Exploring Millennials' Decision-Making Behavior of Higher Education Institution: The Implication of University Social Media Marketing

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Abstract
As the technology usage by teenagers increase, prospective students going to look on the Web and involve with social media to obtain information and perform business with tertiary education institutions. The increasing usage of social media by students allows universities to communicate with them as a millennial generation in a voice that they familiar with. In terms of university admission, a few research has thoroughly researched the prominence of using internet as a strategic choice. In order to compete for qualified students, university needs to understand their student choice process and the information source used. This study reports an exploration and evaluation of Indonesian students' experiences regarding the power of social media on their choice of university. By using the same cohort of first-year undergraduate students, semi-structured and focus-groups interviews were employed in five Indonesian public universities. The findings indicate the use of social media amongst students is growing in importance, especially for university search and selection. This research also found that the common social media platform used by students, the valuable information for them, the influential person during the college search process via social media, the reason for using social media before making a decision to choose particular university as well as the impact of social media on students' choice of university. Overall, this research contributes to the understanding university decision-making amongst students using social media. It also provides ideas for universities to formulate strategies for social media participation and students' recruitment.

Keywords: University, social media, decision-making behaviour, student, Indonesia.

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction
Increasing global competition among higher education as well as declining funds and changing demand patterns require higher education to transform in order to meet their market need (Gibbs, 2001; Jarvis, 2000; 1995; Veloutsou, Lewis, & Paton, 2004). Several methods were used by university to attract domestic and international students in order to survive and remain competitive as service providers. Going online to market their institution for reaching global students is one of the opportunity taken by university as the result of recognizing the current technological habits of prospective students (Poock and Lefond, (2001). the use of internet becoming rapidly apparent by universities for understanding and influencing students' decision-making process of university choice (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Maringe, 2006). In such situation, there is a call for higher education institution to involve in a current new marketing approach (Simões & Soares, 2010).
One of the new marketing approach that university try to employ is digital marketing through the social media. Valuing the potential power and implication of social media, most of university around the word are starting to adopt and use it as part of their marketing strategy. Previous research by Thompson (2007) noticed that there are two social networking sites which possess an extremely strong power on the lives of millions of students, MySpace and Facebook. Therefore, this paper will further explore the potential use of social media by university to market themselves among prospective students, along with in what way social media utilized by prospective students in their decision-making process of choosing a university. Particularly, this paper examines the power of social media to assist students' information search and decision-making in the higher education context. This understanding of promotional tools that

are fit and commonly utilized by prospective students for searching and selecting a university is required in order successfully recruit students.

2. Social Media and Higher Education Marketing

Many scholars explained related social media definitions. Communication experts and marketing specialists has been described the term 'social media' as 'a wide range of a new generation internet applications' (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012, p44). Popular social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, brings individuals to connect each other with a larger community who share a common interest through a convenience platform interactively. Individuals, groups, organizations, or communities could establish such relationship. Katz et.al. (2004) had classified those powers of bonds established through online as strong bonds (family and friends) and weak bonds (acquaintances). Boyd and Ellison (2007, p211) claimed that social media has beneficial in enabling the information diffusion among individuals beside maintaining and/or strengthening the existing offline social networks.

Previous studies have examined the variety used of social media especially for educational purposes. For instance, Hewitt and Forte (2006) who studied privacy on social media, Charnigo and Barnett-Ellis (2007) related regarding the potential of the social media for facilitating the interaction between student with professors and Selwyn (2007) on questioning the outcomes articulated by universities toward the students' use of social media, Young (2008) who examined the Facebook use academic purposes among educators. In addition, some of previous studies also highlighted the appropriateness of social media as an ideal choice in the university classroom (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006) and some found that Facebook usage rates for college students posses rapid adoption (i.e. 80-90%) (Arrington, 2005; Educause, 2007).

In college admission, Hossler (1999) has thoroughly researched the prominence of using internet as a strategic choice. He argued university recruitment management could obtain the value of online information because "Institutions can give students more timely and more detailed information online than would be feasible with print media or even individual counselling sessions" (Don Hossler, 1999, p14). Frazier (1999) also maintained regarding university admission that as the technology usage by teenagers increase, prospective students going to look on the Web to obtain information and conduct business with higher education institutions. Currently, the number of the universities utilizing the internet along with promoting their institutions was increasing along with the increasing number of college students who going online. This internet medium is used increasingly as an instrument to search for a university by prospective students. Hartmen (1998, p54) highlighted the implications and opportunities on using internet for college admissions, that "prospective students are increasingly accessing and relying on the Internet as a primary source for both 'official' and 'unofficial' information about colleges and universities" (p54). by Anderson and Reid (1999) has shown the evidence that more than 80% of students in high school were using the Internet to search universities. Furthermore, Anderson and Reid (1999, p54) asserted that "visiting university Web sites seems to have become a norm –with many people considering their visit to a university Web site as their first visit to the university itself". The research by Abrahamson (2000, p9) put forward that, the Web ranks second as the most valuable source for searching universities among online users after campus visits. Therefore, in order to help prospective students make an accurate decision in choosing a university, the accessibility of online information associated to the tertiary education institutions becomes obvious.

3. Research Methodology

This research endeavors to understand the social media impact on students choice of a public university. For this purpose, an exploratory research was employed as a logical and justifiable

approach (Aaker, Kumar, & Day, 2007). Similar cohort of 48 first-year students in five Indonesian Public Universities in Java and Sumatera were selected as participants for both semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions. First-year undergraduate students were selected to minimize the 'contamination effect' of students responses with current experience (Arambewela, Hall, & Zuhair, 2006). In addition, they have a more comprehensive knowledge of the university than high-school students since they are very close to the choice of university selected to study (Gallifa, 2009). The semi-structured interviews were designed to have more open-ended semi-structured questions and conducted prior to the beginning of focus-group discussions. This method allowing the participants to explain whatever they want on those questions being asked (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Zikmund & Babin, 2007). Semi-structured interviews were employed to gather the information related to the social media frequently used by the students as well as the valuable information acquired from the social media. While focus-group discussion were used to obtained information regarding the decision-making process followed by students to choose a university which involving social media as source of information. Focus-group discussion in this study was formed by seven up to fifteen students for each focus group to think about a series of questions as suggested by Fraenkel and Wallen (2006).

As suggested by Zikmund (2003), qualitative instruments in this study were pretested using content validity (face validity) through discussing and gaining approval from experts in the research area. During or after the first interview, reliability was checked by modifying current questions and/or to generate new questions (Silverman, 2005). In order to ensure the accuracy of the information provided by the participants, an audiotape was used to record during the discussion session with participants' permission beforehand. Researcher transcribed verbatim all the discussion results and initially recorded as specific themes and indicators that are related. Thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the data (Boyatzis, 1998; Silverman, 2005), and addressed the guide provided by Creswell (2007). The data was coded by hand based on conversation theme and organized as well as sorted into categories based on their properties and similarities. The code and retrieve technique was employed to collapse and merge certain categories. This classifying process involved "…sorting units into provisional categories on the basis of 'look-alike' characteristics" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p203). This type of data reduction technique involves labeling the data based on the content. The combination of categories entails a unique specification for each theme and each theme had to be exhaustive. Thematic categories were employed to develop the survey for a subsequent phase of the research.

4. Findings and Discussion

The prominence of information gathering on the choice of a university required many scholars to examine this process in greater detail. Most of the previous research focused on specific aspects related to service in higher education Ham (Alves & Raposo, 2009; Douglas, McClelland, & Davies, 2008; Ham, 2003; Mao & Oppewal, 2010; Moller, 2006; Nasser, Khoury, & Abouchedid, 2008; Petruzzellis, D'Uggento, & Romanazzi, 2006), and some focused on the institutions' services generic student-choice models (Punj & Staelin, 1978; Vrontis, Thrassou, & Melanthiou, 2007) and factors influencing students' decisions (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Menon, 2004; Mihai-Florin, Dorel, & Alexandra-Maria, 2006; Simões & Soares, 2010). Not many explored the information sources and requirements (Veloutsou et al., 2004) or preferred information source (Goff, Patino, & Jackson, 2004). Yet, empirical studies concentrating detailed aspects of the student decision-making process are limited, and among those that do exist only discuss to explicit fields of study (West, Newell, & Titus, 2001).

Therefore, this research endeavors to fill the gap assumed the sources of information are important dimensions when referring information-seeking behaviour (Kiel & Layton, 1981).

Based on the result of this research, it presents the socio-demographic profile of the participants. Out of 48 students' participants, a large percentage of the participants were 19 years old followed by 18 years old, which correlated with a typical population of first-year undergraduate students. More female students participated in this research due to a generally larger class attendance by female students and there are more female students enrolled in five public universities selected in Indonesia. When classified by the city from where participants originated, it was found that the biggest proportion of respondents originated from inside the region where the university resided. The greatest proportion of participants graduated from their high schools one year ago and the majority of them graduated from public high schools rather than private high schools.

Regarding the social media used to search universities that they considered attending, of 48 participants, most of them responded that they use Facebook and Twitter, while Google+ and Pinterest become the lowest site to view. Majority of participants indicated that they viewed those sites at least once per week. Interestingly, Instagram was growing popularity sites among students which especially were invited to participate in Instagram platforms when they were searching for a particular university. Most of the student who viewed the sites were reported that they did "follow or like" universities they considered attending on any social media platform. This finding supports Hartmen's (1998, p54) point of view who highlighted that "prospective students are increasingly accessing and relying on the Internet as a primary source for both 'official' and 'unofficial' information about colleges and universities".

Table 1. Summary of the Research Findings regarding social media impact on students' choice of university

Finding	Description
Social Media used	They used social media to research universities that they considered attending.
Dominant sites	Facebook and Twitter
Lowest site viewed	Google+and Pinterest
Growing popularity sites	Instagram
Commonly visit	At least once per week Facebook and Twitter
Commonly type of participation	mostly reported that they did "follow or like" universities they considered attending on any social media platform
Most influential person during the college search process via social media	interacting with currently enrolled students
Least influential person	other admitted students (however they indicate that students do not want to interact with other students until they have been admitted)
Type of information or impressions gathered	read the comments by students at specific universities as the thing that make them interested
	view notes or blogs to see what people are telling regarding the university
	see photos of students at specific universities or search profiles of students at specific universities
	view to see if I was familiar with anyone currently joining the universities I'm attracted in
	Searched profiles of students at specific universities
The reason of using social media before making a decision to choose particular university	to gather information about university considered attending
	to gather impression about university considered attending
	to make sure they choose the right university
The impact of social media on students' choice of university	sense of the social life
	knowledge concerning the varieties of students enrolled attending

sense of the community within the university considered attending
sense of how they will fit in
sense of university spirit
sense of university reputation (academic quality and prestige)

Social media information provides beneficial information to the students. More than a half of those 48 participants in this study answered that they find valuable information from social media sites during their college search process. Student life was revealed to be the most valuable information by participants, followed by school information valuable, photos valuable, and the rest found information related to activities valuable. Based on participant opinion, the least valuable information was information that remained unchanged and could be found in printed materials or websites. This information including the categories of courses offered, tuition and scholarships, admissions deadlines, and career services. While the student participants identified that those information as the least valuable on the list, they still indicated as an important value to an enormous population of those researched. Findings of this research supports Bonnema and Van der Waldt's thought (2008) who revealed that each subgroup chooses to ask when looking for information about higher education institutions with a specific categories of information sources. The study has also highlighted that social sources, word of mouth or direct sources from the university are sometimes preferred rather than other media or advertising in addition to the real description of the university social life.

Regarding the most influential person during the college search process via social media, of 48 participants, most of them responded that interacting with currently enrolled students via social media was important. However, of those on the category indicates that students do not want to interact with other students while waiting for they have been admitted. Regarding type of information or impressions gathered, majority students participant mentioned that read the comments by students at specific universities as the thing that make them interested, besides view notes or blogs to see what people are telling regarding the university, see photos of students at specific universities or search profiles of students at specific universities. Another type of information impressed students is "view to see if I was familiar with anyone currently joining the universities I'm attracted in". It seems that student wants to obtain the trusted information from others in order to reduce the risk level of deciding an inappropriate university to attend. This finding in line with Gomes and Murphy's (2003) point of view who emphasized that in online enrolment, trusted information is a key issue. Indeed, it has been recognized that for goods and services there is a different in process information searching followed by customers' as well as different in consumption situations (Choi & Lee, 2003; Mitra, Reiss, & Capella, 1999; Newman & Lockeman, 1975). McColl-Kennedy & Fetter Jr, (1999) and Murray, (1991) emphasize that comparing to tangible product, commonly consumers look for more information when encountered with a service purchase decision. Involving in such situation, the consumer has aware about the risky nature of service provision in order to reduce risk (McColl-Kennedy & Fetter Jr, 1999, p242-243). Therefore, in a service marketing context, comprehending consumer search behaviour might be critical.

On responding the question of the reason for using social media before making a decision to choose particular university, the majority of students participant in this study explained that to gather information about university considered attending as well as to gather impression about university considered attending as the most common reasons. However, those students also mentioned that they used social media before making a decision because they want to make sure that they choose the right university to attend. Indeed, information searches signify a key phase of consumer decision models in service areas which associate to a higher level of perceived risk such as tertiary institutions (Beatty & Smith, 1987; Mourali, Laroche, & Pons, 2005).

Students explicitly answered that social media has impact of on their choice of university. Most of the students mentioned that they got a sense of the social life after reviewing information through social media. Some of them found information concerning the varieties of students' enrolled attending as well as a sense of the community within the university considered attending. In such situation, students explained that the social media could give them a sense of how they will fit in and a sense of university spirit although they do not enrol yet. In addition, a sense of university reputation (academic quality and prestige) was felt by a few of students as leading them to the increasing confident level of their decision. As highlighted by Murray (1991) and Choi and Lee (2003) that if the level of perceived risk is higher, the tendency to search for information is greater.

Based on preceding questions responded, it was confirmed that students followed the common steps of all decision making process from problem recognition, information search, evaluation alternatives, and finally purchase decision as explained by Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard (2006; 1995), Kotler & Keller (2009), Perreault and McCarthy (2005), Schiffman and Kanuk (2007) as well as the specific student choice model suggested by Kotler and Fox (1995), Hossler and Gallager's (1987), Chapman's (1981), Jackson (1982), and Hanson and Litten (1982). The summary of this process according to the student participants' information was explained in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of the Research Findings regarding the process of students' choice of university

Students' decision making process	Description
Problem recognition	"I would rather talk with my parents, family, teachers in high school and some of my friends who about going to university"
Information search	"I use social media to see how the university really is and suit with my needs"
Evaluation alternatives	"I do take into account of other comments or testimonials and it makes me confident before making a choice"
Purchase decision	"Yes, social media is useful for me but I still consider my parents', families, and my teachers in high school's opinions. I did not just rely on the social media"
Post-purchase decision	"I think social media is more about feelings and share them to others to gain their supports such as 'like' or other reactions"

In the problem recognition process, initially students look for other reliable sources of information for about choices to attend a university. Seeking advice from their reference group such as parents', families, peers and high school teachers' become the most common way student chose. In this step, reference groups such as family, friends, peers and teachers in high school serve as <u>influential</u> person. This finding support previous research, which discovered that reference groups serve a significant role in affecting Thai students' selections of vocational education (Pimpa & Suwannapirom, 2008) and there is a significant correlation among family, friends, peers' influence and the students' motive to study at <u>a university in Malaysia</u> (Wagner & Fard, 2009).

In information search process, students revealed that social media was used by them to see how the university really is and suit with their needs. Opinions shared and recommendations made by other especially from those reliable person on social media become one of the sources of information considered as a powerful force and part of word-of-mouth marketing. This result confirmed Gomes and Murphy's (2003) opinion that reliable information is a crucial matter with online enrolment. For some students, looking for other comments or testimonials before making a choice was encourage them that would make a correct decision. Students asserted that they need other opinion or review related to the university selected in order to convince them that they did not make a wrong decision. On commenting the question regarding the

common strategies employed by them in evaluation alternatives step, one student mentioned "I do take into account of other comments or testimonials and it makes me confident before making a choice". This activity was serving as part of evaluation alternatives step which is become the features of mostly social media platform. It seems that students considered social media as valuable tool to shape their university choosen.

Students highlighted that social media is useful tools for them to shape their decision regarding the university choice. However, most of the students claimed that although social media could give some advantageous, they still looking for another reliable sources such as university official website or other sources from offline media such advertising, brochure and other people comments through word of mouth communications. As part of purchase decision step, one student confirmed that, "Yes, social media is useful for me but I still consider my parents', families, and my teachers in high school's opinions. I did not just rely on the social media". This comment indicates that besides social media, there are other sources of information used by the students and supplies the information needed in order to make a decision regarding which university to attend. Research conducted by Mateos et al. (2001) confirmed that there was a high relationship between the number of students enrolled in Spanish universities and the growing popularity of their Web sites as information source for university search.

Regarding post-purchase decision as the last step of decision making process, students in majority explained that two way communications provided by social media platform allowing them to receive as well as supply information for others. After making the decision, immediately they could express their response such as feelings and thought regarding their decision made apart from the university chosen. On responding this step, students commented, "I think social media is more about feelings and share them to others to gain their supports such as 'like' or other reactions". This finding validates prior research, which found that "consumers today use social media to talk about their own good or bad experiences and thus share feedback and opinions with peers" (Jaffe, 2010, p.8).

The helpfulness of social media for students' decision making process became obvious along with the growing attractiveness of these media among millennial or prospective students. Recognising the potential of social media and the teen behavior for choosing tertiary education, university turns to go online for promoting their institution, communicating with the millenials, and other marketing purposes especially for students' recruitment. Roblyer et al. (2010) underscored that universities are also using social media for university marketing campaigns. Previous research by Ashburn (2007) confirmed that more that 50% of the college bound students who were participated in the study began on-line at college search process. Indeed, this finding also confirmed that social media seems to be more influential in the information search and evaluation alternatives step rather than other steps. In conclusion, this research findings verified Vollmer and Precourt's (2008) view who maintained that consumers are turning more frequently to numerous types of social media to conduct their information searches and evaluation of alternatives.

5. Conclusion

This research validated that social media information provides beneficial information to the students. According to the respondent social media plays a significat role in the decision making process among millenials in which they familiar with the kind of technologies. Two platforms mostly used by students are Facebook and Twitter. Those social media application play a dominant role in students' lives. The information regarding student life, school information, photos, and university activities accounted to be the valuable information by participants. Whilst courses offered, tuition and scholarships, admissions deadlines, and career services perceived as the least valuable information and could be found in printed materials or

websites. However, there is no ideal mix of online communication or offline communication strategies for recruiting prospective students. The use of social media can benefit for both university and students by strengthening the relationships between university-student and student-student. This media could be adjusted appropriately in addition to traditional way such as campus visits, university fair, university brochure as part of the promotion mix.

Based on the result of this study, information search and evaluation alternatives are two key components of student decision making models. In this situation, social media serve as sources of information and evaluation alternatives helping millenials' information seeking behavior of a particular university. Therefore, university should provide a proper and reliable information source to assist students in making the right decision of a university for study. As point out by Will and Callison (2006) that there is still many opportunities for improvement whilst efforts were being made to contact students online. Therefore, universities requisite to welcome that such kinds of social media as an important tool for communication and information gathering. Further research should address more on growing popular of this new technologies for university marketing in line with the changing aspirations of entire stakeholders involving prospective and current students, parents, and alumni.

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