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Social media’s use in postgraduate students’ decision making journey: An exploratory study

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Universities globally are showing increased interest in the potential of social media as a marketing recruitment tool. This paper explores how and why potential postgraduate business students looking to study internationally use social media in their educational decision making process. Due to a lack of existing research, this study adopted an exploratory approach, gathering data through in-depth interviews with 12 postgraduate international students at an Australian university. The findings indicate that besides Facebook and YouTube, students are using blogs in their study search. The two most common reasons for social media usage are finding out about student life and reading reviews from former students. In the decision making process, social media is mostly used in the information search and evaluation stages. Students’ use of social media also varies across source countries. Our findings are a good information source for education marketers who need to engage more actively with social media.

**Keywords**: higher education marketing, social media marketing, student recruitment, postgraduate education

### Introduction

Social media has not only become a primary source of information for consumers all around the world (Bayraktaroğlu & Aykol, 2008) but also reached a significant status in university students’ lives. The strategies and tools used to communicate with university students have changed significantly with the development of the social media phenomenon (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012). As modern society becomes more and more communicative and engaged in content sharing, universities need to adapt to the latest changes in order to differentiate themselves and to make their message memorable.

One of the main challenges of international educational institutions is achieving success in international markets by recruiting offshore. In order to do this, universities have to undertake a range of activities designed to attract prospective students from around the world (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Social media is one of the new mediums being used in student recruitment.

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Being referred to as media used to enable social interaction, the term ‘social media’ has been described by communication experts and marketing specialists as ‘a wide range of a new generation internet applications’ (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012, p. 44). It is estimated that over 500 million people globally are interacting with social media (Ostrow, 2010). At the same time, the growing number of social media users has attracted marketers who have recognised social media as an important part of their marketing communications strategies (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). According to Stelzner (2013), the most commonly used social media platforms in 2013 (in order) were Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, blogging and YouTube.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, most research about social media has been devoted to recognising its importance and describing or analysing its content. In marketing research, most social media literature focuses on themes such as the effects of the social media on human behaviour (Barker, 2009; Kolbitsch & Maurer, 2006), their aptitude as educational environments (Augustsson, 2010; Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010), and their potential as marketing instruments (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Spaulding, 2010). The interest of higher education institutions in social media as part of the marketing toolkit is increasing (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012), but little is known about the potential of these channels in higher education marketing strategies. One study that focused on the potential of social media as instruments of higher education marketing concentrated on future university students from the last two years of secondary education in the Netherlands. The study explored the undergraduate students’ use of social media in their decision making process (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011). However, no research has been made on how future university postgraduate students, who are already more experienced and familiar with educational choices and decisions, use social media and the impact that it has on their decision making process regarding their choice of a university.

Hence, the purpose of this paper is to investigate how and why potential postgraduate business students looking to study internationally use social media in their educational decision making process. Four objectives guided the study:

(1) Identify the social media networks used by postgraduate business students when they are considering undertaking international study;
(2) Identify the type of information students look for when using social media;
(3) Identify how social media is used at each step of the decision making process;
(4) Explore differences in above objectives based on country of origin of students.

The study will contribute theoretically to our understanding of social media usage as a recruitment tool in higher educational institutions. The study also focuses on students’ online decision making behaviour. In practice, the study serves as a basis for strategy development in social media recruitment for the higher educational industry in general and for Australian postgraduate education in particular. More specifically, our results will allow postgraduate Australian programs to use social media as a recruitment tool in their future marketing plans for higher education.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: an overview of the current literature regarding social media, its role as a higher education marketing tool and its influence on consumer decision making. Next, the research method and procedures are detailed. The paper concludes with a discussion of the results as well as theoretical and managerial implications.
Social media: The changing face of marketing

The technological revolution occurring since the early 2000s has drastically revolutionised traditional marketing approaches and brought marketers to a new era (Altaf, 2014). One of the major platforms that appeared together with this revolution is Web 2.0, a technological and conceptual platform upon which social media operates and evolves. Web 2.0 can be understood as a movement from individually programmed activity in the form of static web pages to interactive or user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media is part of this movement of user-driven online interactive apps. According to Constantinides and Fountain (2008), social media (with applications such as blogs, online communities, social networks and online bulletin boards) is one of the three components of Web 2.0 (O’Reilly, 2005), together with the social effects and the enabling technologies.

Constantly evolving, social media is taking an increasingly significant role in organisations’ marketing communications with other organisations, communities, and especially individuals (Kietzmann et al., 2011). While there are many different ways of defining social media in the existent literature (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), for the purpose of this report, social media will be defined as ‘forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and blogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)’ (Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson, & Seymour, 2011, p. 79). This definition describes best the idea of conversation and interaction between people online (Strauss & Frost, 2011) and includes both the creation and exchange of user-generated content which are important parts of any organisation’s online content. A summary table briefly providing a definition of the various social media sites mentioned in this study can be found below.

(Insert Table 1 here)

The benefit of using social media (compared to traditional media or marketing) is that on social media, the content is not generated as a corporate monologue, but it is seen as a conversation where participants can discuss and upload content, edit, but also rate each other’s content (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). At the same time, with the rise of social media, the power of corporate communication and traditional marketing has decreased. Communication about organisations and brands happens without permission of the institutions in question (Hayta, 2013). Thus, companies have designed special departments committed to the design and control of social media within their organisational structures (Kelsey, 2010). Pollack (2009) claims that the traditional one-sided communication marketers were used to is quickly shifting to a two-way dialogue approach, as this is more likely to be the way of communicating with consumers in the coming years.

Social media and social media marketing allows individuals to ‘present their own Web sites, products, or services through online social channels to communicate in a wide community and to listen to that community’ (Weinberg, 2009, p. 3) – a situation that was not possible with traditional advertising channels. Different than traditional marketing, according to Tuten (2008), social media marketing can be defined as a type of online advertising which targets consumers based on the cultural context of social communities through virtual worlds, social networks, social news sites and social opinion-sharing sites, in order to meet branding and communication objectives (Bélanger, Bali, & Longden, 2014).
Social media’s impact on consumer behaviour and the decision making process

Research provides evidence that organisations willing to include social media into their marketing strategies must realise that social media is not only changing the traditional one-sided way of seeing marketing and communication, but it is also changing the customers’ decision making by adding a new factor that is beyond the organisation’s control in the customers’ decision making process (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). At the same time, social media has become a key part of human interaction and communication, having a big influence on people’s behaviour and decision making (Cheung & Lee, 2010). Interaction between organisations and consumers has also changed, with power switching from the company to consumers due to online socialising (Koufaris, Kambil, & LaBarbera, 2002). This change demonstrates that consumers understand the difference between organisations that push messages towards them to make them use their services and consumers in online communities that are similar to them and have no interest in spreading positive or negative word-of-mouth on social media.

A specific characteristic of social media is the fact that it has a big impact on consumer behaviour. It changes it by adding a new uncontrollable factor to the decision making process – it affects the consumer and other users while it is also affected by other users (Hayta, 2013). In this regard, the effects of social media on consumer behaviour can be divided into three groups:

- Behaviours affecting consumption (positive verbal communication, negative verbal communication, opinion leadership);
- Behaviours affected by others regarding consumption (searching for information on products, searching for others' opinions);
- Consumer behaviours towards using social media as a communication tool to report satisfaction or dissatisfaction following product purchase (Odabaşı & Odabaşi, 2010).

Decision making processes and social media

As mentioned before, social media is not only a central part of consumer behaviour but also an essential part of the decision making process (Zarrella, 2010; Weinberg, 2009). Throughout their decision making, consumers can be more or less involved in the process. There are two types of decisions they can make: low-involvement (decisions made with no planning or previous thought) or high-involvement (complex decisions that have to be considered throughout the whole decision making process) (Kotler & Armstrong, 2011). Given the fact that undertaking a new education is a process that requires extensive thought, it can be argued that education search is a high involvement decision. A high involvement decision process involves five steps (Table 2). The impact of social media within each step is explained in the table below:

(Insert Table 2 here)

Problem recognition arises when ‘consumers realize that they have an unfulfilled need’ (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2008, p. 12) or a desire for something new. Needs might be caused by internal stimuli or external stimuli. There
are different factors that affect problem recognition; such as social factors, cultural factors, reference groups, and environmental factors (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010). After the problem is recognised, consumers start seeking information. Two types of information sources are available – internal and external information searches (see Table 2) (Belch & Belch, 2004).

In the evaluation of alternatives phase, consumers compare and evaluate the existent options that match their desires and needs (Blythe, 2008). The communication of experience from peers is integral in the evaluation of alternatives stage (Jaffe, 2010, p. 8) (see Table 2). At this stage, consumers will evaluate the alternatives offered to them and will have to choose one in the next stage when they make their purchase decision. In the purchase decision stage, consumers stop searching and evaluating information (Cubillo, Sánchez, & Cerviño, 2006) and make their choice among the alternatives. Later, the post-purchase stage is crucial as it can influence consumers’ future purchase patterns as well as those of their peers (Foxall, 2005) (see Table 2).

Many factors influence a consumer’s decision. However, there is one factor that plays an important role in many of the decision making stages. The importance of this factor will be discussed further.

The e-WOM effect in higher education

Social media platforms allow consumers to share content and ideas between each other (Jaffe, 2010) and form online communities. This implies that consumers on social media are more willing to listen to their friends, to trust them, and thus be influenced by them in their purchase decision making process. Even though consumers are responsible for their choices, Word-Of-Mouth (WOM) from other people can influence them (East, Hammond, & Wright, 2007). WOM is person-to-person communication regarding brands, products, services, companies, and organisations that have an impact on consumers’ purchase decisions (Evans, Foxall, & Jamal, 2009). Thus, social influences such as WOM or online WOM can change people’s feelings, actions, opinions or behaviours (Huang, Boh, & Goh, 2011).

The emergence of social media has facilitated the development of WOM online – that is, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which is defined as ‘any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet’ (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). Social media represents an ideal tool for eWOM, as consumers freely create and disseminate brand-related information in their established social networks, which are composed of friends and other acquaintances (Vollmer & Precourt, 2008). As a result, e-WOM becomes part of the consumer decision journey.

Another decision making process that includes the role of digital channels and social media was developed by Court, Elzinga, Mulder, and Vetvik (2009). The model complements the traditional decision making model by recognising the role of digital channels and social media in marketing, as well as the role of e-WOM. The four stages of the consumer decision journey are detailed as: consider; evaluate; buy; and enjoy, advocate, and bond. Compared to the traditional decision making process, ‘rather than systematically narrowing their choices until they had decided what to buy, consumers add and subtract brands from a group under consideration during an extended evaluation stage’ (Hudson & Thal, 2013, p. 156).

Online reviews play an important role during the evaluation stage, as they represent an opportunity for organisations to address negative and positive reviews that might influence the consumer’s buying decision. At
the same time, if the reviews are positive, they ‘represent cost free, compelling advertising’ (Hudson & Thal, 2013, p. 157) for the organisation. Research proved that consumers seem to be influenced more during the evaluation and enjoy-advocate-bond stages (Edelman, 2010). After purchase, as they enjoy the benefits of the product or service that they used, consumers can potentially become part of a ‘loyalty loop’ if they engage in a dialogue with the brand and talk about their experience. It is possible that not every consumer participates in content contribution. However, those who participate may have a strong bond with the brand and could influence another’s perception of it. Social media channels offer important opportunities for organisations to predict the buying decisions of other consumers (Mulhern, 2009) as consumers post reviews, ask questions, and share their experiences through social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and forums.

The use of social media in higher education

From the early 2000s and onwards, students had more information at their fingertips than ever. This change started to pose considerable challenges to higher educational institutions that have been used to doing business ‘according to their conventional rules and pace’ (Bélanger et al., 2014, p. 26). Simultaneously, social media has managed to get the attention of higher education institutions as a tool to connect with students.

Literature on case studies or best practises specific to social media as higher education marketing tools is limited (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011). Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006, p. 10) claim that ‘the literature on higher education marketing is incoherent, even inchoate, and lacks theoretical models that reflect upon the particular context of higher education and the nature of their services’. This happens because the marketing fundamentals do not fully match the needs of higher education institutions, as they are based on consumptive models (Gibbs, 2002). Nonetheless, given the increasing interest of tertiary education institutions in digital education (Harris & Rea, 2009; Parker, 2011), the research in this field is expected to develop quickly (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011).

Researchers claim that the increasing popularity and global reach of social media make it a suitable candidate for institutional branding and recruitment of students (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011). During the last five years, most North American universities and colleges have actively used social media platforms to promote their marketing position (Barnes & Lescault, 2011). During the same period, research indicates that European tertiary institutions only started to introduce social media strategies with the prime objective of increasing their market segment (Asderaki & Maragos, 2012).

The use of social media in universities and colleges is a cost-effective way to reach out to international markets for recruitment opportunities (Choudaha & Kono, 2012). Many benefits are associated with using social media in higher education recruitment, focusing mainly on cost savings, and being able to target recruitment at specific groups of potential applicants (Davison, Maraist, & Bing, 2011). Some of the few researchers who found an important relationship between people who logged onto social networks and the likelihood of applying them in their university search were Hayes, Ruschman, and Walker (2009), who describe in their case study the use of social media by universities as a marketing tool. At the same time, it has been discovered that emotions drive students’ choices of higher education. As a result, universities try to position themselves as student-centred and offering academic excellence (Steele, 2008). Social media is the best way for them to do this due to its benefits.
According to Bélanger et al. (2014), some of the main benefits that social media offers are open communication between students and post-secondary schools, student engagement, and up-to-the-minute updates. Universities utilise social media for marketing purposes and for information dissemination regarding the institution rather than actively engaging with the students (Davis III, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Canche, 2013). Strengthening student-to-student interaction, student engagement and involvement in campus life, and promoting alumni connections are secondary outcomes of using social media (Bélanger et al., 2014). Moreover, Constantinides and Stagno (2012) found that future university students do not rank social media high in a list of information channels that could potentially influence their educational decision making process. This could be due to the low engagement of such tools by universities as direct marketing tools.

As mentioned before, there was no research made on future university postgraduate students and their uses of social media, including the impact social media has on their study decision making process. A key theme of this research is social media usage in postgraduate students’ decision making process where gaps have been identified. These gaps indicate room for improvement in the field of social media recruitment for higher education and will be addressed next.

Method

In-depth interviews

Due to a lack of existing research, this research adopted an exploratory approach – the qualitative research technique of in-depth interviews. This method allows researchers to have a deeper understanding of the research area by taking into account the perspective of the study population and the context in which they live. In addition, a qualitative research method is the most suitable to answer the questions of ‘what’ and ‘how’ that were included in the research objectives of the study (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011).

This study comprised 12 individual depth interviews with current postgraduate international students at the University of the Sunshine Coast. Respondents were recruited using a snowball sampling technique – the identification of an initial subject who provided the names of the other actors (Atkinson & Flint, 2004). In-depth interviews were suitable for the exploratory research as they provided detailed information about participants’ thoughts and behaviours, a more relaxed atmosphere in which to collect information, and much more detailed information than what is available through other data collection methods, such as surveys (Boyce & Neale, 2006). The interviews were conducted with a number of respondents for each of three countries/areas of the target markets (Scandinavia, Germany and France). The student interviewees included four Scandinavians (two Danes, one Norwegian, one Swede), four Germans, and four French. The interviews lasted about 20 – 30 minutes.

The exploratory interview stage of this study addressed the research objectives outlined in the paper. In order to promote discussion, an interview guide, rather than a structured questionnaire, was utilised. This guide consisted of a series of key questions, with prompts, to help probe further during the interview and covered two main topics that covered the research objectives – the use of social media in students’ daily life and the use of social media as part of their educational decision making process. This approach provided the flexibility to explore issues with the students being interviewed, but it also ensured key topics were covered.

The interviews were audio recorded and complemented with field notes by the interviewer. Tape recording provides an accurate record of what was said and it allows the interviewer to concentrate on listening rather than
only taking notes (Gillham, 2000). Tape recording also enabled direct quotes to be used in the subsequent writing up of the research.

Analysis

Profile of respondents

Overall, there were more female participants than male (58% females versus 42% males), with seven females and five males, as shown in Table 3. Respondents’ age ranged from 20 – 26 years, and the youngest participants came from France. The reason behind this is that the average age of entry into tertiary-type A (academic) programmes in France is comparatively young (19.7 years), whereas in Germany and Denmark the average age is 22 and 24 respectively (Education GPS, 2012).

All participants were enrolled in three main areas of postgraduate business study: international business, management and business administration. Table 3 summarises the main demographics of each participant. As can be seen in the table, respondents are coded based on the country of origin and gender (e.g. Sm1: Scandinavian male 1, Ff2: French female 2, Gm2: German male 2).

(Insert Table 3 here)

All the participants used various types of social media in their daily life, with Scandinavians being the ones who use social media extensively, followed by French and Germans (see Table 3).

Given the research purpose of exploring how and why potential postgraduate business students use social media in their educational decision making process, the subsequent analysis will explore patterns within and between these three subgroups of respondents. A wealth of data was generated by the exploratory study, but three key areas emerged as the most important findings. The three findings are outlined below and provide answers to the research objectives of the paper.

Social networks used in postgraduate study search

Respondents were asked about the social media networks they used before applying for postgraduate education, as seen within Table 4. A very strong majority of respondents reported that they mostly used Facebook, YouTube and blogs in their postgraduate study search. Approximately 91% of all the respondents used Facebook and YouTube (11 out of 12), while only 25% used blogs in their study search (3 out of 12). Interestingly, only 1 out of 12 students used other social media including LinkedIn, Instagram and Twitter.

(Insert Table 4 here)

This finding suggests that Facebook and YouTube have a strong degree of use when it comes to considering postgraduate study. The finding also validates and extends the findings of Constantinides and Stagno, who identified that the ‘most popular social networking sites among students are the video content community YouTube and the social networking site Facebook’ (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011, p. 17). There were no major
differences and patterns identified in terms of age and gender. However, it was interesting to see that only one 24-year-old German female student, who is ready to start her career life, was interested in looking for information on a professional social network (LinkedIn), because it is more professional and job-oriented, explaining:

The quality of education is not promoted enough through social media. You can find everything else on Facebook but not stuff about the quality of the studies and possibilities of jobs afterwards. I searched on LinkedIn because I wanted to see something more professional (Gf1).

Job perspectives are also supported by other sources. Literature about specific professional social networks is limited. However, in terms of social networks usage, researchers have identified significant correlations between professional social networks and age. Professional social networks like LinkedIn are mostly used by adults who are looking for networking opportunities, searching for volunteer opportunities or looking for future employers and jobs (Tham, 2011).

Compared to the other Scandinavians, one Scandinavian female student did not use YouTube in her search for study opportunities, as she preferred direct interaction with previous students. However, she used Facebook and Instagram:

I didn’t use social media directly. I was mostly talking to former students that were studying here to hear their opinions and get advice (Sf1).

Blogs have an important influence on an individual’s decision-making process, as they allow everyone to publish and to join multithreaded conversations online, where the audience has access to the entire Web (Weber, 2009). Moreover, blogs play an important role in a consumer’s decision-making process as they allow the distribution of information, personal opinions and influences among their members (Kempe, Kleinberg, & Tardos, 2003):

When you don't know where to study, you can use websites and blogs or ask your friends if they have done something similar (Gf2).

Therefore, consumers’ (students’) behaviour can change once consumers interact with one another (Heinrichs, Lim, & Lim, 2011).

In terms of the country of origin of students, the interviews’ results showed differences regarding the use of social media. When looking for postgraduate opportunities, French students were the ones using social media most, followed by Germans and Scandinavians. All French students used Facebook and YouTube in their study search, with two of them following blogs as well as these two social networks. Comparatively, only one German followed blogs, and Scandinavian students only used Facebook and YouTube in their search with Scandinavians using more Facebook than YouTube. This finding is statistically supported by eMarketer (2013) where France has been identified as the most active country of the three areas of origin (in our target audience) in terms of blogging. Blogs are one of the top social network sites among internet users in France and Germany, while Scandinavia focuses more on social and professional networks like Facebook and LinkedIn. Among the French and German students, one of the main reasons for following other students’ blogs was the authenticity of the information:
Blogs provide some truth; I don't think people lie about what they express in writing when they post their feelings about something they don't like for example. These people are like you, if they are pissed they say it; they don't try to sell you something (Ff3).

The value of truth was an issue, I am quite critical. I don't believe everything that is mentioned on social media like Facebook (Gm1).

Students’ reasons for using social media

The survey participants were asked about the type of information they were looking for on social media when they were interested in postgraduate study opportunities. Table 5 shows the answers by ranking their reasons for using social media in descending order of frequency.

Of the 10 themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews, by far the most commonly selected reason for social media usage was finding out information about student life (8 out of 12 students). This was the leading reason across almost every age and gender group:

It was really helpful to use social media to see how USC’s student life really is (Ff2).

Other top uses included – reviews from former students (6 out of 12), followed by course offers (4 out of 12), study duration, and events and activities (3 out of 12 respectively).

Based on the sample, there was a noticeable difference between the three countries in terms of the type of information students looked for when using social media. German students were the most thorough when it came to finding out information about their future postgraduate study. As can be seen in Table 5, they looked at both student life and professionally related information. Two of the German students (G1m, G1f) looked at five different criteria, covering a broad spectrum – student life, reviews from former students, course offers, study duration, and job opportunities. The participants reported that their substantial use of social media was motivated by easy access to relevant information:

It was easy to get insights of former students, easy access to the university from Germany. I didn't have to travel to get the information I needed (Gm1).

Comparatively, Scandinavians were mostly looking at information about the student life and events. Interestingly, one of them talked about freedom of tailoring his education, with possibilities of choosing the exact courses he wanted:

Compared to my country, I enjoyed the possibility to tailor my education in terms of choosing my favourite electives. The university offered a great variety of classes to choose from (S2m).

This finding is supported by Telhaug, Mediås, & Aasen (2006, p. 143) who claim that for many years, ‘Scandinavians…wanted more individual freedom in the schools, in the sense of more freedom of choice’ as they consider freedom of choice an important element of the decision making process. French students looked for
general information about students’ lifestyle in Australia as well as information about the university environment and activities.

As expected, job opportunities became more important among older respondents (Germany), who appear more focused on social media usage for seeking information about professional development after their study. This also corresponds with our findings on the types of network students used in their postgraduate student search, and it could mean that older respondents are more likely to be regular users of professionally oriented networks like LinkedIn (Gf1), while younger respondents report higher use of entertainment-based networks like YouTube (Ff2, Ff3).

(Insert Table 5 here)

**Social media’s influence on students’ decision making process**

By asking respondents when social media was most useful in their educational decisions, and how they used it, we identified how social media was used at each stage of the decision making process.

As presented in Table 6 below, the stages where social media was most useful in the decision making process were information search (11/12 students) and evaluation of alternatives (6/12 students). The finding validates Lempert’s and Vollmer and Precourt’s findings who argue that consumers are turning more frequently to numerous types of social media to conduct their information searches and evaluation of alternatives (Lempert, 2006; Vollmer & Precourt, 2008).

I used social media to search for information about the university, see pictures and evaluate my alternatives. I was interested to see what people say, for example if it was a good university (F1f).

(Insert Table 6 here)

As can be seen in Table 6, social media was mostly used in the Scandinavians’ educational decision making process, sometimes influencing them at three out of five stages of the process (e.g. Sf2). Of the three areas of origin, Germans were the second most frequent respondents that used social media (three respondents reporting its use in two out of five stages of the decision making process), followed by French students (two respondents reporting its use in two out of five stages of the decision making process). On average, French students preferred an initial talk with previous students or acquaintances about their studies before using social media:

I prefer talking to people and asking them about the information I need, to be honest (Ff3).

**Problem recognition**

Of the five decision making stages, social media did not impact at all the problem/need recognition of the participants. By looking at the gathered data from the in-depth interviews, there were no participants who used social media in the need recognition stage. Some of the participants mentioned that the reasons behind not using social media at this stage were the fact that word-of-mouth (talks with friends/acquaintances) had a bigger impact on their decisions and made them think about study opportunities:
Information search
As mentioned before, social media was most used by students in the information search stage as it allowed them to follow what the university offers (facilities), information about student life (events, pictures) and experiences of former students (testimonials):

I wanted to see the university environment; read about courses. It was really helpful to use social media to see how the university really is (Ff2).

A majority of respondents (11 out of 12) indicated that information searching was easy through social media. This finding validates the conclusions of Solis and Breakenridge (2009), who argue that social media has created a new landscape in supporting the socialisation of information.

Evaluation of alternatives
The second stage where social media was most useful in the students’ decision making process was the evaluation of alternatives stage. With social media’s help, postgraduate students compared and evaluated all the master programs they considered. By using social media (reading blogs, following previous students testimonials), students considered which alternative would be the best to fulfil their need. The two main criteria that influenced their decision making process at this stage were the length of the postgraduate program and the location of the university:

I love the environment I saw on social media – the university is beautiful with kangaroos (F1f).

The program structure appealed to me. In Germany it is not possible to do a full master degree within one year; it takes at least 2 years to complete a master's degree (Gm1).

At the same time, online reviews from former students had a great impact during this stage:

Based on what I talked to my colleague, our talk on Facebook affected me in a high degree (Sf1).

This finding is in line with Brown and Hayes (2008) who said that ‘messages delivered by trusted friends who tell about their own experience are highly influent’.

Purchase decision
As can be seen in Table 6, social media was not extensively used during the students’ purchase decision (3 out of 12 students). For some, it came as the next natural step after evaluating alternatives. For others, it did not have a great impact since they only used social media to gather information or evaluate alternatives. Social media was just a small part of their purchase decision mainly because it was not fully objective and personal:
I mostly used the website to be honest, because I think social media is more about feelings, sharing them (F1f). Human contact is much more important in your decision making process. I will never take a decision about a study just based on social media (F3).

Thus, it can be argued that students’ purchasing decisions were mostly influenced by social factors (e.g. talking to a friend) and word-of-mouth, but not so much by social media.

**Post-purchase decision**

Out of all the interviewed participants, only one of them mentioned that social media could be more useful in the post-purchase stage, as it allows her to share her good or bad experiences with future students:

If you know you want to study somewhere and you don’t know where to study, you can use social media to ask friends if they have done something similar. I didn’t use it but if new students contact me now I will help them (Gf2).

This finding validates the finding of Jaffe (2010, p. 8), who argues that ‘consumers today use social media to talk about their own good or bad experiences and thus share feedback and opinions with peers’. The reviewed literature is inconsistent with this study finding which shows that in their post-purchase decision, postgraduate students are inactive in sharing their word-of-mouth to others with the available social media platforms.

**Discussion and conclusions: Practical implications and issues for further research**

The study provides some helpful practical insight into several issues central to the current discussion of how and why potential postgraduate business students use social media in their educational decision making process.

First, it identifies the social media networks used by postgraduate students when they are considering undertaking postgraduate study. The study is consistent with the existent literature where Facebook and YouTube are identified as the most used social networks by students (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011). An important finding of the study is the fact that besides Facebook and YouTube, postgraduate students are using blogs in their study search. The finding is supported by Conole, De Laat, Dillon, and Darby (2008), who identified that students are starting to use blogs as an ‘information source’ or ‘expert filter’. Another significant finding of the study relates to students’ use of LinkedIn. This could mean that as students get older and closer to starting a career, their motivation for using professional social networks increases. The finding is supported by Stollak, Vandenberg, Burkland, and Weiss (2011, p. 864), who argue that ‘tools such as …LinkedIn have more relevance to older students as they try to connect with others in their job search or find work. Similarly, perhaps younger students use Facebook longer as they are building their social connections’. There is a difference between the way students use social media in their daily life and social media usage for postgraduate search. Students are using on average two times as many social networks on a daily basis (see Table 3) than using social networks when looking for postgraduate opportunities (see Table 4). One possible explanation for the low usage of social media in students’ postgraduate search could be the lack of relevant content. This could be due to the low engagement with these
tools by universities or the fact that some universities limit their attention to social networks like Facebook and YouTube.

Second, the study highlights the type of information that students look for when using social media in their postgraduate search. The two most commonly selected reasons for social media usage were finding out information about student life and reading reviews from former students. Study results indicate differences between respondents regarding the information they expect to see on social media. Postgraduate students expect a wide variety of information which is both educational and professional, but also involves lifestyles. One of the unanticipated findings was that postgraduate students expected to find on social media not only information about student life and university events, but also information about course offers, tuition fees, and job opportunities after graduating.

Third, the study identifies how social media is used by postgraduate students at each stage of their decision making process. Of the five decision making stages, social media was mostly used in the information search and evaluation of alternatives. The low usage of social media in the post-purchase stage could possibly restrict the amount of user-generated content coming from current students. This content could be useful for future postgraduate students who are interested in finding out more about course offers, job opportunities etc.; information that they miss reading about when they look for postgraduate opportunities on social media. One possible explanation for the low usage of social media in the post-purchase stage could be that many of the students did not feel encouraged to voice their feedback and impression about the university and pass along their comments to future students via social media.

The fourth study objective was included throughout all the other three objectives. The differences between the above objectives based on country of origin of students were included in the analysis section. Regarding the limitations of the study, it should be highlighted that the sample was composed to represent a reliable picture of international students coming from three different geographical areas to study in an Australian university. Therefore, this research does not generalise the results to other countries with different cultures and different social media platforms.

This exploratory study provides some interesting insights into the decision making process of potential international postgraduate students and provides a basis for developing further research initiatives. One interesting issue for further research relates to social media’s usage as a recruitment tool for postgraduate education. Considering that there are social media platforms specially qualified for recruiting/screening students (LinkedIn, Xing), it is legitimate to assume that the development of social media in an educational setting could take universities’ marketing strategies a step further in the future. Since literature about specific professional networks is limited, a possible research topic based on social media could cover the relationship between postgraduate students and their preference toward professional social networking sites, such as LinkedIn.

Another issue requiring further investigation could take into consideration the composition of the sample. Specifically, the sample should be expanded to other regional areas, countries and cultures (e.g. China or India) where the social media landscape is different. This type of design would not only help improve the validity of the research, but it could also help highlight regional differences in the way students use social media in their study decision making process. Additionally, researchers could investigate the impact of electronic word-of-mouth through social media on the students’ university decision making process.
The study provides some interesting managerial implications for higher educational institutions. The findings of the study can be a good information source for education marketers who need to engage themselves more actively with social media. Even though social media was thought to be less frequently used for academic purposes (Hrastinski & Aghaee, 2012), this study shows that postgraduate students use it to research study opportunities and expect to find multiple types of information on social media (e.g. from future job opportunities to student lifestyle). Therefore, it would be beneficial for higher educational institutions to include all this information in an interactive way. Interactive channels like Facebook, Skype and instant messaging could be used as platforms for prospective students and universities to communicate effectively in real time.

Other ways that universities could use social media to influence students’ decision making process could be by exploring the benefits of using professional social networks, for instance LinkedIn, as a social media recruitment tool in the future. Since this study revealed that in their post-purchase decision making stage students do not use social media extensively to generate word-of-mouth, universities should carry out certain actions in order to provoke conversations between students. The implementation of an online alumni community could be a good meeting point for past and future students where they could share experiences and provide recommendations.

This study presented preliminary research on postgraduate students regarding social media usage in their educational decision making process. The major contribution of this study is to highlight the motivations and reasons behind students’ use of social media in their study search. This knowledge is key to formulating effective online marketing and recruitment strategies for higher educational institutions that want to attract international students. The study is expected to provide a basis for further research in the fields of educational marketing and social media marketing.

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Word Count: 7,040 words

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Barnes, N. G., & Lescault, A. M. (2011). Social media adoption soars as higher-education experiments and re evaluates its use of new communication tools. Prepared for Center for Marketing Research, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, North Dartmouth.


Table 1. Defining social media sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Media Sites</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>A social networking site that connects people with friends and others who work, study and live around them. Facebook is used to keep in touch with friends, post photos, share links and exchange information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>A popular free video-sharing website that lets registered users upload and share video clips online.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>A free social messaging tool that lets people stay connected through brief text message updates up to 140 characters in length.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>An online photo sharing social Web service that lets you share your life with friends through a pictures captured with a mobile device. Instagram also supports video uploads and lets users of the service instantly share photos on several social sites, including Flickr, Facebook, Tumblr and Twitter or specify a location with any photo to check in on Foursquare.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinterest</td>
<td>A social networking site that lets people share images and videos from their own personal collection or from websites they visit. You can follow boards and be notified when it is updated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google+</td>
<td>The Google+ service delivers functionality and many features similar to those of Facebook with features including ‘Posts’ for status updates, ‘Circles’ for sharing information with different groups of people, ‘Sparks’ for offering videos and articles users might like, and ‘Hangouts’ and ‘Huddles’ for video chatting with a friend or group of friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snapchat</td>
<td>A mobile app that allows users to send and receive ‘self-destructing’ photos and videos. Photos and videos taken with the app are called ‘Snaps’. The sender determines how many seconds (1-10) the recipient can view the Snap before the file disappears from the recipient's device.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>A computer program that can be used to make free voice calls over the Internet to anyone else who is also using Skype.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
<td>A social networking site designed specifically for the business community. The goal of the site is to allow registered members to establish and document networks of people they know and trust professionally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xing</td>
<td>A European social networking website for business professionals similar to LinkedIn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foursquare</td>
<td>Foursquare is a search and discovery mobile app which provides a personalised local search experience. By taking into account the places a user goes, the things they have told the app they like, and the other users whose advice they trust, Foursquare personalises recommendations of the best places to go around a user's current location.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>Short for ‘Web log’, a blog is a Web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual. Typically updated daily, blogs often reflect the personality of the author.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (www.webopedia.com) & (www.whatis.techtarget.com)
Table 2. The decision making process journey on social media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage of process</th>
<th>Impact of social media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem recognition</td>
<td>Needs can be triggered through advertisements displayed on a Facebook page or through the ‘Like’ button, which is a powerful tool to make consumers recognise a need (Zhao, Grasmuck, &amp; Martin, 2008). If students see advertisements popping up on their social media accounts, their study needs might be triggered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information search</td>
<td>External search is very important – it includes word-of-mouth and online social networking (Castronovo &amp; Huang, 2012). Internal search involves the consumers’ memory about the products/services that they used. This means that students that are seeking information about universities can use social media platforms or ask for information from their ‘friends’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of alternatives</td>
<td>Blogs and forums appear as a good place to get valuable information, as they allow discussion with current students that can offer ‘unbiased advice’ (Parker, 2011, p. 273) to the ones that compare alternatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase decision</td>
<td>Students make their choice among the alternatives (e.g. which education to choose).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Table 3. Profile of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>General social media usage in students’ daily life</th>
<th>No. of SM/user</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sm1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest, Google+, Snapchat, Skype, Twitter</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sm2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram, Flickr, Google+, Snapchat, Skype, Twitter</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sf1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Blogs, YouTube, LinkedIn, Google+, Skype</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sf2</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, Skype, Blogs, LinkedIn, Google+</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gm1</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Facebook, Xing, YouTube, Google+, Skype, Blogs</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gm2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, Google+, Xing, Foursquare</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gf1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Facebook, Xing, YouTube, Google+, LinkedIn</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gf2</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Facebook, Blogs, Xing, Skype, YouTube</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ff1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Facebook, Blogs, Instagram, LinkedIn, Google+, YouTube</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ff2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, YouTube</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ff3</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, Instagram, YouTube, Google+, Snapchat, Path</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fm1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, Snapchat</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4. Most common social media platform used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Scandinavia</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sm1</td>
<td>Sm2</td>
<td>Sf1</td>
<td>Sf2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total of SM</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

networks/user
Table 5. Type of information students look for when using social media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Scandinavia</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sm1</td>
<td>Sm2</td>
<td>Sf1</td>
<td>Sf2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student life (pictures, videos, accommodation)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviews from former students</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course offers</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study duration</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events and activities</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University information and news</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job opportunities</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University facilities</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuition fees</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom of tailoring the education</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total of reasons/student</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6. Social media usage in the decision making process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Sm1</th>
<th>Sm2</th>
<th>Sf1</th>
<th>Sf2</th>
<th>Gm1</th>
<th>Gm2</th>
<th>Gf1</th>
<th>Gf2</th>
<th>Ff1</th>
<th>Ff2</th>
<th>Ff3</th>
<th>Fm1</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem recognition</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information search</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of alternatives</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase decision</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-purchase decision</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total of stages</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>