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Handledare: J. Eksell & P. Young
Examinator: Åsa Thelander

To be or not to be engaged

Student recruitment goes online public relations

LINN ANDERSSON

Lunds universitet
Institutionen för strategisk kommunikation
Examensarbete för masterexamen



Abstract

Title: To be or not to be engaged – student recruitment goes online public relations

Digital natives is an age group born into a digital world and who possesses little knowledge about a society without internet or social media. The increased usage of social media has made universities realize that an online social media presence is necessary to attract the attention of their digital native prospective students. Along with social media comes the necessity of create online engagement to interact with stakeholders. The main task for practitioners is to understand what impact digital communication has on the interaction and with stakeholders online. This study is investigating online public relations with emphasis on online engagement in the context of university recruitment. From a social constructivist perspective qualitative interviews have been made with both Swedish university communicators and Swedish upper-secondary school students in order to explain, contextualize and problematize how organisations work with digital communication on social media with an aim to create engagement and thereby build relations. The study settles in a discussion whether engagement is indispensable or not for social media employment.

Key words: *Online public relations, online engagement, social media, higher education, university communication, strategic communication*

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Sammanfattning

Titel: Att vara eller inte vara engagerad – Studentrekrytering blir online public relations

Digital natives är en åldersgrupp född in i en digital värld och som därför innehar lite kunskap om en värld utan internet och sociala medier. Detta ökande användandet av sociala medier har fått universitet att inse vikten av en närvaro online för att komma i kontakt med de presumtiva studenterna som utgör en del av digital natives. Med sociala medier kommer behovet av att skapa engagemang online för att interagera med intressenter. Denna studie undersöker online public relations med fokus på online engagemang från en kontext om universitetsrekrytering. Med utgångspunkt i ett socialkonstruktivistiskt perspektiv har kvalitativa intervjuer genomförts med både svenska universitetskommunikatörer och svenska gymnasiestudenter för att kunna förklara, kontextualisera och problematisera hur organisationer arbetar med digital kommunikation på sociala medier med syfte att skapa engagemang och etablera relationer. Studien landar i en diskussion om huruvida engagemang är oundgängligt för sociala medier eller inte.

Nyckelord: Online public relations, online engagemang, sociala medier, utbildning inom högre studier, universitetskommunikation, strategisk kommunikation.

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Contents

1. Introduction	6
1.1 Purpose	8
1.2 The Swedish university system	8
2. A public relations perspective	10
2.1 Public relations	10
2.1.1 Building relations	10
2.1.2 Grand strategy, strategy and tactics.....	11
2.1.3 A public relation communication perspective	12
2.2 Digital communication and the function of social media in public relations.....	14
2.3 Online engagement in public relations	15
2.3.1 The concept of engagement.....	16
2.3.2 Online engagement within public relations.....	17
2.3.3 Co-creation from a public relations perspective	18
3. Research design & methodology	21
3.1 General approach to science.....	21
3.2 Qualitative interviews.....	22
3.2.1 Focus group interviews	24
3.2.2 Interview participants.....	26
3.2.3 Qualitative analysis method	27
3.3 Reflexivity.....	29
3.4 Ethical considerations.....	30
4. To engage and to be engaged.....	32
4.1 University communicators – Planning, using and motivating social media employment.....	32
4.1.1 Strategy planning and goal achieving	32
4.1.2 The tactical misuse of social media.....	37
4.1.3 The motivation of social media employment – to be where the target group is.	40

4.2 Students – Expectations and demands of universities social media employment in the search for higher education	43
4.2.1 Usage of social media	43
4.2.2 Expectations & demands	46
4.3 Relation building through co-creation.....	48
5. Conclusions & end discussion	51
5.1 Concluding remarks	51
References	53
Attachments	58
Interview guide – Focus group interviews with upper-secondary school students.....	58
Interview guide – University communicators.....	60

1. Introduction

Today's young people, in the age of 18-25 years, are referred to as *digital natives* or *digital naturals* in an online context (Glenn & D'Agostino, 2008; Jones, Ramanau, Cross & Healing, 2010; Young & Åkerström, 2016). This is an age group born into a digital world which is why they possess little knowledge about a society without internet or social media (Jones et al., 2010; Young & Åkerström, 2016). The increased usage of social media has made organisations realize that a social media presence is necessary, not least to be close to their digital native stakeholders present online (Bélangier et al., 2010; Heiberger & Harper, 2008; Phillips & Young, 2009). By following trends, organisations create viral campaigns to reach a viral spread within the social media networks. This viral spread is possible due to the stakeholders engaging online through sharing, commenting and liking the organisation's content. Social media platforms, with Facebook in the lead, have become a complement to organisation's private web pages. The idea behind an increase digital communication employment on social media, is to create an interactive environment where organisations trigger stakeholders to engage through different tactics and strategies. The engagement does in turn, contribute to spread the organisation's message online, to new potential clients and helps the organisation understand their stakeholders' online behaviours and needs (Phillips & Young, 2009). One of the main objectives behind an organisation's social media presence is consequently to make their followers engaged and if not engaged, the message is not as likely to be spread nor will the organisation detect dissatisfactions, respond to questions or learn what the stakeholders need.

Digital communication performed within social media has become crucial in the everyday life both from the viewpoint of private users but also in the organisational world where organisations communicate with stakeholders online (Baym, 2010; Young & Åkerström, 2016). The difficulty with digital communication lies however in the *understanding* of how a digital presence influence the communication. What organisations try to master is what impact digital communication has on personal connections and how the communication changes interactions or even relationships (Baym, 2010; Phillips & Young, 2009). Online engagement is a phenomenon studied within the field of digital communication, used to influence and engage the public in order to build relations and disseminate the organisation message. This study will approach *online engagement* from a public relations perspective applied on university recruitment. Swedish universities are, likewise to many other organisations, aiming to manage

and understand how digital communication through social media influence students' online engagement that in turn will lead to new recruited students. With emphasis on PR objectives such as creating awareness and building relations online (Phillips & Young, 2009), universities are aiming towards an interaction and an engagement with their followers online, in order to reach out to prospective students. Few studies have nevertheless been made on the subject of university recruitment in the context on online engagement and public relations. A more marketing oriented study of social media engagement in the search for information on higher education, was however made by Constantinides and Zink Stagno in 2011. The study concludes that prospective students in the Netherlands are interested seeking information about higher education on social media but that they still put social media secondary to traditional information channels, such as brochures, webpages and personal visits. The study also reveals that students do not show interest in engaging through contributing with content on universities' social media pages- A co-creation strategy that Constantinides and Zink Stagno stress would be beneficial to the universities' social media employment. The social media habits for digital natives in Sweden do witness about similar trends. Olle Findhal's report about the swedes internet habits from 2014 shows that those most active on social media are young people in the age between 12-25 years, but reveals a decreasing activity on Facebook in particular among this age group. They are instead moving on to channels like Snapchat and Instagram (Findahl, 2014; King, 2014).

As understood there is put a high value on engagement within digital communication, not least for organisations working towards a target group of digital natives. It is however not thoroughly investigated how important engagement is for an organisations social media employment and what happens to the employment when engagement does not exist. Is social media utterly dependent of engagement in order to be *social* and not only any mass-media channel? Or can digital communication within social media channels be lucrative even without the stakeholders' engagement? This study will explain, contextualize and problematize how organisations work with digital communication on social media with an aim to create engagement and thereby build relations and spread awareness. This digital communication employment will be put in contrast to the expectations and demands of the stakeholders. The knowledge gap approached in this study does consequently not solely circle around whether or not to engage online, but in a greater context contribute to the discussion if and why engagement is indispensable to social media and the digital communication performed in these channels.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explain, contextualise and problematize how online engagement is accomplished through strategies and tactics of digital communication in order to build relations and create awareness with potential new stakeholders. In order to investigate online engagement the study is applied on a Swedish university context where university communicators aim to recruit prospective students through a social media employment. The purpose is fulfilled by answering the following questions:

- How do Swedish university communicators strategically plan, tactically use and motivate social media engagement in order to reach out to prospective students and recruit them?
- What expectations and demands do prospective students have on the communication given by Swedish universities on social media?
- How do university communicators explain and rationalize in favour of PR oriented co-creation strategies in their work to build relations with prospective students online?

1.2 The Swedish University system

The commission of Swedish universities is to carry education and scientific research to contribute to the development of society. Universities in Sweden should promote increased democracy, knowledge development, economic growth and better education. These are phrases stated by the Swedish Higher Education Authority (Swedish Council for Higher Education) in their ordinance of higher education. In order to educate and develop the society, the research pursued within universities should be made public and spread to the citizens through mass media for example.

Swedish universities and university colleges are authorities and to a big extent financed by public means. The amount of money that each university receives is based on the number of enrolled students and number of examined students. It is the ruling Government that decides the total amount of the subsidy for each university and also it is the Government that is authorized to set a financial limit for a university. In addition to grants, Swedish universities

can also receive money from foundations, municipalities, private donators and research allowances. (Swedish Council for Higher Education).

Higher education an examination in Sweden can be performed by either university or University collages. The differences between a university and a university collage is that universities traditionally have been the only institution with permission to issue examination at research level. A university collage may however apply to the Swedish Higher Education Authority for permission to issue doctor degrees in a specific field area (Swedish Council for Higher Education). In this study, both universities and university collages are participating. Malmö University is however officially called *Malmö University* in English and will therefore be used in this study.

2. A public relations perspective

The purpose of this chapter is to present a brief background to public relations and digital communication in general, and online engagement in particular. The PR oriented theoretical framework presented in this chapter will be used to explain, contextualize and problematize university communicators' social media employment as a tool to carry out digital communication, with purpose to create awareness, build relations and recruit prospective students. This chapter will provide a foundation on which the deeper reasoning and analysis in chapter 4. The reason for presenting an overall theoretical framework, and in more profound reasoning and theories behind the phenomenon together with an analysis is to avoid repetition. Therefore the emphasis in this chapter will be placed on an introductory theoretical background of PR, digital communication and the phenomenon of online engagement that will provide the reader with a solid theoretical base that facilitate the understanding of the analytical reasoning later in this study.

2.1 Public relations – an introduction

“Public relations is a management function, which tabulates public attitudes, defines the policies, procedures, and interests of an organisation followed by executing a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance.” (Bernays in Breakenridge, 2008 p. xvii)

PR as a concept was presented for the first time in the end of the 20th century by Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays, also known as the founding fathers of today's PR theory. Bernays' definition inspires and can still be applied and understood from a PR perspective, 100 years after stated. Below a further presentation of strategies and tactics behind PR is given and examples on how it is useful to and applied on this study.

2.1.1 *Building relations*

As the name reveals, the purpose of public relations is for organisations to create relations with stakeholders consisting of media and press; current and potential consumers and shareholders- in short establish good relations with the public. PR is often referred to as a more pragmatic area but do also consist of a theoretical part emerged from a social science field of study (Botan

& Taylor, 2004; Merckelsen, Möllerström & von Platen, 2016). The importance for organisations to uphold good relations with the public became essential to PR theory after Fergusson's study of *relational approach*, published in 1984. Shortly after Ferguson's study, other researchers followed and studies about PR's influence on the return of investment (ROI) of the company were realized. From these studies a theoretical framework took shape, based on previous established theories in psychology-, rhetorical persuasion-, media relations studies (Pavlik, 1987; Botan & Hazleton, 1989 and Pasadeos, Renfro, Vasquez & Taylor, 2000).

In short, public relations is a combination of an organisation's strategic work and the more tactical executive practice, used to communicate with stakeholders. (Botan & Hazleton, 2006) According to J. Gruning (1997), public relations is "an organisation's managed communication behaviour" (pp.242-243) and responsible for the communication flow in and out of an organisation. When an organisation successfully establishes and communicates brand image that stakeholders find reasonable and true, the company gain confidence. This confidence turn into a trust initiative that hopefully will spread to other potential stakeholders and a positive awareness of the organisational brand is created. The win for a company through well-functioning PR is not only to gain confidence and establish a good image, but does also bring a ROI in a longer perspective (Lipschultz 2014; Stelzner, 2014). PR is, due to this notions also closely related to transparency and word of mouth (WOM). If appearing to be transparent and honest, it is also easier to gain confidence with the stakeholders (Huang-Horowitz, 2015). WOM in turn is also related to confidence and creating awareness. One of the better ways to spread a beneficial rumour about an organisation is through creating a WOM where the information is passed on from a friend to another. If the message is delivered via a reliable acquaintance, the information is perceived as more truthful than if it comes directly from an organisations ad for example (Phillips & Young, 2009; Lipschultz, 2014).

2.1.2 Grand strategy, strategy and tactics

Online public relations is a phenomenon emerging from the digital world in which we are finding ourselves at present. Online PR is, likewise to PR in general, often seen as more pragmatic than theoretical. Relations with the public are built through communication tools such as e-mails, social media channels, web pages, chats and forums. PR is however in the highest degree also a theoretical based field, especially concerning strategy planning and tactic shaping with purpose to provide the organisation with tools that can achieve objectives such as create awareness, build profound relations and ROI. In order to reach these objectives, there is

a need for both *planning*, *executing* and *evaluating*. Organisational goals, strategies and tactics are however often used together as if the concepts were one and the same. To avoid confusion further on, a short introduction defining the differences between strategy and tactics is therefore considered necessary to elucidate.

First let me distinguish the differences between *grand strategy* and *strategy*. This is of importance in the understanding of how goals and strategy of an entire university can differ from goals and strategy of a communication department of a university. According to Botan (2006) *grand strategy* is the planning that concerns a whole organisation, such as the university in general. *Strategy*, on the other hand, is the planning to reach an intermediate organisational goal, for example the university communicators' strategy of building relations with prospective students on social media. Strategy as such, is a series of planned actions made to reach a given goal (Roos, von Krogh & Roos, 2004). The strategy goals on a grand strategic level contains employment of ethics, relationship with public and other environmental forces. The strategy level regarding achieving intermediate goals on the other hand, includes the manoeuvre and decision making behind a PR campaign that aims to benefit and follow through the grand strategies (Botan, 2006). If strategy is the work made by the head, tactics is the work made by the hands, literally speaking. PR tactics consist of executing the plan and monitoring the campaigns as it happens. Even though the strategy is the planning behind creating online engagement, the tactical work of a PR practitioner is, for example supposed to invite the public to engage through the actions performed by practitioners online (Phillips & Young, 2009).

2.1.3 A public relations communication perspective

Fairly simplified, communication as a concept could be divided into two main perspectives. One based on the transmission model, constructed almost mathematically by Shannon and Weaver in 1949 (Heide, 2012; Shannon & Weaver, 1949) and based on a linear process where a sender transmits a message to a receiver. The other perspective is a two-way model of communication which in difference is a circular process that gives the receiver an opportunity to return a message to the sender. A two-way communication perspective is, in contrast to the more monologue constructed transmission model, intended to initiate a dialogue (Cassinger, 2010). Critique directed to the transmission model, from both marketing and PR fields is, centred on precisely the issue of it being one-way oriented. According to communication researchers, one-way communication contradict the very definition of communication (Botan, 2009; Cassinger, 2010; Vareay, 2002). In other words, communication is and should be

involving a back and forth dialogue where the message of both the sender as well as the receiver should be considered of equal importance.

These two perspectives form part of not solely PR communication, but also marketing and corporate communication. In digital communication it is however not rare to see organisations use social media with the idea of a traditional transmission communication, that emphasises on primarily sending out the message (Heide, 2012; Shannon & Weaver, 1949), without reflecting on the benefits and importance of the receiving a communicative response. Many organisations, when looking at the kind of content generated on their social media channels, rather seem to be using the platforms as a tool to reach out with a marketing sell-oriented message to a bigger number of people in a short matter of time, in other words one-way. The appreciation of the interaction possibilities that can be created on social media do seem to lack in favour of reach satisfaction as long as the message is sent out on cyberspace. I would like to underline that this is a personal observation, even if other researchers do stress that social media is not seldom used to create a media buzz copied from traditional mass media (Kane et al., 2009; Smith & Place, 2013). Botan and Tylor (2004) discuss however a different way of seeing the audience as something more than just a means to an end, as something more than just a consumer or a receiver. To see the value in the communication process where two parts or more interact to form and reach a common understanding, is in PR studies considered as a way to influence the public too. Through interaction and dialogue with stakeholders, the organisation learns valuable knowledge about their audience which can be used to facilitate strategy a tactic planning of how to build strong and long lasting relations with this target group in the most efficient way possible. Two-way communication theories is nevertheless not solely advocating a response-communication. Blog posts, news articles and even books could be channels of two-way communication as long as the receiver act upon it through reflection or diffusion of the message.

In this study the clash between marketing and PR will constantly be present. Something that has already been demonstrated in the two first chapters. PR is considered a more practical oriented field and is often related to a bigger heterogeneous public rather than a specific consumer target group. When approaching PR, terms like dialogue and two-way communication seem to figure as synonyms, whereas mass media techniques of diffusing a message to a large group of people in the shortest time possible is related to marketing (Merkelsen et al., 2016). Merkelsen et al. describes these definitions as the paradox of PR identity in the sense that one communication perspective does not exclude the other and that the two-

way communication perspective not exclusively is attained within the PR field, just as the transmission model is not solely a marketing oriented perspective, but equally observed in PR communication. It is true that the line distinguishing PR from marketing is diffuse and that PR practitioners and marketers do, on occasion, perform similar tasks even though the perspectives and the objectives differ (Phillips & Young, 2009). We will experience proof of this perspective affiliation struggle in the employment of the university communicators further on in this chapter, which is why the matter is approached here. References to a PR perspective is permeating this study and let's bear in mind that it is from this perspective this study is founded, even if several phenomenon approached here do occur in both marketing and the PR field.

2.2 Digital communication and the function of social media in public relations

The meteoric rise of social network sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube changed the communication landscape forever. But social media are vastly more diverse: a connected and complex ecosystem founded on relationships, passions and a desire to be connected. (Katy Howell, 2012, p. 3)

The above quote do capture the most central aspects in the use of social media within PR. Firstly we have the biggest channels presented with Facebook in the lead and also a notion witnessing about how the phenomenon of social media has come to change great parts of the online communication landscape. Last but not least Howell stresses the complexity of this phenomenon, founded on a social desire of the human being which lately has been transferred to an online arena. Further on in this chapter I will address the term of *engagement* which is in many respects closely related to social media as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube due to their function to *share*.

During the past decade the PR environment has gone from a traditional press release communication field, to a more complex area emerging from the rise of opinion-led bloggers with Wordpress making it possible for ordinary people taking stand in public, to the social media channels dominated by Facebook and Twitter. This has not exclusively put PR practitioners closer to their audience (Phillips & Young, 2009) but has also positioned the audience coming to journalists and politicians (Nowicka, 2012). With the opportunity to spread a message rapidly and extensively, along with creating trust and showing transparency,

PR practitioners are also confronted with issues and risks when performing online. In digital communication one often talks about capturing trends in the right moment, since what is hot today, is gone tomorrow (Nowicka, 2012). The sharpness demanded by a PR practitioner operating online is crucial due to this sharable mechanism. Messages are spread rapidly and extensively, from one connected to another, and if the message is communicated wrongly or with the slightest chance of being interpreted poorly, it may create unpleasant consequences for the organisation. Phillips and Young (2009) do however object towards the hysteria regarding the assumed power of sharing online. They argue that the message in most occasions only circle in private and more isolated networks where the owners have limited friend circles to which the message can be spread. The conclusion of these arguments is however, according to traditional PR strategies and tactics, to get to know not solely the audience but the functions of digital communication in general and social media channels in particular. I do agree that there are some pitfalls and advices of value to be aware of for a PR practitioner in her employment online. But I do not see the reason to make an entire handbook of how to use social media for practitioners as if the phenomenon was of a constant and non-changeable feature. As stated in the above quote, digital communication is complexed and in constant change and I stress that the only way of managing this phenomenon accurately is for a practitioner to constantly renew and revise ones knowledge about the audience and the media channel. People and target groups do change, likewise the channel, and to say that one thing works because it always has or because a handbook from 2012 say so jeopardise the employment far more than to publish wrongly spelled content or with an easily misinterpreted signification. The audience reality is created from her own personal experiences and references, likewise to social media networks formed by textual and visual content interpreted by individuals with individual opinions of the truth. I believe that the most important task for a PR practitioner performing online is indeed to prepare for change and seize the moment, but the change of the interests, desires and needs of the public rather than the online trends.

2.3 Online engagement in public relations

The phenomenon of *engagement* is somewhat problematic to apply, not least on a study with a PR perspective. This due to the term *engagement's* strong connections to the marketing field but also because of the little emphasis that has been made to conceptualize the term in contexts outside of the behaviour field. Below I will define the term engagement and explain how it is

defined in both marketing and PR, in order to visualise the complexity of the term and the diversity of it in marketing in comparison to PR. Thereafter I will suggest a way of looking at the term from an online public relation perspective and present a way to conceptualize the meaning of *online engagement* in public relations.

2.3.1 The concept of engagement

In communication related literature, the opinions differ regarding whether the phenomenon *engagement* is solely a term or in fact a concept (Dessart, Veloutsou & Morgan-Thomas, 2015; Enginkaya & Esen, 2014; Graffigna & Gambetti, 2015; Pellas & Kazanidis, 2015). Engagement is a subject that during the last decade has become more important within the field of marketing studies. Dessart et al., (2015) stress that the term engagement, used in marketing, is defined through previous research within other social science fields such as organisational behaviour and education. They do however admit, along with Graffigna and Gambetti (2015) and Pellas and Kazanidis (2015) that the significance of *engagement* is interpreted differently from researcher to researcher and the conceptualization is not differentiated from the more traditional concepts of the term. It should also be emphasised that engagement within marketing research is more frequently referred to as a *term* and not a *concept*. When approaching engagement in the field of marketing, it is often related to as *consumer engagement* where engagement is defined as a consumers' *commitment* to enter an active relationship with a particular market, product or a brand (Abdul-Ghani, Hyde & Marshall, 2011). Engagement as such is related to behavioural, emotional and cognitive factors (Pellas & Kazanidis, 2015) where all three are of importance to create engagement. Since this study neither put emphasis on marketing nor on behavioural perspectives, the reasoning will proceed towards a more PR oriented path to define what engagement online stands for.

In PR research the commitment appears to be frequently used synonym to engagement, regardless if it concerns studies about student-, employees- or consumer engagement (Dessart et al., 2015; Enginkaya & Esen, 2014; Welbourne, 2007). A long-term commitment taking part between parties is a traditional but still useful definition of engagement which rime fairly well with the definition of *engaged to be married* (Dessart et al., 2015). With this short introduction to how the somewhat undefined term of engagement can be interpreted, defined and conceptualized as a single, alone-standing word, we now proceed to the next challenge of combining engagement in an online context.

2.3.2 Online engagement within public relations

Online engagement is an action realized by a stakeholder which indicates that there exists an interest for the content on which the stakeholder engage. This interest is demonstrated through sharing, liking, commenting or clicking on a content generated by, in this context, an organisation (King, 2015; Lipschultz, 2014). Online engagement is a convenient strategy to execute on social media due to its potential of differing a message rapidly. Engagement on Facebook for example, provides the followers with various ways of engaging from liking a post, to comment on-, or even share it forward. When talking about social media engagement, the aim is to make the public take part in a given content. The content can be photos, video clips, textual posts, links or shared content from other users. Tactics like hashtag or @ting persons or organisations has turned important for PR practitioners in order to monitor and measure engagement, but is also a tactic that contributes to disseminate the word of the brand, the product or the organisation (Falls, 2010; King, 2015; Lipschultz, 2014). The objective regarding engagement in a PR sense is accordingly similar to general PR goals; to build trust, strengthen loyalty and create awareness through an online word of mouth WOM (Philip & Young, 2014; Lipschultz, 2014; Smith & Place, 2013; Gummesson, 1999). These objectives are likewise central in the social media employment performed by Swedish university communicators, that will be presented more thoroughly in chapter 4, and the reason to why a PR perspective is considered convenient for this study.

Engagement is not however solely a proof of a well-functioning two-way communication, where an organisation post and listen to the audience's comments, but is foremost demonstrating a mutual understanding created through a meaning-making process between organisation and stakeholders (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Johnston, 2014). Engaging communication is working not only due to interesting content in itself but, according to studies, because people by nature seek to create relations with other people as well as with organisations (Katy Howell, 2012; Van Doorn, Verhoef, Lemon, Mittal, Nass, Pick & Pirner, 2010). To accomplish engagement activity, which hopefully will lead to a long lived relationship between organisation and public, there is a need of coherence where both parties feel they have something to gain from the relationship. For example the organisation gain economical profit and good reviews while the stakeholders obtain satisfaction. Satisfied stakeholders will in turn most likely return and stay loyal to the organisation, but foremost they will convert into the best ambassadors of the brand or the organisation as they spread the word through their private social network (Delahaye, Jones, Ramanau, Cross & Healing, 2010). Similar ideas of making current

and alumni students ambassadors for a university exists within university communication. Different tactics on how current students may and are contributing to get prospective students aware of, interested in and enrolled at a university exists, both online as in the real world. The central question arising is nevertheless which are the best tactics to get the perspective students engaged online and what happens if there are no desire to engage? Without engagement social media would not exist stresses Fuchs in his research from 2014. If there is no interest in the published content neither to engage with the organisation online, what will it become of social media? As seen in the yearly report concerning the internet habits of the Swedish population (Findahl, 2014) it does exist a decreasing trend in the Facebook usage of the digital natives. If the main target group of prospective students stop engaging online and leave the channels in which the universities perform, what will happen to the PR oriented employment on this channel if there is no accurate target group to make aware and to build relations with? It is however presumable that even if the digital natives leave Facebook for other social media channels, there will be other target groups to engage on Facebook. Social media would indeed be dead if no engagement was to exist, but rather than death of a channel it is more likely that there will be a change in target group focus first. The new challenges will in this occasion not primarily emphasise on making a new target group engaged in the old channel but also to follow the perspective students to new unexplored social media channels to continue creating awareness, building relations and recruit them to higher education. Regardless of channel and its functions, the aim should be to obtain a two-way communication in which a mutual understanding is created through communication processes between university communicators and prospective students.

According to the above premises I would say that online engagement within PR is likewise to engagement within marketing defined through commitment and a showed interest to commit to an organisation. But rather than being faithful to solely a product or a brand, online engagement from a PR perspective is about creating meaning in the interaction and communicative exchange between organisation and public. This reasoning brings us consequently closer to the last paragraph of this theoretical chapter, a paragraph of co-creation strategies from a PR perspective.

2.3.3 Co-creation from a public relations perspective

Before leaving this theoretical chapter I would like to shed light upon the co-creation strategy that is frequently used in online communication but also a part of the strategic work by

university communicators to get closer to and communicate with students. Co-creation has, likewise to the term engagement, its roots in the field of marketing but has during recent years also gained importance in PR research. In marketing, co-creation was presented as a strategy used to invite consumers or stakeholders to take part in creating value regarding a service or later even a product (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). In PR studies, on the other hand, co-creation turned central in order to understand the public and to together create a like-minded meaning of an organisation (Botan & Tylor, 2004; Van Ruler, 2013). As discussed above, a meaning-making merged together based on the experiences and sight on reality of both organisation and stakeholder facilitates the work of understanding the audience's needs and desires and by that the organisation may influence their stakeholders easier. In the article of Van Ruler (2013) co-creation is addressed from a corporate communication perspective with emphasis on meaning making created by employees within the organisation. The conclusions stress that meaning-making processes involving all employees' image of the organisation is important and has an effect on how the organisation is presumed from the outside. Related to social constructivism, where the human being creates her own reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2014; Van Ruler, 2013) and passes this subjective truth of reality forward to others, co-creating is, in this case, based on similar premises. And even if Van Ruler do explain PR through an organisational co-creation theory, I stress, likewise to Botan and Tylos (2004) that the process of creating a shared meaning also is applicable on a meaning-making process involving the public outside and the organisation. The organisational image is indeed influenced by the corporate identity but at the same time this identity is worth little if it does not cohere with the organisational image created in the mind of the stakeholders. If a university is ranked as one of the best in the world and the employees do agree that this university is the best of choice and transmits this corporate identity out to the public, it is still a part of the puzzle missing if the public do not agree on this notion. This is accurate why online engagement is valuable for co-creation theory from a PR perspective. With engagement online opportunities to invite the public to contribute with their meaning and image of the organisation is possible. Through this two-way communication where both the voice of an organisation as well as the one of the public is heard, a process merging both versions of the reality is taking place and the product is demonstrated transparent to the online public. If it were that the public had a different constructed meaning of what the organisation stands for, the organisation in a dialogue online would have the opportunity to influence the public publicly. It is accordingly in the interaction where an equal understanding of meaning can be created, where both sides are heard and interpreted correctly. If the parties are never confronted in a dialogue, but continues creating

meaning, each one in different directions, there is no co- but only individual creation of meaning existing multipliable.

Co-creation is considered of importance to this study due to both communicators and current students' online communication work in contributing and sharing their reality of their university. What is desired by communicators is an engagement from both current and prospective students in order to influence them but also to understand their desires, needs and doubts *regarding* higher studies at the university. In chapter 4 we will be introduced to strategies involving current students sharing their meaning of the university with an aim to make prospective students to engage and contribute to a co-creation of meaning concerning the university.

Notwithstanding there are problems with co-creation theory as parts of a communication employment is moved on to stakeholders. Most of the critique is expressed concerning marketing oriented co-creation but is of value even from a PR perspective. Once again the question arise whether or not stakeholders are interested in contribute to co-creation. Secondly, co-creation strategies require increased work of the employees monitoring and guarantee quality of ideas and suggestions made by the stakeholders (Verhoef, Beckers, & Van Doorn, 2013). There is also criticism raised against organisations implementing co-creation as a strategy to make use of or even explore the stakeholder or consumer (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008). While the organisations argue that co-creation is beneficial for the public in sense that one is free of contributing with one's own ideas, Zwick *et al.*,(2008) argue that the consumers or stakeholders, unconsciously, becomes a product of free labour. The opposition however stress that co-creation is nothing but a new strategy helping management and employees gaining more profit and an increased economic value rather than an increased value of the product or brand (Zwick *et al.*, 2008). I personally see the advantages from a PR perspective in inviting stakeholders to take part in the meaning-making process of what the organisation or university is and stands for.

3. Research design & methodology

This chapter will present the methodological approach and research design chosen for this study. With an emphasis on social constructivism and qualitative interviews the method of the study has been shaped. Problems and challenges along with ethical considerations regarding this study will be discussed along with suggestions and explications to why a certain mode of procedure was chosen and realized.

3.1 General approach to science

This study aims to seek an understanding on a personal level regarding beliefs and subjective truth of the interviewed participants, rather than a general truth. The study takes stand from a social constructivist perspective (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). The way we understand the world and its society is not based upon an independent truth outside ourselves, but are the product of interactions, thoughts, feelings and expectations constructed through social exchange (Burr, 2014). Through interaction we interpret and thereafter form our own subjective version of truth, an interaction which also is a key component in social media usage, as explained in previous chapter. Shared content reveal parts of the personal self, on how one thinks, feels and experiences the world. It can be anything from political statements to charity or just a picture of a Sunday supper. Through interviews about social media engagement I seek knowledge about how communication between communicators and prospective students is received, interpreted and converted into a truth about higher studies. This truth is gained through interviews with the main actors and their subjective reflections regarding digital communication on social media and the engaged interaction created between communicators and students. I do not intend to gain an absolute truth, but rather attempt to contribute with knowledge on how PR, online engagement and social media communication can be used by communicators and how it is perceived the target group within the area of university recruitment and search for higher studies. The findings and indications achieved in this study aim to contribute to the field of strategic communications and problematize the employment of social media with emphasis on PR and online engagement (Burr, 2014).

The ontological ground on which this thesis is based upon is the relation between data and reality. It is not to expect that the data collected from the qualitative interviews and focus group

interviews should be considered as the absolute reality, the collected data does however contribute to a reflection about tendencies and trends in society and more specifically on social media society according to these two specific groups of actors (Eksell & Thelander, 2014). The mix of data, subjective reality and theory makes the epistemological approach of abduction adequate to apply to this study (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2008; Fejes & Thornberg, 2009). Abduction opens up to a possibility to detect patterns and relations between the more conventional theories and the data gained from the interviews through the alternation between theory and empirical data. Abduction is also an epistemological mode of procedure that is more frequently used in science of strategic communication which is another reason to choose this perspective to a strategic communication study (Eksell & Thelander, 2014).

3.2 Qualitative interviews

Qualitative interviews are based on a researcher's interest in understanding a social phenomenon from the interviewee's or actor's own viewpoint (Kvale & Brinkman, 2014). For this study seven qualitative, semi structured and open ended interviews were made with communicators from Swedish universities. The universities participating were Örebro University (Anna Asplund), Karlstad University (Olle Hallberg), Malmö University (Ida Rosqvist), Lund University (Louise Larsson, Eva Nilsson and Mathilda Roijer), Uppsala University (Jonas Ekström), Göteborg University (Martina Sjövind) and Stockholm University (Helena Komlos Grill). In total nine communicators were interviewed, one from each university or university collage except from Lund where three communicators were present at the same time. The interviews with Ekström, Hallberg and Komlos Grill were made via Skype. The idea was also to do a Skype interview with Asplund and Sjövind, but due to technicalities it had to be conducted over the telephone. Only the interviews with Rosqvist, Larsson, Nilsson and Roijer were made in person. The reason for not making all of the interviews in person was due to the geographical distance. It would have been possible to visit different communication departments if all were located nearby to each other but since all seven are quite far apart the Skype alternative was considered the best option after the circumstances. The majority of Sweden's universities and university collages were invited through e-mail, directed directly to their communication department but solely the seven universities above answered or found the time to participate. The factor of mixing empirical material collected from both smaller and bigger universities; younger and older ones; and universities with both an international and a

non-international profile could have an effect on their digital communication employment. But since the aim is not foremost to compare the universities with each other but rather look upon whether a university's message or communication strategy cohere with the students' desires and expectations, these factors are considered having little influential effect on the overall result in this study. If however obvious and important differences emerging due to these factors would occur, they would be considered of value for this study and contribute to a knowledge worthy to spread among universities and university collages in Sweden.

The motive for using a qualitative method is, in line with the social constructivism perspective, to gain extraordinary and privileged data from subjective and personal opinions. The main topic for these qualitative interviews was to get an insight in the university communicators work with online engagement and social media and to receive this data through the communicators own personal opinions and explanations (Kvale & Brinkman, 2014). Even though the subject of the study did not demand the communicators' personal opinions but rather an over-all insight of how the communication departments work, the Skype interview made it possible to capture body language, voice, tone of voice and other aspects the interviewee express when asked questions.

In this study the qualitative interview provide an insight to the strategic communication work of the universities' communication departments. The interview guide containing 28 open ended questions was the starting point of all seven interviews. Due to differences in work tasks and organisational structure the content of the interviews did however vary. The communicators of Stockholm and Uppsala University did unlike the other five, work mainly with international student recruitment. These communicators did nevertheless stress that they worked closely with their national student recruitment colleagues and were well aware of their work, and were therefore still considered interesting for this study. In most cases I introduce the interview questions and the interviewees filled in and answered freely informatively without any doubts or obscurities of the question or how it was asked. This way of performing an open interview technique did however led to conversation subjects somewhat less relevant to social media and online engagement. But in return I believe this way of interviewing created a truthful relationship where the interviewee felt confident to speak honestly and freely which in turn resulted in knowledge that would not be accomplished with a close-ended interview technique (Kvale & Brinkman, 2014).

3.2.1 Focus group interviews

Focus groups are today mainly used to describe and explain consumer behaviour when it comes to commerce. Nevertheless in this study focus group interview technique is used on prospective student to gain knowledge that could be compared to the statements and employment of the university communicators. The purpose was to get a deeper understanding of the reasoning of the students and seek meaning, experiences and thoughts regarding higher education and online engagement (Gustafsson, 2014). The aim of this study was also to capture different standpoints, arguments and opinions that are more easily captured in a group interview where the students trigger each other to speak (Gustafsson, 2014). A one-to-one single interview with young participants is conventional and could result in statements of poor quality hence adolescents put alone in a room with a recorder could make them shyer than among friends I feared. The subject of online engagement is not a topic that will reveal hidden and suppressed opinions among the students, but to reach further down into the subject than just an x in a survey box, focus group interviews was considered a better data collecting method for this study. The interviews were expected to be of value for both marketing and PR practitioners working with recruitment for higher education, foremost in Sweden. The aim of the focus group interviews was also to present a less ridged image of how and why students think like they do regarding social media and online engagement when searching for higher education (Kvale & Brinkman, 2014). The purpose to this study is therefore not to generalize the findings to a bigger population, as a survey study would advocate. The data could however be of value and show indications on how online engagement is functioning from the viewpoint of digital natives, which represents one of the bigger and most pro-active groups of the online social media society. Likewise to qualitative interviews, these focus group interviews aim to capture the students' personal and subjective opinions which can indicate tendencies in opinion and behaviour applicable to a bigger engagement context.

For this study, five focus groups containing six to eight participants per group were made. In total 32 participants formed part of this study. Two focus groups from Ängelholms gymnasieskola (upper-secondary school), two groups from Olympiaskolan and one group from Kristian 4s gymnasieskola. All groups were of mixed gender and all geographically situated in Scania. The selection of students were, likewise to the communicators, made by coincidence. Several upper-secondary schools in Scania were asked to participate, foremost schools with a social science and/or a communication emphasis, but only three answered or found the time to participate. The students themselves were however not always free of choosing whether to

participate in the focus group interviews or not, but placed there by the principal or teacher. This “enforcement” may have affected the result or at least made the un-willingly participant to stay silent during the interviews.

The purpose was to invite the students to an open conversation without much guiding from me as the moderator. The students should lead the discussion and I should only moderate and facilitate the conversation if necessary (Gustafsson, 2014). Even though the questions were asked in an open-ended way to fit the language of the focus group and to avoid misunderstandings, some of the groups did not open up as much as expected and did only answer the questions as short and briefly as possible without further expounding (Gustafsson, 2014). I believe however that this unobtrusiveness had more to do with lack of interest and lack of previous self-reflection regarding the subject, than modesty to speak one’s mind due to shyness for the group (Gustafsson, 2014). The students were clearly in agreement with their own social media habits and did not have had trouble speaking freely about this topic as such. But due to lack of interest or ignorance over the future and higher education decisions the discussion went poorly in the sense that I needed to moderate more than desired. A majority of the students interviewed for this study stated that they would not apply for university studies for autumn semester 2015, but most certainly will apply within the coming years. Something that could have had an influence on the results.

It should also be clarified that the interviews took part between March and the 15th of April, which is the last date for applying to university. This means consequently that the students spoke from assumptions if and when they would apply this April or not. The stories do not tell if the students actually went through with their applications or if those denying to apply in April did so after all. The accomplishment of the focus group interviews close to the 15th of April and the last day for applying to higher studies the upcoming autumn, may have influenced the statements of the interviewees. If the same students were asked half a year earlier they might yet not have been sure whether to apply or not. Neither would they know what programmes nor courses to choose since they at this point still would be a long way from graduation and far from the deadline of applying to university studies. A realization of interviews in an earlier state could on the other hand have given an impression of more eager and less school weary students with more interests in discussing a narrow future of university studies.

3.2.2 Interview participants

The request to participate in this study was sent to 15 different Swedish universities and university collages and more specifically addressed to their communication departments. Those answering yes to take part in the inquiry were the universities chosen for this study. The criteria requested by the participants from the universities was for them to be communicators working with national student recruitment. Due to the fairly small group of participants I had to make some changes in this criteria and include communicators of international student recruitment to participate. Regarding Stockholm- and Uppsala University, those with international student recruitment communicators, were accepted to participate in this study because of their close employment with communicators at the communication department of national recruitment. I also considered the importance of comparing the social media employment directed to Swedish versus international students. But this comparison could contribute to confusion and bring the study away from the subject emphasising on Swedish prospective students and made for a Swedish audience. There could in fact emerge conclusions pointing towards cultural oriented constructed reality differing digital communication on an international level from a national level. Due to this reasoning I decided to proceed along with communicators from both national and international recruitment departments.

Regarding the students, the inquiry was sent out to nine different upper-secondary schools around Scania demanding a participation of third year students from the field of social science. These age group was considered accurate to this study partly due to their current state of applying to higher education and likewise because of them forming part of the native digitals according to age. Out of nine schools, only three demonstrated an interest in participating. The reason to why I chose to limit the geographical area to upper-secondary schools within the region of Scania was mainly due to facilitate the interviews by not having to travel or do focus group interviews via Skype. I believe that focus group interviews for this subject would be best realized in person to capture the group dynamics even if online focus groups are becoming an adequate methodological option for research (Gustafsson, 2014).

The criteria on the focus groups of gymnasia students was third year students preferably studying programs in media- and communication and uncertain of applying for higher education before April 15th of . Due to difficulties in finding sufficient numbers of focus groups applicable to this criteria a decision to widen the target group to all third year students within the field of social science was made. The reason to choose students to represent prospective

university students and digital natives, and not include other kinds of prospective students such as active students interested in changing programme or alumni with thoughts of going back to school, was mainly due to facilitate seeking contact. By contacting principals and teachers to get in touch with participants in accordance with my criteria, the search went supposedly smoother than if I was to enter an upper-secondary school and ask the students myself. Through the chosen mode of procedure the teachers reserved time for me to realize the interviews during class time. This probably contributed to a larger amount of participants than a non-compulsory interview session would have brought and this mode of procedure could have had an effect on the statements and results in a way a voluntarily interview would have avoided. The factor of uniting students together in a focus group that would not voluntarily sit together could also have had an impact on the statements. It is certain that group constellations where strangers are unified become quieter and people tend to speak their mind in a less extent than if the group consisted of close friends (Gustavsson, 2014). In groups where the participants do not know one another there might emerge a spokesman whose voice is constantly heard whereas others stay silent. In some interviews made this notion was very evident whereas in other groups the majority of the participants spoke equally. It is however to be pointed out that the participants, even if forced to participate, they are not complete strangers to one another hence they have been studying the same subject during two and a half years. The silent participants would therefore, in this case, rather be considered a personal characteristics rather than due to fear of expressing one's mind in front of strangers. It is also to be considered that the knowledge emerging from the qualitative interview is bound to the social context where the interviews are taking place (Cassinger, 2014). This means that depending on group constellation, previous acquaintance among the students and the liberty of speaking one's mind can have an effect on the statements emerging from the focus group interviews.

The main social media channels referred to in this study are Facebook and Instagram since these are the channels most frequently used by both communicators in their work and students.

3.2.3 Qualitative analysis method

The methodological aim of this study is to explain the relation between personal opinions of the students and the executive social media employment of the university communicators. The emphasis is put on similarities between the students' expectations and demands, in relation to the strategic and tactical employment realized by communicators on social media. Most interesting is however to seek for differences and varying meaning between the group of

students and the group of communicators when it comes to how to engage and be engaged online. The aim is however to not solely compare student opinions with communicator opinions, but also to make note of differences in the employment of distinguished communicators and universities. This perspective of regarding exclusively the communicators is considered useful to find different ways of strategies and tactics used for digital communication and how practitioners reason regarding the importance of creating engagement.

The statements from the interviews will be organized into recurrent themes where interesting statements, opinions and facts will constitute the starting point of the chosen themes (Eksell & Thelander, 2014; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The method itself is of hermeneutic sort but more flexible and general. Instead of focusing on a certain part of the text assembled from the interviews, the aim is to find similarities or differences in the texts approaching the same themes. The themes in turn will be the ground on which the analysis is built (Fejes & Thornberg, 2009). Through categorizing the data it is possible to find, not only similarities but also differences. Nevertheless I stress that it is not the details distinguishing the cases that are interesting for this study, but rather the detected patterns that may explain a general trend in the empirical data (Eksell & Thelander, 2014). Through this methodological approach it will also be possible to find weaknesses in the analysis. To compensate these weaknesses a packaging and re-packaging of the empirical facts into the thematic boxes is considered helpful. Even though a general absolute truth is not the aim of this study, patterns of similar or distinguishing sort will contribute to knowledge regarding online engagement and public relation from a higher education recruitment perspective.

The recurrent themes are based on the research questions of the communicators planning, using and motivating a social media employment; the students' demands and expectations of the universities social media work; and how well the students' demands are met by the communicators. From these questions recurrent themes as *a necessity to be where the students are; to use current students as ambassadors; a layout change on Facebook; and a shyness among the students not wanting to be visual on social media* was detected. These are themes that have emerged through the analytical process of unpacking and re-packaging the data. The research questions have worked as guidelines to decide which statements and themes that should be prioritized whereas the recurrent themes were detected during the process. If I would have decided upon potential themes in advance, the risk of only focusing on statements and data confirming these themes would be too big, and the study would not be abductive. By

instead letting the themes emerge in the process I, together with Kvale & Brinkman (2009) stress the risk of only noticing data in favour of my personal subjective apprehension is minimized. From an abductive standpoint, it is also essential to avoid making conclusions based on solely data and without any previous research and a theoretical framework (Alvesson & Sköldböck, 2009). Themes and phenomenon are often too complex to simply be analysed as they are, and therefore a demand of theory influences to twist and turn the reasoning around, is important in order to obtain a truth based on both data and theory. In other words the analysis method is formed through a comparative approach where both the statements of students versus communicators, as well as communicators versus communicators are regarded. The recurrent themes emerging from the interviews are then compared and analysed in relation to theories regarding digital communication and online public relation in general and online engagement with emphasis on digital natives in particular.

It is also important to underline the differences between analytical or theoretical generalizations and statistical generalizations. This study is of qualitative sort and when speaking of generalization it is referred to the one of analytical or theoretical sort (Becker, 2008; Eksell & Thellander, 2014). Another challenge is not to put too much emphasis on details of statements made by a certain individual, since the methodological approach is to detect recurrent themes that could attain a “analytical generalization” (Eksell & Thellander, 2014). This fine line between generalization and in-depth detail, is the biggest challenge of this study and not a rare challenge in other qualitative studies. If the theoretical framework is not applicable on the result the analysis will be poor, and if the method is not pragmatically realized in the way it is supposed to in theory, the study will be weak (Eksell & Thellander, 2014). Just by being aware of these issues is however a step in the right direction to avoid such contradictions and pitfalls. Bearing these challenges in mind will also facilitate my choices of standpoints towards making a reasonable analysis.

3.3 Reflexivity

Since this study is based on social constructivist perspective one should avoid generalizations and rather search for a constructed meaning of truth and knowledge based on the context (Green 2014). Reflexivity in qualitative research is an aspect that gains more and more importance when wishing to attain validity. Through self-reflection the aim is to gain awareness of my own

conclusions, feelings and perceptions I make on the interview statements (Finaly & Ballinger, 2006; Darawsheh, 2014). A reflexive approach when analysing data also increases the transparency aspect and contributes to the probability to detect necessities of changes to make the findings credible (Finaly & Ballinger, 2006). It is also important to shed light upon the subjectivity that both researcher and participants provide to the study through personal assertions. Through a reflexive approach I realize that in qualitative studies the result is a product of both the participants' and the researcher's subjective perspectives (Darawsheh, 2014; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

It is also necessary to mention the language and translation challenges in this study when working simultaneously with Swedish and English. Not only do I, as a researcher interpret the statements of the interview participants on a personal level, but I must also translate my subjective assentation from Swedish to English. A qualitative study based on a reflexive methodology is not only the product of the opinions of the interviewee, but does also reflect upon the researchers or interpreters personal experiences and thought, which was explained in the paragraph of reflexivity and subjectivity. Even though I as a researcher interpret and translate a testimony from the interviews based on my own experiences, feelings and perceptions, my conclusions are not per se less accurate because they are subjective or made by a hermeneutic rather than a positivistic approach. As long as there exists a legibility and transparency together with statements correctly put into context, there exist an established tolerance to such intercultural interpretations (Cassinger, 2014).

3.4 Ethical considerations

The empirical data collected through interviews can make the interviewee feel exposed, especially when the interviewee speaks from an employee perspective, as the university communicators do, where information of the organisation is reviled from an inside perspective (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Four important aspects of ethics were considered to this study, confidentiality, informed consent, consequences and the role of the researcher (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). In the introducing part of the interviews with the students I made it clear that the students name would never be published in this study.

Regarding the interviews with the communicators, the situation was a bit different. Here the aim was to capture the university's or the communication department's way of working with social media communications, rather than personal opinions. On one hand this could make the interviewee more at ease speaking in general rather than in personal but at the same time the communicators leaped a risk when talking, to avoid mixing personal statements with statements of them as a professional communicator. I asked for the interviewees' consensus regarding publishing their names in the study, making clear that the statements would mainly be considered the words of the department or university, not the communicator personally.

4. To engage and to be engaged

This chapter is an analysis composed by three main themes related to the study's three research questions. The first theme approaches findings and analyses the statements of the university communicators and how they strategically plan, tactically use and motivate their social media employment to recruit prospective students. The second theme sheds light upon how students use social media and what demands they have on universities' social media employment when it comes to seeking information about higher education. The last theme will discuss the co-creation strategies of public relations which are closely related to online engagement.

4.1 University communicators – Planning, using and motivating social media employment

All ten university communicators interviewed argue that their social media employment is an important, not to say indispensable, part of the universities' communicative work towards current and prospective students. The main channel used is Facebook, closely followed by Instagram, Twitter and You Tube. The communicators stress that even if the value of being on social media is not evaluated in terms of measurements, they believe that social media has a great impact on the strategic communication objectives such as to *create awareness*, *build relations* and *strengthen* the university brand. In general all university communication departments do try to attain these three main objectives which also are objectives firmly established in public relation theory (Lipschultz, 2014; Philips & Young, 2009). Regarding plan, use and motivate a social media employment, the university communicators essentially express the same strategies, tactics and reasons to the employment, even if some differences do occur. This sub chapter is divided into three paragraphs where the first discuss the strategy planning, the second approaches the more tactical usage online, and the third shed light upon the motivation of a social media employment at Swedish universities.

4.1.1 Strategy planning and goal achieving

The strategy behind the universities' social media communication does not appear all clear at first glance. Only Uppsala- and Lund University handed over their communication departments' strategy plans during the interviews. The other five did barely speak of, neither did they describe their communication strategies in a concrete and contextualized way when

asked about the communication strategy. The current reorganisations within the communication departments that both Stockholm-, Göteborg-, Örebro- and Malmö University are facing at present, could be the reason to why a concrete communication plan was not presented. Some of the communicators also explained that new communication strategies were currently in progression. The majority of the communicators also spoke of using different strategies for different social media channels whereas Ekström from Uppsala University strongly argued against this statement. He stressed that it does not exist a so called *social media strategy separated* from the general communication strategy. Below two examples of different viewpoints of the matter are presented:

"The strategies are different for each channel. For YouTube we have not any clear strategy at this point. Regarding Facebook and Instagram we have strategies but I wonder if they differ from one another." (Larsson)

"Social media as such is not a strategy to us. What is a strategy is brand adoption and building relations. (...) We do not have a separate social media strategy. (...) All channels have a certain function and forms part of a communication strategy. Social media can for example fit well into the recruitment process where the objective is to increase engagement online." (Ekström)

Ekström demonstrates an interesting viewpoint which underlines an aspect that is not uncommon in communication contexts. Social media in itself is not a strategy, but a tool to help execute a strategy. Surely all communicator interviewees do know that social media in itself is not a strategy but due to terminological misuse, confusion arises which aggravates the communicators' line of argument regarding their communication strategy. According to Botan (2006) and Phillips & Young (2009) it is not rare to find strategy and tactic terms used as of equal signification. The same goes for tactics and tools. The communicators do however not use different strategies when it comes to Facebook in comparison to You Tube, hence both are used to reach the same goals: creating awareness, building relations and recruiting students. I do however stress that the communicators use different *tactics* for different channels. On Facebook, a bigger extent of textual information and shared links exist, whereas Instagram is rather about visual motion content. Larsson acknowledges above, that even though she and her colleagues supposedly are using different strategies for different channels, she cannot explicitly point out the differences between Facebook and Instagram strategies. An adequate doubt since it is not the strategies, but the tactics that differ the two channels from each other. This terminological confusion between strategy, tactics and tools may also be the reason to why some universities' communication plans do not appear clearly. If the knowledge about the

differences between strategy and tactics is not clear, it could have a negative impact on the design of the communication plan.

The communicator statements also witness about a distinction in usage of channels depending on target group. A notion firmly established within the field of public relations and confirmed by many PR researchers (Ashley & Tuten 2015; Kane et al., 2009; Martin & Todorov, 2010; Phillips & Young, 2009; Sheehan & Morrison, 2009; Smith & Place, 2013). Facebook and Instagram are directed to current and prospective students whereas Twitter communicates with other stakeholders such as scientists, co-workers and press. This differentiation between channels and target groups could also be a reason to why many of the communicators state they use different strategies for different channels. The target groups are different and so are the tactics, but the strategies are the same: to create awareness and to build relations regardless of if the target group is a student or the press. What differs the channels from each other can be revealed from questions of *what* is communicated and *how* it is communicated. The reasons to *why* the communication is communicated is the same in every channel, once again to create awareness and to build relations. *How* and *what* is communicated is on the contrary defined by the way the communicators speak to the audience and what kind of content is posted.

Strategic goals are also mentioned during the interviews, even if not always in terms of strategy. The majority of the communicators state that the social media channels are mainly used to *inspire* and *inform* the audience.

"On both Instagram and Facebook we try to create a dialogue and inspire the prospective students. On Facebook we also have an informative angle." (Roijer)

Inspiring and informative content can be seen as planned actions on social media to reach a given goal such as creating engagement or awareness (Roos, von Krogh & Roos, 2004). The main objective for both PR practitioners and marketers is to influence the public (Lipshultz, 2014) and through inspiring and informative content, the communicators stress they do reach the strategy goals of increased awareness and also make students engaged. Here however the strategy discussion slips into a tactic discussion about what is inspiring and informative content and how to get the audience to engage. The strategical *planning* is one thing and the tactical *executive* phase is another (Botan, 2006). A mix of both inspiration and information could be a good way to increase the chances of engagement and influence a bigger public, those looking

for pure information, and those interesting in the surroundings a student environment of the university. As the analysis precede into a more tactical discussion about how communicators use social media, we will however see proof of how inspiration related content is more engaging than the informatics one.

A study made by Hutton and Fosdick (2011) concluded that, when online, people tend to engage due to fairly selfish reasons such as to promote oneself, to share experiences with friends and family or to simply waist time. This is thereby one of the reasons to why theory speaks in favour of organisations to also be personal online (Philips & Young, 2009). When being personal, an organisation reveals the persons behind the big organisation and the audience can easier relate to the organisation on a personal level. If the goals of the university are in line with the goals of the prospective students the communication strategies are functioning well (Doorn et al., 2010). Asplund describes the recognition and personality factors' effect on engagement as follows:

"The engagement on social media is varying. What gets most viral spread is content about real people but also the recognisable factor." (Asplund)

As recognized by Asplund, to be personal is equal to using tactical storytelling and content about real people. This in turn has shown a positive effect on engaging audience online. Stories about real people brings audience and organisation closer and personify the organisation. The closeness to the public is not solely something the communicators aim for, but also an established theory for PR when wanting to engage a given audience (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; King, 2014; Phillips & Young, 2009). To getting even closer to prospective and current students online, the majority of the communicators explains that they are making use of current students as university ambassadors on Facebook and Instagram. With current students taking photos and describing their day as a student, the aim is to create a more engaged audience than if a communicator would try to explain what it is like being a student at the university. Hallberg gives an example of the differences between a post made by a current student and a post made by a communicator:

We communicators do not have the opportunity of going to Åre on the yearly student trip or grab a beer with friends at the student pub. This can however the students which make their work with our social media an important part of the university communication. (Hallberg)

Being personal and using current students as ambassadors could be described as a *co-creation strategy*. Even if the communicators themselves do not address this strategy as *co-creation*, the strategy is highly present in their strategical work. By having current students post content about personal happenings and stories on how and why they ended up on this particular course at that university, they give an insight and may help prospective students get inspired and together create a like-minded meaning of the university, the programs and education given there (Botan & Tylor, 2004; Van Ruler, 2013). By using *real* students and their personal stories about their *real life*, the communicators are also creating *creative strategies* (MacInnis, Moorman, & Jaworski, 1991; Sheehan & Morrison, 2009) and implementing storytelling in their social media channels. When using co-creation strategies where current students contribute with content, the university is taking one step closer to its public and is making progress attaching good relations with prospective students, something that a communicator from behind an office desk never could achieve in the same personal sense. A personal attachment between current and prospective students may, according to previous research, be one of the most lucrative ways for university to achieve the strategic goals of creating awareness, building relations and strengthen. Through co-creation and creative strategies the personal angle supposedly do invite the audience to engage, share and comment on the content and WOM is hopefully slowly taking place (Philip & Young, 2014; Lipschultz, 2014; Smith & Place, 2013; Gummesson, 1999). In a longer perspective these strategies may contribute to prospective students getting familiar with the university and do apply for a program which is also a return on investments for the online recruitment process of the university.

The strategic work behind the universities' social media employment contains of an *inspiring* and *informative* approach where co-creation strategies are central. This phenomenon will be discussed more profoundly in part 4.3. The confusion and misuse regarding strategy and tactic terminology, along with a probable lack of communication plan could have an impact on the universities' digital communication employment. If not having clear communication strategies that are applicable on both more traditional communication channels as well as on social media, the communicators work could be more damaging than helpful for the relation building process, leading to scenarios where the communicator post content of irrelevance to the audience and the audience stop listening and more important, stop engaging. It is not so much *how* and *what* to communicate as *why* communicating a given content in a given channels when talking about strategies. Why should certain content be communicated digitally and how should given goals

be achieved by this communication? And maybe most important of all, why should the audience listen, reflect and engage on that given content? These are questions I believe the communicators ought to reflect upon and try to answer before deciding anything about what content to publish in which channel.

4.1.2 The tactical misuse of social media

Examples on informative content are last date reminders to apply to university courses the following semester, reminders of dates to write the *Högskoleprovet* or statistics on how many applicants a university has received in comparison to previous years. Inspiring content is referred to posts with and by current students or on university buildings, surroundings or student corridors and events. Once again with an aim to create a personal insight to a day in the life of a student. The informative aspect is however a bit questioned by some of the communicator interviewees, meaning that the *social* part of social media gets lost if one gets too informative. Ekström approaches some criticism towards organisations usage of social media and the more commercialized one-way communication carried out on Facebook.

"I think that most universities but also companies misunderstand the function of social media when they see it as an information channel. Of course one should post relevant content that is of interest for the target group but they forget that it is the target group that should deliver the content." (Ekström)

Here Ekstrom points out the co-creation strategy discussed in previous paragraph, where current and prospective students ought to be those contributing to the content which is also advocated by Constantinides and Zink Stagno's study from 2011. Surely the idea behind social media, as well as in online public relations, is to interact with the audience rather than feeding them with information that sometimes looks more like advertisements than useful information. Ekström however confesses that it is much easier to get international students to engage and contribute to content than national students, something that he himself has witnessed in his work with both target groups. Why international students seem to be keener on engaging at university related content has nevertheless nothing to do with this study focusing on solely Swedish students. What we can conclude from the majority of the university communicators' statements is however that Swedish prospective students do not engage on university related content as much as the communicators had hoped:

“Even if the intention was to provide a more interactive Facebook page the students did not want to use it that way. (...) But in order not to let the channel self-die we have to keep on posting something and that is why the content is more informative.” (Sjövind)

Sjövind stresses that it is the students that do not have a need or an interest to interact with the university. Instead of an interactive channel where engagement is flowing Facebook has rather turned into an informative channel where the communicators talk and the audience supposedly is listening. It is not however only the audience’s supposed lack of interest in interacting that has prevented an interactive communication on social media according to the communicators. Facebook has during the past year changed the layout in favour for more marketing oriented, one-way communication. Facebook has created more room for marketing ads in sidebars and in the users’ newsfeed which has minimized room for interaction between audience and communicators on the organisations’ own walls. Both Hallberg and Ekström address this matter as one of the main reasons to why they believe Facebook in a short distance in the future will be either gone or transformed into a community of a much different target group than the one of young people like students:

“Unfortunately Facebook has changed the layout a lot lately which has made less room for comments and something that does not work in favour of the interaction. If Facebook does not do something about this I think the channel will be phased out or converted into a channel for a new type of target group.” (Hallberg)

As Findhal (2014) concludes in his report that the digital natives are no longer the biggest user group on Facebook. Adolescents and young adults are slowly moving forward to new channels such as Instagram and Snapchat which are platforms with less room for commercialized pop-up ads and instead focusing on private conversations and content sharing. A function that could be a reasons to why the digital natives are leaving Facebook. I believe, likewise to Botan and Taylor (2004) and Johnston (2014), that social media, and particularly channels as widely spread as Facebook, should first and foremost be focusing on a two-way communication and a PR approach that brings organisations closer to their audience. Rather than foster marketing oriented advertisement sharing, Facebook should facilitate the organisations public relation employment such as listen to the audience, find out what the stakeholders need and want from an organisation, its product and its services. Social media is social due to interaction whereas marketing ads tend to be almost exclusively one-way communication. To build relations with new prospective students and to strengthen the relation with current ones, Swedish universities are in greater need of interaction help from Facebook than suggestions on how to reach out to

a selective target groups through paid marketing ads. It stands clear that Facebook has money to earn in this commercialized favoured layout, but as the fear of Hallberg and Ekström tells, there will soon be no audience left to reach, not even for marketer's, if Facebook keeps up this one-way communication orientation.

Some communicators and especially those of the smaller universities nevertheless claim that they use social media such as Facebook precisely due to more transmission oriented mass media reasons. By using Facebook's own ads manager one can through a fairly small amount of money reach out to a larger group of people chosen by desired criteria of gender, age and location. The small universities that do not have a budget allowing advertisements in *Dagens Nyheter*, can use Facebook's marketing favoured layout and advertising services to spread a message to students:

"It has been a trend, also in the business world to go from traditional mass media marketing to social media. It is not evaluated but it feels like we benefit more from advertising on social media than in digital and traditional press." (Rosqvist)

The strategies and tactics behind a successful social media buzz are copied from the traditional mass media world (Kane et al., 2009; Smith & Place, 2013). Using Facebook as a mass media tool is considered cost effective for smaller universities such as Karlstad-, Malmö- and Örebro University that do not have as extensive marketing budgets as other bigger universities. The usage of social media as a one-way communication tool seems to be accepted by the university communicators even if it goes against the fundamental idea of using Facebook as an interactive channel as stated by communicators above. Instead of using Facebook as an online public relation tool, to create awareness and built relations, the smaller universities have moved away from this idea to a marketing oriented employment feeding stakeholders with commercialized oriented information without listening and responding to the audiences' questions.

The university communicators' tactical use of social media has somehow turned into a misuse. As a replacement to facilitating an interactive environment, Facebook has lately turned into a more transmission communicative channel, advocating the voice of the sender but gives little space for the audience to comment and publish content on a Fan page. This is not an unfamiliar problem for the communicators and the majority of those acknowledging this issue are struggling with finding solutions to be less one-way oriented. Meanwhile they however proceed

posting content that does not engage, of fear that the channel otherwise will die. Part of the responsibility could be put on Facebook for changing the layout in a fairly engagement unfriendly way, but then again, if the communication is not working as desired on Facebook due to its structure, maybe the channel is not the accurate forum to carry on with the digital communication. I stress that the solution is not about cling firmly to a channel which is no longer suitable for the cause. If the channel has changed in an unbeneficial way for both organisation and audience according to interactive criteria, the only solution is to abandon channel or re-think target group or re-think purpose of the communication circling in this channel. It is nothing but waste of both time and money proceeding with something that is not fulfilling its purpose. A purpose which according to the communicators' would be an interactive environment where communicators and audience contributes equally to a two-way communicative dialogue on Facebook with the goals of creating awareness and building solid relations with prospective students.

4.1.3 The motivation of social media employment – to be where the target group is.

As learned in previous subchapters, all communicators give the same goal related reasons for their digital communication to create awareness, build relations and through this recruit new students. In order to accomplish these goals in a digital context, all communicators motivates a social media employment through the same statement “*need to be where the students are*” - refereeing to the students, both current and prospective ones:

"If the number of applicants is clearly connected to our social media presence is hard to say but there is however a value for the university to be on social media since this is where our students are." (Asplund)

The above quote is only one examples of many and clearly pin out the reasons to a social media employment by being close to the audience. Theories regarding a desired closeness to one's audience and get to know one's target group personally, is considered as a key factor in the field of online public relations (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; King, 2014; Phillips & Young, 2009) which makes the communicators' statement on the subject reasonable. The problem is however that being close does not assure that relations are built more that the message sent, is received and interpreted as desired. It is certain that if you have an audience engaging through liking or following the fan page, the message most probably will appear in their news feed. But whether the message is noticed, reflected upon or making the respondent engage is not a certainty. This

notion Asplund sheds light upon in the above statement, how to measure and prove that the social media employment actually demonstrates an increased awareness, built and deepened relations and in the long run, recruit students. Several of the interviewed communicators acknowledge the same problem. Notwithstanding the issue, no means has been made by the communicating departments to evaluate whether the employment has an impact on relation building and awareness creation. With means I mean focus group interviews or surveys with prospective and current students that could indicate whether or not an online employment contributes to the universities RoI. Even though all communicators interviewed agree upon *why* it is important to be present on social media, the opinions differ regarding the motives *if* and *how* the employment has an influence on the strategic goals. Below two examples of the two different viewpoints are presented:

"It stands to reason to be on social media and it stands to reason that prospective students are checking out social media pages and hopefully even ours." (Nilsson)

"It is not as simple to say that just because one is present on Instagram one has reached out to the target group out there. These (social media) channels are today equal to traditional media, since they have grown and become so tricky." (Sjövind)

One of the arguments presume that the closeness is the key factor to introduce a relationship with the audience, something that is true, but only partly. Facebook has, as concluded earlier, turned into a more mass media look-alike tool that no longer gives any guarantees of reaching out to all the followers of a Fan page. Ekström and Hallberg do likewise to Sjövind, address the fact that directing ads to prospective students does not necessarily mean that the message is received, read and understood as desired by the sender. Ekström explains that a few years ago the viral spread of a message posted at Uppsala University's Facebook page reached almost all 10.000 followers, according to Facebooks own statistics provided on a Fan page. Today Uppsala University has 42.000 followers but only 8.000 of them do make notice of their posts. At the same time one should be cautious with relying too much on Facebook's own statistics since there are no guarantees that the indicators of gender, age and geographical location are accurate presented by the users online. It is not certain that only because a user on Facebook has stated she is a female, lives in Stockholm and are 19 years old, this is the truth. Online today anyone can be anything he or she prefers and without any substance of truth what so ever. This person presented above could just as well be a 42 year old male, living in Sidney, which

complicates the whole measurement of audience on social media today (Tsikerdekis & Zeadally, 2014). A necessity of being close to the audience and target group is not a ruthless motivation, but if not being able to confirm that the target group is the actual target group, the closeness argumentation is left without substantial value.

The closeness to the audience is also related to certain groups of audiences. The motives on what target group the universities desire to communicate with do differ some. Lund University for example, are focusing exclusively on prospective students with the motivation that the department in charge of the social media channels is the *division for national recruitment and marketing*. Other universities such as Malmö are instead focusing primarily on current students with the following motivation:

"We want to show we care about our students and that we know it is hard to make the money do as a student. Therefore we have initiated a challenge where current students can win scholarships for smaller investments such as fixing their broken bike. The hope is also to get this campaign to reach out to prospective students and we have already seen an effect on this." (Rosqvist)

By focusing on the current students that most certainly do follow their university's Facebook page, Malmö demonstrates a tactic that can reach out to prospective students through showing care for a current and "poor" student. As Rosqvist explains, this is a relation building tactic that shows that Malmö University care about their current students. Tactics that both triggers a need to engage, contributing to content and helps spread the word and a WOM (Ashley & Tutan, 2005; Botan, 2006; Constantinides & Zink Stagno, 2011; Philips & Young, 2009). By motivating current students to engage and take a viral part in this money gaining competition, a message about Malmö University is spread widely throughout different Facebook networks. Within these networks there is then hopefully prospective students that are not actively following Malmö on Facebook but any how make notice of this competition as awareness is spread about Malmö to others besides the universities' own followers.

Ones again the motivation of a social media employment seems to have sprung from an idea of a traditional mass-media communication perspective likewise to the transmission model. The desired closeness to the audience is somewhat the biggest and most important motive for an online employment according to the communicators. This to me indicates a lack of

understanding of both relation building online and an insight of what social media and online communication is about. In order to create relations it is obvious that one has to understand and get to know the audience. But just because both parties are present in the same viral world, it is not evident that they are communicating with each other, neither one, nor two ways. To get to know the public and to form solid and long lasting relations there has to be an exchange of communication so that, in this case the university, can learn about the students' desires and needs. A good tactic to do so is through creating engagement. Engagement is about commitment, for both parties and an exchange is formed. When the stakeholder engage on a content it is because it arose emotions or because of receiving information. In exchange the organisation's message is spread forward to others, potentially new stakeholders. If however the content does neither arise emotions nor provide information of interest, there will be no exchange, no win-win and no engagement. Without engagement and interaction it will be difficult for the organisation to get to know the audience which would make the closeness to the audience worthless. Because just by existing side by side without a two-way communication, will not bring knowledge about the other party.

4.2 Students – Expectations and demands of universities social media employment in the search for higher education

The following part will present and analyse the findings gathered from focus group interviews with third year students. The first theme approaches the students' usage of social media in their search for information about higher education. The second theme is about the students' expectations and demands on the university communication on social media.

4.2.1 Usage of social media

A majority of the students interviewed, except for one girl, declare they do not follow neither have they visited a Swedish university's social media channel like Facebook or Instagram. The students argue that they do not expect universities to be on social media but they neither find it negative:

“It is not necessary for the universities to have a Facebook page but it is a plus if it is funny. (...) The home page is where I go first when looking for information about programs and courses” (Kristian den 4es Gymnasieskola)

Why the students do not expect to find universities on social media could be related to the fact that most of the students do not see a necessity in searching for information about a university on Facebook for example. The students rather go directly to a university's web page in search for information and it is from the web page they expect to find the information they need. The entertaining aspect seems however to be a general recurrent theme when it comes to the students personal pleasure and usage of social media. As the conclusions tell from Hutton and Fosdick's study (2011), stating that people online tend to engage foremost due to selfish reasons, the student statements witness about the same. The above quote is a good example of what many of the other students say, that Facebook is used primarily to share private and internal messages, jokes and movies. They also stress that they hardly ever take notice of ads popping up in newsfeed and sidebars, at least not consciously. When it comes to engage on other's posts, they do so mainly if the content is of personal or internal nature, whereas liking and commenting content posted by organisations are rarely made. Many of the students also acknowledge that this behaviour of not interacting and engaging on posts unless they are highly personal, might be a new ongoing trend, which was not the case a few years ago. They describe how they only three years earlier, at an age of 15, posted all kinds of Facebook statuses from what they had eaten to what music they listened to. Now the students say they feel more restricted about showing others on social media what they do and think. As the discussion moves forward into engaging on university content the reasoning is the same:

"Imagine if you like a lot of universities' Facebook pages and then you are not accepted to neither of these universities. What an embarrassment!" (Olympiaskolan)

"It is most interesting to follow Rönneskolan since it is where I go to school right now"
(Ängelholms Gymnasieskola)

Several other statements, similar to the two above, expressing a shyness or non-interest in liking, sharing or in general engaging on content from a university where one still does not study, are expressed during the interviews. According to theories of online public relations arguing about the necessity for organisations and their practitioners to be personal online (Hutton & Fosdick, 2011), it seems to be the other way around for private users. When organisations work towards being more transparent on social media posting content of a personal angle, the private users instead have turned more passive in posting personal posts, and in particular the younger Swedish users. Many students also argue like the girl from Ängelholms gymnasieskola, that it makes more sense to follow their gymnaie school's

Facebook page until graduation and first when accepted to a university, start to follow their Facebook page. The students also explain that following a university as a newly arrived current student makes more sense from a networking perspective getting linked to class and institution mates.

The kind of shyness of being too visible on social media seems to be a general opinion among the students. The shyness can also be an explanation to why reports about social media usage, such as the one made by Findahl (2014), presents a decreasing Facebook use within this student age group, in favour for more private channels such as Instagram and Snapchat. The students also conclude, after been showed Lund- Mamö-, and Karlstad University's Facebook pages as examples, that the content posted do seem more directed to current students than of importance to students. The information posted on Facebook, of relevance to prospective students, they could just as easy find on the university's web page the students argue. As seen in the previous discussion about the communicators, the initial reasons to a social media employment were to create interaction and engage prospective students online. But as recognized by the communicators the students feel differently. Unlike the desires of the communicators, the students prefer private conversations such as phone or e-mail to the parties concerned.

"E-mail contact feels more serious. If you ask a question on Facebook you cannot be sure about who is answering you." (Ängelholms Gymnasieskola)

Once again the privacy aspect seems to be valued highly among the younger audience. As an 18 year old student you do not wish to go public with all your questions and doubts about your future, including what to do after graduation. It is almost as if theories regarding public relations, about being personal; using creative strategies of storytelling and being transparent, has made one second turn when it comes to the behaviour of the digital natives. Instead of being personal, sharing information and be actively present online, this target group reverses into a more passive and shy approach where trends speak in favour of not engaging at all. Many of the students also confess that they more frequently use Flash back to search anonymously for information, among others even about program and courses, rather than go public on Facebook, even though the students admit they know that Flash Back related content is not a reliable source of information.

The shyness and restriction to engage online that we see among the prospective students is interesting, not least in comparison to how social media is constructed around online engagement and how universities are motivating and planning their social media employment. The fact that the students also reveal an interest to forums like Flash back where the anonymity is valued, demonstrates a complete contradiction to how social media is constructed. Could there be a problem if the organisation's social media usage is contradictory to the usage of the audience's? According to theories organisations should be active, create engaging content, be honest, personal and transparent. This is however quite contradictory to the students' behaviour of being passive, non-engaging, private and anonymous. Is these contradictory digital behaviours one of the reasons to why digital communication has turned more one-way oriented than desired or is the engagement hysteria over rated? These questions will be discussed further in chapter 5 along with the end discussion.

4.2.2 Expectations & demands

If students do not expect universities to be present on social media, what do they expect? As described above, an informative webpage easy to handle is more than enough according to the students. If an interest for a university in general or a program in particular exist, the students begin their search on Google and onward onto the homepage of the university. The students do however assert that some kind of inside information from current students is of value when taking decisions about a university or another. What a course is like and what one can become after graduation are examples of questions the students are keen on to learn. A suggestion about making the homepage more interactive with course ratings and integrated fields for comments is proposed by some students.

"Thera are many ways of making webpages more social-media-alike with possibilities to interact directly on the webpage." (Kristian den 4es Gymnasieskola)

This would make it possible to merge the function of the interactive social media with a more informative and traditional home page they argue. With reference to webpages rating hotels, computers or games, this idea of integrating interaction and information on a university webpage also gives a shy prospective student the opportunity to leave an anonymous comment or question on the actual webpage of a particular course or a program. It also makes it possible for current students to rate courses and programs and answer prospective students' questions directly on the webpage.

What the prospective students do expect from the university is indeed a personal approach, but not online. As seen above, the students do not expect universities to be on social media, and therefore they do not have any particular say in expectations or demands about what universities should post on social media. They believe that the social media sites are more directed to current students than to them as prospective students:

“There is nothing negative about a university not being present on Instagram. One does not expect to find them there (...) Maybe it can be relevant for current students to follow their universities on Instagram,” (Ängelholms gymnasieskola)

It seems consequently that the students do not expect or demand much of the university communicators’ social media employment, since prospective students are not yet forming part of the university world. What students are demanding and expecting has however little to do with online communication and more to do with public relations in real life. This has notwithstanding not much to do with the essence of this study but I do feel it is important to shed light upon this matter since similar statements are recurrent in several focus group interviews. The statements denote a certain disappointment of expectations that the students feel are not satisfied by the universities in terms of communicating what they have to offer the prospective students:

“I think it is lousy that not even the universities close to here come and visit us or arrange an exhibition on Helsingborg Arena about their university.” (Olymppiaskolan)

A demand of events where universities invite or travel out to upper-secondary schools to spread a message in person about program and courses and by this invite to a dialogue with the gymnasium students is expressed. In difference of being personal online to make prospective students engage, create awareness and build relations, the students demand the universities being personal through invitations to an insight of the university world. What makes these statements of value to shed light upon is the fact that the universities already *do* offer these kinds of events. Many of the universities arrange events at the universities called Open House and the majority also do travel around Sweden with the yearly *SACO* exhibition. If the demands exist and the means to satisfy them too, why does such a disappointment appear in so many of the interviews?

How relationship should be established is a question addressed in this subchapter. Where the expectations of the university communicators circles around building an online oriented relationship with prospective students, the students demands a different way of getting in contact with universities. The prospective students do, in the context of higher education, demand in private communication alternatives which are in line with their demonstrated online shyness. They do not have a need of building online relations with universities, but they do ask for possibilities to interact in real life with both communicators as professors and current students. Once again a contradiction between what universities do and what students need is occurring. It seems easy to talk about strategies and tactics to build relationships but what if one of the parties lack a need in forming online relations? Should organisations then settle for only creating awareness of their existence through a mass-media oriented communication on social media? The first step to establishing relations is to make others aware of one's existence. If social media can help contributing to create awareness of the existence of universities, and foremost the smaller unknown ones, maybe a more one-way oriented communication not demanding engagement but which only purpose is to create awareness, maybe the communicators are accurate in proceeding with their social media employment even if the students do not engage. The first step to build relations could be initiated through awareness creation whereas the actual contact is preformed away from the viral world, in real life just as the students demand.

4.3 Relation building through co-creation

This last subchapters will discuss more profoundly how communicators rationalize in favour of PR oriented co-creation strategies with the aim of building relations with prospective students. A reasoning about the problems with co-creation will be conducted along with opportunities.

As described in the introduction chapter, the study of Constantinides and Zink Stagno (2013) demanded some sort of co-creation strategies where current and prospective students would help building and disseminating the university image online. Even if not referred to as co-creation strategies the ideas behind it is present in the statements of the university communicators. Here below Hallberg points out the importance of stakeholders' contributing with their version of what the university is and stands for:

"The value of being on social media is, according to my subjective opinion, enormous. Partly due to our limited marketing budget but also due to that our own followers contribute to content which make it more shareable and genuine." (Hallberg)

We have already seen examples where communicators indicate a need and a desire to use social media channels with co-creation based strategies. Malmö University described the potential in inviting current students to describe their needs and win a price as a tactic to reach out to prospective students through the networks of the current ones. Karlstad University along with Lund University have introduced students to be in charge of their Instagram account with purpose to get closer to the current students and let them tell their story of what it is like to study at university. These are all reasoning on how to form a mutual understanding and build an image of an organisation that reflects both the perspective of current students' as well as the communicators' (Botan & Tylor, 2006). The communicators rationalize about co-creation on social media, and foremost Facebook, where all three parties are important to the interactive communication performed. The idea is that the communicators themselves post information, current students share inspiring content regarding the student life and prospective students engage on the content with likes, comments and questions to be answered. Related to co-creation is the need of cooperation which Komlos Gill explains below:

"There is indeed a value of being on social media not at least due to cooperation which is one of the universities overall goals. What it is all about is to show what SU is too many different types of stakeholders." (Komlos Grill)

Regarding the social media employment it all comes down to the co-creation of what the university is and what it could do for different stakeholders. It is obvious that many communicators do look upon their Facebook channel feeling a defeat of not being able to make the channel as co-created and alive as planned. It is probable that a co-created Facebook page would be more sharable and in turn increase the engagement, but what happens if the interest for co-creation among the audience does not exist? What happens if, as we seen proof of, an interest to engage do not exist on social media in general and at university generated content in particular? Does the whole idea of social media then fall? Can there be social media without engagement and co-creation? Or does it all comes down to attracting the right target group within the right channel in order to generate co-creation and engagement? This study along with previous research do indicate that the Facebook channel no longer is the most lucrative forum for the universities' target group of prospective students. At least not if the purpose is to get

them involved in co-creation and to engage. Should then the goals of the university communication, such as create awareness and build relations with prospective students, be carried out elsewhere, in other channels or even outside of the digital world?

The questions about engagement together with co-creation online have turned central issues in this study. The relation between social media and engagement seem to be evident in order for social media employment to work as desired. But if there is no engagement maybe it is time to re-think the whole employment and for the communicators to ask themselves if the workload put on social media is overrated since neither ROI nor established relations with prospective students is measurable by their social media employment. One need to ask oneself why try to engage an audience with little or no interest to be engaged.

5. Conclusions & end discussion

In this last chapter the conclusions made from this study will be summarised and put into a wider perspective regarding online public relations, digital communication and above all online engagement.

5.1 Concluding remarks

The purpose of this study was to explain, contextualize and problematize how online engagement is accomplished through strategies and tactics based on digital communication that would contribute to build relations and create awareness with potential new stakeholders. The main phenomenon recurrently present in this study is *engagement*. In order for organisations to get to know their audience and build relations, engagement is important to achieve. Without engagement there is no interaction, and without interaction no two-way oriented communication perspective can be achieved. It therefore appears reasonable to conclude that engagement is a key factor within digital communication with purpose of building online relations on social media. Consequently this indicates that regardless of the work and effort put on strategy and tactic planning, it is still the engagement factor that determines whether the message is communicated, spread and acted upon. Meaning that independent of carefully considered strategies and tactics it all comes down to whether the content in fact creates engagement or not. One may follow theories on how to establish relations with stakeholders online through being personal and use co-creation strategies to engage, but if the stakeholders are not sensing a win in engaging, even the best strategies and tactics are worthless.

The discussion about a one-way communication perspective versus a two-way perspective has also been present in this study, much in owe to the phenomenon of engagement. A well-functioning engagement imply an interactive communication where both parties are equally given space to express meanings and opinions. With both parties I refer to organisation as one, and stakeholders as the other. This concludes that an interactive communication on social media goes hand in hand with engagement. A more traditional mass-media oriented communication from a transmission perspective on the other hand, is not compatible with engagement since the emphasis is put on foremost the voice of the sender. This reasoning brings us to the main question regarding online public relations and digital communication, can social media exist

without engagement? In this study we have come to learn about the struggle and issues that Swedish universities are facing regarding their online communication. We have learned that, both stakeholders; represented by prospective students and organisation; represented by university communicators, denote of a lack of an interest to engage on the universities' social channels. This has forced the communicators turn their Facebook channel in particular, into a forum of the very one-way oriented communication that is not considered compatible to engagement and interaction. A catch 22 situation is occurring and difficult to escape. Even if the communicators desire a two-way oriented communication to be performed on Facebook and are trying with all possible means to create engagement it is not possible as long as the audience do not desire to engage. The lack of interest in engaging has made the communication one-way oriented, and until engagement is achieved there will be no interactive communication.

Engagement is according to me a symbiosis between two or several parties who all find a win in taking part and engaging. If there is nothing to gain, there will be interest to engage. As I see it, the online content either has to trigger emotion with the stakeholder, or result in some kind of price, through a competition or similar. If the content is purely informative, the chance of creating engagement is small. This indicates consequently that mass-media communication, which mainly contains of informative content, will not create engagement and is therefore always domed to be one-way oriented. It is not however suggested that one-way oriented communication has no function on social media. If aiming to solely create awareness online and make an impression with the stakeholder without a demand of engaging, the one-way communication perspective as an accurate choice. This approach does however limit the very signification of the social component in social media as it disregards the importance of engagement as a mechanism of being social online. Without engagement social media does not stop existing but by limiting the social part in social media left is nothing but media, a synonym to the very mass-media oriented communication that is the contrary to the two-way and interactive communication environment organisations wanted when they once entered the viral world of social media. If online public relations is about not only creating awareness but also building relations and getting closer to one's audience with purpose to interact and learn, then engagement is indispensable to both social media and a two-way communication perspective.

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Attachments

Interview guide – Focus group interviews with upper-secondary school students

Introduction questions:

- Are you going/planning on going to university?
- When? (Near future or someday?)
- Have you decided what to study? (Program, faculty, course?)
- If not, why?

(Explain social media briefly)

Function of social media

- Have you ever visited/following social media sites of Lund or Malmö (or any other Swedish social media site)? (Instagram, Facebook, twitter, YouTube)
- Why? Why not?
- What would make you visit them?

Content and value

(Show Facebook page of Malmö, Lund and Karlstad)

- What is your impression of them?
- Why?
- Does anything of the content on these pages make you feel more interested in applying to this university?
- Why? Why not?

Engagement and information

- Talking about engaging content, is anything on their pages engaging according to you?
- If you would search for a university on social media without finding a fan page, what would you think of that university?
- Why?

- If you were interested in knowing more about a university, where would you start searching?
- Why?
- If you were interested in getting in touch with the university, where would you turn?
- Why?
- Why/why not Facebook?

Universities on social media

- Why do you think universities are present at social media channels?
- How important do you think it is for a university to be on social media? Why? Why not?
- What do you expect from a university's social media channel?
- What would or what motivates you to study on a university earlier than expected?

Round up questions

- Have you anything more you would like to add or ask?

Interview guide – University communicators

Introduction questions:

1. What kind of social media does university X use?
2. For how long have the university been active on these social media channels?
3. How long have you personally been working with this?
4. How many co-workers are handling the social media channels and how? (One at each channels, mix, other?)

Goals

5. What goals does the university have with its presence on social media?
6. Why is social media presence important to the goal of the university in general?
7. Do different channels have different goals?
8. How are these goals related to the university's big goals?

Strategy

9. What strategy lies behind the social media presence of X university?
10. Is this strategy applicable on all the different channels in use?
11. How is the strategy planned? (What is actually taken into consideration, important to take into consideration?)
12. How is the strategy implemented?
13. How can the strategies used on social media be seen as an important part of achieving the big goals of the university?

Engagement

14. How do the university try to engage prospective students?
15. How is engagement (from prospective students) on university X's social media sites?
16. How could the university think and act to reach a higher engagement among prospect students?
17. How is this attached in the online communication strategy?

Value

18. What value does university X find in being present on social media?

19. What are the main reasons of being present on social media?

Expectations

20. What does the university expect by a social media presence?

21. Has these expectations been fulfilled? How?

22. What is the plan to fulfil the expectations in the future?

23. How does the communication department feel about a future presence on social media?

24. Is the climate changing and where and how will the communication department work in this area in the future?

25. Is there a future for universities on social media?

Round up questions

26. Do you have anything to comment on or add?