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Relationship quality in higher education marketing: the role of social media engagement

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ABSTRACT

The landscape in consumer marketing is changing due to the rise in popularity of social media. This shift has also affected how higher education institutions build relationships with their stakeholders. This study explores how social media engagement impacts relationship quality between the university and one of its key stakeholder groups, students. Data were collected via an online survey and analyzed using the Mann–Whitney U test, regression and the Kruskal–Wallis test. Results indicated a positive association between students following a university via social media and the perception of having a high-quality relationship with their university, and that following a university on multiple social media sites leads to an even higher perception of relationship quality. The results provide important and timely implications for both universities and higher education marketers. Our findings suggest that higher education marketers should invest resources in social media communications to form high-quality relationships with their stakeholders.

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Social media; relationship quality; social exchange theory; commitment; trust

Introduction

Higher education is not just about educating and developing students, although those activities are certainly a vitally important part of the market. There are other important activities such as engaging current students, faculty and staff, and connecting with alumni, community members and trustees. In recent years universities have been turning more frequently to social media outlets to build and maintain high-quality relationships with these stakeholders (Smedescu, 2014). For instance, in a study investigating social media usage among the top 100 institutions listed in the U.S. News, 2010–2011 Best Colleges: National Rankings, 92% of the colleges reported using social media in conjunction with their official websites as a way of connecting with their various stakeholders (Greenwood, 2012). In another study, which surveyed marketing teams across 69 UK universities, 98% of the respondents said they were investing in social media as part of their marketing strategy (Shaw, 2014).

Social media has been particularly important when contemplating how to connect with students, given the high level of familiarity and usage among this age group.

According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, social media usage has increased nationally by almost 1000% in 8 years for individuals between the ages of 18 and 29 (Griffin, 2015). In 2015, it was estimated that over 90% of students use social media, up from just 12% only ten years ago (Perrin, 2015). Sutter (2016) reported that in 'North America, 77% of internet users are active on social media, up 6% from January 2015' (p. 1). In March 2016, Facebook reported an average of more than one billion active daily users, an increase from just one million users in 2004 (Zuckerberg, 2016). According to Duggan, Elison, Lampe, Lenhart, and Madden (2015), 74% of college students are now using Facebook, compared to 68% from the year prior.

Not only are young adults using social networking sites, but they are also engaging on them at very high frequencies. The average user spends nearly 1.72 hours per day on social media platforms, which equates to almost 30% of total time spent online (Bennett, 2015). The results of two studies by Ipsos Open Thinking Exchange (2013) and Walsh, Fielder, Carey, and Carey (2013) found that American youths spend substantially more time on social media than the average user, with young people spending 3.8 hours a day on social networking and female first-year college students spending an average of nearly 12 hours a day on social media. In a more recent report, it was found that teens now spend upwards of 9 hours a day on social media (Wallace, 2015). In addition, in an annual nationwide survey of college students by UCLA, it was found that '27.2 percent of students spent more than six hours on social media a week in 2014, up from 19.9 percent in 2007' (Griffin, 2015, p. 1).

With social media rising in popularity and frequency across university campuses and among college students in particular, it is becoming more pertinent to understand the kinds of impacts universities are having with their social media efforts. As Kinsky, Freberg, Kim, Kushin, and Ward (2016) noted, the 'penetration of social media into seemingly all facets of life' has contributed to 'a growing scholarly interest in exploring how college students use social media' as well as to the 'perceptions of students who use social media in higher education' (p. 3). Existing research on social media in higher education has focused on the way in which these platforms contribute to a university's recruitment efforts and brand awareness (Smedescu, 2014). Others have explored the effectiveness of social media as a pedagogical tool (Kinsky et al., 2016; Subramani, 2015). In our study we take yet another approach to the study of social media in higher education by investigating the interplay between social media usage and perceptions of relationship quality among college students. Specifically, we seek to determine whether students' engagement with universities' social media sites, captured via their 'following' behavior, correlates positively with relationship quality. We also explore whether higher levels of social media engagement, in the form of 'following' multiple social networking sites, have an even greater positive impact on relationship quality. Understanding the factors that positively impact relationship quality is critical for the success of higher education marketers. Indeed, as de Macedo Bergamo, Giuliani, Camargo, Zambaldi, and Ponchio (2012) argued, 'relationship marketing is critical to create and maintain a relationship between institutions and students, such relationship being developed towards customer retention and loyalty' (p. 26).

Theoretical development

Our theoretical development is divided into several sections. First, we discuss the important marketing concept of relationship quality in the context of social exchange theory (SET). We then outline three key components of relationship quality: relationship satisfaction, trust and commitment. From there we establish a connection between relationship quality and social media within the context of higher education, which leads into our hypotheses pertaining to students' social media following behavior, multi-platform usage and perceptions of relationship quality.

Relationship quality and SET

In order for universities to remain viable in the long term, it has become imperative for these institutions to form and maintain positive relationships with their stakeholders, specifically students. To help facilitate this relationship building and maintenance process, higher education marketers have begun to focus their attention on the concept of relationship quality. *Relationship quality* is defined as the overall evaluation of the strength of a given relationship (Crosby, Cowles, & Evans, 1990; de Macedo Bergamo et al., 2012; Verma, Sharma, & Sheth, 2016). The importance of relationship quality is well established in the marketing literature (Athanasopoulou, 2009). In fact, relationship quality is said to be the most influential mediator in relationship marketing (RM) research (Jap, Manolis, & Weitz, 1999; Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006).

Relationship quality is founded on the commitment-trust theory of RM (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and incorporates SET and organizational behavior concepts (Palmatier, 2008). According to Homans (1958), a social exchange is a voluntary exchange of resources between two or more actors. A social exchange relationship rests on the norm of reciprocity (Bagozzi, 1995), 'which posits that, if one exchange partner does something beneficial for another, an obligation is generated to reciprocate good faith behavior' (Omar, Zainal, Omar, & Khairudin, 2009, p. 199). This reciprocation can involve tangible resources, such as the exchange of money, or can be socio-emotional in nature, such as the exchange of respect, trust, commitment or loyalty (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003). Exchanges can also exist among human (e.g. students) and non-human entities (e.g. universities and their social media sites) (Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997).

In his research on SET, Lévi-Strauss (1969) classified social exchange relationships into two broad categories. The first is restricted exchanges, which are direct exchanges between two actors. For example, an actor (e.g. a university) gives resources (e.g. timely information) to a second actor (e.g. a student), who then 'returns the favor' by giving resources (e.g. trust or commitment) back to the original actor. The second type is generalized exchanges, which involves indirect reciprocity between three or more actors. In this scenario an actor (e.g. a university) provides resources to a second actor (e.g. a student) who then reciprocates this 'good faith' behavior by extending resources to a third actor (e.g. another student). Through the direct and indirect exchanging of resources, relationship quality is believed to be enhanced for the various parties involved (Hoppner, Griffith, & White, 2015).

Prior research has revealed various factors that lead to positive social exchange relationships. For example, in a work setting reciprocated social exchanges, in the form of

organizational citizenship behaviors and commitment, have been found to develop among employees when managers are supportive or benevolent toward their employees and/or when they exhibit transformational leadership behaviors ([Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005](#); [Lapierre, 2007](#); [Yun, Pearce, & Sims, 2000](#)).

Research in RM has also revealed important antecedents to these exchanges. For instance, [Morgan and Hunt \(1994\)](#) found that high-quality relationships, such as those that involve reciprocated exchanges, are built upon relationship satisfaction, trust and commitment ([De Wulf, Oderkerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001](#); [Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002](#)). Other important precursors of relationship quality are communication, shared values, relationship benefits, relationship termination costs and opportunistic behavior ([Morgan & Hunt, 1994](#)). However, these factors are believed to impact relationship quality to a lesser extent. Therefore, the focus of our study is on the first set of factors, namely relationship satisfaction, trust and commitment. In the following sections we discuss these concepts in greater detail.

Relationship satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction is defined as a 'customer's affective or emotional state toward a relationship, typically evaluated cumulatively over the history of the exchange' ([Palmatier et al., 2006](#), p. 138). Satisfaction is important for relationship quality because it can increase cooperation between relationship partners, which enhances the strength and quality of the relationship. Although relationship satisfaction has not been studied extensively for its effects in higher education, there is evidence in the sociology literature that relationship satisfaction increases more for those who received active support for self-expansion ([Fivecoat, Tomlinson, Aron, & Caprariello, 2015](#)). This concept can be applied to the higher education setting as well. Since a core competency of any university is expanding students' minds to knowledge; it makes sense that students actively involved in a relationship with their university would find more relationship satisfaction with their university. Indeed, as [McCullough and Gremler \(1999\)](#) argued in their study of guarantees in services and education, 'treating students as customers, education as a service product, and applying the lessons of service marketing' (p. 129) to the higher education context are all critical factors in achieving student satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction has also been found to lead to fewer relationship terminations ([Ganesan, 1994](#)). In higher education, fewer terminations results in increased student retention; therefore, relationship satisfaction is an important component of an overall strategy for building high-quality relationships with students.

Trust

Within the marketing literature it has generally been agreed upon that trust is an essential ingredient for successful long-term relationships ([Berry, 1995](#); [Garbarino & Johnson, 1999](#); [Morgan & Hunt, 1994](#)). According to [Morgan and Hunt \(1994\)](#), *trust* is 'confidence in the exchange partner's reliability and integrity' (p. 23). Trust is also known to be associated with a number of other positive qualities such as consistency, competence, honesty, fairness, responsibility, helpfulness and benevolence ([Altman & Taylor, 1973](#); [Dwyer & LaGace, 1986](#); [Larzelere & Huston, 1980](#); [Rotter, 1971](#)). When individuals or organizations (e.g. universities) uphold these qualities, they are more likely to be perceived as a trustworthy party. This, in turn, will lead to the development of stronger interpersonal bonds, an

increased likelihood of reciprocated ‘good faith’ behavior and, ultimately, a greater likelihood of forming high-quality relationships (Achrol, 1991). In the higher education literature, it has been found that communication directly from universities via social networks is considered to be trustworthy by entering students (Gibbs & Dean, 2015).

Commitment

Not only does trust contribute to relationship quality directly, it also has an indirect effect on relationship quality via relationship commitment (Achrol, 1991). *Relationship commitment* refers to an individual or organization’s continued desire to maintain a valued exchange relationship (Park, Lee, Lee, & Truex, 2012; Verma et al., 2016). Relationship commitment arises when an exchange partner believes that an ongoing relationship is so important that it warrants maximum efforts or investments to maintain it (Hoppner et al., 2015). Trust is believed to influence relationship commitment because ‘relationships characterized by trust are so highly valued that parties will desire to commit themselves to such relationships’ (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 24). In other words, ‘the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely’ (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 23). One way in which relationships endure over time is through parties engaging in reciprocated behavior either in the form of direct or indirect exchanges of resources (Lévi-Strauss, 1969). Indeed, as Hoppner et al. (2015) argued, reciprocity ‘functions to satisfy, solidify, and reinforce a partner’s commitment to the exchange relationship’ and ‘creates the basis for high-quality relationships’ (pp. 65–66). However, it is important to note that not all social exchanges will necessarily lead to trusting, committed relationships. For a relationship to foster this type of commitment, it must be perceived to be of importance and/or of value to the exchange partner. That is, the resources that are exchanged must offer some sort of noticeable benefit to the exchange partner to warrant reciprocation.

While limited in number, there have been a few studies that have investigated relationship commitment and trust within the higher education context. For example, in Holdford and White (1997), student commitment to their institution was determined by perceived benefits of attending the school, perceived similarity between the school and the students, trust between the faculty and the students and the quality of communication between the students and institution. Likewise, in the study by Hennig-Thurau, Langer, and Hansen (2001), it was discovered that students with a stronger emotional commitment and trust toward their educational institution tended to experience higher quality relationships.

Social media and relationship quality

Social media marketing ties into relationship quality because the best social media strategies are those that focus on building trust and on communicating a clear and relevant customer benefit (Barwise & Meehan, 2010). A company’s social media investment has also been shown to lead to higher quality relationships with its stakeholders (Clark & Melancon, 2013). Indeed, as Sashi (2012) argued, ‘the interactivity of social media greatly facilitates the process of establishing enduring intimate relationships with trust and commitment’ (p. 260) between organizations and their customers. Verma et al. (2016) and Jung, Ineson, and Green (2013) similarly pointed to the importance of social media

in fostering high-quality relationships, arguing that online social networks could provide new RM opportunities and add value to the organization.

In a higher education context, social media provides universities with a medium for fostering high-quality relationships with their students. Students are connecting with their university's social media sites as a way to get informed on the latest news, and because they 'want a quick response when they have questions, which helps them save time and enables communication' (Smedescu, 2014, p. 77). As Park et al. (2012) noted, meaningful interactive communication contributes to psychological and attitudinal changes in the parties involved, which includes the development of relationship commitment. Since social networking sites enable more frequent, faster and richer interactions (Sashi, 2012), universities are able to establish high-quality relationships with their students by communicating quick, meaningful and interactive information to their students via social media (Barwise & Meehan, 2010).

Social media has also been found to positively contribute to relationship quality by helping users gain a sense of belonging to a particular community (Stageman, 2011). This occurs when social media sites provide opportunities for engagement, collaboration and other exchanges with other site users as well as with the institution itself (Barwise & Meehan, 2010). One of the most common forms of engagement in social media stems from becoming a site 'follower.' Although there are many ways in which students can engage with universities via social networking sites such as commenting, sharing photos or videos, reposting content, liking posts, etc., this study will consider following (i.e. liking the Facebook page, becoming a follower on Twitter or Instagram, etc.) as the primary method of engagement.

By following a social media site, users are given more direct and, thus, quicker and more frequent, access to the information and other benefits the institution has to offer. Since site followers, as opposed to casual users, are more likely to be exposed to the benefits that come from an institution's social media site, we argue that these users will feel a greater sense of obligation and commitment to engage in reciprocated exchanges. This, in turn, will lead to higher quality relationships between the student and his/her university. Such an argument is premised on the earlier discussion of SET and the norm of reciprocity (Blau, 1964; Omar et al., 2009), which dictates 'that an action performed by one party [e.g. a university posting timely and relevant information on its social media site] requires a compensating movement by the other party [e.g. a student's exchanging of commitment and trust to the university]' (Hoppner et al., 2015, p. 65). Such reciprocating behaviors reinforce the bonds between exchange partners (e.g. between the university and its students), which, as noted earlier, creates the basis for high-quality relationships (2015). There have been a number of studies from the marketing literature that have indeed found such an effect to take place (e.g. Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Griffith, Harvey, & Lusch, 2006; Jap & Ganesan, 2000; Leonidou & Kaleka, 1998).

Research on social media in higher education has also established connections between social media and two key components of relationship quality, satisfaction and trust. For example, Mostafa (2015) found that

when the student perceives the academic engagement via social media to be of emotional value, he or she becomes satisfied. In other words, students perceived being academically engaged via social media to be a source of enjoyment and gladness in undertaking their studies, which in turn enhanced his or her satisfaction. (p. 1)

Likewise in Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009) it was revealed that students' use of social media, specifically Facebook, positively contributed to their satisfaction and social trust. Based on these arguments we hypothesize that increased social media engagement, as captured in a student's 'follower' behavior, will lead to a higher quality relationship with his/her university.

H1: Following the university on social media is positively related to students' perception of relationship quality with their university.

Another way in which students can engage with their institutions is by following multiple social media sites, a behavior that is becoming more and more common in recent years. According to the Pew Research Center (2014), multi-platform use is on the rise: 52% of online adults now use two or more social media sites, a significant increase from 2013, when it stood at 42% of internet users. Young adults, in particular, have been found to be more likely to use multiple social media platforms (Media in the Middle East, 2016).

To better accommodate the needs and wants of their students, institutions have resorted to offering a variety of social media platforms. For instance, Greenwood (2012) investigated the top 100 institutions and reported an average of 3.7 social media sites with 1 college having as many as 7 social media sites. The most frequent social media sites at these institutions were Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, LinkedIn and Foursquare (2012). With respect to our study, we argue that when students are more engaged in their institutions' social media sites (as demonstrated by 'following' multiple sites), they will have more frequent access to valuable resources. According to SET, having more access to resources will lead to an increased obligation in these individuals to reciprocate these benefits to the university and to others (e.g. other students). As discussed earlier, these reciprocating behaviors are expected to lead to greater levels of trust, commitment and satisfaction among these individuals and, ultimately, a higher perception of relationship quality. The work of Henderson (1990), Konsynski and McFarlan (1989) and Lee and Kim (1999) corroborates this assertion. In their studies, the authors found the frequency and intensity of social exchanges to have a positive impact on relationship quality such that more frequent exchanges led to higher quality relationships. Based on these arguments, we hypothesize the following:

H2: Students who follow the university on more than one social media site will perceive a higher quality relationship with the university than students who only follow the university on one social media site.

Methodology

Research approach

The main research question for this study is whether higher education marketers can enhance the quality of relationships between the university and its students via its social media efforts. We chose to survey students to better understand their engagement in social media as well as their perceptions of their university. Specifically, the researchers gathered data on students' social media behaviors as they pertain to following the university on different sites, as well as their perception of the relationship they have with their university. The survey design is a common method used by marketing researchers to

collect a large amount of data from a sample of the population at a given time. Additionally, online surveys have proven to be more efficient than paper surveys in terms of resources, including cost and time. Another benefit of online surveys is that by design, they limit human error in data transcription and coding. Established measures as well as original measures were used to capture the data. The appropriate statistical analysis tools were chosen given the format of the data. *Post hoc* analyses were also employed to further examine the data.

Design and data collection

The data for this study were collected via an online survey of undergraduate and graduate students of a mid-sized four-year public university in the Eastern United States during the fall of 2014. Respondents were asked a series of questions about which social media sites they use and if they follow the university on social media. They were also asked a series of relationship quality questions (i.e. those pertaining to relationship satisfaction, trust and commitment) and demographic questions. The questionnaire is available in [Appendix](#).

Sample

The convenience sample of the university community was solicited by undergraduate and graduate students currently enrolled in marketing courses at the university. Data collection yielded 240 usable surveys. The sample was largely in the 18–25 age segment with approximately 87% of respondents reporting their age in either the 18–22 or 22–25 age segment. The status segments were distributed as follows with approximately 10% freshmen, 19% sophomores, 27% juniors, 31% seniors, 6% graduate students, 2% faculty and 3% staff. The students' majors were primarily business (48%) followed by science (22%), humanities and fine arts (18%), education (7%) and interdisciplinary studies and undeclared majors (5%). The main focus of this study is on students; both undergraduate and graduate students were included in the analysis. Faculty and staff were not included in the analysis due to their small numbers. The dataset including students only was comprised of 218 usable surveys. The sample followed the university's social media accounts in varying combinations with the largest percentages coming from:

- (1) Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (18.2%);
- (2) Facebook only (18.2%);
- (3) Twitter only (16.6%);
- (4) Facebook and Twitter (11%); and
- (5) Instagram and Twitter (10.5%).

Measures

The items measuring social media usage were created for this study. The social media items gathered usage information about different sites and if the students did or did not follow the university on specific social media platforms. Additionally, the respondents were asked how many sites they followed the university on and asked to identify which

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, correlations^a

	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4
1. FollowUniv	1.19	.40	1			
2. NumberSites	1.51	1.15	-.64**	1		
3. Rel Quality	38.31	7.80	-.23**	.20**	.39**	1

^a $n = 218$.

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

platforms. The relationship quality items were adapted from Garbarino and Johnson (1999) and were measured on a 5-point Likert scale anchored by 'strongly agree' and 'strongly disagree'. Relationship quality is a composite measure of the items from the three scales that comprise the variable (relationship satisfaction, trust and commitment). The relationship quality composite measure was found to be reliable with a Cronbach's alpha estimate of .942. Table 1 presents estimates of the means, standard deviations and correlations for the measured constructs.

Data analysis and results

The data were analyzed using a Mann–Whitney U test, regression analysis and a Kruskal–Wallis test with SPSS to test the empirical relationships proposed in the hypotheses. The Mann–Whitney U test, a non-parametric alternative to the *t*-test, was performed in SPSS and compared followers and non-followers on relationship quality. The test showed a significant difference between those who follow the university on social media and those who do not when it comes to relationship quality ($p < .01$). Specifically students who indicated that they followed the university on social media reported a higher quality relationship, on average, with the university, providing support for Hypothesis 1.

Simple linear regression in SPSS was performed to explain the relationship between one independent variable (i.e. number of social media sites used to follow the university) and one dependent variable (i.e. perception of relationship quality). The regression equation was significant ($p < .01$) and the relationship between the variables was positive such that more sites followed correlated to a higher quality relationship being reported with the university. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was also supported. Table 2 provides the results of the Mann–Whitney U test and regression analysis.

Post hoc analyses were conducted to study patterns in the data. The Kruskal–Wallis test in SPSS was chosen as the statistical test of choice due to its ability to determine differences among group means with three or more groups without assuming a normal distribution of data. This test showed that there is a significant difference between groups of

Table 2. Hypotheses 1–2 results.

Hypothesis	Beta (t-value)	Significance	Supported?
H1: There is a positive relationship between following the university on social media and the perception of having a higher quality relationship with the university. (Mann–Whitney U test)	2286.5	.001 (<.05)	Yes
H2: Students who follow the university on more than one social media site will perceive a higher quality relationship with the university than students who only follow the university on one social media site. (regression)	1.36 (3.00)	.00 (<.05)	Yes

Table 3. Kruskal–Wallis results.

Dependent Variable	Grouping Variable	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Relationship Quality	Site Categories	13.99	3	.003

students who follow the university on differing numbers of social media sites. Specifically, it was found that there is a significant difference between students who follow the university on one or two social media sites and those who follow it on three or more social media sites, providing further support for Hypothesis 2. Table 3 shows the overall results of the Kruskal–Wallis test while Table 4 shows the detailed comparisons based on number of sites followed.

Discussion

The aim of our study was to determine whether students' engagement with universities' social media sites contribute to a higher quality relationship with their university (Hypothesis 1) and whether higher levels of social media engagement, in the form of following multiple social networking sites, have an even greater positive impact on perceptions of relationship quality (Hypothesis 2). With respect to Hypothesis 1, our results indicate that following the university on a social media platform does, on average, enhance students' perceived relationship quality with their university. As predicted in Hypothesis 2, we also found a significant relationship between students following more than one university social media site and perceived relationship quality. Specifically, students who followed three social media platforms reported having an even higher relationship quality within their university than those who followed only one or two sites. Collectively our results suggest that social media has the potential of positively impacting university–student relationship quality.

We interpret these findings within the context of SET (Blau, 1964) and the norm of reciprocity (Bagozzi, 1995; Houston & Gassenheimer, 1987). Specifically, we argue that the quality of the relationship between students and their university was strengthened due to students having access to valuable resources via the university's social media sites. Students' exposure to and engagement in these resources triggered a feeling of obligation to reciprocate 'good faith' behaviors, which led to stronger (e.g. more satisfying, committed, trusting and higher quality) relationships with the university.

Table 4. Mean differences in relationship quality according to number of sites followed^a.

(I)Number of Sites	(J)Number of Sites	Mean Difference (I–J)	Std. Error	Sig.
1	2	.40	1.34	.77
	3	–3.46	1.48	.02
	4	3.10	2.75	.26
2	1	–.40	1.34	.77
	3	–3.88	1.57	.02
	4	2.70	2.80	.34
3	1	3.46	1.48	.02
	2	3.86	1.57	.02
	4	6.56	2.87	.02
4	1	–3.10	2.75	.26
	2	–2.70	2.80	.34
	3	–6.56	2.87	.02

^aDependent variable: Relationship quality.

Contributions, limitations and future research

Taken together, this research provides insight into the complex use of social media by both students and universities as a main form of relationship building. We drew upon SET to show how following the university on one or more social media platforms can impact students' perception of relationship quality. Specifically, our results demonstrated that relationship quality may be enhanced as a result of resource exchanges taking place among actors via social media and that relationship quality may increase even further when actors have access to more resources (such as through a university connecting with students through multiple social media sites).

This study extends the current higher education literature by investigating the impact of social media usage on a previously unexplored outcome, namely students' perception of relationship quality with their university. Our research also contributes to the research stream in RM by linking social media following behavior to relationship quality. Further, in drawing upon SET and the norm of reciprocity, our study fills a critical gap in the RM literature, one in which the 'integration of reciprocity into the RM framework has been noticeably absent' (Hoppner et al., [2015](#)).

A limitation of this research is the use of a single university for our sample. However, since our study was a first attempt at linking social media following behavior to relationship quality in a higher education setting, we thought starting with a single institution would allow us to zero in on our variables of interest while controlling for outside effects that might be created by differing institutions. In addition, since we were interested in studying the effects of multi-platform usage on relationship quality, it was important to identify a university that utilized a wide array of social media platforms. In the case of our chosen institution, nine different platforms were available to its stakeholders. Our chosen institution was also known for having a highly diverse population, with students coming from 46 states and 58 countries. Being able to survey a broad range of students, albeit in a single institution, helped to contribute to the generalizability of the results. While the characteristics of our chosen institution made it a well-suited site for our research objectives, we recognize the limitations that arise from drawing from a single institution, and therefore caution readers from extrapolating our findings to other educational contexts. To ensure the generalizability of our findings, we welcome researchers to replicate our research design in other contexts and/or to develop a comparative study in which results could be contrasted across multiple universities of different sizes and social media practices.

Another extension of our study is for researchers to develop a study that measures for the effects of specific kinds of social media engagement or interaction (other than just being a site follower) on the perception of relationship quality with the university. This could include tracking the number of posts or connections a user makes in a given period of time or the kinds of content that users perceive as being most beneficial. A third area for future research is to reveal differences in social media use and the relationship quality of different stakeholders other than just students. These stakeholders could include both internal and external customers of the university such as customers, vendors, alumni, staff, faculty, parents, businesses, sponsors, etc. By surveying these different groups of people, more nuanced comparisons can also be made based on participants' demographics, such as their age, gender or educational level.

Practical implications

Our research has important implications for higher education marketers. Based on the findings of our study, it is recommended that universities dedicate resources to developing social media platforms, as doing so is likely to enhance their relationship quality with their students. In particular, universities may want to work at increasing the number of platforms that are available to their students to at least three. Further, since high-quality relationships are not only contingent on the exchanging of resources, but on the exchanging of 'valued' resources, universities will also want to make sure that they exercise effective social media management techniques and that they have the personnel and technological support available to properly run their sites. For example, if a university creates multiple social media platforms, but is very slow to post information or is providing information that is irrelevant, uninteresting or inaccurate, this could have a detrimental impact on the trust and commitment of its student users and ultimately on the quality of their relationship with their university. It would also be helpful for universities to solicit feedback from their students and other key stakeholders to assist them in determining which social media content is most valuable to these groups.

Institutions of higher education will also want to be aware of the 'best practices' for social media to generate the greatest possible impacts on its users. For example, recent research on the relationship between social media frequency and user engagement has found the optimal number of posts for Twitter to be three tweets per day, for Facebook two posts per day, for LinkedIn one post per day, for Instagram at least 1.5 per posts day, and for Pinterest to be at least five posts per day (Lee, 2015). Universities will want to be knowledgeable of these best practices regarding when and how often to post on social media, as failing to do so could negatively impact students' engagement with these sites and subsequently student–university relationship quality.

Since offering social media platforms in and of itself does not guarantee that students will access and/or engage with these sites, it is also important for higher education marketers to develop strategies for encouraging social media usage. This could involve universities encouraging new students to become 'followers' of their social media sites during new student orientation or having students engage in their social media sites through their residence halls, academic courses or university-sponsored events. Universities might also want to consider holding regular contests on their social media sites or to make use of the 'polling' features available on certain social media platforms to increase student engagement and/or to encourage participation in specific sites.

Conclusion

Social media is an emerging field in both marketing and higher education that is growing in importance. It can have many valuable results for marketers such as increased exposure, increased traffic, improved search-engine rankings, decreased marketing costs and increased sales (Stelzner, 2011) or, in the case of our study, enhanced relationship quality between a university and its students. Collectively, the results of our study suggest that universities should invest resources in social media communications if they intend to form high-quality relationships with their stakeholders, especially students. Specifically, social media marketers for universities should find ways to encourage

students to follow the university on multiple social media sites; at least three. As our results suggest, these relationships could lead to beneficial outcomes for the university and its stakeholders in the future.

Disclosure statement

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Appendix Social media survey

General Behavioral Patterns

1. Which social media sites do you use? Select all that apply.
 - a. Twitter
 - b. Facebook
 - c. Google +
 - d. Instagram
 - e. Pinterest
 - f. YouTube
 - g. Snapchat
 - h. Tumblr
 - i. Yik Yak
 - j. Other _____
2. Which site do you use most? Choose one option.
 - a. Twitter
 - b. Facebook
 - c. Google +
 - d. Instagram
 - e. Pinterest
 - f. YouTube
 - g. Snapchat
 - h. Tumblr
 - i. Yik Yak
 - j. Other _____
3. Why do you use social media? Select all that apply.
 - a. Professional networking
 - b. Exchange of information with peers
 - c. Marketing or sales
 - d. Gathering market intelligence
 - e. Personal professional development
 - f. News and information
 - g. Promotion of my personal 'brand'
 - h. Promotion of my company / organization
 - i. Job seeking
 - j. Research
 - k. Other _____
4. Roughly how many hours per day do you spend on social media sites? Choose one option.
 - a. Less than 1 hour

- b. 1–2 hours
 - c. 2–3 hours
 - d. 3–4 hours
 - e. More than 4 hours
5. When do you usually check in to social media sites? Choose one option.
- a. Morning (until 11am)
 - b. Lunchtime (11–1)
 - c. Afternoon (1–5)
 - d. Evening (6–8)
 - e. Night (after 8pm)
 - f. Throughout the day and night
6. What is the most essential technology you use? Choose one option.
- a. Desktop computer at home
 - b. Desktop computer at library
 - c. Laptop computer at home
 - d. Laptop computer at library
 - e. Smartphone
 - f. Tablet
 - g. Other_____

Follow University

7. I follow at least one university social media site. Choose one option.
- a. Yes
 - b. No

Number of Sites

8. Indicate on which sites you follow the university. Choose all that apply.
- a. Facebook
 - b. Google +
 - c. Instagram
 - d. LinkedIn
 - e. Pinterest
 - f. Snapchat
 - g. Twitter
 - h. YouTube

Relationship Quality

Relationship Satisfaction

9. I am highly satisfied with my relationship with the university.
- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree
10. Compared to the ideal relationship with a university, I am satisfied with my relationship with this university.
- a. Strongly Disagree

- b. Disagree
 - c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree
11. I value the relationship I have with this university.
- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree
12. The quality of the relationship with this university is consistently high.
- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree

Trust

13. This university performs with integrity.
- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree
14. This university is reliable.
- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree
15. This university has my best interests in mind.
- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree

Commitment

16. I feel a sense of belonging at this university.
- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree
17. I care about the long-term success of this university.
- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree

- c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree
18. I feel strongly motivated to continue my relationship with this university.
- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree

Demographics

19. What is your age? Choose one option.
- a. Younger than 18
 - b. 18–22
 - c. 22–25
 - d. 26–30
 - e. 31–35
 - f. 36–40
 - g. 41–45
 - h. 46–50
 - i. Older than 50
20. What is your major field of study? Choose one option.
- a. Science
 - b. Business
 - c. Education
 - d. Humanities and fine arts
 - e. University college
 - f. Other _____
21. What is your classification? Choose one option.
- a. Freshman
 - b. Sophomore
 - c. Junior
 - d. Senior
 - e. Graduate Student
 - f. Faculty
 - g. Staff