

Social Networking Sites for University Search and Selection

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Abstract

The potential power and implications of using social media to reach an enormous audience has been recognised as well as the technological habits of prospective students today. However, many universities are not leveraging on this media tool beneficially as part of their marketing tools. This research provides an analysis and evaluation of the use of social networking sites for university search and selection. The research investigates the current issues related to the information sources used by students for selecting a higher education institution. The research conducted a content analysis from a sample of business and marketing sciences research published in refereed journals from 2000 to 2013. The findings show that the use of social networking sites for university search and selection among prospective students is growing in importance. The reason for the popularity of these sites is that they can supply information from three different sources: direct information from the university, trusted information from social networking or reference groups (friends, peers, current/former students, alumni), and real time, on-line information from university websites. The research found the future for universities to promote their programs and events through social networks is worthwhile as they are already popular and well established among stakeholders.

Keywords: Social networking sites (SNSs), university, search, selection

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions are facing new challenges. The transformation in higher education have been influenced by intensifying global competition, declining funding and changing demand patterns (Gibbs, 2001; Jarvis, 2000; Kallio, 1995; Veloutsou, Lewis, & Paton, 2004). As competition increases in the higher education institution sectors, public and private universities increasingly view students as consumers and try to market their institution intensively. Universities as service providers require restructuring themselves in order to survive. Consequently, higher education institutions should respond to such challenges by understanding and influencing the higher education institution choice process among prospective students in order to remain competitive (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Maringe, 2006).

Related to this trend in higher education, attention needs also to be given to the methods of attracting domestic students and international students. For domestic students, the higher education institutions should strengthen the orientation towards selling programs to students within the country. To attract international students, higher education institutions both domestic and foreign institutions need to expand their institution to provide distance education, study abroad/exchange, and foreign site-based degree programs. In such situations, marketing efforts play an increasingly important role in higher education, particularly in student recruitment management. Hence, there is a call for the development of new marketing approaches (Simões & Soares 2010).

To successfully recruit students, higher education institutions need a deeper understanding of the sources of information prospective students used when selecting a higher education institution. These include the thorough examination of promotional tools that are appropriate and mostly used by prospective students for searching and selecting a university. In regard to university marketing, student choice behaviour focuses on how students make decisions to spend their available resources (time, money and efforts) in selecting a particular university in which to study.

Seeing this opportunity to reach global students, the education marketers turned to go online to market their institution. Pooch & Lefond (2001) already noted the technological habits of prospective students in the near future and therefore make use of the internet for promoting and marketing by colleges and universities is becoming rapidly apparent. Higher education institutions are beginning to adopt social media and recognise the potential power and implications for using it as a part of their overall marketing mix. It was found that social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook have a very strong influence on the lives of millions of students (Thompson, 2007). Therefore, this paper will explore how educational institutions can use social networking sites to market themselves to prospective students, as well as how prospective students use these same technologies in their decision making process. In particular, the paper investigates the use of social networking to

facilitate information search and decision making in the higher education context.

The paper commences by summarising the definition and history of social networking sites and follows with detailing the use of social networking sites for university search and selection as well as a short summary of the emergence of research related to the information sources used by students for choosing a higher education institution. The future of social networking in higher education sectors is explained briefly. Following these aspects, the implications of social networking sites on university search and selection are explained in relation to the current research area. The paper's conclusion concentrates on summarising the previous section and giving recommendations for further research in the field.

2. Social Network Sites (SNSs)

There are multiple schools of thought regarding the definition of social networking. Social networking can be simply defined as the interaction within a group of people who share a common interest. According to Wasserman & Faust (1994) a social network consists of a set of actors ("nodes") and the relations ("ties" or "edges") between these actors. The relation may be formed between individuals, groups, organizations, or societies. With regard to the power of ties, Katz et al. (2004) classified them as strong ties (such as family and friends) and weak ties (such as acquaintances). The type of tie influences the level of trust when individuals are seeking information.

Such a relation might be established online through the medium of social networking sites. Social networking sites, like Facebook and Myspace.com, allow individuals to communicate with a large community through a simple platform. Currently, social network sites are rapidly becoming ubiquitous online. Boyd & Ellison (2007, p211) revealed that social network sites are "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system". As such, social network sites can help facilitate the dissemination of information between individuals as well as maintain and/or strengthen their current and/or off line social networks (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Boyd & Ellison (2007) revealed that actually, the first recognizable social network site, namely SixDegrees.com launched in 1997, allowed users to create profiles. This site promoted itself as a tool to help people connect with and send messages to others. In 2001, the South Korean virtual world site Cyworld was started and added other features on social networking sites. Five years later in 2006, Cyworld become popular in the US for general purposes. Friendster was launched in 2002 in the US as a social complement of previous social networking sites. MySpace was commenced in 2003 to compete with other sites like Friendster. Unlike previous social networking sites, in 2004 Facebook was designed for supporting the college network in Harvard only. At the beginning of September 2005 Facebook expanded to include high school students. A year later, the use of Facebook also becomes popular for general users. At the same time, Twitter followed the success of Facebook as a social networking site for everyone.

Hitherto, the uses of social network sites were varied. Some studies have been carried out in relation to the issues of using social network sites for educational purposes. Such issues include privacy, student anxiety in interacting with professors (Hewitt & Forte, 2006) doubts regarding the capability of the social networking sites for academic purposes (Charnigo & Barnett-Ellis, 2007) and the question of how universities will articulate the outcomes of the students' use of social networking sites (Selwyn, 2007). On the contrary, Young (2008) has noted the appropriateness for educators to use online social spaces like Facebook for academic purposes. Lampe et al. (2006) also pointed out that this site is ideal choice for use in the college classroom. Specifically, Facebook has had rapid adoption (i.e. 80-90%) and usage rates for college students (Arrington, 2005; Educause, 2007).

As college students form a the majority of internet users, therefore they have many labels including the Net Generation (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2004), Generation Y, Millennials (Howe & Strauss, 2000), and Generation Me (Twenge, 2006). Strauss and Howe (2006) indicated that each generation is unique with its own social and culture value that is shared by its members. For the Net Generation, digital technology becomes part of their social and cultural values. This generation have spent their entire lives engaging digital technology and have been referred to as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001).

Previous research has identified the potential users of the Internet. In their research La Ferle, Edwards and Lee (2000) found that 92% of teens aged 14 to 19 considered themselves users of the Internet. While The Pew Research Centre (2001) found that 73% of American youth aged 12 to 17 went online. The technological advances of the 1990s have also fundamentally affected the way people spent their time in using the internet.

Sevier (1998) and La Ferle et al. (2000) found that most adolescents spent less than an hour on surfing the Internet at home or during school each day whereas, just about one-fourth spend one to three hours daily online, another three percent used the Internet more than three hours each day, and more than half the teens use the Internet at home. Therefore Marconi (2001, p108) underlined that “Generation Y’s medium of choice is the Internet”.

Considering this opportunity to reach an enormous audience, higher education institutions quickly went online. Kittle and Ciba (2001) in their research on Using College Web Sites for Student Recruitment: A Relationship Marketing Study used random samples during a three-year study to examine the home pages of four-year colleges and universities on the World Wide Web. They found that roughly 40% of colleges were using the Internet for promotions in 1996. In addition, they also noted that those numbers jumped to 99.1% of colleges having Web pages two years later. The importance of using the internet in college admission as a strategic choice has been thoroughly researched by Hossler (1999). He maintained that on-line information is useful for university recruitment management because “Institutions can give students more timely and more detailed information on-line than would be feasible with print media or even individual counselling sessions” (Don Hossler, 1999, p14).

In line with the increased number of college students who are using the internet as well as the number of the universities which are promoting their institutions through the internet, this medium is used increasingly as a tool to search for a university. Hartmen (1998, p54) in his article on the Internet and college admissions: implications and opportunities 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” (p54). There is evidence shown by Anderson and Reid (1999) in their study that 83% of high school students were using the Internet to explore colleges. In addition, Anderson and Reid (1999, p54) maintained 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”. Later studies by Abrahamson (2000, p9) suggest that, the Web ranks second only to campus visits as the most important source for researching colleges among online users. Regarding university admission, Frazier (1999) claimed that with the increase in technology usage by teenagers, prospective students expect to gain information and conduct business with higher education institutions on the Web. Therefore, for prospective students, the availability of online information related to the higher education institutions becomes prominent in order to help them make the right decision in choosing a university.

3. Research Method

The research took as its starting point a bibliographical review through books, master's and doctoral thesis, technical papers, websites and scientific papers in different databases. Searches of electronic and on-line databases, namely: ProQuest, ERIC, Emerald Full-Text, Ingenta (Including Science Direct), EBSCO (Business Sources Premier and PSYCINFO), ABI Inform, Google Scholar were conducted. In addition, searches through the internet and manual media were also carried out in order to identify other publications and secondary references by authors identified in the previous searches. Additional articles were identified from searching the bibliographies of retrieved articles. The search strategy used thesaurus search terms, such as “social networking sites (SNSs)”, “search”, “selection” or “choice”, and combined them with “higher education” or “universit(y/ies)”. An additional term such as “internet”, “web” was also used in order to focus the current issues of information search activity and source preferences by university’s students as well as identify relevant studies that explored the influential factors in student choice context. The search of publications between 2000 and 2013 were completed to identify relevant studies that explored what factors influenced undergraduate students to choose a university. It was decided to limit articles to those published after 1999 because it was felt that these articles would be most relevant to current situation of higher education reform around the world. Indeed, since higher education has been transformed into a highly competitive environment, choice and decision making in higher education is an area of growing research interest (Soutar & Turner 2002). Predominantly now when the students have to undertake complex decisions within a wide range of options to choose a university in order to make the right choice.

Publications in the English language from all countries such as Asia, Africa, Europe, Canada, the USA, the UK, Australia and New Zealand were considered for review. However, in order to give a significant contribution for the research context, the review was limited on published scholarly journal papers from empirical research, and excluded thesis, unpublished conference papers and opinion pieces in professional publications. The journals chosen are widely accessed and these selected journals are: Marketing Education Review, Journal of College

Admissions, Chronicle of Higher Education, Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, Management and Marketing, Journal of Consumer Research and International Journal of Education Management, Higher Educational Research and Development, College and University, Studies in Higher Education, New Directions for Institutional Research, The Journal of Higher Education, British Journal of Educational Technology, Journal of Marketing Education, International Journal of Educational Management, Journal of College Admission, Journal of Marketing For Higher Education, Journal of Services Marketing, Tertiary Education and Management, Journal of Consumer Behaviour, Journal of Marketing, Quality Assurance in Education, Educational Research for Policy and Practice. As a study on the use of social networking sites for university search and selection that is still new in the context of education around the world, this study was implemented in a limited scope of the available literature.

An approach was used to analysis in this study, namely content analysis. The content analysis used in this study was primarily hermeneutical, relying on identification of key words and phrases used in the various survey and experimental designs that provided information of information factors on undergraduate choice. Based on content analysis or the process of summarizing and reporting of written data (Cohen et al. in Cowan, 2011), the research topics in the articles selected for analysis were categorized according to key words in the given abstracts, issues discussed as well as research scope. Throughout the data analysis carried out, each category identified was further clarified using thematic analysis. After compiling the key operational references to the keywords under study, additional qualitative assessments were made to identify situational logic or contextual references (Archer, 2000:144). An extensive review of the literature is important not only for establishing the necessary background, but also as a way to develop a theoretical insight.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Social Networking Sites for University Search and Selection

Literature on university choice contends that the decision of students to continue their education at tertiary levels is influenced by a number of factors. In service sectors such as higher education institutions, which relate to a higher degree of perceived risk, information searches constitute a key element of consumer decision models (Beatty & Smith, 1987; Mourali, Laroche, & Pons, 2005). Since in a service sector, Murray (1991) and Choi and Lee (2003) highlight that the higher the degree of perceived risk, the greater is the tendency to search for information. Given the importance of information gathering on the choice of a university, one significant aspect of this process that needs to be examined in greater detail is the information sources that are used by students when they make a decision about university.

It has been acknowledged that consumers' information searching is different for goods than services. Information searching has been used in different consumption situations (Choi & Lee, 2003; Mitra, Reiss, & Capella, 1999; Newman & Lockeman, 1975). Generally, consumers will tend to search for more information when faced with a service purchase decision rather than tangible product (McCull-Kennedy & Fetter Jr, 1999; Murray, 1991). The rationale is that consumers involve in such activities because they want to reduce risk due to the commonly risky nature of service provision (McCull-Kennedy & Fetter Jr, 1999, p242-243). Therefore understanding consumer search behaviour may be especially important in a services marketing context.

As regards higher education institution choice behaviour, a line of inquiry has focused on generic student-choice models (Punj & Staelin, 1978; Vrontis, Thrassou, & Melanthiou, 2007). Previous research has addressed specific aspects related to higher education institutions' services. For example, satisfaction in the higher education service has been investigated by Ham (2003); Petruzzellis et al. (2006); Moller (2006); Douglas et al. (2008); Nasser et al. (2008); Alves and Raposo (2009); Mao and Oppewal (2010), and service quality in university catering services by Parente et al. (2007). Nevertheless empirical studies addressing detailed aspects of the higher education institution decision-making process are limited, and those that do exist refer to explicit fields of study (West, Newell, & Titus, 2001). Particularly, research focusing on information sources for higher education institutions is integrated into studies focusing on related areas, such as factors influencing students' decisions (Băcilă, Dorel, & Alexandra-Maria, 2006; Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Menon, 2004; Simões & Soares, 2010), information sources and requirements (Veloutsou et al., 2004) or preferred information source (Goff, Patino, & Jackson, 2004). Hence, as pointed out by Kiel and Layton (1981) sources of information and choice factors are important dimensions when addressing information-seeking behaviour.

It has been frequently observed that consumers look for others opinions when considering the purchase of products and services. Opinions shared and recommendations made on social networking sites become one of the important sources of information for users and a powerful force on almost every aspect of business because

they strengthen word-of-mouth marketing. In fact, a research conducted by Brand Strategy (2007) revealed that 78% of global consumers say they trust and believe other people's recommendations for products and services more than any other medium. Indeed, since consumers provide much of the content and the marketers have less control over messaging and positioning this means social media may become a more trusted source of information than advertising (Red Bridge Marketing, 2008). In this sense, companies' own marketing messages are seen as less objective than those from other people's opinions. Therefore, consumers use online sources including social networks, to find these opinions.

Previous studies have noted the importance of reliable sources of information for student decisions to attend a higher education institution. A survey of 716 students from 19 schools in South Africa by Bonnema and Van der Waldt (2008) revealed that there are specific categories of information sources that each subgroup prefers to consult when seeking information about tertiary institutions. The study has also shown that media or advertising sources are not always the preferred source, but that social sources, word of mouth or direct sources from the institution are sometimes preferred.

Pimpa and Suwannapirom (2008) in a research on marketing factors and reference groups for Thai students' choices of vocational education found that reference groups play an important role in influencing students' final decision to enrol in a vocational institution. In their survey of 412 first year students from eight government vocational institutions in Thailand they revealed that teachers from the students' previous school is the strongest personal influencing factor, followed by influencing factors from family and senior students who are currently enrol in vocational institutions. This research is also in line with Wagner and Fard (2009) study on 162 students who are currently attending the pre-university level programmes in Malaysia. They found that there is a significant relationship between influences from the family, friends, peers and the students' intention to study at a HEI.

Brennan's (2001) study set out to examine these theoretical ideas in the specific context of prospective students' decision-making in Australia. From a mail survey to a random sample of 576 Victorian first year university students immediately after they had enrolled in a university, it was found that interpersonal sources of information, which included family, friends and school counsellors influenced their choice decision of a university for further study. However, another study was conducted by Riana et al. (2006) on 81 first-year undergraduate students at the Universitas Terbuka (UT) School of Management in Jakarta, Indonesia in relation to their decision making process found that for their information sources, distance students relied more on impersonal sources of information such as university brochures and websites, rather than on personal sources.

Regarding the communication network, Gomes and Murphy (2003) highlighted that trusted information is a key issue with online enrolment. There are two top trusted networks according to the survey from College Search and the Millennial Generation (2007, p4) namely admissions counsellors (63%) or current students (73%). Social networking sites can provide a trusted information source in the higher education recruitments since they provide information from three different sources instead of one. These sources include direct information from the university, trusted information from social networking or reference groups (friends, peers, current/former students, alumni), and real time, on-line information from university websites. In this situation, members of social networks serve two roles, in which they become both supply and consume the content of information at the same time.

The usefulness of social networking sites for educational promotion became apparent along with the growing popularity of these sites among teens or prospective students. Roblyer et al. (2010) emphasised that colleges are also using SNSs for university marketing campaigns. However, Roderick et al. (2008, p124) found in their research on low social economic status urban students from Chicago, that the use of university websites had not significantly influenced the students in their decision making process because there was very little evidence that students were using resources such as these to help guide their college search. Although this research dismisses cyber networks owing to their statistically low presence on students search and decision to attend college, a recent survey from Eduventures, Inc. has shown the increasing trend of high school students' use of on-line cyber networks as sources of information over the past few years. They also noted that 80% of the college bound students who were involved in this study indicated that their college search began on-line (Ashburn, 2007).

4.2 The Future of Social Networking

With the increase in the competition among higher education institutions to attract prospective students, universities around the world need to find a way to differentiate themselves in the minds of the prospective students, their parents and other stakeholders. Although still limited, current research supports the role of social

networking sites in the recruitment process as the Generation Y feel familiar with such technologies. As pointed out by Will and Callison (2006) that while efforts were being made to reach students online, there is much room for improvement. For that reason, universities should find the right mix of communication that meets the expectations of a highly critical audience namely prospective student and their parents, even though there is no perfect mix of communication or e-communication strategies for recruiting prospective students nowadays.

In the future, the popularity of social networking as promotional tools for university marketing will become manifest. Public web sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, have redefined and expanded social networking sites (SNSs) to enable students to communicate with acquaintances, initiate friendships, join groups, and trace people with similar interests. As Herring et al. (2005, p11) concluded that because blogs “allow authors to experience social interaction while giving them control over the communication space,” they will continue to grow in popularity and “be put to increasingly diverse use”. The popularity of websites as information source for university search are also noted by Mateos et al. (2001) who found a high correlation between the number of students enrolled in Spanish universities and the popularity of their Web sites.

Social networking as a new and dynamic internet tool will continue to advance as well as its capabilities as a networking platform, communication dissemination channel and a promotional medium. With respect to education, some scholars already have documented the other variety of uses of social networking sites beside for being used for student recruitment. Examples of other such uses are: the student-professor relationship on Facebook (Hewitt & Forte, 2006), student-faculty relations and perceptions of social networking sites (Roblyer et al., 2010), the application of Web 2.0 in university libraries (Harinarayana & Raju, 2010), and faculty participation affecting student-professor relations (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). Therefore, in the future improvement, however, will be needed for universities and site administrators to take advantage of the full range of social networking’s capabilities.

The potential advantages of social networking sites are likely expanded to be issue-focused for both commercial and non commercial purposes. In their research on college and university Web sites, Will and Callison (2006) examined how institutions communicate online. It was found that alumni and friends were targeted most profusely on homepages, possibly because of they have the potential to make financial donations as university endowments. Furthermore, prospective students were most targeted with links to the admissions office and online and downloadable applications for enrolment. This indicated that higher education institutions should be able to use the sites to the maximum for communication, recruitment, and social marketing purposes.

Social networking sites will expand as a medium that can serve as a two way communication, in which the university can communicate directly to the current and prospective students as well as having students provide feedback to the university, so that these communication channels will continue to become preferable. “The importance of the use of the Internet for promotion and marketing by colleges and universities becomes rapidly apparent while examining the technological habits of preteens and teens who will be of college-going age in the near future” (Poock & Lefond, 2001, p16). Mack et al. (2007, p4) affirmed that such kind of networks seem to be perceived as “... an excellent mechanism for communicating with our students because it allows us to go where they already are; it is an environment that students are already comfortable with”. Therefore, this social media will emerge as an innovative approach to promote university activities and events, to recruit and retain the student body, and to strengthen bonds to the university.

Despite the fact that social networking sites might have initially become popular with adolescences as an entertaining media to share with friends with the same interests, now social networking is increasingly involving adults in general and educators particularly because of their capability to communicate with and engage students. Given the high level of parental and familial involvement in the university decision process as noted by some scholars (Al-Yousef, 2009; Ceja, 2006; Fann, McClafferty Jarsky, & McDonough, 2009; Smith & Fleming, 2006), universities are now looking for the opportunity to engage with all of their stakeholders. Consequently, social networking sites possibly will be one of the most effective ways to engage today’s students and to strengthen the ties between all the stakeholders and the university for increasing the numbers of enrolment, improving participation, and establishing a basis for strong and committed alumni relations.

5. The Implication for the Research

As mentioned previously, higher education institutions are facing new challenges that call for the development of new marketing approaches. The information search stage of decision making is a remarkable influence on consumers’ choices. As Murray (1991, p10) affirms, for both marketing managers and scholars, “knowledge of information acquisition strategies is vital since the information search is an early influential stage in the purchase

decision process". From a marketing management point of view, implications of this research may contribute to the design of more effective marketing communication campaigns. For instance, when defining the promotional mix, higher education institutions' managers need to consider the social networking sites as a key information source.

Given the decision to choose which higher education institution to apply to will have long-term implications on the students' life and careers, therefore it is a high-perceived risk decision. As Briggs and Wilson (2007, p61) state, "decisions are based on a combination of information available, word of mouth, perceptions and reputation". During the decision-making process, prospective students actively engage in information searching. Students can resort to various resources to gather relevant information about the university under consideration. In addition to formal sources, they seek advice from social networks (e.g. friends or acquaintances, peers, teachers) and counsellors. The importance of interpersonal sources has been previously recognized for high perceived risk decisions, as a complement to formal sources (Murray, 1991). This is corroborated the recent study findings by Simões and Soares (2010) which reveal that 'former/current ABC University students' and 'teachers' constituted, respectively, the second and third most relevant information sources (among the three mostly used).

Since the decision making process are made throughout the information search stage, therefore doing the information search is vital before making the choice decision. Hossler & Gallagher (1987) claimed that the search stage involves the accumulation and assimilation of information necessary for students to develop a shortlist of institutions. During this stage, students begin to consider the various options in terms of higher education (Wiese, van Heerden, Jordaan, & North, 2009) and to interact actively with potential institutions (Attinasi, 1989; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). They underwent activities to seek information by visiting campuses, searching brochures and websites and talking to friends about higher education institutions or universities.

The information search stage will determine whether students have adequate information sources to make the right decision. In addition, the stage is also influenced by many factors. Studies on the college choice model researched by McDonough (1997) in California and Roderick et al. (2008) in Chicago have shown that students use different networks during the college search compared with the selection stages. Hamrick and Stage (2004, p151) revealed that the predisposition stage is influenced greatly by 'family background' and 'school experiences'. The predisposition stage involves the development of occupational and educational aspirations as well as the emergence of an intention to continue education beyond the secondary level. Many students enter the search stage of the institution selection process during their first few years in high school. The search stage is influenced by parental support as well as the information available about institutions. The information search stage falls within the scope of this study and therefore social networking sites as the information sources used by student are thoroughly explained.

Early research by Chapman (1981) and other authors (Arpan, Raney, & Zivnuska, 2003; Bradshaw, Espinoza, & Hausman, 2001; Seymour, 2000) determined that HEIs make use of various means to market their services, including word-of-mouth, web pages, open days, brochures, alumni networks and advertisements in newspapers, radio and television. Findings from a study by Hoyt and Brown (2003, p4) identified web sites as the most important source of information for students, while research findings by Seymour (2000, p11) highlighted campus visits as the most influential source of information for prospective students. Findings from local studies by Jones (2002) identified word-of-mouth from friends as the most important source of information, while the findings of a survey study of high-school learners in the Pretoria (South Africa) region by Coetzee and Liebenberg (2004) recognised open days and web sites as the most important sources of information considered by students.

Previous studies have reported the growing importance of websites as an information source for university applicants (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Mentz & Whiteside, 2003). However, in their survey on 1641 students who were enrolling for the first time at a Portuguese university, Simões and Soares (2010) revealed that the university website was rated among the three most used sources of information by the majority of respondents. The results also showed the importance of the Internet as a key source of information for prospective students (Simões & Soares, 2010). This result is partially in line with Veloutsou et al. (2004), who concluded that students rely principally on information sources produced by the university.

The growing importance of social networking sites as a promotional tool has been noted in some articles. From promotional Web sites to on-line enrolment, the social networking sites are redefining the relationship between colleges and students (Schneider, 2005). Raisman (2003) revealed that Web sites have become a primary marketing tool for colleges and universities. Thelwall (2008) pointed out that the advantage of groups in general

social networking sites like MySpace is that they may be noticed by members' friends and would then serve as an implicit word-of-mouth style recommendation. Furthermore, for marketers, the using of social networking sites have become extremely powerful since the users feel that the information is not pushed at them but referred to them by a trusted friend in a trusted network (Red Bridge Marketing, 2008). In this sense, using social networking sites, will provide a marketing tool for universities to communicate directly with students through well-established and popular networks.

At present, there is a dearth of empirical research that has been conducted on the importance of social networking sites for education (Crook & Harrison, 2008). Within the literature of marketing education, some research have been carried out on the efforts of virtual worlds (Wood, Solomon, & Allan, 2008) and wikis (Cronin, 2009; Workman, 2008). Some other research is related to social network sites for academic purposes (Cain, 2008; Griffith & Liyanage, 2008; Hewitt & Forte, 2006; Mazer et al., 2007; Selwyn, 2007; Towner & VanHorn, 2007). Unfortunately, the influence of social networking sites on higher educational marketing has not been closely examined. In addition, from an students' perspective, it is essential that enough information is available so that a well-informed choice can be made (Briggs, 2006; Briggs & Wilson, 2007). Given this research hypothesis centres on choice factors considered by students when choosing a university, in which the information search stage becomes a key part of the students' decision-making process in higher education institutions, therefore it is interesting to study.

6. Conclusions

With the decrease in the role of government and sources for higher education funding as well as the changing of students demand pattern, universities around the world need to find a way to differentiate themselves in the minds of the their stakeholders, in particular their current and prospective students. In order to remain competitive, higher education institutions need to understand and influence the choice process for prospective students.

Regarding the nature of service with the high level of risk, consumers in general and students in particular tend to search for more information before making a decision. The information search constitutes a key element of consumer decision making models. In this sense, sources of information and choice factors are important dimensions when addressing information seeking behaviour. A proper information source will determine whether students make the right choice of a university for study.

Given recruiting students to universities is about building and maintaining relationships, therefore for today's prospective students, these connections are built and maintained using technology. For reaching prospective students, institution sites are a primary channel and the effective use of the internet can help keep universities keep a step ahead of their competition. Universities also need to increasingly use this kind of technology in order to take advantage of the full range of social networking's capabilities. Indeed, while social network sites, such as Facebook, My Space and Twitter play a central role in students' lives, higher education institutions need to appreciate that such kinds of social networking sites are not a fad, but an important vehicle for communication and information gathering. Without a doubt, higher education institutions need to learn much in relation to implementing social network sites for promoting higher education institutions.

The benefit of social networking sites can advantage both the university and students by increasing university-student and student-student relationships. Efforts should be made by higher education institutions to expand their marketing activities, promote their programs and events through social networks which already popular and well established among stakeholders. Traditional recruiting methods, such as university brochure, university fair, and campus visits, will continue to be part of the mix, but as technology becomes more prevalent, the mix will need to be adjusted accordingly. By understanding the preferred communication methods of the prospective students, university marketers and admission professionals will be in the better position to not only communicate with these students, but also to build the relationship necessary to bring them through the admission process to enrol.

Further research should also address the changing expectations of all stakeholders including prospective and current students, parents, and alumni in light of new technologies for university marketing. Also, since the popularity of social networking applications could make them a powerful cognitive tool, future research may explore the use of those media for other academic purposes. For example, the utilize of websites established where students could interact on an academically-focused networking site, with students posting on walls and professors engaging in on these discussions.

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