

Post COVID reputation management in Chinese and UK higher education: how do the universities represent themselves through social media to governments and international students

Zhuo Sun, Miguel Antonio Lim, Heather Cockayne

University of Manchester, Manchester, United Kingdom

Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This study discusses the intricacies of resource dependence, recruitment rationale, and reputation management (RM) using social media (SM) strategies adopted in Chinese and UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), during and post COVID-19 crisis. The research enriches existing literature by providing a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing university behaviours through the lens of Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) in the post crisis era. Specifically, the recruitment of International Students (ISs) in the chosen UK and Chinese HEIs is intricately tied to securing resources. While Western contexts have been extensively studied in relation to HEIs' adoption of SM use for RM, this paper offers empirical evidence in Chinese context. The active/reactive RM framework is implemented in this paper to guide the designing, renders the deductive nature of this study. 19 interviews were conducted at the UK and Chinese universities, and content analysis is employed to explore the administrative perspective.

Full paper

Introduction

Increasing competition within higher education (HE) renders HEIs are attempting to evaluate their online visibility and recognition (Maresova, Hruska & Kuca, 2020). This is consistent with Roper's (2012) comment about the difficulty to develop a positive reputation for organisations because of the prevalence of social media (SM), which also implies the vulnerability of universities' reputation. Current literature explores extensively how social network sites (SNSs) such as Twitter (X), Instagram, LinkedIn etc. can be employed as means to improve HEIs' reputation, especially with students as the main stakeholder (ibid.). However, Rutter, Roper and Lettice (2016) suggested that the awareness of adopting SNSs to facilitate RM is ubiquitous, whereas how to use them strategically to gain good results challenges all organisations, including HEIs. While they failed to specify the type of universities, or the contexts universities operate in, their argument implies that further studies on HEIs employ SNSs are needed (ibid.). Particularly because students are the largest targeted audience of SM. The use of SM in facilitating RM in current literature needs further conceptual exploration. To date, most studies on the adoption of SM by HEIs are conducted within 'western' contexts, (Soares, Limongi & Cohen,

2022), yet the Chinese context is less studied given it 'has the world's most active environment for social media' (Li, Zhang & An, 2023). Particularly, how HEIs navigate using SM for RM under the impact of COVID-19 requires further investigation.

This paper draws insights from 19 practitioners to explore similarities and differences, utilising the active/reactive RM framework by Sun and Lim (2023). The contribution of this study resides in understanding how SM is used in promoting and managing crises in both contexts, impacting universities' reputations during crisis times. The RDT is employed to analyse the rationales behind employing different resources, highlighting differences in reliance on specific stakeholders between Chinese and UK HEIs. The active-reactive RM framework provides a comprehensive perspective on RM activities in universities, emphasising the need to discuss crisis promotion and coping in HE settings together. The study's predisposition is guided by this framework, informing interview questions and coding themes. Interviews' insights are connected to RDT, illustrating the creation of reliance on external stakeholders in Chinese and UK HEIs.

Research questions

Proposition 1: The source of resources for the UK and Chinese HEIs is different, and it is more diversified in the UK HE than in China, therefore RM activities are associated with reliance of resources,

Research question 1: Based on proposition 1, what purposes does the recruitment of ISs serve in the UK and Chinese HE?

Proposition 2: Using SM can facilitate RM is recognised by the Chinese and UK HE.

Research question 2: Based on proposition 2, how do the UK and Chinese HE managers use SM in RM?

Methodology

In this study, a qualitative case study is conducted to explore the differences and similarities of the selected Chinese and UK HEIs usage of SM for RM (Yin, 1984). 13 semi-structured interviews conducted in the Chinese university (from now on University A), and 6 semi-structured interviews conducted in the UK university (from now on University B), because of the reaching of data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Content analysis (CA) is applied given the pre-determined framework guiding this study. University A and University B were both selected as the result of purposeful sampling.

Results

The findings contribute to the existing literature by uncovering institutional intricacies, offering a more holistic understanding of the factors influencing these universities' behaviours with the application of RDT. To elaborate, the recruitment of ISs at the selected Chinese HEI is rooted in increasing the possibility of gaining more resources such as public funding and policy advantages, which manifests their dependency on the local and central governments. Furthermore, fiscal grounds are not the only

contributor of the formation of the dependency, but also in CM. It means as external stakeholders, local or central governments are one of the recourses of containing events that undermine universities' reputation. On the other hand, recruiting ISs at the selected UK HEI is mainly because of fiscal rationale, whereas further societal benefits are included in the discussion. Additionally, centralised dependency is not found in the UK university's SM usages, which could suggest diverse source of resources.

References

Fusch, P. I., & Ness, L. R. (2015). Are we there yet? Data saturation in qualitative research. *Qualitative Report*, 20(9), 1408–1416. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2015.2281>

Li, L., Zhang, J., & An, X. (2023). Using social media for efficient brand marketing: An evaluation of Chinese Universities using Bilibili. *Socio-Economic Planning Sciences*, 88, 101645–. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.seps.2023.101645>

Maresova, P., Hruska, J., & Kuca, K. (2020). Social media university branding. *Education Sciences*, 10(3), 74–. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10030074>

Roper, S. (2012). *Corporate Reputation, Brand and Communication*, Pearson Education UK, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.manchester.idm.oclc.org/lib/manchester/detail.action?docID=5138683>.

Rutter, R., Roper, S., & Lettice, F. (2016). Social media interaction, the university brand and recruitment performance. *Journal of Business Research*, 69(8), 3096–3104. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.01.025>

Soares, J. C., Limongi, R., & Cohen, E. D. (2022). Engagement in a social media: an analysis in higher education institutions. *Online Information Review*, 46(2), 256–284. <https://doi.org/10.1108/OIR-06-2020-0242>

Sun, Z., & Lim, M. A. (2023). A Systematic Literature Review of Higher Education Reputation Management: Active/Reactive Framework. *International Journal of Chinese Education*, 12(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2212585X231175164>

Yin, R. (1984). *Case study research*. Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications.