

Strategic Stakeholder Communications on Twitter by UK Universities

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Universities are known to have a particularly complex stakeholder environment, thus, identifying the stakeholder environment and management for effective communication is essential to elicit stakeholder engagement. While acknowledging that the identification of relevant stakeholders seemingly underpins stakeholder management in Universities, this paper argues that merely identifying the stakeholders is not enough but understanding the strategic communications between the Universities and their stakeholders. Tweets from the official and verified the Twitter account of Russell Group universities in the UK were extracted and thematically analysed. Results indicate that a typology of strategic communications with Universities stakeholders – Recruit, Retain and Report. Universities are trying to recruit prospective students, to retain their present students and staff and report progress, achievement and activities to the general public and external stakeholders. Following social media norms, Universities were using customised hashtags in their tweets and encouraging others to do so as well. This study extends knowledge of Universities' stakeholder analysis and management, presents a typology of communication strategies which can inform content creation strategy for the Universities and further identifies how Universities are using social media to engage and reach out to their stakeholders. The study presents implications for University Managers as they need to be strategic in developing campaigns that can appeal to their diverse audience.

Keywords: Strategic; Stakeholder; Communications; Twitter; Social Media, UK, University, Russel Group

Introduction

The success of any organisation depends on those who have a stake in it. Organisations are expected to communicate with their stakeholder. Firms' effective and coordinated communication is essential for positive image perception among its different stakeholders (Van Riel and Fombrun, 2007). Stakeholders are 'any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives' (Freeman, 1984, p. 46), group or individual

who is affected by or will affect strategy (Nutt & Backoff, 1992), they may gain or lose from an organization's activities because they have a stake in it (Allen, 1988; Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010).

Like many other organisations, Universities have stakeholders whom they need to communicate with as there are varying interests and commitments. Universities are known to have a particularly complex stakeholder environment (Chapleo & Simms, 2010). Thus, identifying the stakeholder environment and management for effective communication is essential to elicit stakeholder engagement (Payne and Calton, 2017). This study, however, moves from just identifying the stakeholders to understanding the communication strategies between the University and stakeholders on social media.

Stakeholders in Higher Education Institution

Universities are recipients of public funding, and they must account for their activities and achievements to government and broader society (Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010). Universities are expected to reach out to prospective students seeking admission (Mogaji, 2016; Mogaji & Yoon, 2019) and present the impact and broader benefits arising from their publicly-funded (Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010).

The evolving social aim of a university as lead to the emergence of new classes of university stakeholder have emerged (Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010). Some of the identified Universities' stakeholders are Governing entities, Administrators, Employees, Clienteles, Suppliers, Competitors, Donors, Communities, Government regulators, Non-governmental regulators, Financial intermediaries and Joint venture partners (Burrows, 1999; Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010). With a specific focus on the University of Portsmouth as a case study, Chapleo & Simms (2010) identified nine stakeholder types in a University, based on some general commonalities. These nine types of stakeholders were further consolidated by their geographic proximity to the University, relevance to different areas of the University and its operations. Likewise, Mainardes et al. (2013) focused on a Portuguese university to identify 21 stakeholders, starting with students and ending with International students.

While acknowledging that the identification of relevant stakeholders seemingly underpins stakeholder management in Universities (Chapleo & Simms, 2010), this paper argues that merely identifying the stakeholders is not enough but understanding the strategic communications between the Universities and their stakeholders. Previous studies have often determined the stakeholders by focusing on a particular University; they achieve this by interviewing staff who are 'opinion formers' within the University. These individuals were considered appropriate because they have knowledge, expertise or information that will guide decisionmaking of opinion seekers (Chapleo & Simms, 2010), this present study to adopt a different approach and be more explicit in its path by focusing on the communications between the stakeholders that have been identified and the Universities.

Social Media for Strategic Communication

While there are many channels for Universities to communicate with their stakeholders, the role of social media in this evolving and increasingly interconnected nature of the world (Bryson, 2004) cannot be overestimated. Nearly 2.1 Billion people in the world have social media accounts, and 7 in 10 internet users are active on social media (Saleh, 2018). 95% of online adults aged 18-34 are most likely to follow a brand via social networking (MarketingSherpa, 2015) and 90% of brands use social media to increase brand awareness (Newberry, 2019). Social media provide brands with a dynamic new space to reach, interact and engage with consumers (Tafesse & Wien, 2018; Mogaji et al., 2016).

Despite its benefits, engage with stakeholders on social media presents its limitations and challenges as it is increasingly observable that it presents enormous risks for brands and individuals (Baccarella et al., 2018). Information shared on social media may not be considered confidential; this is often in the public domain. This lack of privacy presents a challenge with regards to communicating with stakeholders where confidentiality is essential. Besides, these communications happen online, often from where conversation can be misconstrued, taken out of context, copied, shared and archived. There are possibilities of cyberbullying, trolling, online witch hunts, fake news, and privacy abuse, which are examples of the "dark side" of social media (Baccarella et al., 2018). Besides, other stakeholders and non-stakeholders can join in the conversation by commenting, retweeting, liking and sharing (Mogaji, 2016). Identifying specific

message and media strategies to engage with stakeholders on social media is, therefore, essential.

Rationale for Study

With this understanding, this study attempts to develop a theoretically grounded typology of stakeholder communication strategies for Universities on social media. This study is contextualised in the United Kingdom, focusing on its Universities and its stakeholders. The research builds on previous work done by Chapleo & Simms (2010) as they have carried out the stakeholder analysis in higher education in the UK, albeit using a single University as a case study. Also, the present focuses on manners in which Universities are communicating with their stakeholders and importantly, it focuses on social media as a channel of communication.

This study offers more than just the management of stakeholders but engaging and communicating with the stakeholders by providing relatable content, which drives the conversation and provides more insight. Achieving this will help the Universities' meet their mandates, fulfil their missions and create public value (Bryson, 2004). The study makes both theoretical and managerial implications. The study extends knowledge on stakeholders' management by explicitly focusing on social media communication; it presents a typology and creates opportunities for future research direction. Managers will also find these implications relevant as they engage with stakeholders, recognising that each stakeholder has different expectations and requires a different managerial approach. The subsequent section explores the methodology section, and this is followed by the results and discussion, after that the concluding section and future research directions.

Methodology

An inductive, generic, qualitative approach is adopted to achieve the aim of this study. This approach "seeks to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved" (Caelli et al., 2008, p. 3). Tweets from the official and verified the Twitter account of Russell Group universities in the UK were extracted for thematic analysis.

The Russell Group is a self-selected association of twenty-four (24) public research universities in the United Kingdom. The group is headquartered in London and was established in 1994. All the universities had an active Twitter profile. Fifty tweets from each account were extracted between 1st and 15th August. These were tweets from the official twitter handle and excludes retweets of other accounts ' tweets. This selection criterion is essential because retweet is not always a guarantee of endorsement and could be seen as virtual support and amplifying the messages of other accounts.

1200 Tweets were extracted, serially numbered and saved as PDF for each University. The 24 PDF documents containing 50 numbered tweets from the University was exported to NVivo for further thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke (2006)'s approach. Themes were inductively extracted. The inductive study involves coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This form of thematic analysis is data-driven. The tweets were read over and over again to gain a better understanding of the engagement between the Universities and stakeholders. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested that "Immersion usually involves 'repeated reading' of the data and reading the data in an effective way - searching for meanings, patterns, and so on".

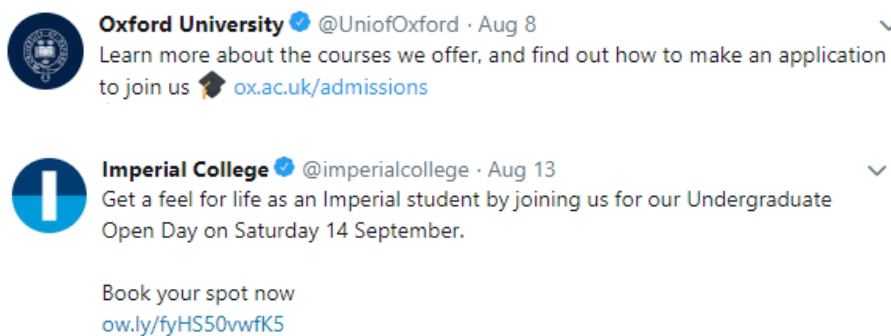
The tweets were coded for the target audience (stakeholder) and purpose. 150 randomly selected tweets, not part of the sample, were used to calculate the intercoder reliability check using both Cohen's Kappa and Krippendorff's alpha level of agreement, ranging from 1.000 (University) to 0.998 (target audience)

Results

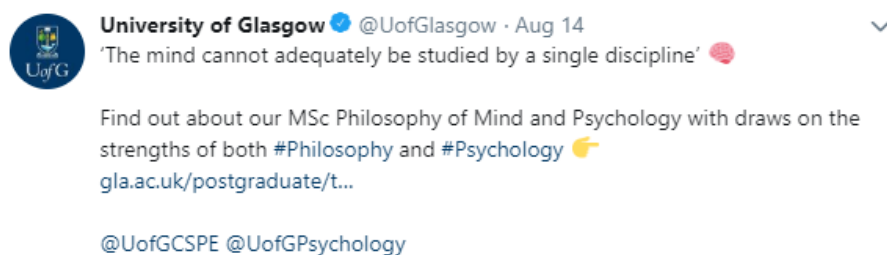
The analysis of the tweets revealed three key themes that recognise the purpose of Universities' strategic communication with their stakeholders, while overlaps between the messages are acknowledged, these thee themes present the overall message strategy of the Universities. Screenshots of the tweets from the Official profile page are shown to bolster the arguments and better illustrate the points.

Recruit

Recruiting prospective students is a paramount objective for Universities, engaging with them on social media is also essential. Universities make an effort to communicate with prospective students and more likely their parents and guardian; these groups are considered stakeholders of the University. The University uses its social media profile to provide relevant information so that the stakeholders can make an informed choice. For prospective students, this may include providing links to a website containing courses on offers, providing support for filling the application form, invitation to open day.



It was important to note that the Universities were not only engaging with undergraduate students; there were tweets targeted towards postgraduate students. Prospective students are invited to explore post-graduate studies as well.



Universities also use their platform to engage with potential candidates who might be interested in working at the University. Information about vacancies for lecturers and research fellow is shared. Universities are making an effort to recruit not only students but also the staff.



Retain

These are communications geared towards stakeholders who are already within the University. They can be considered internal stakeholders. These stakeholders include the staff, present students and students that have accepted to study at the University. The current students are considered the most significant stakeholder in the University. Universities are making an effort to ensure that students who have accepted to study at the University are retained. Making them feel welcomed and settled in fine. They provide information about the supports available such as for accommodation or IT access and how to meet other students on their course.



To also retain present students and staff, Universities share news about student activities and achievements. These updates are presented to encourage and motivate the students to achieve greatness themselves. Besides, Universities tweets about vacancies and opportunities that may interest their students.

-  **University of Liverpool** @LivUni · Aug 9
Hear about our amazing med students who were awarded @TheDukeOfYork entrepreneurship award! Find out more about their work on our Student News pages: bit.ly/2KsypD
-  **Imperial College** @imperialcollege · Aug 14
Do you want to gain valuable skills while working with an amazing team of people? How about the chance to win some Amazon vouchers? 🤗
Volunteer at Welcome Week from 26 September to 4 October! Sign up now: ow.ly/9idr50v1Wun #OurImperial

Staff news, achievements and contributions are also shared on the social media to engage with these internal stakeholders. The University welcomes new staff on the social media page, and they share research activities and outputs. Also, they tweet news coverage about the staff and the University. The university also uses their social media profile as a platform to share emergency information for staff and students.

-  **University of Glasgow** @UofGlasgow · Aug 15
Congratulations to everyone who received a #RAEngResearch Fellowship. Delighted that @martavig5, @rpmiddlemiss & Ross Millar are coming to UofG to develop their @UofGEngineering & @UofGPhysAstro projects! #WorldChangingGlasgow #TeamUofG
[More → raeng.org.uk/news/news-rele...](https://raeng.org.uk/news/news-rele...)
-  **LSE** @LSEnews · Aug 15
Due to a protest outside India House, we are currently advising staff and students to avoid accessing campus from the Aldwych and Kingsway. Other approaches to campus are accessible as usual.
-  **The University of Manchester** @OfficialUoM · Aug 9
At the end of her fieldwork our PhD researcher @MapenzieTauzie wanted to give back to her research community, so she organised football & netball tournament which went on for 10 weeks. @GlobalDevInst
-  **Cardiff University** @cardiffuni · Aug 7
Join scientists from @CardiffDental at @MenterCaerdydd Saturday 10 August from 10.30am to 3.30pm - take part in an immersive FREE bone health escape room and see how quickly you can escape! buff.ly/2KyFaoG

Report

Universities make an effort to provide and report on activities and development going on within the organisation. They feel obliged to communicate news and progress with their stakeholders. Unlike effort made towards retaining internal stakeholders through engagements, this report is more important for the external stakeholders which include alumni that needs to know what is going on within the University and how best they can contribute back to the University, The Funders and Research Partners that need to be informed about research activities. The general public (including prospective parents) that may be interested in some activities or events at the University and who wants to know how well the University is doing and the Press media that wants to produce news for the public. Universities use their social media profile to flaunt their achievements. Besides, the University also tweet about their accomplishments, their world ranking and research activities.



Universities were also found to use their social media profile to report their Corporate Social Responsibilities to their stakeholders, informing them what they have done, their contributions

and the impact they are making. To further engage, Universities invite the member of the public to events and activities. These are avenues for Universities to reach out and engage beyond research and teaching.



Discussion and Conclusion

The study sought to understand the communication strategies of Universities on social media as they engage with their stakeholders. The study acknowledges that there was no intention of identifying stakeholders as other previous studies have done, but to extend knowledge on stakeholders' analysis and management in higher education by exploring their communication strategies on social media, specifically on Twitter. The study presents the analysis of selected tweets from the 24 Russell Group Universities in the UK.

Results of the analysis confirm findings from previous studies that have identified stakeholders in higher education. The study recognises students, staff and the general public as stakeholders. Three key communicating emerged from the reviews. Firstly, Universities are making an effort to recruit prospective students, Secondly, to try to retain their present students and staff and thirdly, they report progress, achievement and activities to the general public and external stakeholders. Figure 1 presents a summary of key findings.



Figure 1: Summary of the key findings and Typology

The present study confirms the limitation of social media as a means of strategic communication with stakeholders. Acknowledging that some information may be confidential and not appropriate to be shared on social media where everyone has access to it, some stakeholders, as identified in the literature, were not engaged with. Stakeholders like academic and research bodies, including funding councils, regionally focused stakeholders: local government, community, police and community forums and Government bodies: Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), Department of Innovation, Universities, and Skills (DIUS) and Home Office. The Department of Education and Skills (DfES) (Chapleo & Simms, 2010) were rarely engaged with on social media. In most cases, it was a retweet of information for the general public, in the case of police and research funding opportunities from the funding councils.

Though Chapleo & Simms (2010) found local businesses as the second most commonly identified stakeholder group, there was no much communication between the Universities and the local businesses on social media. Universities are more likely to engage with prospective students and the general public on their social media profile. The analysis revealed that these two groups are the most frequently targeted with information. Prospective students are informed about courses

that are available at the University, the support available to enhance their learning and other admission information. The general public is informed about research activities of the University, the latest ranking, staff achievements, perhaps an attempt to create an outstanding perception about the University.

The reduced engagement with the present student is acknowledged. It is, however, essential to note that there are various profiles on Twitter that are specifically targeting the current students with their content. There are twitter accounts for the Student Union, Sports Team and Student Societies which are more likely to be sharing information that is relevant to students. Besides, there are accounts for different services in the Universities such as Library, IT and accommodation, these profiles are more student-facing and their contents are more beneficial to the students.

Likewise, even though the staff of the University were one of the most frequently identified groups of stakeholders (Chapleo & Simms, 2010), there is limited engagement between faculty and university on Twitter. It must be acknowledged, however, that Universities share information about staff such as their media coverage, research activities or achievements. However, content relevant for staff is shared rarely on the University main profile. An explanation could explain the fact that there are twitter accounts for Departments and Research Centre sharing specific information that is targeted towards the staff which may not also be on the University's main account

As previously acknowledged by previous studies, there is an overlap between these stakeholders, and as found in this study, there is an overlap in communication as well. Some information is found to be relevant to different stakeholders at the same time; more so, the Universities share this information from their main account. There are instances where information are appropriate for prospective students (being recruited) and present students (to be retained). Likewise, there were events for both internal and external stakeholders. Effectively managing these communication overlaps is essential so that other stakeholders do not feel they are not receiving value from the engagement.

Following social media norms, Universities were using hashtags in their tweets and encouraging others to do so as well. These hashtags were frequently used with prospective students as they confirm their places in the University and when celebrating an achievement. The University of Nottingham uses #loveNotts; Kings College uses #FutureKings, #GoingtoOxford was to welcome

students to Oxford University. Likewise, the University of Leeds welcomes prospective students with #HelloLeeds while the University of Glasgow uses #TeamUofG. There was evidence of students creating contents for the universities, especially during clearing where students are making video encouraging prospective students considering clearing.

There are theoretical and managerial implications of this study. Firstly, it extends knowledge of Universities' stakeholder analysis and management. The study moved beyond just listing stakeholders to explicitly focusing on their communication strategies on social media. Secondly, it presents a typology of communication strategies – recruit, retain and report, which can inform content, creating a plan for the Universities. Thirdly, it extends knowledge on how Universities are using social media to engage and reach out to their stakeholders.

The study presents implications for University Managers responsible for marketing communication, student recruitment and managing relationship with stakeholders. Managers need to be strategic in developing campaigns that can appeal to their diverse audience. Besides, considering that there are social media profile from different faculties, departments and group in the University, it is essential to coordinate and ensure all profile reflects the value of the University and aligns with the brand guideline of the University (Mogaji, 2019). As social media presences and postings of employees can be problematic for organisations (O'Connor, Schmidt, & Drouin, 2016), there should be a central control team, developing guidelines to guide employee content, bringing the guidelines to the attention of the employee. Likewise, there should support for Administrator of social media profile that will be associated with the University and those who have the intention to develop theirs. With different stakeholders to be engaged with, different messages from different channels and different profiles disseminating information, it is essential to put policies and guidelines in place which provide advice on how to best use social media tools and represent the Universities' official positions that govern the use of social media (Hrdinová, et al. 2010). Using the student to co-create content should be encouraged and adopted by other Universities. Likewise, the use of the hashtag is encouraged; importantly it provides an insight into how the stakeholders are engaging with the content.

Limitation and Future Research Direction

While this study has made an attempt to understand the strategic communication between universities and their stakeholders, there are some limitations of this study, which should be acknowledged and considered while interpreting the result of this study. The study only focuses on 24 Russell Group Universities in the UK, and that means the result may not be generalizable. Further research should endeavour to have a holistic approach of the Universities in the UK and perhaps compare the communication strategies between different University groups. Secondly, tweets were collected in August as Universities were planning for clearing and adjustments; there is an indication that tweets in a different month might provide a different insight into how Universities are engaging with stakeholder. Future studies may want to consider data from different months to further confirm the validity of this result. Lastly, retweets were excluded from the analysis as they were contents from another profile. However, Universities were retweeting amplifying messages from another social media handle; further research may want to explore this as well. Future studies can further explore the branded content with regards to the typology and empirically test its effect on stakeholder engagement. As Mogaji & Farinloye (2017) highlighted a gap in the marketing of higher education in Africa, this study can also be transferred to other countries to understand how their Universities communicate with stakeholders.

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