An evaluation of the use of Facebook in student recruitment: a cohort study

Introduction

Higher education institutions in the UK are operating in an increasingly competitive environment that is promoting teaching excellence, student satisfaction, and student 'consumer' choice (Department for Education, 2017; Bunce, Baird & Jones, 2017). The number of applications in 2017 for university places in the UK was down 2.4% on average across the sector, and for some universities this decrease was substantially higher (UCAS, 2018). Recruiting students and providing a quality student experience have become top priorities for universities (Rutter, Roper & Lettice, 2016).

Social media has become an integral part of the toolkit of university marketers (Barnes & Mattson, 2009; Peruta & Shields, 2017). In a survey of 69 universities in the UK, 98% said that marketing on social media was an important part of their recruitment strategy, with the majority of them using Facebook (96%) or Twitter (88%) to engage with students (Shaw, 2014). In this context, the current study evaluated the use of a subject-specific Facebook group to build connections and relationships with potential new students with the aim of converting offers to study at one university – Oxford Brookes University (OBU) – into acceptances.

A study of 56 universities in the UK by Rutter, Roper and Lettice (2016) found that the number of followers of a university on social media (Facebook and Twitter) predicted student recruitment success. Other studies of prospective students in the Netherlands (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011) and the US (Hesel, 2013) revealed that students want to establish sense of community by following their university on social media, as well as gain information about how they might fit in, and what everyday life at the university will be like. There is also evidence that first year students who have greater engagement with social media have a greater connection to their institution, and are more engaged in university life (Higher Education Research Institute, 2007). Another study of American university students similarly found that following their university on social media enhanced students' perceived relationship quality with their university, and that the more social media channels they followed, the stronger the relationship (Clark, Fine & Scheuer, 2017). However, a study of 300 students in the UK conducted for the Guardian newspaper (Shaw, 2013) suggested that only one in four students feel that they have been influenced by university Facebook accounts. Nonetheless, that same study also found that one fifth of students suggested that universities should make more use of social media in their recruitment efforts, given the frequency of the students' own use of social media.

Developing relationships with students seems not only to be important for university recruitment but also for the student experience. The need for 'relatedness' or connectedness is a universal psychological human need, defined as the desire to feel connected to others and to feel cared for (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Studies have found that students who feel more connected to their university are more likely to have a deep approach to learning (Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear & Hendres 2011; Bunce & Bennett, 2018), have reduced levels of dissatisfaction (Bunce, Bennett & Jones, 2018), have higher grade point averages (Goodenow & Grady, 1993), and complete their degree (Wilson & Gore, 2013). From this research, it could be argued that developing a sense of connectedness between potential students and their university through the use of a Facebook group would enhance the student experience.

The use of social media by universities is, therefore, extensive but there is little research to assess its impact on recruitment or the student experience. The current study evaluated the use of a subject-specific university Facebook group for students who had been offered a place to study at OBU, but had yet to begin their course. OBU is a post-1992 university with a strong focus on the student experience (THE, 2017), making it a relevant context within which to explore the impact of social media on recruitment and the student experience. In this study, the number of applicants who accepted their place to study was examined as a function of whether or not they were members of the Facebook group. In addition to this, current students were surveyed to explore their experience of belonging (or not) to the Facebook group. Based on previous research, it was expected that the Facebook group would create a

relationship between the students and with the university and thereby help them decide to accept their offer of a place to study at OBU. It was also expected that membership of the Facebook group would have a positive impact on the student experience of OBU.

Developing and running the Facebook group

The Facebook group was originally set up centrally by the OBU marketing team as part of an initiative to increase the number of students accepting their offer of a place to study (i.e., to improve conversion rates). It was jointly administered by the marketing team and an academic member of staff. Invites to join the group were sent out to all successful applicants within their offer letter via email by the course administrator within two weeks of their interview. Sixty-three students became members of the group (see Figure 1). The Facebook group was private; this meant meaning that requests to join the group had to be approved by the group administrators (i.e., marketing or academic staff), and only members of the group could see who else belonged to the group and the content shared within it.

A total of 179 posts were made between February, when the Facebook group was created, and September, when the new students arrived. This equated to approximately one post per working day. The posts were predominantly made by one academic member of staff. These posts comprised content about the course, such as teaching and learning activities, or were shared from other Facebook accounts including those run by the university, relevant professional bodies, and stakeholders.

Figure 1: Numbers of applicants who were: a) offered a place to study at OBU, b) became a member of the Facebook group or not, c) accepted or rejected their offer, and d) took part in the survey or not.

The study

Participants

Participants in the evaluation study were all studying a health and social care subject. Of the 54 first year students who were enrolled on the course, 44 (81%) participated in the survey (see Figure 1). There were 20 undergraduate (UG) participants and 24 postgraduate (PG) participants, and the majority (n = 42, 95%) were female. Thirty-six (82%) participants who completed the survey were also members of the Facebook group: 15 were UG and 21 were PG. Length of membership of the Facebook group was predominantly dependent on when they were interviewed for their place on the course: 17% (n = 6) students had been a member for between 6-8 months, 47% (n = 17) had been a member for between 3-6 months, and 36% (n = 13) had been a member for less than 3 months.

Materials

After establishing whether or not students were a member of the Facebook group they completed demographic questions to ascertain their gender, age, and whether they were an undergraduate or postgraduate. They were then asked two specific questions to establish whether or not belonging to the group helped them to decide to accept their place at Brookes (Yes/Not sure/No), and whether they would recommend the group to new applicants (Yes/Maybe/No). In both cases, participants were also asked to explain their reasoning behind their responses. They were also asked two open-ended questions to establish: (1) why they became a member of the Facebook group or not; and (2) what they thought about the content that was posted in the group.

Procedure

Before conducting the survey, ethical approval was obtained from OBU's University Research Ethics Committee. Students were provided with a link, both in class and through the program site in Moodle, which took them to an online evaluation form. Completing the survey took no longer than 10 minutes. Responses were anonymous and participation was completely voluntary.

Results

This section first presents an analysis of the numbers of students who accepted their offer of a place to study at OBU as a function of their Facebook group membership. It then examines the student experience by exploring current students' responses to the survey about the Facebook group.

Facebook group membership and accepting an offer of a place to study

This analysis explored whether there was an association between Facebook group membership and the number of students who accepted their offer of a place to study. The proportion of students who accepted their offer was higher in the Facebook group (59%, $n = 37$) than students who were not in the Facebook group (32%, $n = 17$) (see Table 1). Analysis revealed that this association was significant, χ^2 (1, $N = 116$) = 8.219, $p = .004$. Based on the odds ratio, the odds of students accepting their place if they belonged to the Facebook group was 3.02 times higher than if they were not a member of the Facebook group.

	Accepted study offer	Rejected study offer	Total
Facebook group member	37 (59%)	26 (41%)	63 (100%)
Facebook group non-member	17 (32%)	36 (68%)	53 (100%)

Table 1: Number of students who accepted or rejected their offer of a place to study as a function of Facebook group membership

The student experience of Facebook group membership

Why did students become members of the Facebook group?

The reasons that the 36 students provided for joining the Facebook group could be categorised into two predominant themes: (1) practical information; and (2) relationship building (see Table 2). Practical information reasons included wanting to stay up to date with information about the course, being interested in finding out more about the course, getting suggestions to prepare for joining the course, and easing pre-university anxiety by finding out more, for example:

> "Just wanted to know more about the course before I started" (PG)
>
> "I thought it would be beneficial for me whilst I was preparing for university" (UG)
>
> "Because I thought it would be helpful" (UG)
>
> "To keep up to date with information about the course and information worth reading before joining" (UG)

Relationship building reasons primarily involved wanting to get to know other students that would be starting the course at the same time as them, but also included getting to know members of staff, for example:

> "I thought it would enable me to meet other people on my course" (UG)
>
> "Good to see who's teaching on the course" (UG)
>
> "Thought it would be useful to meet other students" (PG)

Some students also provided responses that included both types of reasons, for example:

> "Because I wanted as much pre-course information as possible, and I wanted to meet my peers" (PG)
>
> "As a platform for interacting with other students and a source of information" (PG)

Approximately two thirds of students joined the Facebook group because they wanted practical information about the course, whereas approximately one third of students sought to build relationships with fellow students and staff (see Table 2). Looking at the figures in Table 2 for UG and PG separately reveals that slightly more PG students sought Relationship Building than UG students (39% versus 26% respectively). A chi squared test, however, revealed that the association between student type (UG or PG) and reason for joining was not significant, χ^2 (1, N = 116) = 0.769, p = .293, meaning that a similar number of both UG and PG gave information reasons and relationship building reasons for joining the Facebook group.

	Practical Information	Relationship Building	Total
Undergraduate	14 (74%)	5 (26%)	19 (100%)
Postgraduate	14 (61%)	9 (39%)	23 (100%)
Total	28 (67%)	14 (33%)	42 (100%)

Note: some students provided more than one reason

Table 2: Number of undergraduates and postgraduates who joined the Facebook group for Practical Information or Relationship Building reasons.

Why did students not become members of the Facebook group?

The reason that the 8 students gave for not joining the Facebook group was because they did not have a Facebook account. Indeed, one of the students explained that she opened an account simply to become a member of the group.

Students' evaluation of the group content

Most (86%, n = 31) of the students were very positive about the content, for example, they commented on how 'interesting', 'informative' 'helpful', 'relevant' and 'useful' it was. This suggests that the content provided them with practical information and helped them to develop a sense of relationship with the university, which were the reasons they cited for joining the group. Six percent (n = 2) of students were less positive, saying that some of the content did not seem relevant, although one of these students also noted that it was 'good to see how passionate the lectures are'. Eight percent (n = 3) of students were unable to comment because they had not looked at the content recently.

Would students recommend the group to future applicants?

Most students 86% (n = 31) agreed that they would recommend that successful future applicants should join such a Facebook group. One student explained:

> "This group would be useful to join so that you can be informed and up to date with information posted, and it could also allow you to make friends that are also studying the same course" (UG).

The remaining 14% (n = 5) of students indicated that 'maybe' they would recommend it to future successful

applicants. They did not elaborate on this response.

Did the Facebook group help successful applicants decide whether to accept their offer of a place to study at OBU?

Nearly all student members of the Facebook group (92%, $n = 36$) stated that they had already decided to accept their place at OBU prior to joining the Facebook group. A further three students were undecided when joining the group. One of these undecided students explained that they accepted their place primarily because of their positive experience on the interview day itself. Therefore, students who took part in this study and who had joined the Facebook group seem to have already decided to accept their offer at OBU.

Discussion

This cohort study suggests that a subject-specific Facebook group for successful applicants has a number of benefits in terms of the student experience, and that it may play a role in university recruitment activities.

The first major finding was that students who were in the Facebook group were significantly more likely to accept their offer of a place to study at OBU than those who were not. There are, however, a number of reasons to be cautious about this result. First, the present findings are correlational and do not permit conclusions to be drawn about cause and effect. Although it is possible that being in the group supported students in their decision to accept their offer, it is equally possible that students who had already decided to accept their offer joined the group. In other words, deciding to accept their place to study at OBU may have resulted in engagement with Facebook, rather than engagement in Facebook resulting in offer acceptance. The survey of current students suggested that the latter interpretation was more likely because the majority said that they joined the group after deciding to accept their offer. Therefore, it is not clear from this study whether or not such Facebook groups have the potential to help students to decide to convert their offer into an acceptance. Second, we do not know why the 26 students who joined the Facebook group did not accept their offer because of the impracticality of surveying these students. Thus, the effectiveness of this type of Facebook group as a recruitment tool, and more specifically as a conversion tool, remains open to question. Future research is needed to explore what role social media plays for students who do not accept their offer, and to consider the importance of encouraging students (e.g., at interview days) to follow their university on social media if they are undecided about attending.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding the impact of the Facebook group on conversion and acceptance rates, it seemed to have advantages for the student experience. Most students explained that they joined the Facebook group hoping to get more information about the course. Their positive evaluation of the content of the group suggested that it achieved this. This supports findings of previous research with students in other countries (e.g., Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Hesel, 2013) by showing that social media sites provide a useful and important way for potential new students to learn more about their intended course of study.

Belonging to the group also seemed to help students to develop a sense of connectedness with each other and staff on the course: students explained that they would recommend belonging to the group because it enabled them to get to know each other, for example, it would 'allow you to make friends that are also studying the same course'. Having a sense of belonging or 'relatedness' is an important psychological need (Deci & Ryan, 2000) that is associated with educational engagement, less student dissatisfaction, and higher levels of achievement at university (Bliuc et al., 2011). Facebook group membership thus has the potential to enhance the student experience by creating a shared sense of identity among a cohort of students (Bunce, Bennett & Jones, 2018).

There are a number of limitations to bear in mind when interpreting the results of this study. First, it was limited to a single subject in health and social care with a relatively small cohort of students. Fostering a sense of connectedness or relationship building may be harder to achieve using Facebook with much larger groups of students (Dunbar, 1993), or with programs that have less focus on interpersonal skills in their core content (Glick, Wilk & Perreault, 1995). Second, the large majority of participants in the study were female, who are traditionally considered as more likely to value a sense of community than males (Geary, 1998), and who use social media differently to males (Barker, 2009; Correa, Hinsley & De Zuniga, 2010). The impact of Facebook group membership thus requires further

research to explore the extent to which its impact on recruitment and the student experience may be dependent on subject type and gender.

In summary, this evaluation suggests that a subject-specific Facebook group had a positive impact on the student experience prior to joining OBU, and may be useful as part of a university's recruitment efforts. More students accepted their offer of a place to study if they were a member of the group than if they were not, but responses to the online evaluation survey suggested many members of the group had already decided to accept their offer prior to joining the group. Thus, the role of the Facebook group specifically in *converting* offers of a place to study into acceptances remains unclear. Nonetheless, student members evaluated the group favourably and would recommend that future students become members of such a group because it gave them insights into day-to-day life on the course and fostered a sense of connectedness. In the current political climate, prospective students are encouraged to seek a greater amount of information and engagement from a university to enable them to make more informed consumer choices (Department for Education, 2017); Facebook groups seem to provide an effective way for universities to achieve this. Further research is needed to explore the impact of Facebook groups for different types of students to understand its impact on conversion rates and to support the student experience.

Acknowledgements

References

Barker, V. (2009). Older adolescents' motivations for social network site use: The influence of gender, group identity, and collective self-esteem. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, *12*(2), 209-213.

Barnes, N. G. & Mattson, E. (2009). Social media and college admissions: The first longitudinal study. *Center For Marketing Research*.

Bliuc, A. M., Ellis, R. A., Goodyear, P. & Hendres, D. M. (2011). The role of social identification as university student in learning: Relationships between students' social identity, approaches to learning, and academic achievement. *Educational Psychology*, *31*(5), 559-574.

Bunce, L., Baird, A. & Jones, S. E. (2017). The student-as-consumer approach in higher education and its effects on academic performance. *Studies in Higher Education*, *42*(11), 1958-1978.

Bunce, L. & Bennett, M. (2018) A degree of studying? Approaches to learning among undergraduate student 'consumers' (manuscript submitted for publication)

Bunce, L., Bennett, M. and Jones, S. E. (2018). Social identity processes in undergraduates' course (dis)satisfaction, approaches to learning, and academic performance (manuscript submitted for publication)

Clark, M., Fine, M. B. & Scheuer, C-L., (2017) Relationship quality in higher education marketing: the role of social media engagement. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, 27*, 40-58, DOI: 10.1080/08841241.2016.1269036

Constantinides, E. & Zinck Stagno, M. C. (2011). Potential of the social media as instruments of higher education marketing: a segmentation study. *Journal of marketing for higher education*, *21*(1), 7-24. DOI: 10.1080/08841241.2011.573593

Correa, T., Hinsley, A. W., & De Zuniga, H. G. (2010). Who interacts on the Web?: The intersection of users' personality and social media use. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *26*(2), 247-253.

Deci, E. L. & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, *11*(4), 227-268.

Department for Education (October 2017). *Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework Specification*. Retrieved
from https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-excellence-and-student-outcomes-framework-specification

Dunbar, R. I. (1993). Coevolution of neocortical size, group size and language in humans. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *16*(4), 681-694.

Geary, D. C. (1998) *Male, female: The evolution of human sex differences.* Washington DC: American Psychological Association

Glick, P., Wilk, K., & Perreault, M. (1995). Images of occupations: Components of gender and status in occupational stereotypes. *Sex Roles, 32*, 565-582.

Goodenow, C. & Grady, K. E. (1993). The relationship of school belonging and friends' values to academic motivation among urban adolescent students. *The Journal of Experimental Education, 62(1),* 60–71.

Hesel, R. A. (2013). *The influence of social media sites on the college search process.* studentPOLL. Available from https://www.artsci.com/s/studentPOLL_V101_Sept2013.pdf

Higher Education Research Institute. (2007). *College freshmen and online social networking sites*. Retrieved from https://heri.ucla.edu/PDFs/pubs/briefs/brief-091107-SocialNetworking.pdf

Peruta, A. & Shields, A. B. (2017). Social media in higher education: understanding how colleges and universities use Facebook. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, 27, 131-143*, DOI: 10.1080/08841241.2016.1212451

Rutter, R., Roper. S. & Lettice, F. (2016). Social Media Interaction, the University Brand and Recruitment Performance. *Journal of Business Research, 69,* 3096-3104.

Shaw, C. (2014). Have traditional student recruitment campaigns lost their bite? Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2014/mar/10/university-student-recruitmentsocial-media-marketing

Shaw, J. (2013). University recruitment: one fifth of students say social media doesn't work. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/apr/17/university-student-recruitment-social-media

THE (2017) Teaching Excellence Framework Results. Retrieved from https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/teaching-excellence-framework-tef-results-2017).

UCAS (2017, July 12) *UCAS 30 June deadline for UK higher education shows UK applicants down 4% and EU applicants down 5%.* Retrieved from https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/ucas-30-june-deadline-uk-higher-education-shows-uk-applicants-down-4-and-eu-applicants-down-5

Wilson, S. & Gore, J. (2013). An attachment model of university connectedness. *The Journal of Experimental Education, 81(2),* 178–198.