and internationally? and 2) How can higher education institutions utilise social media to attract local international potential students?

Literature Review

1. Social Media

Social media has been defined as web-based 'communication and information channels in which active consumers engage in behaviours that can be consumed by others both in real time and long afterwards, regardless of their special location' (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010, p. 312). Social media encompasses a wide range of sites including social networking sites and blogs such as Twitter and Facebook (Siddiqui & Singh, 2016). Over the years, social media is increasingly being used as a marketing platform in the era of digitalisation (Drummond, O'Toole & McGrath, 2020). Also, social media can be used to help individuals and organisations create, view, extract, and share a variety of information and other forms of expression through the use of virtual communities and networks (Kapoor et al., 2018).

Statistics suggest that the number of global social media users had increased from 4.59 billion in 2022 to 4.89 billion in January 2023 (Statista, 2023). By the year 2027, the number is expected to increase to 5.85 billion users (Statista, 2023). Among its users, 1.02 billion are from China, approximately 755 million from India, 302 million from Indonesia, and 217 million from Indonesia (Statista, 2023). Social networking and communication applications also recorded some changes in usage for Malaysians between 2018 and 2020. The Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) found that an estimated 88.7% of the Malaysian population are internet users, and of this number, 93% were social networking site users using either Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn, and other sites (MCMC, 2020). In terms of age, it was found that in the year 2021, a third of online users worldwide were between 25 and 34 years (Statista, 2023). A total of 22.8% were users between 18 to 24 (Statista, 2023).

As social media usage continues to grow and change each day, educational institutions must continue to engage in two-way communication with their wide range of audiences: current and prospective students, staff, industries, and more. Social media is known as a useful platform to share key messages about the university, such as the university's current achievements, students' experiences, and other stories that reflect the university's core values (Farinloye et al., 2020). Also, social media is a useful tool to keep connections alive with the university's alumni (Farinloye et al., 2020).

2. The Use of Social Media as a Promotional Tool

Over the years, social media platforms have been actively used by universities across the globe (Brech et al., 2017; Kimmons, Veletsianos & Woodward, 2017; Le, Dobele & Robinson, 2019). Typically, social media sites used by universities to promote their brand are for the public to view and communicate with the social media administrators or with other users (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Palmer, 2013). Asderaki and Maragos (2012) concluded that the major issue that should be highlighted is the misperception that social networking sites per se could be considered a panacea due to both their popularity and accessibility. However, on the contrary, the use of social media is not a one-way path to success. It is one of multiple channels to reach and attract prospective students, and it needs to be well integrated into a broader promotional strategy built on certain goals and specific target audiences (i.e. young students, adult lifelong learners, and professionals) (Asderaki & Maragos, 2012).

Higher education institutions all over the world are becoming more aware of the potential of social networking as a marketing and recruitment tool as well as a catalyst for strategic change in the education industry. The use of social networks to further marketing objectives is becoming more and more obvious in a variety of industries, and the education sector is no exception (Rutter, Roper & Lettuce, 2016). Higher education institutions use this technology to accomplish their marketing objectives, as well as for recruitment, admissions, communicating with students and stakeholders, fundraising, student-teacher connections, and primarily to increase their competitiveness. In a research conducted by Brech et al. (2017), they suggested that universities often rely on Facebook to promote their brands.

Going global is no longer an option if universities are to survive and thrive as the preferred education provider. Internationalisation is a considerable part of the modern higher education policy agenda at the global, regional, national, and institutional levels (Asderaki & Maragos, 2012). For instance, in Malaysia, it is expected that university enrolment of international students is to quadruple from 1.8 million in 2000 to 7.2 million in 2025 due to the ongoing strategies and policies implemented in the country (Asari, Muhamad, Khalid, 2017). Aderaki and Maragos (2012) indicated that internationalisation policies include marketing strategies, enhancement of higher education institutions' attractiveness and reputation, development of cross-border cooperation, and academic networks. Therefore, recruitment of international students is another area of social media use that may have an impact on the universities' educational approach.

In a study conducted by Zhu (2019), the researcher found that universities in the United Kingdom use Weibo and WeChat to actively attract and recruit Chinese international students. Findings suggest that interaction and public replies to followers can generate trust and create electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM) to attract more users to follow the universities' social media accounts (Zhu, 2019). Another study that was conducted among postgraduate international students at an Australian university indicated that students use Facebook and YouTube, as well as blogs, to search for information about the universities and courses to which they intend to apply (Galan, Lawley & Clements, 2015).

In another research done by Constantinides and Stagno (2011), they suggested that social media is a crucial instrument for reaching and attracting prospective students in higher education. Potential students who are typically between the ages of 15 and 19 and who belong to the Millennial generation—a group that is well-versed in technology and heavily reliant on social media—have a very high social media penetration rate. According to Barnes and Mattson (2009), a significant number of universities engage in recruitment initiatives using social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook, though to various degrees of proactivity. Given that a prior study shows that prospective students mostly use social media for information-seeking (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011). In another study conducted by Vrontis and colleagues (2018), they also found that students use social media networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube to search for information on colleges, universities, and courses. Despite the widely usage of social media among universities especially in Western countries, a study conducted by Shields and Peruta (2018) found that social media did not impact university students' decision to select the university however, they used social media to learn more about the universities that they were considering.

Even so, social media has been seen as a crucial platform for a university's marketing and recruitment efforts because these activities can directly affect the institution's success and have an impact on educational

policy. Anyangwe (2011) contends that an institution's success is more closely related to its online marketing initiatives. Wootton (2011) suggested that for-profit universities in particular will increasingly rely on online marketing as a strategic tool for attracting new students. Hayes, Ruschman and Walker (2009) also added that based on their study on how universities use social networking as a marketing tool, there is a strong correlation between people who are logged into social networks and their propensity to apply to the institution in question. In another study conducted by Galan, Lawley and Clements (2015), they indicated that education marketers need to engage more actively on social media. Hence, Wheeler (2012) added that social media marketing and recruiting for overseas students are essential. Thus, using social networking can give universities a more successful way to attract students from outside.

Methodology

1. Research Design
This study was conducted using the qualitative research method. The researchers recruited 12 undergraduate students (six Malaysian and six Indonesian) from Malaysia and Indonesia to seek a deeper understanding of their perceptions regarding the role and contributions of university's social media platforms when attracting potential local and international students. The participants were all selected using the purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling is a method for identifying and selecting participants who are proficient and well-informed about a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Clark, 2011). This method was selected on the basis that it will allow the researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the reasons why prospective international students rely on social media when selecting their potential university and ways to improve the university's social media platforms to attract future students.

2. Data Collection Process
Prior to conducting the virtual in-depth interviews, participants were give a brief description of the study for the purpose of informed consent, and their permission to record the interviews was obtained. Interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes in duration. Participants were explicitly informed of the voluntary nature of their participation and were assured the freedom to discontinue at any point. Any queries regarding the study were addressed before the interviews commenced.

3. Participants
During the interviews, participants were posed with various questions, including inquiries such as, "Before pursuing your studies, where did you get the information about the potential university and courses?" and "Did social media influence your choice?" Additionally, questions were posed to elicit insights into elements on social media platforms that could aid universities in attracting international students, as well as perspectives on the importance of regularly updating university social media platforms such as, "What are the elements on social media that could help universities attract international students? and "Do you believe regularly updating the university's social media platforms are important?"

4. Data Transcription Process
Throughout the transcription process, all participants' identities were anonymised through the use of pseudonyms to safeguard their privacy. Moreover, any mentions of specific universities were redacted to maintain anonymity. In this study, the code "IP" signifies Indonesian participants, where as "MP" denotes Malaysian participants.

5. Data Analysis
For this research, the researchers employed the thematic analysis to analyse the data. The transcripts were thematically analysed firstly using an open coding process that focused on building larger themes and descriptions. This was followed by axial coding where the codes were linked to conceptual bins. Next, selective coding was conducted where the researchers integrated and refined the data. Any codes that were

either redundant or overlapped with one another, were reduced and this led to the identification of two themes which are: (1) The use of social media by local and international students; and (2) Ways to appeal to potential local and international students on social media.

Findings
During the data analysis, two main themes were identified, and they are: 1) The use of social media by local and international students, and 2) Ways to appeal to potential local and international students on social media.

1. The Use of Social Media By Local and International Students
For this code, the researchers divided it into two sub-themes to illustrate the reason participants rely on social media to make informed decisions about the university and courses that they would like to pursue their studies. The first sub-theme being i) *Getting regular updates*, and the second sub-theme being ii) *Easier to navigate and more attractive.* This code is used when participants talked about the reason why they turn to social media when choosing the right university. Examples of response include: *"...going through the website to find information on the courses and others can be hard... Social media would be a much better option".*

Getting Regular Updates
Based on the findings, the participants indicated that it is crucial for universities to have an active presence online. All of the participants are active on social media and they indicated that although they use social media to network with friends and family, social media is also used as a news source. A few of the participants did mention that they were influenced by their friends and family when they were making a decision to choose the right university. However, the majority of the participants did admit that social media played an important role in the decision-making process. They often refer to the university's social media platforms to get regular updates on the courses the university offers, and to also see what the university organises on a daily basis. One of the Indonesian participants (IP1) for instance, said that:

> *"Yes, I check the social media because I want to know how the university is actually doing in the current time and I would like to know the newest program of the university. Moreover, I believe that when an institution have a good branding on social media, it shows that the university is approachable and open for sharing information."*

Another Indonesian participant (IP3) had also indicated that he was influenced by the information shown on the university's social media such as Instagram. He said:

> *"...I first searched for information about [the university] and the easy way is to search on social media such as Instagram. In this way, I have more information about [the university] and am more enthusiastic about participating in the program."*

A Malaysian participant also had a similar view (MP1). She believes that social media influenced her choice in furthering her studies at her current university and that social media helped shed the light on the true image of the university. She added, "All in all, my choice of furthering my study is not merely driven by its ranking but its reputation that is being perceived by social media." Another student (MP2) said:

> *"Through social media, I can read other people's thoughts and feedback related to studying in [the university]. In social media, people often share their honest opinions on certain issues which is a leading point so people can set their expectations on certain things."*

MP3 also commented in length:

> *"I believe that regularly updating the university's social media platforms is important as people, especially students, will see that the account is active and there's initiatives or opportunities that they can seek throughout*

the posts made on social media. Seeing that going through the website to find information on the courses and others can be hard. I believe that regularly updating the information in regards to the course on social media would be a much better option."

Although the majority of the students had indicated that they were influenced by social media when choosing the right university, two participants were influenced by their friends and family. Even so, both of the participants did mention that social media remains an important platform for potential international students to get regular updates and help them make informed decisions. Furthermore, they used social media to learn more about the university of their choice. For instance, MP4 replied:

"Social media does not influence my choice in pursuing my studies in the current university. The university has always been a choice for me due to the variety of courses offered. Another factor is that most of my family members went to the university, and seeing the syllabus and subjects offered is good, it gives a strong reason for me to choose the university."

Easier to Navigate and More Attractive
The participants had also indicated that social media platforms were easier to navigate compared to university websites. The layout of the university websites are often different from one university to another. Although social media platforms can contain limited information, the contents and postings made by the university allows them to view what is in store for them if they were to select the university as their preferred choice. Postings are also often direct to the point with less number of pop ups and buttons to click.
One of the Indonesian participants (IP3) felt that social media is easier to use to search for information. He explained that when he first searched for information about a university in Malaysia, he went straight to the university's social media platforms such as Instagram. The videos and images posted attracted him to further his studies at the university. MP3 on the other hand mentioned that social media platforms such as the university's Facebook page sparked her interest. She described the attractive posting on the page about the university's campus life and student experience shaped her decision to pursue her studies at the university.

2. Ways to Appeal to Potential Local and International Students on Social Media
For the second theme, the researchers divided it into three sub-themes to present the suggestions made by the participants to increase the visibility of social media postings among potential international students. The sub-themes are "Language used", "Regular postings" and "Two-way interactions". This code on the other hand is used when the participants talked about how universities could attract potential local and international students on social media. Examples of responses include: *"Try to be more engaging on Twitter since this generation leans more towards Twitter".*

Language Used
Although the majority of the participants did rely on social media to select their choice of university and course, however, they did suggest some of the ways to improve the university's social media accounts in order for it to be more appealing to potential local and international students. One of them is the language used in their postings. Out of the 12 participants, four of them had indicated that some of the universities in Malaysia and Indonesia use the Malay or Indonesian language in their postings. They believe that it can be difficult for international students to get information and potentially lead them to choosing a different university to pursue their studies. For instance, one of the Indonesian participants (IP2) had suggested for a university in Malaysia to use English in their postings. She highlighted that she found it hard for her to understand the language and find necessary information.

"I think universities should use English in their social media platforms. Honestly, it is a disadvantage for international students to understand the information in [university's name undisclosed] social media, because from what I observed, mostly it uses the Malay language and we hardly understand it. So we end up understanding the information only by the visual icon, vector or stickers." (IP2)

Another Indonesian student (IP5) had indicated that the use of English language for the content or caption as translation is needed if the local language is being used so that it can help international students to understand the content further. Two other Malaysian participants also felt the same way. For example, MP5 felt that postings in English could help attract more international students. She said, "Postings in English may help in attracting more international students to be interested in pursuing their studies here." The other participant (MP2) said:

> *"[The university] uses Malay languages the medium on social media to disseminate information. Postings in English may help in attracting more international students to be interested in pursuing their studies here."*

Two other participants (MP4 and MP6) who highlighted the language used in the social media postings by the university had also suggested for universities to use "formal but at the same time easy to understand language" and "...the writing cannot be too lame. It needs to have a lively element in it so it won't feel like a one way communication."

Regular Postings
Another important suggestion by the participants was for universities to regularly post on their social media. All of the participants agreed that regular postings, especially those that are interesting, can attract many potential international students. For instance MP3 and MP6 indicated that the new generation relies on social media to find information and that those who are interested in the university will anticipate new updates from the university's social media platforms. Another student explained (MP5) that frequent updates on social media can attract potential students to learn about a specific course and that these postings can also give a view of "how fun it is to further their studies at the university". Meanwhile MP2 explained in length:

> *"Big yes. Regular updates can demonstrate our university's level of activeness. For instance, how we connect, collaborate, socialise, build professional identities and participate in professional networks. If all these are shown on social media, it would definitely attract more local and international interest towards the university."*

Another Malaysian student (MP1) also said:

> *"As from what I've learned and observed, social media algorithm either Instagram or TikTok, it is better to post more than five posts a week to increase the probability of users finding and engaging with your content."*

MP1 also added that regularly updating the university's social media platforms is crucial because it could,

> *"elevate the university's appearance and the university can become well-known on social media."*

One of the Indonesian students (IP4) said similarly where she felt that the current generation relies mainly on social media to get information. Most of them are active on at least one social media either Instagram, Twitter, TikTok or Facebook. She also said:

> *"Daily post or weekly post will help the university account engage more audiences in the near future, even international students. Also choosing one theme on each social media will make people at least remember the account because of its unique design or anything related."*

Another Indonesian student (IP5) replied in short, "Regular postings are important. Currently, social media is growing rapidly."

Two-way Interactions

Other than posting frequently on the universities' social media, all of the participants agreed that active interactions between the social media platforms and the users or followers is important. Some of the participants were surprised that universities are not fully utilising their social media platforms to attract local and international students especially that the younger generations are mostly online. Postings made are often 'one-way' and questions asked on the platforms are often left unanswered. For instance, one of the Malaysian participants (MP6) had indicated that universities need to improve their "two-way communication" online as it could help those who require more information on a certain topic. Another Malaysian student (MP5) had suggested for universities to create question and answer sessions (Q&A) on their social media platforms.

During the interview, the participants also spoke in length about Twitter and how Twitter is useful to post short and important information (or better known as Tweets). One participant felt that universities should be more engaging on Twitter as most of the younger generations use Twitter (MP1). She said: "Try to be more engaging on Twitter since this generation leans more towards Twitter." Data also suggests that one of the participants felt that universities should use a younger social media specialist to handle all of the social media accounts as they would understand more how to communicate with the current generation. The participant had said (MP3):

> *"It's time to invest on a proper social media specialist from my generation to handle the aesthetic of the university's social media as that itself shapes the appearance of the university."*

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the role of social media on prospective local and international students' selection of university. More specifically, we investigated the importance of social media platforms in promoting higher education institutions locally and internationally (RQ1). Furthermore, we examined how higher education institutions utilise social media to attract potential students both domestically and internationally (RQ2). This study contributes to the existing body of literature by focusing on the perspectives of Malaysian *and* Indonesian students, offering insights into a relatively understudied demographic in this context.

Our findings align with prior research, notably that of Farinloye et al. (2020), who similarly emphasised the utility of social media as a recruitment tool for prospective students. Farinloye et al. (2020) highlighted the transition from traditional methods such as prospectuses and websites to the more dynamic and interactive nature of social media platforms. Likewise, Vrontis et al. (2018) underscored the reliance of students on social media for gathering information about potential universities and courses. However, our study also echoes the observations made by Shields and Peruta (2018), suggesting that while social media may not directly influence students' decisions, it serves as a valuable resource for acquiring detailed insights into universities under consideration.

One of the interesting findings in this research pertains to the language preferences expressed by participants regarding university social media content. Participants emphasised the need for a formal yet engaging tone that resonates with the target audience. The language used by universities had also been highlighted by studies conducted by Farinloye and colleagues (2020), as well as the study by Ndofirepi, Farinloye and Mogaji (2020). According to Ndofierepi et al. (2020), different regions in Africa would use different languages such as Arabic, and French. In South Africa for instance, they recognise 11 official languages (Farinloye et al., 2020). With the various languages used in Africa, it can pose a challenge when trying to engage with potential students (Farinloye et al., 2020).

Furthermore, our findings underscore the importance of consistent and informative social media postings in providing potential students with a comprehensive understanding of university life. The finding matches with the study conducted by Constantinides and Stagno (2011). They found that regular social media updates in offering insights into academic culture, campus atmosphere, and other important information curical for prospective students' decision-making process (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011). Lastly, our study emphasised the necessity for universities to actively engage with their social media followers, as highlighted

in the works of Zhu (2019) and Galan, Lawley and Clements (2015). This active engagement fosters a sense of community and responsiveness, thereby enhancing the overall attractiveness of the institution to prospective students.

Conclusion

The purpose of the research was to examine the impact of social media on the recruitment of prospective university students, both local and international. Particularly among younger generations in search of alternative information channels, Instagram and Twitter are experiencing a surge in prominence among social media platforms, surpassing Facebook. Prior to enrolling in institutions, the findings indicate that prospective students, both local and international, prefer to gather information via social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Participants cited several reasons for choosing social media platforms for university information, including regular updates, user-friendly interfaces, and insights into the university's true image. Since social media is predominantly accessed via mobile phones, participants emphasised the importance of concise and direct information delivery with minimal redirections and distractions. In addition to prioritising frequent updates and fostering two-way communication online, the study recommends that institutions of higher education adapt their social media language to appeal to both local and international audiences. To effectively engage with audiences worldwide, it is advisable to use a universal language like English rather than local languages such as Bahasa Melayu or Bahasa Indonesia. Furthermore, it was recommended to assign dedicated personnel or teams the responsibility of overseeing social media platforms and facilitating interactive communication.

Future research opportunities include examining the specific information types that prospective students want and expanding the geographical coverage beyond Malaysia and Indonesia. The study acknowledges its limitations, including a small sample size and limited geographic scope, suggesting potential areas for future research to address. In summary, social media platforms have evolved into essential instruments for the promotion of universities, necessitating organisational investments in social media management and adjustments to evolving communication patterns in order to sustain competitiveness in the ever-changing digital environment.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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