



Improving Student Transition and Retention; a Netnographic Insight into Information Exchange and Conversation Topics for Pre-arrival Students

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between successful transition to university and student retention is well established. Fundamental to this success is the university's ability to develop evidence-based interventions to support the initial phases of transition. Yet, gaining insight into the initial transitional processes is problematic. This is due to the university transition beginning when the student commences their information search for institutions and courses, rather than after they arrive for induction. Meaningful pre-arrival insights can, however, be acquired when the student begins to communicate their choices through their social media network. The aim of this study was to provide insight to inform proactive transition and retention interventions, by exploring pre-arrival social media communication exchanges. A twenty-one-month netnography of prospective student social media conversations, identified through a hashtag on Twitter and Instagram was undertaken. Thematic analysis of the netnographic data identified four consistent topics of conversation, revealing the expectations and tensions of a cohort from the initial transition stage until induction. This research makes the following contribution; employing proactive induction interventions that are informed by pre-arrival communication insights improves retention and academic grades.

Keywords: Transition, retention, social media, netnography, insight.

Introduction

Universities are increasingly concerned with improving student retention using formal induction programs which are designed to help new students transition smoothly. This is because transition tends to create tensions for students, as they move between their established network and an emerging one. Due to widening access in HE, and an increasingly diverse student population, the potential for tensions to develop has been exacerbated, resulting in mounting complexity and a requirement for more innovative interventions which provide opportunities for students to develop meaningful connections with each other (Thomas, 2012). Students now arrive with widely differing expectations surrounding the culture of the HE environment (Temple, Callender, Grove, & Kersh, 2014; Thomas, 2012), and the networks that will shape their transition. Even if the new network is familiar and shares, largely the same values and expectations as the student's prior experiences there are still tensions, which may lead to decision remorse, withdrawal or disengagement. Thus, diverse expectations have a significant impact on the successful transition of students and their engagement with the university (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005). It therefore, becomes increasingly important to understand and manage these expectations, with a view to developing the appropriate evidence-based interventions required to enhance the student transition experience and uphold university retention (Shovlin & Docherty, 2017).

Typically, implementing interventions aimed at managing student transition expectations, and their academic and social engagement with the university, begin in the early weeks of the first academic term (Nelson, Kift, & Clarke, 2008). During these early week interventions, there is intense communication between staff, students, and the various networks that they inhabit, as they seek to co-produce an understanding of expectations and attempt to make sense of the transition. The problem is that these emerging networks have become as complex as the diverse students' that inhabit them; they now encompass many forms of communication between the student and the university. Recently, Thomas, Briggs, Hart, & Kerrigan (2017) have explored social media communication networks as a method of gaining further insight into diverse student expectations during the induction stage of the student transition. The rationale suggested is that, if universities have more insight into their student's expectations, then they can develop and manage interventions more effectively.

We argue that, in the web 2.0 era (where recipients of messages can now generate content and are no longer limited to the passive viewing of internet messages) using induction week social media communications as the starting phase for understanding and managing expectation hinders the enhancement of the transition experience. Kaplan and Haenlein (2011) have shown that students interact with social media throughout every stage of their decision-making and transition process. There are identifiable changes in student's communication activity and behaviour from when they first begin to make

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university and course choices; in particular, their social media network expands. The increasing tendency of social media users to interact and generate content provides an increased level of interconnectivity and co-creation between established and developing networks of people (Hajli, 2014). Thus, social media communications provide an insight into increasingly complex emerging networks of the transitioning student. This upsurge in the use of internet-based messages transmitted through social media networks (Mangold & Faulds, 2009), means that universities can now gather information pre-arrival, during, and throughout induction. We have observed the emergence of initiatives designed to encourage pre-arrival social media interactions. However, as Thomas et al. (2017) have argued currently, empirical insight gathering typically starts months after the initial conversations have commenced, and at a point where the tensions leading to disengagement due to external network factors may have potentially occurred. In practice, it means that there is a disconnect between creating pre-arrival initiatives and using insight gathering to develop an up-to-date evidence-base to implement interventions appropriate for that particular cohort of students. At best, the crucial first weeks of induction are managed using evidence from previous transition evaluations whilst catching up with current student expectations on social media. It is now not only evident that the transition journey of the prospective HE student begins many months before their arrival for induction, but also that in the web 2.0 era student-centric insights are available pre-arrival to inform the development of proactive transition interventions.

Web 2.0 informed interventions

University marketing teams explicitly seek to promote their social media accounts prior to students arriving on campus for induction week (Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008; Ye, 2006). Although these accounts allow for the integration, collaboration, and creation of user-generated content, the use of social media generally tends to have a promotional goal, such as signposting new arrivals to induction activities (Swenson et al 2008: Ye 2006). Indeed, Ritson (2016) argues that marketers tend to focus on promotion, becoming myopic to the many other opportunities made possible through a co-created relationship. Nevertheless, through the promotion of their social media accounts, universities aim to benefit from social media's role in managing expectations and facilitating the development of new communication networks (Thomas et al. 2017). This is commendable due to the influence that new peer relationships and interactions have on student adaptation to and retention in universities (Tinto, 1975). However, using social media merely as a promotional tool, or to monitor induction week communications, limits the possibilities available.

The university marketing team from our post 1992 is facilitating the co-creation of new pre-arrival networks yet, is not generally cognisant of the transitional conversations that they are having. Current online promotional activity from the university marketing team does not fully embrace the interactive co-creative possibilities made feasible through social media/web 2.0 networks. Online relationship development appears to focus on the information exchange between the university and the student, which ignores the interactive networks that extend beyond this single nexus and pre-date arrival. Currently, there is little understanding of the types and topics of conversations between students and their emerging peer networks during the pre-arrival phase. Social media interaction, promoted by the university, encourages new peer relationship developments and integration ensues before potential students have even physically met; however, insight into social media conversations on pre-arrival transition is lacking.

It is not our intention to challenge the consensus that induction week programmes are widely recognised as being a 'valuable instrument in the induction process' (Cock, Nixon, Walker, Mitchell, Walsh & Zaitseva, 2008, p.37). We sought to develop a greater insight into the topics of conversation taking place between these influential new peer networks in the social media domain prior to student arrival at our university to enhance induction week activities. We were able to identify when the transition journey begins online and learn about what is important to the students throughout all the transition stages, prior to university campus arrival. Our netnography of social media communications enabled us to examine the expectations and tensions of transitioning to the university for an otherwise diverse cohort, and therefore consider how online and offline activities intersect as part of the transition (Thomas et al. 2017). This allowed us to map the emerging student transitional journey in the months and days prior to arrival. Using our insight into the topics of conversation that mattered to the new arrivals, we were able to plan evidence-based induction interventions aimed at supporting successful transition to university and aiding retention. Although, much of the context for the following discussion is inevitably institution-specific, due to the philosophical nature of the research, the challenge of promoting student retention and encouraging students to make the transition to university successfully is by no means unique to this case study. We would therefore suggest that other institutions consider the wealth of information available via social media that is currently under researched and could be put to good use in supporting student transition.

Method

This study sought to explore the pre-arrival phase of the student transition journey. Consistent with the distanced and exploratory nature of our study, this paper presents insights gained through the adoption of a twenty-one-month netnographic study. Netnography is a contemporary qualitative research methodology that has been cultivated in the marketing literature as an appropriate method to assess and understand online cultures (Kozinets, 2015). With its origins in

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ethnography, netnography is rooted in participant observation, uses conversations as data, is an interpretive research method that adapts the traditional, in-person participant observation techniques of anthropology to the study of interactions and experiences manifesting through digital communications (Kozinets 1998). Perhaps, what was most important about the netnographic adoption, was the access it afforded to a sample group (pre-arrival) which would not have been possible to explore through any other means. Because of this, the researchers were able to operate in a covert, but ethical, fashion and observe participant discussions about the university and pre-arrival journey online, without bias or interference. Netnographers observe textual discourse in online communities (Kozinets, 2002); this well-established method enabled us to access and analyse how individuals share experiences and information with organisations and unfamiliar others (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The starting point for our netnographic observations was the promotion and adoptive use of the hashtag #IWANTNU, which had been previously identified by university marketing as the sole identifier of initial online information exchange between the university and the student regarding their prospective transitional journey.

Table 1. Stages of the netnographic enquiry

Stage Method Steps
(1) Entree:
Identifying the online community relevant to the research question. The online communication platforms Twitter and Instagram were selected to track the hashtag #IWANTNU, based on relevance to the research question, high 'traffic' and frequency of posting, detailed and descriptively rich data availability, and a range of between-member interactions.
(2) Data Collection Part One: Field Notes:
We made field notes, incorporating a description, reflection and analysis of what we observed throughout the research process.
Data Collection Part Two: Capturing Screen Shots & Written Communications:
The written communications including images, videos and interactions exchanged between the university, the prospective students, and within peer-peer interactions on Twitter and Instagram were copied and pasted into a document, ready for further analysis.
(3) Data Classification:
We classified the messages, based on whether they were primarily social or informational, and whether they were on, or off topic.
(4) Descriptive Coding:
We read through the extensive print outs from Twitter and Instagram related to the question and the hashtag, highlighting relevant material with brief comments. As a result of this read through, a preliminary range of descriptive codes were defined, for example as 'discussion regarding course selection' 'accommodation' and discussion of 'university apparel'
(5) Interpretive Coding:
This process involved clustering descriptive codes into groups and interpreting the meaning of clusters in relation to the research question and objectives related to phase one research.
(6) Overarching Themes Identified:
The third stage of thematic analysis in netnography involved the identification of overarching themes. This involved deriving key themes for the data set as a whole, by assessing interpretive themes as related to the theoretical background and objectives of the study.

Accordingly, our sample group for the data collection was anyone using the hashtag '#IWANTNU', to identify their conversation. The rationale for this approach was that by using the hashtag the social media poster had identified themselves as a potential student and had started to communicate their transitional phase to others in a public forum. As such, they were actively encouraging interaction and potentially seeking to establish peer relationships.

We aligned our data collection with our post 1992 North-east of England university marketing launch of the '#IWANTNU' hashtag, and the student admissions journey for September 2016 start. Over a twenty-one-month period (from January 2015 to October 2016) we captured covert screen shots of all posts containing the hashtag #IWANTNU. Cognisant of the complexity of social media communication in the web 2.0, and evolving 3.0, era, the screenshots were collected and observed

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across two different social media platforms (Twitter and Instagram) and on three different devices (mobile phone, tablet, and desktop).

Initially, we chose to observe Twitter at the start of the prospective student journey. As the university's preferred social media platform, Twitter had the most followers and the most activity. However, as data collection progressed it became apparent that Twitter's usability does not make peer-to-peer communication as accessible as other platforms. Prospective students were using Twitter to communicate with the university, but they favoured Instagram for peer-to-peer communications due to the platform's ease of allowing users to comment on pictures in a more obvious way than Twitter. Instagram enables users to take photos/videos and share instantly with friends on different networking sites, which provides a rich source of social-semiotic data to add to Twitter's textual discourse. As Abbott, Donaghey, Hare and Hopkins (2013) findings reveal, young mobile users are motivated to take photos using their mobile phones and share them with others instantly, as this enhances their online presence and identity and allows more effective interaction. Therefore, to acquire further insight into how users negotiate meanings, a netnography of Instagram was undertaken to complement the Twitter data.

Ethical Considerations

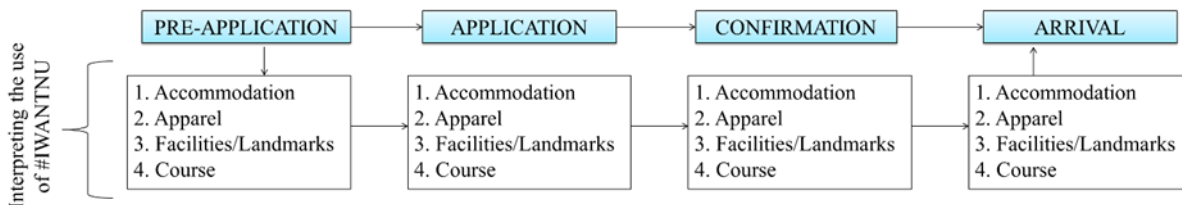
Internet research ethics have evolved in recent years and ethical issues on the internet have been further subject to consideration given the proliferation of new online platforms (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018; Kozinets, 2015). Obtaining consent amongst fragmented networks of stakeholders across multiple digital platforms is a practical and ethical challenge for researchers (Kozinets, 2015). This is likely to be complicated further as online content, even that generated by users, becomes the intellectual property of the actors hosting the platform (Kozinets, 2015). Langer and Beckman (2005) state that a key criterion for determining whether online content is in the public or private domain relates to the restriction of access. These authors state that if access to the observable communication or content is restricted by the use of passwords, then the communication and content can be regarded as private. In contrast if no password restrictions (other than platform logins) are in place then the content can be regarded as public. Hashtags can be accessed without recourse to passwords. In fact, an important motivation for using a hashtag is that anyone who sees the hashtag can click on it and be brought to a page featuring the feed of all the most recent tweets that contain that particular hashtag (Twitter.com 2018). Therefore, based on the ethical approach adopted by netnographers and traditional ethnographers in public spaces, we adopted a direct covert observer netnographic approach. In addition to this, data collection for this study took place prior to the introduction of the data protection act 2018, however the type of data which has been collected is classified as organic social media content, this therefore means it is unaffected by GDPR, because under the GDPR, you must obtain the legal basis to do so if you want to process personal data (Gov.uk, 2018), no processing of personal information took place during this study.

Our analysis focused on the two important elements of netnography: (1) the data was a direct and inclusive copy from the social media platforms and devices; and, (2) the data was inductively analysed in relation to observations of the community's topics of conversation, and was a fair representation of its members, their interactions and transfer of meanings (Kozinets, 2002). Reflective field notes contributed to the ongoing and directed coding and analysis (Kozinets, 2015), enabling us to separate posts into those relevant to the student transition journey, and those that were off topic. Only posts pertinent to transition journey progressed further to second level thematic analysis, ready for interpretation and discussion. From these posts, we were able to establish a hierarchy of topic importance, based on the number of likes and the number of comments following each conversation's theme. The generalised emerging coded themes from our netnography enabled us to integrate the most pertinent topics of conversation into induction talks with the cohort of students when they arrived on campus. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these evidence-based conversations had a measurable effect on student performance.

Results and Discussion

The results of the thematic analysis revealed that there are four stages in the pre-arrival transitional journey (Fig 1). We had initially sought to explore pre-arrival as one stage; however, it was noted that communication of the '#IWANTNU' hashtag intensified around the pre-application, application, confirmation, and arrival stages. The University activity using and promoting social media communications were responsible for the distinction between the stages, intensification, and for providing the basis for the topics of conversation at each stage. Yet, despite the promotion of a message appropriate to each stage of transition by the university, the students' hierarchy of topics of conversation in response to the hashtag #IWANTNU remained unchanged throughout. For example, when the university promoted the posting of conversations and images featuring apparel in the application and confirmation stages, the prospective students used the promotional topic to change the focus of the conversation to accommodation. As such, the data provided a unique insight into how potential students prioritised establishing social networks, once they had constructed an online identity as a student at their chosen university. Our analysis revealed that within these emerging social media networks students discussed their expectations and transitional tensions.

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Figure one - Pre-arrival stages and conversations of the transitioning student.

To provide insight, and to encapsulate the complexity of pre-arrival conversations, we discuss our findings in more detail under three subheadings, with supporting examples. Only three subheadings are employed in our discussion, as there are instances where conversations overlap; in particular facilities were frequently discussed in relation to the course of study and vice versa. However, we suggest that this only strengthens our argument, that; meaningful and complex conversational topics can be identified online regarding the student transition journey.

Apparel

We begin our discussion with apparel, the rationale for this is that branded promotional clothing and 'freebies' acted as the initial catalyst for student directed conversations. The university in our case study had promoted conversations about open day talks on social media, but their offline promotional activity had inadvertently encouraged conversations about apparel. It is not within the scope of the present study to explore this failing of integrated marketing communication, but if the university wants to direct the topic of conversation, they need to be aware of consistency of message. Furthermore, if the university wants to engage with students as content co-creators then they need to adopt a cultural strategy (Holt & Cameron 2010), through initiating conversations that are of interest to the students progressing from promotional marketing to a relationship approach. Again, due to the scope of this study, we are not suggesting this does not happen at other institutions, our point is to raise awareness of a cultural strategy market initiative can be used to support successful transition into HE.

For most prospective students the transitional journey formally began with open day attendance. At this point prospective students were introduced to the hashtag '#IWANTNU' and instructed to adopt this hashtag when creating any posts regarding their transitional journey with our post 1992 university. Initially, the hashtag '#IWANTNU' was used by the university to initiate discussion regarding university selection. The aim was to enable users to come together in a virtual conversation about the open day event, and to encourage peer-group interaction and a sense of social presence (Tu, 2002). Although the findings support this to some extent, the topic of conversation were predominantly driven by the students, who tended to act as content creators and guided the narrative to a topic of their choice. For example, the discussion thread '#IWANTNU' on an open day was saturated from various university social media accounts encouraging students to get involved with course talks and participate in tours of the campus; "On campus today? Make sure you check out our accommodation tours and talks!" Whilst this was of interest to some students, evidenced by their use of the Twitter 'like' feature, what we witnessed was the appropriation of the hashtag for the topic of conversations that were of interest to the students. Instead of responding directly to the conversation started on the university Twitter platform, the majority of users responded by uploading photographs of tangible items of apparel that identified them with the university and as university students. For example, lanyards promoting the university brand, the prospective student's name, and their chosen course. Photographs of lanyard and student identification cards proved very popular in the data set on open day. Students were keen to evidence their affiliation with the university and their chosen course. At this stage in their transitional journey, the students were using apparel to demonstrate that they were exploring potential future identities through affiliation with the university.

Patterns are emerging within the posts, which include a rise in posts using photographs and visuals on Twitter to demonstrate identification with the university, verified by user's wearing apparel – the university hoody. This is aligned with a rise in engagement through likes, which could imply a larger audience are now identifying with the hashtag due to the use of visuals. (Researcher note, March, 27, 2016).

Another example of apparel dominating social media conversation was the abundance of university hooded jumper images posted at the confirmation stage. When a student committed to our university via a confirmed first choice selection on their UCAS account, the university sends the student a hooded jumper branded with the university logo and the year the student

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plans to start their course. As part of this initiative, the university asked the student to upload a 'selfie' wearing the jumper and to use the hashtag (#IWANTNU) to promote their photographic image to display their association with the institute. The abundance of university images of hooded jumpers posted was predictable, the strategy of encouraging interaction through symbolic identifiers of group membership is well established (Brown & Lohr, 1987; Tajfel, Turner, Austin & Worchel, 1979). What was interesting is how quickly an unrelated topic of discussion accompanying the selfie emerged. For example, one user posted a picture in a university hoody and exclaimed "Woo Northumbria hoody! #excited #IWANTNU". Another user quickly commented on the post with "Hey. What course are you doing", the discussion continues with the original poster "I am doing Law, how about you?" and the engagement continued fixed on this topic of discussion. These social media posts enabled the broad topic of identity through affiliation with the university, to quickly transform into a conversation about the course of study. In these posts, students were attempting to identify a network of their course peers, to converse with which was useful for informing an understanding of the early stages of peer-to-peer interaction.

Accommodation

Instagram posts featuring branded university images of hooded jumpers initiated further peer-to-peer communication in relation to accommodation and course selection. Whilst peer-to-peer social media posts responded to university initiated conversations about hooded jumper colour, texture, and size, it was the topic of accommodation that emerged as a frequent discussion point for transitional students. Unsurprisingly, the broad topic of accommodation was of interest to the majority of social media posters, regardless of the course of study. Previous research (Berger, 1997) has highlighted that a sense of community in residence halls fosters the social integration of first-year students. Therefore, the transitioning student conversations moved quickly from identifying themselves with the university to seeking to establish social networks prior to their arrival. Irrespective of other social diversities and program of study, the students were aware that their accommodation would be a significant factor in promoting the establishment of initial social networks. Through these posts regarding accommodation the students sought and offered reassurances to each other; they evaluated expectations and helped to alleviate tensions.

There were frequent examples of prospective students demonstrating their affiliation with their allocated accommodation. For example, one student posted "Room all booked and confirmed!! @TrinitySquareNU #IWANTNU". Another student posted "Can't wait to go to uni now!! Even more excited to live in Trinity Square it looks amazing #IWANTNU". Even when the conversation began with an Instagram post picturing apparel, accommodation received significantly more engagement. In response to a picture of a student in her hooded jumper, a student asked "which accommodation you gone for?" this encouraged others using the #IWANTNU hashtag to comment, provide responses, and engage.

It is, therefore, important to recognise that although the university initiates discussion within the hashtag thread, what is important to the student becomes the focus of the transition journey conversations. For that reason, it is incumbent on the university to not only consider how students are responding to university-initiated content but also how they are creating content themselves. As Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) have discussed, user generated content is a creative effort which has been generated outside of professional routines and practices for the purpose of communicating from an individual's perspective on a topic of importance to them. We did find evidence that the university was monitoring user generated content and responding to what was important to students at a specific stage of the transitional journey. For example, there were a plethora of social media groups available to join to find peers from the same accommodation halls. In response to a prospective student Twitter post asking if "anybody in Stephenson building flat 1?? @NUFreshers16 #IWANTNU", the university signposted the student to the official Stephenson halls group on Facebook page. Whilst this was a well-intentioned response from the university, further analysis revealed that the Facebook page is saturated with university promotional messages, attracting very limited engagement from the prospective students, who at this point seem to only have one goal – find peers from the same halls. Whilst this might seem not so difficult for students to ignore the deluge of information on the page, quickly liaise with others, and then create a separate Facebook group with new peer's, research has shown that instant responses to answers is a key motivation for use (Hrastinski & Aghaee, 2012). Therefore, the institute needs to be more efficient in terms of communicating key information to the students.

Previous research (Braxton & McClendon, 2001), has recommended that residence-hall professionals develop multiple opportunities for residents to engage in frequent face-to-face social interaction. As we discussed previously, this is encouraged during induction week; however, social media has made it possible for meaningful social interaction to take place virtually as well as physically. Communication regarding accommodation is complex and difficult to manage; however, there is an abundance of student created content available that specifically identifies the expectations and tensions, which could be used to assist transition. It is clear from our data students do not just want basic information regarding price of accommodation, location and whether they are the most stylish. They are aware of the importance of creating and joining a peer network to support their transition. Social media enables them to achieve this aim and to alleviate many of the transitional tensions prior to their arrival. Therefore, by exploring peer to peer communication, and the richness of conversations created on social media, rather than engaging at an abstract level. Awareness of these factors can assist a more

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effective management of these initial stages by identifying what is really important to the students. In our data set this was finding out information about other students in their accommodation.

Course, facilities and landmarks

Students spend a significant amount of time adjusting to their new lives at university using on and offline resources in order to establish a new identity (Thomas et al. 2017). As we have argued, this adjustment does not begin in induction week; prospective students use various sources of information throughout the application process to begin promoting aspects of their new student identity. Throughout our data set, it was clear that students felt it was important to communicate certain facets of their transitioning journey, which connected the student with either the university or the city they were studying in. Our analysis revealed that identification ranged from broad associations with the city and region to narrow alliances with their course of study.

Our intention here is not to highlight these themes as newly emerging discussions of interest for students; the influence of the course, university facilities, and famous city landmarks at the student's desired destination are well established topics of conversation in the transitional literature (Berger, 1997; Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Briggs, Clark and Hall, 2012; Scanlon, Rowling & Weber, 2007). What we want to highlight is how the university can use social media insight on these discussion topics to begin the process of transition before arrival and then use them to further enhance integration upon arrival.

The following posts capture the significance of these influences:

"Best sports facility's of any university I have been too, the applied sports science course is exactly what I wanted!!#IWANTNU"

"Sport Development and Coaching at Northumbria was amazing!!#IWANTNU"

"I very much enjoyed seeing the computer science facilities #IWANTNU"

Twitter image – caption – *"Angel of the North #IWANTNU"*

Instagram image of Newcastle quayside caption – *"so excited to hopefully be moving to Newcastle in September after visiting again today #IWANTNU"*

A further note of interest from our analysis of student created content on facilities and landmarks is the specific use of Instagram and the implications this has for further transition communication analysis in this area. Consistent with previous research (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), it is apparent from our analysis that different social media sites are used for different purposes; this is largely due to the functional capabilities of the social media platforms. For example, Twitter is used for conversations (Boyd, 2010), yet it does not easily allow for peer-to-peer communication and therefore makes it hard to focus on the relationships between participants within the networks. The university tended to post much more frequently on Twitter, when Instagram would be more appropriate for some of the messages and in support of pre-arrival conversations. In addition, Instagram allows for ease of commenting between members using the hashtag and makes it easier from the university's perspective to assist with the mapping of the relations between communication technologies and people (Van Dijck, 2013). Our findings also resonate with previous studies exploring young users' experiences when using Instagram; young mobile users look at the world more attentively, the act of planning a photo or looking for things to capture makes the photographer more deeply engaged in the experience, which tends to lead to deeper enjoyment (Abbott et al. 2013; Ting, 2015). The abundance of photographs in the facilities and landmarks hashtag thread supports this, the qualitative comments associated with carefully curated images of notable city landmarks were prevalent throughout, as were discussions of what was deemed a quality facility. Therefore, Instagram is not just a platform where students pick up cues regarding identity formation and share experiences, but it also affects decision-making and behaviour, and is currently an underutilised resource for managing effective transition at our post 1992 institute.

Conclusion - methodological and practical suggestions for improving student transition

The aim of this study was to inform evidence-based initiatives, which are employed to support the student transition journey and to promote university retention strategies. To achieve this aim, we explored how co-created social media conversations can provide an insight into the expectations and tensions of the pre-arrival transitioning student. From our analysis, it was evident that the networks of influence on successful transition are not only multiple and varied, but similarly, they have the potential to change year on year and potentially vary across different universities. We observed that the university is becoming increasingly aware of the role social media plays in integrating students into the institution, evidenced by encouraging students to join group chats and creating their own content. However, even in induction weeks the notion of using social media to encourage fresher's to enrol on social media platforms and to learn about their new housemates is a relatively new strategy for universities (Thomas et al. 2017). These observations highlight how the university enables the creation of social media user generated content, which can begin to identify not only changes in student communication behaviour and activity, but also what engages the student in conversation. Yet, in the pre-arrival stage, social media continues to be used as a promotional tool for our post 1992 institute. By focusing on promotion rather than relationship management; the university is overlooking an opportunity to benefit from insight into transitioning student conversations in the pre-arrival stage. Similarly, the value of peer influence in informing transitional choices is not being developed to its full extent.

To our knowledge student-centric pre-arrival conversation topics, available through social media netnography, are not formally used to inform induction week activities or personal tutor initial conversations with new students at our institute. As we stated previously, this is because induction teams are playing catch-up on the expectation and tension topics of conversations that are important to that cohort. Pre-arrival information could be easily integrated into university induction programs to more effectively manage transition. Here we provide an insight into how we used the pre-arrival themes emerging from our research to engage with students in the induction stage. Based on our insight, the generalized themes informed small-scale induction conversations with a group of students on our programs. We were aware that accommodation, university apparel, course choice and facilities and landmarks were important topics for the pre-arrival students. Therefore, in the preliminary personal tutor discussions, we gathered the students together and we explained that our program students were distinctive in their choice of course; the people in the room were their new network of support throughout their time at university, their network consisted of their peers and the teaching staff. Guided by our insight we asked; where are you staying and how is your accommodation? Have you visited the Angel of the North yet? Do you know that there is an Olympic sized swimming pool in sport central? What excites you the most about starting your course? Are you aware there is a sale on at the Student Union shop where you can pick up your university hooded jumper at a discounted price? In addition to this, we used the formal induction activities to visit several notable landmarks around our campus and the wider city. Although our induction week findings are informal observations, we have noted that the Sport Management students (Paul's cohort) who attended the induction talks had better attendance and engagement, had performed on average 8-9 per cent better in assessments than their peers who did not attend induction, and that none of that select group had withdrawn from the program. There are too many variables to support a robust conclusion on whether our insight was directly responsible for the enhancements observed, but our conversations were generically evidence-based and focused on what mattered to the students in the empirical data collected through our netnographic study. We would encourage future mixed-methods research into the relationship between netnographic evidence-based insight interventions and the identification of the variables which effect student transition, performance and retention.

University recruitment faces uncertain times; our study raises awareness of the wealth of information available via social media that is currently under-researched, and which could be used to support student transition. These conversations capture the excitement and positivity of the upcoming transition sensations that should extend throughout the student's time at university. They also reveal the expectations and tensions that are explicitly or covertly communicated in the student's topics of conversation, something that should be managed through innovative interventions. If students' needs are central to induction activities, then it is vital such market initiatives support their transition. Merely using social media as an abstracted promotional tool lacks foresight. Transitioning students want information, but once they have made a university and course choice, that topic of conversation is no longer their focus. They begin to think about more personal and individual tensions; as such, young people now rely on social media for guidance and making friends (Thomas et al. 2017). As Thomas et al. (2017) have previously argued, the insights that social media provides are invaluable in supporting these transitions. We agree but suggest that these insights are activated much earlier on in the process and are available pre-arrival. As we have demonstrated, netnography offers a student-centric approach; however, it is a demanding enterprise. Nevertheless, the insight that it provides into an increasingly diverse student body (Thomas, 2012), who are entering HE as a gradually market-driven environment, are more perceptive than perhaps evaluations of previous cohorts' experiences or reflective accounts.

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