



Beyond a “spectator sport”: Social media for university engagement and community building

Jenny Zhengye Hou, Massey University

Jim Macnamara, University of Technology Sydney

Abstract

Compared with the burgeoning literature on social media use in business organisations, few studies have investigated how social media can aid non-profit organisations such as universities to achieve engagement objectives. Engagement and community building are important for universities in the context of student recruitment, retention, and satisfaction, as well as staff relations and public relations. To advance understanding of this under-studied area, this research examined the use of social media in a New Zealand university. Based on in-depth interviews and content analysis, this study explored the reported tension between the interactive participatory culture of social media and the promotional use for one-way information transmission and persuasion – in short, the shift from passive spectatorship to active co-production. Given the young and social media-savvy nature of universities’ key audience – students – this analysis argues that social media can play a facilitative role in university engagement and community building, but that a participatory co-production approach must be used rather than running social media as a ‘spectator sport’ platform for all but professional content production.

Keywords: social media, community building, engagement, universities, New Zealand

Introduction

Social media have become increasingly popular among public relations practitioners due to their potential to reach large audiences and afford real-time communication unmatched by traditional media. As such, a variety of organisations adopt social media mainly for one-way information distribution and promotion (Valentini, 2015), which clashes with the relational practice of users and participative culture that characterises social media (Motion, Heath, & Leitch, 2016). According to Nielsen and Schroder (2014), one radical change introduced by social media is the shift from “passive media spectatorship” (p. 476), where audiences (e.g., viewers, listeners, readers) were traditionally cast as recipients of messages and had no agency over the news production, to new forms of ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins, 2006) in which publics engage in news sharing, commenting on, and creating their own content. This active role appears more prominent among university students, who are often described as social media-savvy and resist corporate exploitation for marketing purposes (Bal, Grewal, Mills, & Ottley, 2015). University students, in Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe’s (2007) term, the “always-on generation”, tend to use social media for connectedness more than participating in product or business relations.

A search of extant public relations literature on social media indicates a focus on corporate contexts, discussing how to use social media to organisational advantages (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). Limited attention has been given to non-profits, including universities, that differ substantially from companies in terms of roles, values and social responsibilities (Sriramesh, Rivera-Sanchez, & Soriano, 2013). Although the recent years have witnessed the widespread use of social media for university marketing (Belanger, Bali, & Longden, 2014), there lacks research on whether and how universities employ digital to fully engage students and build a campus community (Demetrious, 2014). In fact, community building and engagement is key to universities prior to the emergence of social media, with long-term goals of developing multiple knowledge, co-creation of solutions, and collaborative partnerships (Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco, & Swanson, 2016). However, the current trend of commercialising universities on social media and regarding students as customers (Paek, Hove, Jung, & Cole, 2013) has left a large void in the community building and engagement areas of university communication.

To contribute to the above under-examined area, this paper conducted a case study to examine the ways in which a New Zealand university utilised three popular social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) (Dabner, 2012) for community building and engagement with students, one major stakeholder group of a university (Brech, Messer, Schee, Rauschnabel, & Ivens, 2017). New Zealand was chosen as a case study because it ranked as the fifth largest educational exportation market (following the US, UK, Canada and Australia) and enjoyed a high adoption rate of social media in universities (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Through an analysis of 26 interviews and social media content analysis, we found that social media were overwhelmingly used for university marketing and one-way content production. To address the reported tension between promotional use but participatory culture of social media, we suggest that universities should use social media beyond a spectator sport, namely, no longer treating audiences (i.e., students) as passive spectators and consumers, but instead empower them to be partners, contributors, and collaborators of university community building. The following analysis starts from theoretical reviews, followed by describing the multi-method data collection and thematic analysis. It then presents the major findings, based on which the significance and implications of the case study are discussed.

Media become social – or not!

Social media, also called ‘participatory media’ or ‘peer production’, are defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (p. 61). This definition usefully draws attention away from the common focus on the technological aspect of new media, which leads to the pitfalls of ‘technological determinism’ (Deibert, 1997) and the ‘discourse of novelty’ (Carpentier & Cleen, 2008), to recognise the social, cultural and political contexts of these media and the resulting communication changes (Couldry, 2010). Compared with traditional media and Web 1.0 (e.g., websites, emails), social media offer unique advantages including free information flow without gatekeeping, multi-media content, networking, identity development, and community building (Davis III, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Canché, 2015). Macnamara and Zeffass (2012) summarise the key features of social media as openness for participation and interactivity involving dialogue, conversation, collaboration, and co-creativity harnessing collective intelligence, and relinquishing control that characterises one-way, top-down information distribution models.

The ‘social’ nature of social media is deemed to have fostered new paradigms of public engagement and restored agency to users (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). In social media, “people formerly known as the audience/consumers are simply the public made realer, less fictional, more able, less predictable” (Rosen, 2006). Blankenship (2010) classifies social media users’ agency into five groups: attention (decide what content deserves attention); participation (when and where to comment); collaboration (co-create knowledge); network awareness (build privacy); and critical consumption (selectively absorb information). In response to this shift from passive spectatorship to active participation, Allagui and Breslow (2016) state that organisational communication in social media should be: a) participatory (interacting with target audiences); b) authentic (conversing without an overtly commercial demeanour); c) resourceful (providing helpful information via various means); and d) credible (based on facts) (p. 22).

Public relations scholars seem to enthusiastically embrace social media without necessarily evaluating their actual benefits, or reflecting who gains most from their use. As Valentini (2015) notes, the dominant discourse in the public relations literature is that using social media is “good” (p. 170). Scholars (e.g., Kelleher & Sweetser, 2012; Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011; Taylor & Kent, 2010) believe that social media have the potential of two-way communication, direct interactivity, and open dialogue. However, other studies (e.g., Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012) have shown that the practical use of social media focuses on one-way transmission of information and publicity and not, as in most cases, two-way communication by using forums, networks, and chat rooms. The fundamental clash between the defined characteristics and culture of social media, and the uses to which they are put by many organisations, has been largely downplayed. A long-standing debate still exists: should social media be viewed as just being ‘social’, or as another new form of ‘media’?

While a growing number of public relations studies have adopted a relational approach to social media communication (Waters et al., 2009; Xifra & Grau, 2010), the system-based, instrumental relationship building is inherently tied up to, and thus criticised for, ensuring organisational interests. For example, Smith (2010) reveals how social media build relationships with publics through a “steady flow of inputs and outputs” that contributes to organisational stability (p. 330). What has actually been privileged in the systematic view of relationship building is a ‘deliberative’ model of engagement that benefits those with greater access to online resources (Heath, Waymer, & Palenchar, 2013). Kennedy and Sommerfeldt (2015) use ‘internet dystopia’ to criticise dominant neoliberal actors of exploiting digital to perpetuate ideologies that may disinterest and disengage publics. In this sense, social media have yet to become ‘social’ because their

participatory feature is not fully applied by most organisations (Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2012), including universities as described next.

Social media dynamics in the academy

Unlike skilful corporate use of social media, universities have only recently experimented with this new platform in the wake of global economic recession, government deregulation, and the pressure of marketing universities in a saturated higher education market (Whisman, 2008). Research indicates that university use of social media, especially those official accounts, is in its infancy, which can be divided into four stages (see Table 1).

Table 1. Extant studies on social media use in universities

Social media use	Issues examined	Primary methods	Main findings	Examples
1. Social media adoption	Whether and to what extent social media are adopted in universities	Surveys	Social media have been increasingly adopted in universities (e.g., 68% in Canada; 80% in the US).	Belanger et al. (2014); Kelleher & Sweetser (2012);
2. Social media for marketing and branding	How can universities use social media for marketing branding and student recruitment	Content analysis; Case studies	Social media are instrumental to branding through publicity, one-way information delivery and marketing segmentation.	Barnes & Lescault (2011); Waters et al. (2009)
3. Social media for pedagogical purposes	How can universities use social media for teaching and learning	Experiments; Focus groups	Social media are used as online teaching tools to improve students' learning outcomes	Neier & Zayer (2015); Wankel (2009)
4. Social media for relationship building and stakeholder engagement	How can universities use social media to build relationships and communities	Surveys; Content analysis	Universities seldom use social media's interactive features to foster relationships and dialogues	McAllister (2012); Rossmann & Young (2015)

The first stage is to have a social media presence “just for the sake of it” (Belanger et al., 2014, p. 27), or “because everyone else has one” (Charlesworth, 2014, p. 329). This ‘me-too’ presence has created blandness or a bare-minimum existence in university social media. Several studies (e.g., Belanger et al., 2014; Kelleher & Sweetser, 2012) surveyed that although universities increasingly adopted social media, they failed to update content frequently. The second stage is to use social media for marketing branding and student recruitment by publicising promotional information and projecting university images that

look unmatched to their physical bodies (Barnes & Lescault, 2011; Waters et al., 2009). Because of the pervasive marketing online, Ang (2011) criticised many universities that confused customers with social media users who were not necessarily customers. The third stage is to use social media for pedagogical purposes such as creating online discussion forums and course-specific pages to improve students' academic performance (Neier & Zayer, 2015). The fourth stage of using social media for relationship building and stakeholder engagement, albeit important, turns out to be underdeveloped, because universities have not made full use of the interactive and participatory features (e.g., real-time conversations, user-generated content) (McAllister, 2012; Rossmann & Young, 2015).

On the other side, social media use among university students and the student-run communication platforms show a different picture. University students, most of whom were born after 1990 but exposed to new technologies unprecedentedly, are called 'millennials' (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005), 'net generation' (Tapscott, 1999) or 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001). They run the gamut from identity expression, media piracy (e.g. illegal downloading), and entertainment, to social activism – all of which are manifested through social media. Ellison et al. (2007) clarify that students primarily use social media for maintaining pre-existing relationships that they have already developed offline, rather than make new connections. Davis III et al. (2015) realise that students prefer direct, peer-to-peer communication online such as posting, messaging, commenting, tags and likes. Those who are active in content creation report a greater sense of connectedness and higher level of social involvement (e.g., joining offline activities, student clubs), than those mainly engaging in content consumption (e.g., viewing photos, browsing websites).

However, problems also emerged from student-run or peer-support network communication characterised by fragmentation, lack of resources and meaningful purposes. Davis III et al. (2015) have the concern that students spend excessive time on non-academic activities in social media. Turkle (2011) questioned the superficiality in students' "digitalised friendships" or "robot relationships with the inanimate" – played out with emoticon emotions, so often predicated on rapid response rather than reflection (p. 17). He thus argued students may not genuinely engage (e.g., converse, collaborate) in peer communication but just connect or consume. Also, international students may not feel 'ontological security' with local students, and are thus likely to isolate themselves from those closely bonded groups (Takahashi, 2014). Moreover, DeAndrea et al. (2012) caution that student peer-to-peer communication could lead to negative mutual impact by using Facebook to post pictures of binge drinking behaviours etc.

From the above description, it can be noted that for one thing, current university use of social media (e.g., marketing, publicity) deviates from the ways students are already utilising them (e.g., networking, interaction). For another, the grassroots use of social media among students seems discursive without clear goals and coherent strategies. Thus, there is a great need for universities to not only challenge existing assumptions (e.g., social media as a cost-effective marketing tool), but also to play a leading role in engaging with students to energise broad campus community building. A university-led, community engagement approach to social media offers two benefits: a) It extends peer-to-peer connections to multi-faceted social ties between students and faculties, staff members, centres, and other sub-units within universities; and b) The community thinking reminds universities to fulfil core values of serving public interest and contributing to social transformation, rather than drifting away on the tide of commercialisation. For this reason, it is critical to define 'community' and 'engagement' in a university social media environment, as below.

Defining community and engagement in university social media

The centrality of community and engagement cannot be emphasised more in both contexts of social media and higher education, although there lacks a unified definition for each concept (Fitzgerald et al., 2016). According to Callaghan and Fribbance (2016), building a vibrant university community entails engaging students in meaningful practices, providing access to resources, mobilising them to pursue academic excellence, and encouraging participation in debates, actions, and reflections that make a difference to wider communities. Building an e-community in university social media means to optimise the platforms as important sites for “the informal, cultural learning of ‘being’ a student, with online interactions and experiences allowing roles to be learned, values understood and identities shaped” (DeAndrea et al., 2012, p. 16).

Existing research has identified a few key features characterising a university community online. Firstly, similar to offline communities with shared common interests, regular patterns of interaction, and strong emotional bonds, a university community built on social media requires going beyond structural virtual communities, and developing shared values that all members of the university community can identify with (Seargeant & Tagg, 2014). Secondly, a university community online should make students feel like partners, contributors, and co-producers by posting new information, providing feedback, creating groups, or even shaping university decision-making (Nevzat, Amca, Tanova, & Amca, 2016). Thirdly, a university community online empowers students with space for self-presentation and self-growth. Students can feel free to articulate interests, concerns and agendas in university social media. They also benefit from the community to grow themselves not only as successful learners of knowledge and skill sets, but also as change agents to make social impacts through citizenship behaviours (Fitzgerald et al., 2016).

Engagement has been the key to university community building even before the advent of social media. Different theorists approach and operationalise engagement differently. Brech et al. (2017) highlight online engagement as multi-way interactivity, which can be measured by: comment (post), rate (like, favourite), and spread (share). Rowe and Frewer (2005) define ‘engagement’ as a combined process of public communication (information dissemination), public consultation (soliciting input), and public participation (co-creating solutions). John (2013) distinguishes two types of engagement: a) distributive engagement (e.g., users circulate or share content) to fulfil organisational pre-defined goals (close-ended); b) communicative engagement (e.g., relational practice, value exchange) to seek public appraisal and contributions to organisational decision-making (open-ended). Given the difficulty in achieving ideal engagement with no prior agendas, Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) suggest a ladder of “information-community-action” engagement: Information serves to attract participants, followed by dialogue and community building, and ended up with participants’ actions (e.g., purchase, donation) (p. 350).

Other studies recognised the importance of engaging content to community building. For example, Brech et al. (2017) call to strengthen social media community through engaging content that is posted with an intermediate frequency (four posts/week), embedding incentives for user participation, and sending experiential, image, and personal or exclusive messages. Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) describe engaging content characteristics including giving recognition and thanks to the members of a community, acknowledging current and local events, and sparking direct conversations. To design content engagement strategies, Motion et al. (2016) emphasise disrupting institutional determinism that privileges organisational interests, changing unequal organisation-public power relations, and undermining organisational communicators’ intentionality. In other words, organisations (e.g., universities) should avoid coercing publics into any predetermined agendas (Leitch & Neilson, 2001).

To summarise the previous three sets of literature, it can be noted that although increasingly universities tap into the unlimited potential and benefits of social media, the real challenges lie in: a) whether they are aware of the fundamental clash between their tendency toward self-promotion in social media and students’ expectations of participatory communication; and b) how to reconcile the dilemma of marketing universities online and fulfilling a community engagement mission. In a world awash in social media, university organisations need to reflect what social media mean for them, and how to use new technologies to address various puzzles, paradoxes, and responsibilities. Beyond descriptive surveys of capturing the trend of social media adoption and tactical analyses of student-run, peer-to-peer communication, there needs to be in-depth research to explore how universities can play an active role in not only *being* social (e.g., connection, link) but also *doing* social (e.g., interaction, engagement). For this reason, this study explores three questions:

RQ1: Why are social media being used in a university environment – i.e., what is the purpose and role of university social media communication?

RQ2: How are social media being used in a non-profit university environment?

RQ3: How is the reported tension between tendencies toward self-interested promotion and participation-based community building managed by university communicators in social media?

Methodology

Since this study explores the above *why* and *how* questions, a case study approach (Yin, 2009) was considered appropriate. A public New Zealand university was chosen as a case study for two reasons. Firstly, it had the largest number of students enrolled by distance and in three campuses across three different cities of New Zealand, with one third being international students, all the while being under the pressure of retaining domestic students. Secondly, the university has actively adopted a range of social media platforms such as Facebook (with 73,784 likes), Twitter (with 12,800 followers), and YouTube (with 20,000 subscribers).

The main source of qualitative data was collected from 26 in-depth interviews with communication, public relations, media, and marketing professionals from both the university-level External Relations (ER) office and the department-level sub-units, yielding 328 pages of transcripts. This study applied a semi-structured interview guide to cover issues such as university communicators’ understanding of community building, preferred relationships with students, social media engagement strategies and tactics, and the rationale of communication decision-making. The interview procedure was approved by the university’s research ethics office, as a result of which de-identification of all interviewees was agreed upon. Interview data collection ceased after reaching data saturation. The other data source was gathered from qualitative content analysis of the university’s Facebook pages, Twitter posts, and YouTube video clips over the course of a semester (from 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2016), which according to Belanger et al. (2014) is a reasonable timeframe and a sufficient sample to capture the social media application in real-time coverage.

The 328 pages of interview transcripts were analysed through inductive thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis refers to “searching across a data set...to find repeated patterns of meaning” (p. 86) and to link back the synthesised data to research questions and theoretical frameworks. The social media content was analysed by using basic descriptive statistics such as counting the number of posts pertaining to a topic category (e.g., paper offerings, programme promotion, student success, research highlights, executive activities, events), and the number of student interactions such as posts (e.g., comments, enquiries), rates (e.g., likes, favourites), and

spread (e.g., shares, retweets) (Brech et al., 2017). To improve the research validity, a member-checking technique was applied to report the interview results back to the respondents and asked them to verify the accuracy of transcripts (Creswell, 2009). Both interview data and content analysis were cross-validated. What follows next is the presentation of findings to address the research questions.

Findings

RQ1: Why are social media being used in a university environment – i.e., what is the purpose and role of university social media?

This question probes into whether university communicators are aware of the reported dilemma between self-interested marketing online and the community engagement imperative. According to the interview data, a strong marketing theme emerged, affirming the prime use of the university’s social media for student attraction and recruitment. Rather than being fearful about the perils of using social platforms, respondents seemed to be more concerned about the risk of not using them. One marketing officer explained, “As we need to be market-oriented we have to operate in that digital world. Don’t be abusive of social media threats. It’s a cost-effective tool of marketing” (Personal communication, November 16, 2015). The university’s senior management has also seen the value of social media in marketing to attract global audiences who may not be able to visit the campuses but can experience the culture and services virtually. “As a shop front to the world,” a digital officer added, “social media shape how the world sees us until people get here. Distance students especially need those social media platforms” (Personal communication, November 18, 2015).

The strong marketing orientation with social media was intelligible from the respondents’ positioning of social media, their perceived target audience, social media content production, and the constitution of the university’s ER team. For example, respondents used metaphors such as ‘online help desk’, ‘promotion mix’, ‘extension of bulletin boards’, and ‘digital arm of marketing’ to position the role of social media. They reported they mainly targeted prospective students, largely school leavers and international students. “There is a lot of online energy going into recruiting students but we don’t actually, I think, do a good job in engaging the students we already have,” one marketing officer admitted (Personal communication, November 28, 2015). The content analysis of the university’s Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube accounts also suggested that nearly one third of the posts were overt marketing by distributing information on paper offerings, course introduction, exchange programmes, open days, high school visits and the like. When reviewing the structure of the ER team, we realised that marketing specialists outnumbered the total of media, public relations, communication, and events professionals.

In particular, social media were directly under the stewardship of the marketing stream, named ‘social marketing’. “Communication and PR professionals have only recently been given access to social media, being able to actually post on and use them”, said a communication officer (Personal communication, November 17, 2015). The public relations stream was reported to work closely with marketing people to direct promotional materials at prospective students and move them from attraction through to the admission process.

RQ2: How are social media being used in a university environment?

This question interrogates whether and to what extent university communicators employ the interactive and participatory features of social media. Through juxtaposing the interview data and content analysis, our results showed that social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) were primarily used by the university as platforms of one-way information transmission, publicity, and image building, with limited online interaction and participation

from students. In one social media editor’s words, “Content production is still the king” (Personal communication, November 17, 2015). According to the editor’s description, they tended to use a content production worksheet to plan different agendas, topics, news, and stories, following a timeline around several key dates such as open days, school term commencement, Easter break, exams, and graduation weeks. Without student consultation and open dialogue, university communicators decided what could be seen and heard from their social media.

The content analysis of social media posts revealed nine categories of topics: course promotion, campus life, research highlights, student achievements, events/activities, international collaboration, industry linkages, senior leadership dynamics, and others – of which few were about community building and engagement. A content producer emphasised, “It really takes time to develop good content. We need to find relevant content and package it in an interesting and engaging way” (Personal communication, November 19, 2015). When the respondent was asked what meant to be ‘engaging’, she replied, “Students would like it and be happy to share it without prompt.” An obvious focus was placed on attention grabbing and driving traffic to the pre-packaged content, rather than initiating dialogues with students and seeking their inputs. This was confirmed by another media specialist:

I try to make the Facebook page about Māori (a minority ethnic group in New Zealand) and Pacific groups visible both within and outside the university. Well, this simplified what I do. I do whatever it takes to enhance that visibility. Creating that visibility is what I enjoy most, ensuring good stories flow to media and get published. That’s always exciting. (Personal communication, November 27, 2015)

In order to attract traffic online, respondents summarised four characteristics of social media content production: original (not simply sharing or reposting others’ information), authentic (telling stories about real people, not advertising), youth-focused (incorporating popular culture), and relatable (adding value to student life). A lot of visual tools (e.g., photos, videos, infographics) were used extensively for publicity. However, limited participation from or interaction with publics (i.e., students) was identified, except that a few posts generated a relatively high volume of likes and shares. Even though the university recruited some student interns to contribute posts from a student perspective, which seemed to embrace the user-generated content feature of social media, that student-supplied content was required to follow the university’s pre-determined agendas.

The evaluation of online spectatorship, or to use the respondents’ preferred word ‘engagement’, seemed to be enacted by counting the number of followers, likes, viewers, favourites, shares and subscribers through software such as Google Analytics and Sprout Social. These numbers constituted the major part of their annual performance report to the senior management. One digital officer commented, “It’s probably the only thing (e.g., counting followers, likes) that we can track and we can track our rival universities as well. If no one favoured the tweets, it means that no one paid attention to what we said” (Personal communication, November 24, 2015). Although this way of evaluation falls into John’s (2013) ‘distributive engagement’ – instigating audiences to share or circulate content that serves organisational interest – a communication officer tried to justify this:

I know ‘likes’ is not everything, but at the moment ‘likes’ means building an audience base. Once we have that base, hopefully we can build engagement because at least we can reach that number of people. Anyway, this measurement of effectiveness is better than being linked to the marketing goal and student recruitment numbers.
(Personal communication, December 7, 2015)

RQ3: How is the reported tension between tendencies toward self-interested promotion and participation-based community building managed by university communicators in social media?

From the previous analyses of RQ1 and RQ2, it is noticeable that the tension between self-interested promotion and participation-based community building in social media has not been fully recognised or addressed by the university communicators. Nonetheless, a further analysis of the interview data and social media content signalled emergent efforts were being made around community building and engagement online, albeit not yet reaching a critical mass. For example, most respondents shared that community building and engagement in universities should aim to employ social media to create a sense of belonging and emotional attachment between the university and students, which serves as the foundation of co-design and co-organisation of the engagement process and potentially co-production of solutions to the commonly concerning issues. One public relations officer elaborated:

Ideally, building a university community means three things: a) to help strengthen student coalition around shared interests; b) to create partnership between the university and students; and c) to empower students to articulate themselves and participate in university affairs, or even to reshuffle the university’s pre-existing agendas.
(Personal communication, December 10, 2015)

To achieve these goals, our data revealed three experimental tactics of community building and engagement used by the university: role-model and peer motivation, social network support, and top-down empowerment. According to the respondents, role-model motivation refers to leveraging the influence from peers to inspire the student cohort, strengthen their connections to each other, and create communities (e.g., clubs, groups) around shared interests. For instance, we identified a story from Twitter about one disabled PhD student who overcame various hurdles to attain his degree. This story piqued the most likes, shares, and comments on Facebook and Twitter. As the content editor analysed, “Students feel relatable and engaged with peer storytelling. They like stuff about themselves and fellow students, rather than big news on research or policies” (Personal communication, December 4, 2015). Inspired by this role model, students consequently created their own Facebook page PhDs@Uni to share, exchange, and help each other.

Social network support implies that the university attempts to solicit and mobilise support from students’ extended families and ethnic groups, which is much valued in Māori culture, to build vibrant student communities. For example, ER’s communication team created *Māori of the Week* on Facebook during the graduation weeks to invite families to join in celebrating student achievements at various offline functions. One public relations officer explained the rationale:

In order to engage Māori and Pacific students, we need to engage their extended families and communities. We actually used Facebook to target more families, than students. We wanted to showcase Māori student achievements to their ethnic group and the whole country, providing students with a strong sense of belonging, recognition and accomplishment. (Personal communication, November 10, 2015)

A third tactic of community building and engagement related to top-down empowerment from the senior leadership to endorse a participatory approach to interact with students. For example, the vice-chancellor opened his own Twitter account to publish original content, rather than reposting given information from the ER office. He also re-tweeted student achievements, or solicited public feedback and input on university policies or initiatives. However, this top-down empowerment appeared to only signal the very first step in shifting away from the traditional organisational communication, to participatory collaboration with the student cohort. There was insufficient evidence that the university had fully applied the co-production feature of social media for community building and engagement.

Further, our data suggested several barriers for the university community building and student engagement. Firstly, respondents reported the lack of an open and interactive digital climate, where bold practices such as public participation and contribution can flourish in university social media. One digital officer articulated, “The biggest challenge isn’t technology but culture. Perhaps management level is still nervous about social media, thus preferring linear, controllable marketing” (Personal communication, November 15, 2015). Another communication advisor proposed a view of ‘E-communities by default’: “Ideally, there should be an atmosphere to encourage moving as many people as possible online. When we talk about community building, we should naturally think of social media platforms” (Personal communication, December 12, 2015).

Secondly, university bureaucracies appeared to be an impediment to community building in social media. All participants noted that universities consisted of different interest groups and probably had the widest stakeholder base. Such complexity made it difficult for universities to proactively use social media within rigid regulatory frameworks. Specifically, the respondents spotted the discrepancy between the university guidelines and department implementation. “School people didn’t see the ‘big picture’. They think it is ER’s job to build communities” (Personal communication, November 26, 2015). The absence of collaboration between academics and professionals was also observed, “Academics don’t see the imperative of community building. They might see this as another call on their time” (Personal communication, December 12, 2015). Additionally, some respondents identified the challenge from disconnections between social media strategies and technological support. One digital officer explained, “Digital strategies for community engagement is not in the IT people’s remit, but we still have to write our own social media strategies. And comms people need to be up-skilled” (Personal communication, November 9, 2015).

The third constraint of community building in social media was found to be the stabilised power relations; that being said, the decision of student engagement was made by the university’s top leaders. Respondents shared that the approval mechanism was a major obstacle to participatory and collaborative social media practices. One respondent explicated:

As we essentially need to convince multiple layers of committees that this is a good idea, and often, and it's no disrespect to any individuals, but often the committee people don't understand what we are talking about. Sign-off is really a fraught thing, and it's so difficult for them to make a meaningful decision to approve or not, which slows things up a lot.
(Personal communication, November 17, 2015)

Therefore, some respondents called for a 'federal model' to manage the university social media. A 'federal model' means, on one hand, establishing a central social media team that provides university-wide resources to department levels, which can, in turn, take action independently. On the other hand, the university communicators encourage online publics, especially students, to set up their own agendas, voice their concerns, and take initiatives, while the university only steps in when intervention is needed. This model fulfils the collaborative and democratic principles of social media but requires strong institutional commitment. Universities often invest seven-figure sums of money in marketing campaigns to attract students, whereas social media focused on community building with strong concern for these students still have a long way to go.

Discussion and conclusion

In looking beyond the 'what' is happening to the 'why' and 'how' social media were being used in a university, this case study revealed that the university communicators placed a higher priority over marketing online than fulfilling implicit imperative of community engagement. Driven by the global trend of branding higher education institutions (Bal et al., 2015), the university social media were preferably used as an additional channel of disseminating promotional information, and showcasing the university image, which sharply clashed with the general use patterns among university students (e.g., networking, sharing) (Davis III et al., 2015). With the commercial intrusion and domination, the community thinking and engagement effort in the university social media appeared too weak to create strong bonds and empower members of the university community to participate, collaborate, and contribute.

The finding that 'content production is king' corroborated Valentini's (2015) assertion that rhetorical tradition of public relations (e.g., message crafting, symbolic production) dominates new media. A co-creational approach (Botan & Taylor, 2004) that sees publics as co-creators of communication and best fits with social media affordances was not yet implemented. By and large, the university ran social media like a spectator sport, featured by appointing their own players (i.e., communication professionals), following a set of prescriptive rules (i.e., content production templates), and treating audiences (i.e., students) as passive spectators in attempts to develop them as fans. Due to the dearth of interaction, university social media players may look like "fake friends" (Motion et al., 2016, p. 215) or dominant, elite decision-makers to students, despite the official links to connect with students that have been established.

Nonetheless, this study captured a budding shift from the university-centred marketing publicity to participation-based community building via various tactics. For example, the role-model motivation appeared effective for the university engagement since it followed the rationale of 'social validation', whereby young people tend to repeat the behaviours of outstanding peers from the same community (Senbel, Ngo, & Blair, 2014). Social network support from students' families and ethnic groups assisted the university community building through developing bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000) to the university. Top-down empowerment indicated the loosened control over social media from the senior management. However, this study has further identified institutional barriers, or in Couldry's (2010) words, 'organisational challenges', to enable university engagement at

a strategic level. Those barriers included the lack of open digital culture, university bureaucracies and fragmentation, and the stabilised power imbalance between the university and students.

The above findings shed light on practical implications for social media use in universities. While facing an inexorable tide of commercialising universities in the global marketplace, higher education institutions need to resist colonising social media for marketing, because they still shoulder social missions of community building, civic engagement, and serving public interest. A participation-based, community building approach not only accords with social media culture but also lives up to millennial students' expectations. Thus, university communicators are advised to use social media as a catalyst of systematic engagement that targets inter-generational (e.g., past, current, prospective) students and mobilises cross-sectional (e.g., academics, professionals, executives) collaboration to build the university community. In other words, normalising community engagement in university social media is not about finding ways to fit the community concept into existing communication practices, but about transforming the university social media logic to encourage community engagement to thrive.

To facilitate community engagement, content production still hold a critical role in connecting wide audiences to university missions, providing relevant resources, and serving as a foundation for more complex functions (e.g., dialogue, partnership). However, we suggest an integration of online content shareability with offline engagement activities. As Allagui and Breslow (2016) support, from sharing, liking, and commenting on social media content to offline engagement can not only continue one's participation in a conversation when one is away from social media, but also produce viral impacts across a broad spectrum of community members. Online content-sharing and offline interaction could coexist in mutually reinforcing ways to strengthen university engagement. Therefore, we call university communicators to climb up Lovejoy and Saxton's (2012) “information-community-action ladder of engagement” (p. 350), through which ‘information’ articulates main points, ‘community’ involves dialogue, participation and collaboration, and ‘action’ enacts a real behaviour (e.g., attending events, signing petitions).

On a deep level, to address the paradox of organisation-driven marketing publicity vs. public-oriented community engagement in social media requires universities to change their communication standpoint. This means official communicators need to detour away from predetermined agendas, no longer treating social media as a “value-added function for senior management” (Mahoney, 2011, p. 144). Instead, they should encourage publics, especially students, to be co-designers of engagement strategies and co-planners of university community building. University engagement should be multi-dimensional to include John's (2013) both ‘distributive’ (e.g., content circulation) and ‘communicative’ engagement (e.g., student co-production) in search of a balance between achieving communication effectiveness and facilitating dialogues with students. To this end, a ‘youthful style of working’ – working with young contributors of content, integrating with student-run, peer-supported social media, and incorporating popular and fandom culture – is necessary to engage diverse audiences, some of whom would otherwise be indifferent.

In conclusion, this study makes three contributions to the underdeveloped scholarship of social media communication in universities. Firstly, through the lens of university-run social media, this study refocuses on the essential but largely downplayed value of community building in university communication practice. To complement the widely adopted marketing, relationship, and dialogic theoretical approaches to social media public relations, a community perspective invites university communicators to reflect on their coordinative role in developing shared values, nurturing partnerships, and empowering public agency. Secondly, this study integrates time-tested higher education theories on engagement (e.g., systematic engagement, ladder of engagement) with social media public relations scholarship to produce knowledge suitable particularly for university social media practice. Given the “centrality of engagement in higher education” (Fitzgerald

et al., 2016, p. 245), engagement theories will continue to assist theory building of social media public relations for universities. Thirdly, this study offers holistic understanding of university social media use within a broad and challenging context, wherein global universities are undergoing tremendous transformations, especially in terms of university governance, the commercial value of the knowledge they produce, and their relationships with wider societies.

Like many other case studies with findings specific to a particular organisation, the research results yielded here cannot be generalised to a university population. Nevertheless, they still provide a prime example of how the tension between the trend of commercialising universities online and the imperative of fulfilling social expectations should be managed by university communicators. Future research could attempt to investigate how publics i.e. students, expect, experience, and evaluate the community building and engagement in university social media. In particular, more studies should be done to explore and operationalise the communicative engagement, for example, finding out the enabling conditions and possible mechanisms for university communicators to embrace open-ended, public participation in co-producing content and making decisions. Additional inquiries into the ways of collaboration between university-run social media and student-initiated, peer-shared networks would also be valuable to improve the whole social media communication in university contexts with far-reaching impacts.

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