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# Managing social media for strategic communication in a New Zealand university: Implications from a case study

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## Abstract

*Social media continue to be a prevailing topic in the strategic communication studies, with a predominant focus on how to leverage new technologies to the advantage of organisations, especially corporations. Yet little is known about how social media could be utilised for non-profit organisations such as higher education systems, whose mission goes beyond profit accumulation to serving public interest. To fill in this gap, this paper conducted a case study to examine how university professional communicators perceive and practice strategic communication on social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube). Drawing on 18 in-depth interviews and document data, this study unravelled a gap between practitioners' normative perception of strategic communication and pragmatic marketing-oriented practices because of various constraints, including the disconnection between digital strategies and technology competence, the discrepancy between university guidelines and school implementation, and the dissociation between academics and professionals. This study sheds light on improving the strategic communication for increasingly commercialised public universities in search of a balance between fulfilling economic and social values in the digital age.*

## Introduction

Social media have drawn growing attention from both scholars and practitioners to their impact and value for organisations' strategic communication and goal attainment (Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015). As defined by Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Ruler, Verčič and

Sriramesh (2007), "strategic communication" refers to "the purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission" (p. 3). At the centre of practice is to align communication with "the company's overall strategy and to enhance its strategic positioning" (Argenti, Howell, & Beck, 2005, p. 83). The literature has mainly taken root in a corporate context, enquiring whether social media revolutionise strategic communication in a fundamental way (e.g., Christ, 2005; Hughes & Porter, 2007), or how companies adopt digital technologies to maintain strategic interests (e.g., Catalino, 2007; Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). However, this mainstream scholarship has been increasingly criticised for privileging organisational goals over public interests, as well as the lack of attention to non-profits, which differ from corporations in mission and culture, and have to "do a lot with a little" (Jaye, 1996, p. 32).

Noticeably, social media appear to have recently been adopted in higher education systems to engage with their principal stakeholders – the always-connected student generation (Barnes & Lescault, 2011). According to McAllister (2012a), 67% of the world's top 100 universities have an official social media presence, with Facebook being the most popular application. The main use of social media seems to be in service of branding and marketing universities due to reduced government funds in light of recent downward trends in the global economy. As a result, a business strategy has been reinforced in universities' strategic communication practices in order to attract ever-greater numbers of students (Belanger, Bali, & Longden, 2014; McAllister, 2012a). The social mission inherent in public education and the critical relationship building with students have therefore been downplayed.

Against the above backdrop, this study undertakes a case study approach to the strategic communication and social media use of a university in New Zealand. Across this national context, tertiary education has been transformed by government deregulation, internationalisation and globalisation, and a challenge in interfacing with fierce global educational competition (Ford, Joseph, & Joseph, 1999). Furthermore, the introduction of the Performance Based Research Funding (PBRF) regime in the early 2000s has increased pressures on the core practices of the university sector. PBRF, a ranking exercise designed to ensure ‘research active’ institutions are appropriately rewarded, is applied to the country’s eight public universities and has been noted for moving the sector away from the traditional protection and privileges the sector has traditionally enjoyed (Larner & Heron, 2005). In response to this new funding reallocation, New Zealand universities become externally oriented to forge new international relationships and enhance global competitiveness.

In this climate, marketing universities as global institutions to attract international students seems like an alternative solution to the mounting resource problems. Despite being criticised, there emerged a tendency to view students as consumers (Durkin & McKenna, 2011). Research indicates that New Zealand universities have learned to adopt corporate-like public relations and communication practices such as using various promotional mixes, catchy taglines, branding and advertising campaigns (Gray, Fam, & Llanes, 2003). The advent of social media, especially Facebook, has further strengthened the marketisation by disseminating one-way information to prospective students (McAllister, 2012a). The net result of these practices appears to be a more intense focus being placed on economic rewards and branding than on the conventional non-profit social mission of bringing “emotional satisfaction, spiritual values and the sharing of humanitarian ideals” to students (Arnett, German, & Hunt, 2003, p. 91). The present study attempts to

problematise and ascertain what it means to be *strategic* for public universities embracing social media.

## Literature review

### *Strategic communication and social media*

As an emerging field, strategic communication is interchangeably called public relations, corporate communication and communication management (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013). In the first dedicated *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, Hallahan et al. (2007) defined “strategic communication” as “the purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission” (p. 3). Although subsequent scholars (e.g., Argenti et al., 2005; Grunig, 2009) have elaborated this concept in varied contexts, at the centre of strategic communication is the aim of reaching the overarching goals and interests of a particular organisation. Strategic communication prioritises organisational goals and success through following a sequential rationale: management sets goals and objectives, plans change actions, and removes any obstacles (Stroh, 2007).

The mainstream strategic communication literature has centred on a corporate context and even more so in the wake of burgeoning social media. Social media in this research do not refer to specific technologies or platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) but are used as a context characterised by open, sharing, interactive and participatory culture (Motion, Heath & Leitch, 2016). In the social media environment, a topical issue of strategic communication revolves around how to leverage an array of new technologies to advance organisational interest, particularly business development and expansion (Holtzhausen, 2012). For example, a number of studies (e.g., Eisenberg, Goodall, & Tretheway, 2007; Sloan, 2006) have explored the formulation, planning and implementation of strategies to align companies’ competencies with opportunities and constraints associated with digital networks. Also, scholarly attention has been paid to improving the effectiveness of strategic communication in specialised areas such as issue management, relationship building and image restoration (e.g.,

Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011; Zerfass, 2010). Although these insights contributed to organisational effectiveness, they are criticised for privileging management discourse and promoting the blind acceptance of organisational goals (Holtzhausen, 2012). Especially in the social media space that allows citizens to set their own agendas, self-serving strategic communication is deemed private, sometimes illegitimate, and not deserving of being in the public sphere (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013).

The field of strategic communication has recently called for a turn to a non-profit context where public interest and social mission need to be fulfilled by organisations (Self, 2010). In this vein, one argument is that to communicate strategically on social media means to claim legitimacy of a viewpoint or practice in the public sphere that is no longer controlled by organisations but co-shaped by vastly diverse publics (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2010). Public participation and interests should therefore be integrated into organisations' strategic planning and communication (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). To overcome the tension between the organisation-centred strategic interest and the social-media-enabled wider community interest, scholars (e.g., Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Motion et al., 2016) call to introduce a governance (different from a top-down control) approach to public engagement. Governance means to align organisational initiatives with public expectations, and to meet organisational goals while practising on ethical, not manipulative, grounds (Motion et al., 2016).

In addition, social media posed great challenges to non-profits and public institutions including those in commercialisation transition. As Waters, Burnett, Lamm and Lucas (2009) observed, non-profits are usually constrained by a tight budget but aspire to achieve a lot. This entails having to not only survive the bottom line but also fulfil social missions and responsibilities. Further, public institutions may have a complicated audience profile, but the lack of resources and inflexible bureaucratic structures have left them at an early stage of

using social media, let alone using it strategically. Universities typically sit in such dilemmas in the digital age as illustrated below.

#### *Social media in higher education systems*

Over the past few years social media have gradually entered the higher education systems for a number of reasons. In addition to just following the trend "to keep up with other universities and units" (Kelleher & Sweetser, 2012, p. 119), many universities are forced to adopt social media in the wake of increasing global competition and commercialisation. It is deemed as the best way for universities to connect with the social-media-savvy millennial generation in the digital space that they occupy. According to McAllister (2012b), more than half of US universities have added the most frequently used social media tools (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn) to their websites. Asderaki and Maragos (2012) also found the majority of European tertiary education institutions present themselves at least on one of these popular social media platforms. Similar levels of adoption and application of social media have occurred in Australia and New Zealand universities (Raciti, 2010).

However, systematic research on strategic communication on social media by higher education systems is relatively scant (Kohring, Marcinkowski, Lindner, & Karis, 2013). A prevailing theme found in the literature is the prime use of social media as a tool of marketing or an extension of publicity, to deliver one-way information and promote university offerings and images (Barnes & Lescault, 2011). The so-called strategic goal of using these new platforms appears to be geared towards recruiting new and international students, rather than creating a dialogue and maintaining relationships with students (Kelleher & Sweetser, 2012). Although some recent efforts have been made to refocus on the communication aspect of social media, most investigations (e.g., Belanger et al., 2014; McAllister 2012a) are benchmark studies and descriptive surveys used to calculate the occurrence, percentage and frequency of social media use in higher education systems. In sum, there is a lack of in-depth research on the ways

in which social media are being used for universities' strategic communication and why.

*Spotting the gap: whose strategic interest?*

Based on the previous sections, two key questions require resolution. The first is: where is the communication *with*, rather than *to*, publics? And secondly, whose strategic interest has been, or should be served, by a public university that has been undergoing marketisation and financial pressures? As is captured in existing studies, most universities have not yet explored the full potential of social media "except to sell things" (Kent, 2008, p. 39). Social media are mainly used for marketing, branding, publicity, one-way news feed and information delivery *to* students (Belanger et al., 2014). Their potential to communicate and engage *with* students has yet to be employed by university communicators (McAllister, 2012a). According to Rowe and Frewer (2000), engagement can be implemented at two levels: 1) public communication, aiming at providing authentic and useful information to publics; and 2) public participation, characterised by the establishment of a dialogue with publics based on a two-way information flow.

The lack of public participation and engagement has triggered another issue: whose strategic interest is served or should be fulfilled? This question is even more pressing for public institutions like universities in a struggle between marketplace competition and social expectations. There is a need for a solution to better use social media in universities' strategic communication to accomplish both market imperatives and social interests and responsibilities. To address this need, the current study has two aims: firstly, to understand how university professionals interpret strategic communication in the digital age and what they are aiming for; and secondly, to ascertain how they apply social media in practice and what are the driving forces behind the practices. Two research questions are proposed:

RQ1: How do university professional communicators perceive strategic

communication in the digital and social media environment?

RQ2: What practical strategies and tactics are being applied by university professionals on social media, and why?

### **Method: A case study approach**

Since this study asks questions of *how* and *why*, a case study approach is deemed appropriate to investigate the issue in-depth within a real-life context (Yin, 2009). Recent public relations and strategic communication literature (e.g., McAllister, 2012a; Waters et al., 2009) has also called for a case study approach to compensate the drawbacks of descriptive benchmark surveys on social media adoption and use. Specifically, a single case study design is applied in this research, aimed at providing thick descriptions of the issue under investigation, and generalising the findings in a theoretical sense, rather than to a population (Yin, 2009). The current university has been chosen as a case study mainly because it is one of the largest public universities in New Zealand, and has actively used social media in marketing and communication practices.

#### *Case background*

With more than 80 years' history, the university currently has enrolled more than 15,000 students at home and from abroad. The university has a team dedicated to External Relations (ER) with an explicit focus on external publics while attending to internal communication such as producing and distributing the vice-chancellor's (VC) e-log, newsletter and seminar information. The ER team reports to an assistant vice-chancellor (AVC), who is a member of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) chaired by the VC. Under the ER office, there are five parallel clusters consisting of marketing and recruitment (25 people), communication (8), web office (10), alumni and development (9), national events and sponsorship team (3). Public relations professionals, officially titled 'communication advisor' or 'public relations and media specialists', sit within the communication team with five advisors managing communication issues for each of the five colleges of the university. The web office

is mainly responsible for website operation, production of video or photography, and providing technical support to different schools. Social media are managed by a social marketing coordinator (SMC) who is working under the marketing cluster. This university is present on most social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube. In addition, each school has one technical consultant to manage their own school websites or social media pages. The university has also a student administration (SA) unit to manage both prospective and current students.

*Data collection and analysis*

This case study collected qualitative data from long interviews and document review. Long interviews, as per Hon (1995), “go beyond studying individual perceptions and feelings – identifying shared mental categories among participants as the primary goal” while still providing “an opportunity for (participants) to speak for themselves” (p. 39). This case study conducted 18 long

interviews with people from the ER office, SA unit and from the college and school level (see Table 1). The recruitment of participants was through a theoretical purposive snowball sampling informed by the research aims and questions. An open-ended interview guide was used to cover the key issues: perceptions of strategic communication in the social media environment; social media-based strategies and tactics being used; the rationale of applying those strategies; current problems and future development in this area. The interview process was approved by the university’s research ethics office, as a result of which de-identification of all interviewees has been ensured in this paper. Some documents reviewed were accessed either from online or given by participants as complementary contextual information. Documents gathered included the university’s strategic plan, ER office structure map, annual reports, news releases, social media analytics and personal correspondences.

**Table 1. Demographics of the participants in this case study**

Working units			Level of units		Gender		Level of positions		
ER office	SA department	School office	University	School	Male	Female	Senior	Medium	Junior
11	3	4	14	4	7	11	5	9	4
N=18			N=18		N=18		N=18		

Note: “N” = number.

Both interview and document data were analysed through inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), namely, “searching across a data set ... to find repeated patterns of meaning” (p. 86), and through pattern matching to link the synthesised data with research questions. To improve the research validity, member checking was applied by reporting the interview results back to the participants and asking them to verify the accuracy (Creswell, 2009). To assist coding, a research assistant was employed. The inter-coder agreement was tested (.75) to ensure the research reliability. The themes and sub-themes which emerged

from the data include: a shared normative perception of strategic communication, pragmatic approach to practices, and signs of change and future development as illustrated next.

**Findings**

*A shared normative perception of strategic communication*

To answer RQ1 “how university professionals perceive strategic communication in the social media environment”, this study found a shared understanding among the university professional communicators. A key theme

emerging from the interview data was 'engagement' which was, albeit unsurprisingly, conferred by the participants with rich meanings. According to most participants, the overarching goal of engaging with students was to create communities where students can not only have a sense of belonging, but also feel empowered to create their own communities. As the social marketing coordinator explained, "We want people (students) to feel that it's a bit of a club that they particularly belong to and that it delivers stuff that is tailored directly to them." Another communication advisor added:

Engagement is opposed to a poster that just says 'here is a brand'. We are not selling a brand. We are working with students to build a multi-faceted life, a living thing, and a shared ownership.

The interview data further revealed three components to achieve the engagement goal. The first widely recognised component is student-centric information delivery to address their needs. It is interesting to find that participants used different rhetoric to elaborate the 'student-centric'. For example, a respondent from the SA unit defined it as "talking with your ears a lot more. It's about listening to, and understanding the way in which student communities like to engage." A digital officer emphasised that "Authentic messaging is critical for student sharing and reposting, as what students need today is not advertising." Another typical view is to 'add value to student life through relatable content', as explained by a college-level communicator: "Unlike the old generation, the net generation will only be willing to engage if we can actually show them this is relevant."

A second essential component of student engagement is perceived to be participation on a regular basis. One communication officer articulated:

Engagement is a strategic communication that elicits a response. You want more than just to push newsletters at people, for instance. You want to be in a situation where you are engaged in a conversation.

However, a digital officer said that in order for students to be able to participate, both the

content and the method of delivery need to be engaging enough for the students to spread and share within communities and networks, and be willing to repost without prompting.

The data indicated a third critical component to engaging publics online is a strategic vision that looks beyond short-term benefits and helps youth gain growth through their lifecycle. This long-term focus calls for solid groundwork to build a relationship with students. For example, one marketing practitioner explained,

The strategic vision means a process starting from imagining a picture of future success (what does success look like in that future point in time), followed by identifying targets to engage (who are most important) and outlining the strategic steps to get there.

It seems clear to most professionals that strategic communication is neither quick wins nor operational gains on a daily, weekly or even monthly basis. It is more about what they are building on through a strategic communicating process.

By reviewing the demographics of these participants, it's not difficult to realise why these professionals appear to share a normative perception of strategic communication. Most of them come from communication, public relations or publishing backgrounds. Some of them attained their master's degree from the communication school of the university, so they shared a knowledge base of what strategic communication should be. However, the participants also acknowledged there is an evident gap between what should be done and what is actually being done because of various constraints and barriers from multiple levels, as explained below.

*Pragmatic ways of practice and the reasons behind*

To answer RQ2 "How university professionals practice strategic communication and why", the juxtaposition of interview and document data uncovered a pragmatic approach to strategic communication on social media.

*Marketing and branding dominate*

When it came to daily communication practice on social media, a prominent theme emerging from the data set was that marketing and student recruitment through branding is a common practice. A clear focus has been put

on prospective students whether they are domestic or international. One marketing officer was frank about the reason, “That’s where we get our revenue from. Then it kind of filters down from there to current students, staff, alumni etc.” Marketing and recruitment is not only a priority for the university, but also on the colleges’ and schools’ top list. As the digital officer recalled, “They [school people] would always come to us and say, ‘Hey, we need to pull up this information on Facebook to target and attract potential customers. Can you help with this?’”

This marketing dominance was enabled through structural arrangements. For example, the web officer introduced his team as the “digital arm of the marketing team”, and “working closely with marketing people to achieve recruitment goals”. All social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) are under the control of the marketing team, especially the SMC (Document data: External Relations Structure Map). According to the digital officer, the communications/public relations team has only recently been given access to the university’s social media accounts, being able to actually post or use them. In reference to the SA unit, one of their major tasks is to provide administration information online such as enrolment dates, timetables, fees and paper offerings in order to help convert potential students to actual ones. Further, it is found from the annual social media analytics that the evaluation of social media engagement is linked to the marketing and recruitment goals. This is cross-validated by a web officer:

We are currently looking for a way to benchmark people’s awareness, affection and decision-making after viewing our website or Facebook pages, so that we can tell at which stage the potential customers are. Then we can work closer with the marketing team to implement specific strategies targeting segmented publics and drive them through the process from an expression of interest to final enrolment.

The high level of attention paid to potential students and the rich resources invested in

recruitment have led the communicators themselves to believe more needs to be done to engage with the current students. As one communication advisor commented, “There has been a really strong strategic plan towards recruitment, but I don’t see the same level of commitment to students who we already have”. Driven by the trend of pursuing a business strategy and winning the global market share, the university seems to have downplayed the importance of current students, and paid less attention to its social mission to engage and guide students for growth. Social media, despite offering interactive network features, are primarily used as a marketing tool to achieve the organisation-centred business goals.

#### *Content production is ‘king’*

Apart from being used as a marketing tool, social media have primarily been used as a form of digital bulletin board to publicise information and deliver seemingly engaging content which, actually, does not encourage student participation and interaction. As one content editor said, “One-way content production is king”. The data also disclosed that a large number of communicators devoted most of their time to searching techniques and tactics to produce ‘engaging’ content, but their evaluation of engagement was still linked to publicity, such as gauging the number of likes on Facebook, the favourites on Twitter and the views on YouTube.

One frequently used technique for content production is to provide practical information, such as ‘where I can find my timetable?’, ‘when do I have to be enrolled?’, ‘when do I have to pay my fees?’, and ‘how I can get a scholarship?’ One digital officer said, “Social media have an information role, just like another form of help desk or contact centre”. However, another communication advisor insisted that engaging content should be related to youth culture, original and authentic. Some participants clarified that students loved seeing news about fellow peers and their success, rather than big stories on research or policies that appeared to be far from their everyday life. Their experience of students led them to believe students did not like serious news releases but preferred more fun stories, and

students appreciated being able to share the news of real events and activities in which they could take part.

In addition, visual tools (e.g., photos, videos) were identified to be frequently used in content production. For example, one web editor said she had conducted trials where she sent one tweet without a photo, and sent the same tweet with a photo attached to it. She found the latter received more favourites and tweets. In her words, “This is engagement”. Another example was given by a digital officer who reported that a drone video of one of the university’s campuses went viral and was shared by many students, and then had a flow-on effect on enrolment.

#### *Constrained interaction and the reasons behind it*

The analysis of data identified a third aspect of pragmatic practices on social media: constrained interaction, namely, interaction enabled to a certain extent but constrained by multiple factors. The interview data provided two typical examples. One is given by the social media editor, who has even engaged with students on campus by sending them food when she noticed the student tweet online saying that they were stuck in the lab and stressed about preparing for an exam. However, she also admitted that, because of the shortage of resources, she could not have such interactions often:

When I took the food and coffees into the lab, the students were so blown away. They didn’t expect I would come. I took photos of them and then posted it out on social media and stuff. I think those personal face-to-face experiences are really beneficial. I would like to do more of that stuff in future if more human or financial resources could be provided.

The other typical example is that the university social media team involved student interns in assisting content production from a student’s perspective, but these interns are not encouraged to answer enquiries online directly, or interact with other students without instructions from the supervisors.

The data continued to suggest the reasons behind this pragmatic implementation of strategic communication on social media. Three gaps have been identified as shaping forces of the market-oriented and one-way communication landscape. The first gap rests on the disconnection between digital strategies and technology competence. According to the web officer:

IT or digital people usually don’t know how to come up with a strategy of communication to engage with students while coms or marketing people are not familiar with social media technologies such as how to run a forum or a chatroom. Some old-fashioned people even don’t know how to reply on Facebook.

The communicators from the school level also expressed a need for and an interest in receiving technological training before they can really engage online. Another gap emerging from the data lies in the discrepancy between university guidelines and school deliverables. For instance, although the whole university is guided by a comprehensive strategic plan, most schools still prioritise marketing as a goal and seek solutions to financial pressures. A third gap emerging from the data is the dissociation between academics and professionals. Some communication advisors feel that academics tend to focus on research and publications because of the nationwide PBRF pressure, and are rarely attentive to dynamics on social media. The lack of collaboration between academics and professionals makes it difficult to take the initiative and fully engage with students and wider communities.

#### *Signs of change and efforts being made*

Despite being pragmatic and conservative about social media engagement, this research further identified some signs of change and efforts being made by the university communicators to explore the full potential of social media. One encouraging sign is the VC’s social media presence and engagement with students online. For example, the VC has created his own Twitter account and sent information independently, rather than just retweeting the pre-packaged content by the ER

team. According to the digital officer, who provided the VC with technical training:

The VC would now retweet student success and interact with them. Say, if people have something serious to ask him, he would be happier to ring them up because 140 characters are hard to have a deep and meaningful conversation online.

Other efforts being made to improve the strategic communication and engagement online include the founding of a centralised customer relationship management (CRM) team aiming for long-term relationship building with students (Document data: Introduction of CRM). The whole ER team is also calling for ‘a federated model’ to collaborate with the school level, through which the ER team takes leadership in designing an overarching digital strategy while coaching and empowering the school staff to use social media to their own advantage. The central resources and services will be shared but the school can also take actions independently as long as the protocol is abided by. As a whole, the university communicators are making efforts to create a climate of engaging students more strategically in search of a balance between fulfilling the organisation’s own economic interests and public and social missions of what a university should be doing. As the communication director summarised at the end of his interview, “We would like to make higher level attempts to develop and measure engagement, and ensure it happens”.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Through situating strategic communication in the social media context, this case study has interrogated how one New Zealand university found a way to cope with the dual pressures of market competition and social expectation, as well as managing the potential conflict between organisational goals and public interests. Although these tensions have long been stated in critical public relations and strategic communication literature (e.g., Holtzhausen, 2012; King, 2009; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012), the task to resolve them is still or even more pressing and challenging in the digital

age. Fundamentally, the real difficulty posed to strategic communicators is how to mediate the cultural clash between the promotional culture of strategic communication and the participatory culture of social media. As shown in this case study, there appeared a clear divide between what the communicators think they should doing (e.g., engagement) and what they are really doing (e.g., marketing) on social media. This perception-reality gap corroborates McAllister’s (2012a) observation that universities’ social media use is still in the infancy of promotion. With the control of communication in the hands of the organisation (i.e., university) it is questionable whether publics (i.e., students) to whom the communication has been aimed can really be engaged on social media. A number of key findings with important implications are discussed below in light of the literature review.

Firstly, this study has identified a shared, albeit normative, understanding of strategic communication among the university communicators who have recently set foot in social media. Engagement, underpinned by a public-centric and participation philosophy along with a strategic vision of the future, emerged as a prominent theme in the participants’ interpretations of strategic communication on social media. Practitioners’ emphasis on engagement reflected that they were aware of the drawbacks inherent in traditional strategic communication, which is often driven by top-down, well planned, and “command-and-control mechanisms” (Hemp & Stewart, 2004, p. 127). The disorganised and sometimes chaotic social media occupied by young people prompt communicators to feel engagement as the core for strategic communication on social media. This engagement orientation also shed light on advancing the theory-building of strategic communication by incorporating literature on public participation.

Secondly, it was intriguing to find the inconsistency between the communicators’ claimed strategic communication and their pragmatic implementation online. Their pragmatic practices were typically reflected in the prioritised marketing promotion, one-way

content production, and constrained interaction with publics. The marketing dominance confirms the trend identified by previous studies (e.g., Barnes & Lescault, 2011; Belanger et al., 2014) that the prime use of social media in universities is to recruit students who tend to be technology savvy and make purchase decisions by seeking information online. Although the participants justified the value of one-way content production to build an audience base for engagement, the university's predefined contents may perpetuate a particular ideology that could actually disengage students. In other words, their preferred one-way communication reinforces the control as a "long troublesome issue" (Murphy, 2011, p. 3) in strategic communication, especially when "organisations attempt to determine in advance the terms of any public debate in which they engage" (Leitch & Neilson, 2001, p. 135).

Thirdly, this study identified possible reasons for the dissonance between participants' normative perceptions and pragmatic practices, as well as the efforts being made by them to narrow the gap. The research results showed that apart from the major reason of market imperative or bottom-line survival, multiple factors at various levels jointly contributed to the current situation. For example, one factor covers the disconnection between digital strategies and technology competence. IT people need to be trained in strategic communication while communicators have to upgrade social media skills. Another shaping factor regarding the discrepancy between university guidelines and school-level translated practices implies that there is a need for a centrally coordinated mechanism to reconcile different interest pursuits and value orientations on social media. For this purpose, the newly introduced idea of governance, which aims to align and protect the mutual interests of organisations, publics and society at large (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Motion et al., 2016), provides a more resilient framework than a top-down 'control' approach to managing strategic communication in the digital age. In addition, the lack of collaboration between academics and professionals indicates a buy-in effort needs to

be made; namely, professionals should attempt to bring important internal members, such as existing students and academics, on board to collectively fulfil the social aims of public engagement.

On the whole, this case study contributes to enriching the extant body of knowledge in strategic communication through offering a contextual understanding of the practices in non-profits' – specifically universities' – social media space. Through highlighting the contextual specifics of non-profits (e.g., dual pressures of economic survival and social expectations), this study has explicated the central issue of dominating organisational interest, and invited both strategic communicators and researchers to refocus on public interest, which is necessitated by the participatory social media culture. Perhaps a starting point to rebuild the traditionally organisation-centred strategic communication theory is to bridge with engagement literature (e.g., Rowe & Frewer, 2000; Stirling, 2008) in order to develop scholarship that is more adaptive to the digital environment and appeals to multiple values. Having said that, it does not mean strategic communication theories should discard the useful "promotion mix" (e.g., marketing, publicity) (Mangold & Faulds, 2009, p. 357), but instead should embed "a broader focus on the social influence of communication" (Garcia, 2012, p. 213).

This case study has also offered valuable insights and practical implications for universities' strategic communication on social media. The prescriptive style of communication by setting marketing/promotion goals followed by implementing prepared strategies may not fulfil the expectations of publics, especially youth immersed in digital space. A more balanced approach to align universities' initiatives with public interest and social norms is needed. In doing so, universities are encouraged to engage with young publics based on popular culture that concerns with "the everyday, the intimate, the immediate..." (Jenkins, McPherson, Shattuc, & Durham, 2002, p. 3). The practice would also benefit from going beyond just pushing message awareness to creating emotional attachment between universities and students, and among

the students themselves. To enable this focus shift, empowerment from the top management, such as by inviting the vice-chancellor's conversation and interaction with online publics, would help to reduce the organisational determinism and lead strategic communication in a more inclusive and socially responsible way.

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