Revealing the Underlying Insights on the Use of Social Media

by Foreign Students—A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract

Student retention's strategy has been key interest of Universities worldwide in line with its potential benefits in improving the University's image besides contributing to the improvement in the institution's financial performance. Recent communication technologies which are known for their ability to reaching the target market have gradually nullified the utilization of the traditional advertising tools. Of these communication technologies, education institutions are gradually embracing the social media in order to leverage its potential benefits. Review on the past studies reveals that there is an abundant of quantitative researches which investigated the use of social media by university's students where limited focus was on the qualitative approach. This study intended to explore the underlying insights on the use of social media by carrying out semi-structured interviews among foreign students of the private higher education institutions located in Klang Valley, Malaysia. This study found that utilization of social media, quality information, usage influences and students' engagement are the four important themes pertaining to the use of social media discovered from the interview sessions conducted. This study also provides several implications for both practitioners and academics.

Keywords

social media, foreign students, qualitative research, student retention

1. Introduction

Malaysia has been striving to attract foreign students from various parts of the world (Manzuma-Ndaaba, Harada, Romle, & Olanrewaju, 2015) as the housing of foreign students results into huge capital inflow which would contribute to the nation's economic growth in the long run (Baharun, Awang, & Padlee, 2011). At present, there are about 140,000 foreign students in Malaysia whom originate from 160 countries (The Sun Daily, 2015) where their enrolment in the Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) is typically greater than enrolment in Public Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs). This is due to Government's policy in prioritizing the intake of local students for the undergraduate programs in PHEIs (Yusoff, 2014). Therefore, foreign undergraduate student is a definite target market for the PHEIs (Padlee, Kamaruddin, & Baharun, 2010).

Student retention's strategy has been key interest of Universities worldwide in line with its potential benefits in improving the University's image besides contributing to the improved financial performance (Ortiz & Choudaha, 2014). Besides, PHEIs in Malaysia have begun to emphasize on the student retention's strategy in coping with the industry's intensive competition (Lau, 2009).

Due to the possibility of reaching potential target market scattered around the world at reduced cost, recent communication technologies have been gradually nullifying the utilization and reliance on the traditional advertising tools (Scott, 2007; Reddy, 2014). Kemp (2015) reported that the growth of social media is high where the population of active social media users is equivalent to 29 percent of the world

population (Kemp, 2015). It implies that social media is a great opportunity for marketers to reach the potential customers.

Similarly, education institutions are progressively embracing the social media in view of its potential benefits in building positive image through the virtual information exchanges besides engaging with the existing students at ease (Mattson & Barnes, 2009; Broome, Croke, Staton, & Zachritz, 2011). In addition, it is also an effective tool to recruit the potential students where nearly all the universities in United States of America are somehow utilizing media in recruiting their potential students (Barnes & Lescault, 2011). Likewise, Selvarajah, Krishnan and Sajilan (2014) discovered that use of social media has had significant positive influence on the school leavers' enrolment decision at PHEIs in Malaysia. Meanwhile, Reddy (2014) added that foreign students' university decision making process is also being influenced by the assessment on the potential use of social media in searching university information, student activities, programs offered and other related information.

Review on the past studies reveals that there is an abundant of quantitative researches which investigated the university students' intention in using social media (e.g., Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Peluchette & Karl, 2008) and effectiveness of social media in recruiting potential students (e.g., Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Merrill, 2011). Number of qualitative researches on this field is rather limited where an exception can be given to the study conducted by Galindo, Meling, Mundy and Kupczynski (2012) which focused on the impact of social media towards the students' retention in the higher education institutions from the administrative perspective. In order to fill this academic gap, this study intends to explore the underlying insights of foreign students with regards to the use of PHEI's social media.

2. Literature Review

Based on the extensive and structured reviews of the past studies of three decades, Agudo-Peregrina, Hernández-García and Pascual-Miguel (2014) concluded that studies on the technologies adoption/acceptance have had utilized either Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) or Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) where reliance on these models has been slightly losing ground in the few recent studies which opted to the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). Among TAM, TPB and UTAUT, TAM is known for its appropriateness and effectiveness in investigating the adoption of various information technologies besides predicting the hypothetical relationships (Chen, C., & Chen, P., 2011).

This study utilizes the TAM due to the shortcomings of UTAUT and TPB. Raaij and Schepers (2008) attributed UTAUT as a less parsimonious model due to its inability in generating high coefficient of determination (R^2). Raaiji and Schepers (2008) added that the model would contribute to a high R^2 value only when the originally hypothesized relationship is moderated with up to four variables such as gender, age, experience and voluntariness. Besides, the two UTAUT's constructs (i.e., facilitating conditions and social influences) which have wide variety items possess the challenges of grouping and labeling the varied items into a single meaningful construct (Raaij & Schepers, 2008). On the other hand, TPB is often identified with its inability in explaining the large proportion of variance of behavior and intention construct (Al-Debei, Al-Lozi, & Papazafeiropoulou, 2013). This model is also characterized with the operationalization difficulties due to the generic belief sets which are not unconnected to the specific behavior of information system's acceptance (Bhattacherjee, 2000). It is also seen as less parsimonious as it could possibly reduce the reliability of constructs (Casey & Wilson-Evered, 2012).

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TAM typically postulates that Perceived Usefulness and Perceived Ease-of-use of a particular technology would affect the individual acceptance towards the technology (Davis, 1989 as cited in Broman; Schuitema & Thogersen, 2014). Briefly, Perceived Usefulness (PU) is about the extent of person's belief on the use of a particular technology/system in enhancing his/her job performance meanwhile Perceived Ease-of-Use (PEOU) is about the extent of person's belief on the effortless use of the technology/system.

In addition to these two constructs—PU and PEOU, this study incorporate two additional constructs which are deemed appropriate. The first additional construct is Social Influence which was noted for its significant influence on the adoption intention of a technology (Venkatesh & Davis, 2003; as cited in Jambulingam, 2013). Several past researchers (e.g., Bagozzi, Wong, Abe, & Bergami, 2000; Muk & Chung, 2014) have had examined the Social Influence alongside the two original constructs of TAM. The second additional construct is Information Quality (IQ) which was found to have a significant influence on the students' enrolment decision (Ou, Davison, & Cheng, 2011). It is worth to note that the success of any information system model heavily relies on the effect of its information quality and users' satisfaction (Delone & McLean, 1992, 2002; as cited in Demissie & Rorissa, 2015). Briefly, Social Influence (SI) is about others' influences on the person's behavior e.g., adoption of technologies (Chia, 2012) while Information Quality (IQ) is about the accuracy, completeness and dependability of the information communicate over the particular technology (Coskuncay, 2013).

3. Research Methodology

This study was carried out using the phenomenology design (Creswell, 2014) where the phenomenon of this study, i.e., social media's usage intention by the foreign students was described merely based on the outcomes of series of interviews conducted without including the researcher's own experiences.

3.1 Sampling Design

Foreign students utilizing the social media of PHEIs located in Klang Valley for academic purposes were the target population of this study. Klang Valley is chosen as the PHEIs in this area had recorded high enrolment of foreign students (Shin, Postiglione, & Huang, 2015). Phenomenology design requires three to ten participants sharing their viewpoints on a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Initially, it was decided to interview one foreign student from each of the top six PHEIs located in Klang Valley. Snowball sampling technique was then used to approach the participants for the interview sessions. The data collection of this study was concluded only with 4 series of interview sessions (despite the initial sample size of 6) as the researcher noticed that the responses from the last 2 interviewees were rather repetitive of others. Creswell (2014) explained that the researcher could stop gathering data when the information gathered is no longer fresh and repetitive.

3.2 Data Collection Procedures

The interview protocol of this study was initially prepared based on the review of past studies. One foreign student from Lim Kok Wing University located at Cyberjaya was then interviewed during the preliminary stage of data collection. The preliminary interview was to identify the suitability and clarity of the questions listed besides observing the participants non-spoken language. The study's interview protocol was then amended based on the feedbacks received from the preliminary interview. Semi-structured interview sessions were carried out with chosen foreign students. Each of the interview sessions lasted about 45 minutes and the conversation was audio-recorded.

3.3 Measurement of Accuracy

The concept of reliability and validity are not appropriate to be used in qualitative researches (Golafshani, 2003). Qualitative researchers rather concern on the consistency and trustworthiness of the data instead of the concept of reliability and validity, respectively (Grossoehme, 2014). As suggested by Manfred and Celia (2004), the stepwise replication was then used to ensure the data consistency where the researcher and the research assistant handled the raw data separately. The first cycle coding process after the data transcription was handled separately by the two researchers. The findings obtained were finally reckoned on the consistency. Meanwhile, member checking technique was used in measuring the trustworthiness of the data (as suggested by Malhotra, 2010). The draft write-up of findings was returned to each interviewee for seeking their insights and consent on the content retrieved from the interview conducted.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

There are three important steps in the qualitative data analysis namely data transcription, coding and data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The audio conversation of interview sessions conducted was manually transcribed into the written format. Upon transcribing the data, both researchers prepare the fist cycle coding separately based on each transcript. Before proceeding to the subsequent step of second coding, the two sets of first cycle codes generated were compared and tallied in order to ensure the consistency. First cycle codes with similar characteristic or nature were grouped together in developing a specific theme. Refer to Appendix 1 for the finalized list of first cycle codes and Appendix 2 for the list of themes developed based on the grouping of first cycle codes. The themes generated from the second coding were then used in the data analysis.

4. Data Analysis and Discussions

Seven themes (i.e., second codes) were revealed based on the list of first cycle codes generated from the data transcripts (refer to Table 1). In order to avoid the possible reiteration among these themes, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), the themes were further categorized into four themes namely the utilization of social media, quality information, usage's influences and students' engagement.

Table 1. Second Coding—Refinement of the Themes

No.	Initial Themes	Finalized Themes
1	Useful for communication	Utilization of social media
2	Easy to use	
3	Information Quality	Quality of information
4	Information Reliability	
5	Usage of social media	Usage influences
6	Impact of social media on students	Students engagement
7	Emotional Engagement	

Note: developed for the study.

4.1 Utilization of Social Media

The outcomes of interviews demonstrated that all interviewees prefer to use the social media instead of their respective PHEI's official website. They attributed the social media's convenience, effortless usage and prompt responsiveness to their preference. Table 2 summarizes the key responses with regards to the Utilization of Social Media.

Table 2. Key Responses on Utilization of Social Media

Respondent	Key Respondent
A	"For the advantage, they will update if there are activities or events are going on, if there is any sudden change on the… for example, most of the time we know the time or the venue for classes thru WhatsApp group or Facebook group from the tutors update…"
B	"I think is faster… If we have questions we can straightaway in the Facebook chat or something because if we ask thru email, it will take some times and you won't get a fast response from email than Facebook Messenger … so…"
C	"Errm, they post events like announcement on what is going on, is there something special or… they share everything on Facebook group for people to know what's going on…"
D	"You could get anything from website or Whatsapp I mean… for example if there is any prompter in my rooms, I just go to the Facebook page and I type. They will come and fix it".

Note: developed for the study.

This finding is similar to finding of Mok (2012) who found that that 93.7 percent of the surveyed student-respondents preferred the experience of using Facebook for the course-related matters where few of them acknowledged the recent trend on the reliance of Facebook rather than the institutions' web-based learning platform. This implies that preferences for the use of social media are indeed a common trend among today's students. In addition, social media was also recognized for its effectiveness in exchanging the information and reaching others (Langer, 2014; Stahlberg & Maila, 2013; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

4.2 Quality Information

Interviewees' responses on the quality information communicated over the institution's social media were quite conflicting. On one hand, Respondent B noted the quality of information communicated over the social media. Respondent B said "*As this is the information from my University, I am sure the quality is there. Any post on the page is reliable as far as I concerned*". Head and Eisenberg (2011) described that students prefer social media as their channel of getting information due to its easy accessibility and reliability. Therefore, social media is often seen as an effective, informative, current source of information (Desilver, 2014). On the other hand, Respondent D has shown his preference over the institution's website rather than the social media. Respondent D said "*I always have negative judgment on the information shared over Facebook or Twitter as people always post based on their own opinion; but in website, the information normally tend to be accurate. So, I am always careful with the news from Facebook or Twitter in making any decision*".

4.3 Usage's Influence

The interviews conducted showed that all respondents agreed that their usage on the institutions' social media is greatly influenced by their friends, lecturers and the social media itself. Table 3 summarizes the key responses with regards to the influences of social media usage.

Table 3. Key Responses on Usage's Influences

Respondent	Responses
A	-
B	"I think I saw in the Facebook page suggested … So I think I should like it because I am in the university… can get information".
C	"All [my] friends are using social media so it's convenient to communicate".

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D	"The information provided will be very good. We could access a lot of things where we don't know it come from. When it could bring full of knowledge; it has its opportunities on positive things and negative things as well. I think 90 percentage of students use it; it is good and will bring advantage…"

Note: developed for the study.

Students were reported to use the social media as a communication tool not only for communicating among friends and family (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008) but also among the other students and lecturers (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007; Cicevic, Samcovic, & Nesic, 2016). This implies that today's students have positive experience towards technology and social media as learning facilitation tools (Poelhuber & Anderson, 2011).

4.4 Student Engagement

The interview responses (as tabulated in Table 4) implied that interviewees have positive view towards the use of social media which in turn indicates the impact of social media on their life as student. Nevertheless, Respondent C had expected that the institution to provide additional services or information over their social media instead of just the typical information about academic program. He stressed that provision of such information is vital for his continuous engagement with the institution through the social media.

Table 4. Key Responses on Student Engagement

Respondent	Responses
A	"Only the website have some problem in opening and accessing. The Facebook is much easier to ues than website—e-learning".
B	"I would use the Facebook as long as I am still here before I gradate. I will still follow and continue even after I graduate".
C	"I will be happy if they have additional transactions over the social media instead of just course announcement…"
D	"I most use Facebook and Twitter so far. I have my own page on Facebook and Twitter account. I love to communicate and share knowledge with people around me" like what I update studies, I love to share. I have my own.

Note: developed for the study.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study found that utilization of social media, quality information, usage's influences and students' engagement are four important themes discovered from the interview sessions conducted. Briefly, this study found that interviewees used social media due to its convenience, effortless usage and prompt responsiveness. In the context of information quality, while few interviewees are confident about the information communicated over the social media, few opinionated that information communicated over the PHEI's official website is more reliable than the information over the social media. It was also revealed that social media usage was mainly due to the influences from peers and lecturers. Interviewees have essentially positive engagement with the PHEI's social media and continuous engagement is expected to incur through the provision of additional related information.

The findings obtained from this study provide several managerial implications for the practitioner in education industry, especially for private and public higher education institutions. The conflicting

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opinion on the quality information communicated over the social media implies inability of social media in appealing to the entire population. PHEIs are recommended to ensure and enhance the quality of information communicated over the social media in order to directly or indirectly influence the students' enrolment decision.

The possible student continuous engagement with the institution through the provision of additional related information suggests that PHEIs can leverage the effective social media in retaining the current students due to its cost stingy nature (Scott, 2007) as compared to the costly approaches such as alternative reduction of tuition fees, offering scholarship and so forth.

From theoretical perspectives, this study provides a significant contribution on the current body of knowledge. This study had reinforced the possible application of TAM model with the inclusion of the additional two constructs, i.e. Social Influence and Information Quality. This provides platform for future researchers to further their investigation in this topic.

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, findings generated are lacking of generalization. The future researchers are suggested to pursue either a mixed method research or quantitative research in order to produce more comprehensive findings.

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Appendix 1. First Cycle Codes

Interviewee 1	Interviewee 2
Descriptive Coding : Club and societies	Descriptive Coding: Good education
Descriptive Coding : YouTube	Emotion Coding: I like what I upload studies
In Vivo Coding: Discuss and ask questions with my lecturers.	Emotion Coding: I love to share.
In Vivo Coding : More convenient to communicate with friends	In vivo Coding: E-learning
In Vivo Coding : Post thing in Facebook	Descriptive Coding: Full of academic information
In Vivo Coding : Update on event at Facebook	In vivo Coding: Social media is effective
Descriptive Coding : Study purposes	In vivo Coding: Strong bonding with students and staff
Descriptive Coding : Newsletter or Articles	Descriptive Coding: Efficiency in spreading information
Process Coding : Having sports carnival	Descriptive Coding: Efficiency in getting students information
In vivo Coding : Update like on next day	Descriptive Coding: Involvement in decision making
Descriptive Coding : Information announcement	Descriptive Coding: Faster feedback from staff
Process Coding : Using social media	In vivo Coding: Effective way of mode of communication.
In vivo Coding : Gen y communicate	Descriptive Coding: Timely and useful information
In vivo Coding: One way for everyone to communicate	Descriptive Coding: Useful tools for communicating people among countries.
Emotion Coding : I am happy	Descriptive Coding: Information in social media is less reliability
In vivo Coding : engage with students will be an incentives	Descriptive Coding: Social media is useful in promotion.
In vivo Coding : Use social media to communicate	Process Coding: Practicing for some improvement
Descriptive Coding: Criteria of being in institutions	(improvement in how to use social media in communicating with students)
Descriptive Coding: Orientation program	Process Coding: You can know what is happening around the environment
Descriptive Coding : Environments	Descriptive Coding: Adverse impact on student life
Emotion Coding : I have passion to do homework	In vivo Coding: Useful to comments social relationship.
In Vivo Coding : Social media is very important	Descriptive Coding: Useful on academic
Descriptive Coding : Social media is useful	Descriptive Coding: Social media influence my studying decision
Descriptive Coding : Accessible to social media	
Descriptive Coding : Trustable information	

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Interviewee 3	Interviewee 4
Descriptive Coding: Use social media to communicate	Process Coding: Know the events going on
Descriptive Coding: Social media posted university-related matters	Process Coding: Promote for the new intake
Descriptive Coding: Can get information from social media	Descriptive Coding: It is optional to like the page
Descriptive Coding: Liking the page is due to peer influence	In vivo Coding: E-learning website sharing same thing like in social media
Descriptive Coding: Lecturers use to post assignment, articles, guidelines	Descriptive Coding: Social media can update the latest events and activities
In vivo Coding: Easy to communicate & ask information	Descriptive Coding: Social media can notify sudden changes of the class through WhatsApp group
Descriptive Coding: Easier to use than e-learning website	Descriptive Coding: Social media can share information instantly
Emotion Coding: Likes social media for communication purpose	Descriptive Coding : Social media ask direction for assignments or ask when face difficulties in studies
In vivo Coding: Faster response, time-saving, more reachable	Emotion Coding: Too committed to social media
In vivo Coding: More interesting and easier	Emotion Coding : It is distracting
Emotion Coding: Feel good if use social media to communicate	Descriptive Coding: Spending too much time on it
In vivo Coding: Faster and more active	Descriptive Coding: Used to social media
Descriptive Coding: Will still follow and use university's social media after graduate	Descriptive Coding : It is quick, fast and stay with trend
Descriptive Coding: Social media don't give detailed information about postgraduate programmes	Descriptive Coding: Efficiency in update the information
Descriptive Coding: Social media is not enough to influence retention	Emotion Coding: Feel positive to social media
	Descriptive Coding: E- learning website always crashed, cannot access most of the time
	Emotion Coding : I don't like go to e-learning website, sometimes ignored it
	Descriptive Coding: E-learning site is not efficient, takes time
	Descriptive Coding: Social media easier than e-learning website
	Descriptive Coding: Social media is optional to use
	Descriptive Coding: I use Facebook most of the time
	Emotion Coding: It's addictive.
	Descriptive Coding : Social media is much easier
	Descriptive Coding: My friend is using the social media also
	Descriptive Coding: I know the page from my friends.
	Descriptive Coding: Share everything on social media so most people will noticed it.
	Descriptive Coding: Because there are large crowd on Facebook
	Emotion Coding: I trust the info because it is the main page
	Emotion Coding: I trust the info because it is control by the staffs
	Descriptive Coding: I will use in future the pages for subject
	Emotion Coding: I am happy to use social media
	Descriptive Coding: it is convenient
	Process Coding: I will further my studies
	Descriptive Coding: Further studies if I get scholarship
	Descriptive Coding: Further studies because I feel compatible with the environment
	Descriptive Coding: Further studies because of relationship with other (friendly staff)
	In vivo Coding: I will recommend my institution to

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Appendix 2. Second Coding

Grouping of First Cycle Coding (Second Coding)		
1. Communication In Vivo Coding: discuss and ask questions with my lecturers. In Vivo Coding: More convenient to communicate with friends In vivo Coding: Gen y communicate In Vivo Coding: More convenient to communicate with friends In Vivo Coding: Use social media to communicate (general tools for people to communicate) Descriptive Coding: Faster feedback from staff In Vivo Coding: Effective way of mode of communication. Descriptive Coding: Useful tools for communicating people among countries Descriptive Coding: Involvement in decision making Descriptive Coding: Use social media to communicate with my friends and family In Vivo Coding: Easier for students to communicate and ask information Emotion Coding: Likes social media for communication purpose Emotion Coding: Likes to communicate with lecturer through Facebook Descriptive Coding: Social media ask direction for assignments or ask when face difficulties in studies	**2. Social media information are accurate and up to date** In Vivo Coding: Update like on next day In Vivo Coding: Update on event at Facebook Descriptive Coding: Timely and useful information Descriptive Coding: it is quick, fast and stay with trend Descriptive Coding: efficiency in update the information Descriptive Coding: Social media can update the latest events and activities Descriptive Coding: Social media can notify sudden changes of the class through WhatsApp group	**3. Social media information is reliable** Descriptive Coding: Trustable information Descriptive Coding: Information in social media is less reliability Emotion Coding: I trust the info because it is the main page Emotion Coding: I trust the info because it is control by UTP's staffs

Grouping of First Cycle Coding (Second Coding)			
4. Social media is easy to use. Descriptive Coding: Social media is useful In Vivo Coding: Useful to comments social relationship. Descriptive Coding: Useful on academic In Vivo Coding: More interesting and easier. Descriptive Coding: Social media is much easier Descriptive Coding: Social media easier than e-learning website	**5. Usage of Social media** Descriptive Coding: My friend is using the social media also Descriptive Coding: I know the page from my friends. Descriptive Coding: Because there are large crowd on Facebook Descriptive Coding: Adverse impact on student life Descriptive Coding: Likes the page due to peer influence	**6. Impact of social media on institution** Descriptive Coding: Criteria of being in institutions Descriptive Coding: Orientation program Descriptive Coding: Environments In Vivo Coding: engage with students will be an incentives Descriptive Coding: Information announcement Descriptive Coding: Full of academic information Descriptive Coding: Involvement in decision making Descriptive Coding: Social media don't give detailed information about postgraduate programs Emotion Coding: The good news motivated me to stay in UTP Retention Intention	**7. Emotion engagement of students on social media** Emotion Coding: I am happy In Vivo Coding: Social media is very important Emotion Coding: I like what I upload studies Emotion Coding: I love to share. Emotion Coding: Feels good to use social media to communicate Emotion Coding: Feel positive to social media Emotion Coding: Too committed to social media Emotion Coding: I am happy to use social media Descriptive Coding: it is convenient

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