In the following report, Hanover Research explores best practices in social media and digital marketing in China.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

As Chinese students increasingly look online for information to aid the college application process, it is imperative that Western higher education institutions provide information that is pertinent to and that directly targets Chinese students. While the scope of digital media tools is immense, institutions must use tools carefully. In this report, Hanover Research discusses best practices in social media and web marketing in China. In Section I, we review literature on best practices in student recruitment marketing, beginning with an overview of the target audience in China and an introduction to the top social media platforms used by high school and college students. In Section II, we provide short case studies of six institutions that have embraced social media as a method of recruiting international students from China. First, we summarize the overall key findings.

KEY FINDINGS

TAILORING MARKETING MATERIALS TO THE AUDIENCE

- Institutions should amplify their reputation as being high-quality, and should also take care to thoroughly explain application processes to less prepared applicants who may not understand the basics of admissions protocols in other countries.
- Particular aspects that should be emphasized in marketing materials and social media posts include ranking and reputation (particularly for well-regarded academic programs), overall quality, safety, and the opportunity for an international experience.
- While social media marketing is intended to reach applicants themselves, institutions must understand that their parents are likely to have a critical role in decision-making. Parents are more interested in qualities such as employment prospects upon graduation, social and emotional support services, the range of programs offered, and possibilities for migration.

POPULAR SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

- The social media platforms that appear to be most promising for reaching out to Chinese applicants include Sina Weibo (similar to Twitter), Renren (similar to Facebook), and Youku (similar to YouTube).
- Institutions that take care to understand the unique properties of Baidu (similar to Google) can ensure that their pages receive traffic from interested students. Strategies for harnessing Baidu’s capabilities include using common search terms (for example, “top UK university”), using a localized microsite, hosting the website within the firewall, and keeping important information at the top of the website.
LAUNCHING AN EFFECTIVE DIGITAL MARKETING CAMPAIGN

- Social media sites should be updated regularly and posts should link back to the institution’s website. Content must include key information on admissions criteria (including upcoming deadlines), program options, and other guidelines and requirements. Stories about recent events on campus and testimonials from current and former students complement the logistical information and provide a more personal side to an institution’s web presence.

- Direct communication is one of the most critical elements of an effective digital marketing campaign. Social media platforms should not be one-sided, but instead should inspire dialog to keep “followers” interested.

- Prospective students should be presented with accessible options for asking questions of admissions staff and student representatives, and responses should be both prompt and personal.

TRENDS AMONG HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERS

- Most institutions use more than one social media site, and Sina Weibo, Renren, and Youku appear to be the most common. It is also common for institutions to use a messaging or telephone program such as QQ or Skype.

- Most of the institutions in this analysis hired a current or former student to manage their social media sites. English content is typically selected by the marketing or admissions office at the university and then translated by the social media coordinator. Institutions often employ Mandarin speakers to create a meaningful presence on China’s social media platforms as well as to field any questions from potential applicants.

- Though most institutions did not explicitly describe data collection procedures, it appears that institutions gauge the success of their social marketing campaigns by the number of applicants from China as well as the number of followers on their social media platform.
SECTION I: BEST PRACTICES IN STUDENT RECRUITMENT MARKETING IN CHINA

In the following pages, we provide an introduction to student recruitment marketing in China. We begin by describing research on motivations of Chinese students seeking international programs in order to assist universities in highlighting information found to be important to the target audience. From there, we discuss current trends in social media use in China and provide an overview of the top social medial platforms for recruiting international students. Finally, we introduce best practices in integrating social media use into an institution’s digital marketing campaign, with a focus on strategies for fostering communication and dialogue with potential applicants.

UNDERSTANDING THE AUDIENCE

An institution should consider the cultural context in which it presents its brand online and must be aware of the types of information in which Chinese students are most interested. In the following paragraphs, we discuss some of the key characteristics of the target audience.

World Education Services (WES), an international education intelligence firm,\(^1\) divides international students into four main segments based on their preparedness for higher education and their financial resources.\(^2\) The segments are defined as follows:

- **Highfliers**: high academic preparedness, high financial resources (32%)
- **Explorers**: low academic preparedness, high financial resources (28%)
- **Struggling**: low academic preparedness, low financial resources (21%)
- **Strivers**: high academic preparedness, low financial resources (19%)

As shown in Figure 1, the majority of international students from China (60 percent) have high financial resources, while only about half (51 percent) have high academic preparedness.

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\(^1\) “About WES.” World Education Services. http://www.wes.org/about/

The particular motivations of the two more affluent groups are explained in a 2011 article by Ann White, director of the Hong Kong-China division of the Institute of International Education. White explains that Chinese students turn to international institutions with two main goals in mind, depending on their competitiveness as applicants.3

Among “highflier” students, those seeking a “top-tier” education tend to prefer U.S. undergraduate institutions “as they offer the optimal route to U.S. graduate schools, viewed as being of top quality.” White notes that British universities are also preferred as they “appear to be perceived as adding social polish.” Most “highfliers” know what they want and how to get it: these applicants “have specific fields and goals in mind, and will independently research options and probably consider the United States first for undergraduate study. Typically these high-fliers are clear and confident about which field and majors they want.”4

Meanwhile, the affluent yet less academically prepared “explorers” group conducts its search for higher education with the goal of seeking an alternative to the competition at home. These students are more open to different countries as well as fields of study, and may consider a variety of institutions in a number of destinations. White explains that “explorers” are less likely to understand the application process than their “highflier” peers and may feel “bombarded with sometimes misleading information from local agents.” These students are most responsive to institutions that appear “helpful and friendly to international students,” particularly if they offer special ESL programs.5

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
In most cases, the decision to attend an international university is a calculated one for both highfliers and explorers: students who believe they are unlikely to be admitted to a top Chinese institution choose to study abroad because they “think the cachet of an international degree will help them more than a degree from a second- or third-tier Chinese university.” These students tend to be “very aware of different countries’ options and paths to post-study employment opportunities” and generally prefer (in descending order) the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. Overall, foreign institutions can cater to both groups by highlighting positive outcomes for students, including employability, graduate school placement, internships, job prospects, and alumni networking opportunities.

**Most Influential Factors**

Paul Hoskins writes in *The Guardian’s* Higher Education Network blog that an institution must be “selective in its choice of featured people, places, products, and performance. The rationale for including facts and accompanying messages around these categories must be evidence based – best, or better, than the rest– as well as wrapped and presented in a culturally-nuanced layer of understanding.” Below, we highlight the top factors found to be influential in making decisions about where to enroll in international programs:

- An institution’s **ranking and reputation** are consistently cited as among the most motivating factors for Chinese students and families; Chinese families particularly favor institutions that others have “heard of.” Top ranked institutions, as well as institutions with a history of accepting Chinese students, are most well-known, though Tom Melcher, Chairman of Zinch China, argues that an institution can improve its brand awareness through aggressive marketing in China. Chinese families are also highly influenced by university rankings, though they may not understand the differences between specialty lists (e.g., liberal arts colleges, regional master’s colleges, etc.). As such, Zinch International, the college admissions portal, emphasized in its 2011 presentation that institutions should highlight any “ranking-like statistics even if unique to the program.”

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6 Ibid.
   http://www.ed.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.38061!/fileManager/Understanding%20Student%20Recruitment%20in%20Mainland-China%20A%20Case%20Study%20Jan%202010_.pdf
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
Along the same lines, the perceived quality of an institution – in terms of the education and also the qualification – is a highly influential factor.\(^\text{14}\) A 2009 survey of Chinese students from INTO Knowledge found that the **quality of teaching** was the second highest-rated factor that influencing mainland students’ choice of institution.\(^\text{15}\)

An institution’s **safety** is another quality that should be highlighted in marketing materials, particularly in more urban environments with more frequent incidences of violent crime.\(^\text{16}\) Chung et al. reported in a 2009 study that “the perception of New Zealand as a safe and harmonious society was critical” for Chinese students choosing New Zealand as an educational destination.\(^\text{17}\) In INTO Knowledge’s 2009 survey personal safety and security was the top rated influencing factor.\(^\text{18}\)

Although the quality of the institution is important, several sources have indicated that Chinese students highly value the **opportunity for an international experience**, and this is most available at an institution where Chinese students are in the minority.\(^\text{19}\) In that regard, Zinch International argues that institutions should highlight low international student enrollments as providing a “real overseas experience.”\(^\text{20}\)

**FAMILY INFLUENCE**

It is in the best interests of institutions to expand the reach of their marketing efforts to a wider array of decision-makers, according to several sources. White writes that “in many cases, it is the parents who have the final say as to which country and which institution the student should apply.”\(^\text{21}\) Zinch China further supports this finding, asserting that institutions “need to focus marketing on parents and use the child as a ‘marketing channel.’”\(^\text{22}\) The figure below was included in Zinch China’s presentation at the National Association of International Educators (NAFSA) 2011 Annual Conference Different decision makers, and compares higher education decision-making processes of American and Chinese families.


Figure 2: Decision-Making Processes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UNITED STATES</th>
<th>CHINA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who leads the process?</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who supports the process?</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Grandparents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who follows the process?</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Zinch China

Because parents are so influential in choosing an institution, it is important to understand that parents value different criteria for making decisions. Bodycott’s 2009 study sheds light on the differences in what is important to parents and students in deciding where to study.23 Bodycott interviewed 251 parents and 100 students from mainland China who were evaluating study abroad options. Figure 3 shows the main differences between parent and student ratings of importance, as identified in this study. The only factor found to be important to both groups was the range of programs available.24

Figure 3: Most Important Factors for Study Abroad Options

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTOR</th>
<th>PARENTS</th>
<th>STUDENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Push</td>
<td>Inadequate supply of universities in China</td>
<td>Quality of education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pull</td>
<td>Employment prospects on graduation</td>
<td>Onsite accommodation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social and emotional support services</td>
<td>Range of programs available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Range of programs available</td>
<td>English speaking environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Migration possibilities</td>
<td>Language and academic support services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Facilities, buildings and grounds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Timing is also a factor in applying to and selecting a university, and Chinese institutions use an accelerated process compared to U.S. and British institutions. Zinch China explains that students take the national college entrance exam, called the “gao kao,” in June after their final year of high school. As a result, Chinese students who are not aware of the admissions process used in other countries are at a disadvantage when applying to international institutions. On the other hand, institutions with rolling deadlines or later admissions cycles may be more appealing to Chinese students who are only just starting to consider their options for international study near the end of their senior year of high school.25

Regional differences within China must also be considered. According to Chong and Liu, young people in Taiwan and Hong Kong are more likely to be knowledgeable about options

for education in foreign countries, while their peers in mainland China may require more information about international study opportunities. As such, it is important to thoroughly explain concepts that may be unknown to mainland applicants (for example, “liberal” education).26

**TRENDS IN SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN CHINA**

Social media use in China is constantly rising – at last count, there were nearly 600 million active users, a figure that is up 60 percent just from 2012.27 A 2012 survey by McKinsey and Company that investigated various characteristics of social networking behavior revealed that an estimated 91 percent of the total population visited a social media platform in the previous six months, and 95 percent of internet users in China who live in the nation’s largest cities have a social media account.28 Most of China’s internet users access the internet through a personal computer, though mobile devices are also gaining popularity: according to McKinsey, “about 50 percent of mobile-phone users in [the] survey said they were planning to buy a smartphone in the next six months, 35 percent said they have used a tablet computer, and one-fourth of consumers who do not own a tablet computer said they plan to buy one in the next year.”29

Chinese social media users also tend to be very active: the McKinsey survey reported that users in China generally spend approximately 46 minutes per day on social media sites, compared to 37 minutes in the United States and just seven minutes in Japan.30 Actual usage of these sites, however, can be broken down into six different categories by motivation and behavior:31

- **Social enthusiasts** spend a large portion of their time maintaining friendship networks; they account for about 15 percent of social-media users.
- **Resenders**, who account for 15 percent of participants, actively repost messages, such as jokes, from other sources. Although they do not post original material, they often have large numbers of followers.
- **Readers** generally do not participate but read what others have posted. They make up about 14 percent of users.
- **Opinionated users**, comprising about 14 percent of participants on social-media sites, express their own (often strong) opinions and build large personal followings.

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   globe.com/blog/social-media-china/
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid. (Bullets quoted verbatim)
- **QQ spillovers** gain access to social-media sites through their use of Tencent’s QQ instant-messaging service. While this group accounts for 21 percent of the audience for social media, participation from these users is minimal.

- **Inactives** belong to social-media sites but do not participate in a meaningful way.

Overall, the social media market in China has been described as “very fragmented and local.” According to a McKinsey and Company brief, “each social-media and e-commerce platform has at least two major local players: in microblogging (or weibo), for example, Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo; in social networking, a number of companies, including Renren and Kaixin001. These players have different strengths, areas of focus, and, often, geographic priorities.” A brief overview of the top sites is provided in the figure below.34

### Figure 4: Overview of Top Chinese Social Media Sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Douban</td>
<td>Open forum for movie, music, and book reviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiayuan</td>
<td>The largest internet dating website of China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaixin 001</td>
<td>Cloned the most successful and well-known Facebook applications to the Chinese market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pengyou</td>
<td>A real-name social network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qzone</td>
<td>Social networking website where users can write blogs and share photos, music, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renren</td>
<td>Facebook of China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sina Weibo</td>
<td>Chinese microblogging website (similar to Twitter), with ability to included images and video</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tencent Weibo</td>
<td>Chinese microblogging website (similar to Twitter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wechat</td>
<td>Mobile voice and text app with social networking features, including photo-sharing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Go-Globe.com and Mashable

Over 80 percent of Chinese social media users are active on more than one site, and local platforms dominate the market.35 Though specific numbers vary (in part because of issues with virtual, or fake, followers), it is clear that Qzone, a social blogging site, and microblogging platforms Tencent Weibo and Sina Weibo are favorites among users. For instance, the McKinsey survey revealed that 44 percent of respondents use Qzone the most, followed by Sina Weibo and Renren (19 percent each), Tencent Weibo (8 percent), and

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Kaixin (7 percent). Recent estimates – as of March 2013 – of registered users on some of China’s top sites are shown in Figure 5, below.

**Figure 5: Registered Users, in Millions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Users (in Millions)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qzone</td>
<td>712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tencent Weibo</td>
<td>507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sina Weibo</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wechat</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pengyou</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renren</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Douban</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaixin 001</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiayuan</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ad Age global news and Go-Globe.com

**SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS**

In the following paragraphs, we introduce some of the top platforms for reaching out to Chinese high school students.

**BAIDU**

Baidu is China’s equivalent of Google, and also offers other services including “Baidu Tieba” (“Post Bar,” a discussion forum) and “Baidu Zhidao” (“Baidu Knows,” a question and answer site). Key strategies for using Baidu effectively include:

- **Present content that aligns with key search terms.** Paul Hoskins writes in the *Guardian* blog that Chinese students generally “look for a ‘top UK university’ in a particular subject, not a specific place and not your establishment. The websites they are most likely referred to are those of agents where there is very little discrimination between the offer of one establishment and another.” As such, Clay Hensley, of the College Board, argues that “universities need to take programs and majors into account when trying to reach students.” According to Hensley,

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“universities should consider search-engine optimization for their strongest programs with international appeal, so that the programs, not just the institutions, will pop up in search results.”40

- **Have a localized microsite.** Arnold Ma writes in *Fourth Source* that institutions must “understand that appending Mandarin pages to a UK website does not work. Pages will not be visible on Chinese search engines. It is therefore necessary to have a localized microsite built from the ground up with Chinese browser habits, design/UX standards and consumer persona in mind.”41

- **Increase accessibility within China.** Local sites should be “hosted within the Chinese Government firewall, or over a Content Delivery Network (CDN), otherwise loading times may be slowed to the point at which the site becomes inaccessible. An ICP license is also required from the Government for all business websites, but obtaining one is a matter of formality.”42

- **Understand differences in search processes.** Paid searches on Baidu are different from those used in the UK or the U.S. due to the Chinese language structure. According to Ma, “this fundamental difference directly affects the bidding of keywords and optimization/structure of accounts. For example, ‘phrase match’ on Baidu acts more like ‘modified broad match’ – broad match modifier does not exist yet on Baidu PPC. Also, ‘broad match’ captures far more queries due to the complexity of the Chinese language.”43

- **Simplify text and pages for search engine optimization (SEO).** Ma writes that “Baidu spider is still not as powerful as Google bot, and generally does not crawl deeper than three levels within website structures.”44 Therefore, institutions should “keep the most important information at the top of each page,” make the site “easy to navigate with a clear hierarchy,” and keep keyword density to between 6 and 10 percent.45

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43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

RENREN

Renren and Qzone are both considered the Chinese versions of Facebook. According to Chong and Liu, Chinese teenagers typically begin using social media with Qzone and QQ (China’s top instant messaging program), two platforms that boast high concentrations of users below the age of 18. As they get older, college students outgrow Qzone and move on to Renren, which is dominated by the young adult population.47

Tencent’s Qzone may boast a larger count of registered users, but the site has been criticized as being heavily populated by “dormant, skeleton profiles” with “low value and retention rates.” The site, which is accessed primarily by teenage, rural, and casual users, allows the use of nicknames and aliases rather than real identities.48 Meanwhile, Renren is more popular among college students,49 “as it serves as an ideal resource for accessing news about their respective universities, including curriculum updates, supplementary materials and class discussion boards.”50 Chong and Liu write that college students often retain “their Qzone and QQ accounts — usually, they will log in to QQ to stay in touch with their old friends, parents and classmates, but neglect their Qzone pages and use Renren

49 Ibid.
instead.” Renren users tend to be more “transparent and honest” when using Renren, while they are more likely to filter their messages on Qzone.51

Figure 7: University of Kentucky’s Renren Page

**WEIBO**

Weibo, which means “microblog,” is the Chinese version of twitter and is offered under several platforms. The two biggest players are Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo.52 Like Twitter, Weibo allows users to post 140-character microblogs, pictures, and videos.53 One of the differences in user activity, however, is that while Twitter users often post about news, Sina Weibo users tend to comment more on entertainment topics.54 Similarly, some of the users with the most “followers” on Tencent Weibo are celebrities, hosts, famous companies, and media and entertainment agencies.55 Sina Weibo is particularly common

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51 Ibid.
among university students, young professionals, and urban dwellers, while Tencent users tend to be more rural.\textsuperscript{56}

According to Tina Hu, senior director in China for CIC, “Weibo is the best for outreach” for institutions because it allows users to read information that is not publically available.\textsuperscript{57} It is estimated that 70 to 80 percent of China’s university students have a Weibo account, and between 40 and 50 percent of students use it every day.\textsuperscript{58}

\textbf{Figure 8: University of Huddersfield’s Sina Weibo Page}

\textsuperscript{56} Lukoff, Op. cit.
YOUKU

Youku is China’s equivalent of YouTube, though there are some distinct differences. First, while YouTube’s videos are primarily user-generated, 70 percent of Youku’s content is syndicated (i.e., professionally produced). According to Victor Koo, Youku’s Chief Executive Officer, Youku also primarily features “longer” videos, rather than short clips or music videos.

As a forum for reaching out to prospective students, Youku presents some unique opportunities. Clay Hensley, director of international strategy and relationships for the College Board, explains that “video is particularly popular among Chinese students... because it is hard to censor.” Institutions can enlist current students as “brand ambassadors” to “talk about their university life and education in Mandarin or Cantonese and post the video on their own sites or pages. The university should then link to the students’ videos.”

Figure 9: University of Alberta’s Youku page

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**Effective Integration of the Digital Marketing Campaign**

In addition to a well-managed digital media campaign, an institution’s international student website must be designed to clearly and efficiently provide visitors with pertinent information, writes Philippe Taza, founder of Higher Education Marketing, a digital marketing agency. Taza notes that website content should be limited to essential information that “ensures that future international students can easily find what they’re looking for in a quick five second scan.”\(^6^3\) The blog specifies that “critical elements” include:

- A search feature for available undergraduate and graduate programs
- Admissions criteria
- Upcoming international recruitment visits
- Financial and visa requirements
- Clear calls to action buttons

Beyond this streamlined landing page for international applicants, additional pages within an institution’s international student portal should “focus on promoting your most highly rated programs, emphasizing positive world rankings, and adjusting your messages to be easily understandable to students who have grown up with different education systems and are unfamiliar with local geography and culture,” according to Taza. Additionally, testimonials from current and past international students in the form of written blog entries or video posts provide personal connections to potential applicants. To encourage communication, institutions can enlist current students “to serve as resources in a ‘Contact a Current Student’ website feature.”\(^6^4\)

Overall, institutions must remember that social media is not intended to be one-sided: communication and personal contact are the driving forces behind successful digital marketing campaigns. Inigral, a U.S. consulting firm that helps universities leverage social media to connect with students, describes several strategies for using social media to recruit international students. Among them, Inigral recommends that institutions create a private (i.e., not open to the public) community where admitted students can meet faculty, administrators, and other prospective students online. According to Inigral, international students are likely to use online groups for three main functions: meeting others from their home country, connecting with others around majors or interests, and getting answers to questions. Institutions can also foster open lines of communication by hosting online chats, skype interviews, or meetups.\(^6^5\)

\(^{63}\) Taza, P. “4 Steps to Designing your Website for International Student Recruitment.” EDUniverse. http://eduniverse.org/4-steps-designing-your-website-international-student-recruitment

\(^{64}\) Ibid.

Sociology PhD student and blogger Yimei Zhu writes that interaction with prospective students may be the key factor in obtaining followers for a University’s Weibo page. In examining growth in the number of followers for six UK universities, Zhu found that the University of Sheffield increased the number of followers by 41 percent between August 2012 and February 2013 through deliberate, high-quality interaction with other users:

After exploring the contents on Sheffield’s Weibo page, it is clear that their Weibo account has actively interacted with students and kept it down-to-earth. They have many posts and reposts showing activities in campus and students’ lives, such as speed-dating event, students eating dinner together and job fair. When students asked for a question regarding to a post, the official account replied in detail. It gave the sense to other student readers that University of Sheffield (account owner) care about them and would communicate with them if they try. Another strategy is to ask question to their followers. For example, Sheffield posted a picture and asked ‘who knows where this is?’ Many students replied. It fostered interaction—not only Sheffield official account interacted with followers, but followers also interacted with each other as they saw there was a relaxing environment when people could discuss things freely.

Similarly, Julie Cahill, Assistant Director of International Marketing and Recruitment at the University of Montana, explains that “hyper-responsiveness makes a lasting impression on prospective international students,” and her staff make every effort to respond to emails from students and applicants within 24 to 48 hours. To better serve potential applicants from China, Montana’s admissions office created an International Student Associate position and hired a Mandarin-speaking student to serve as applicants’ first point of contact.

Finally, a 2012 study conducted by swissnex China reveals additional practices found to be effective in the use of social media to promote international universities to Chinese students. The study focused specifically on Sina Weibo as a platform for communicating with students regarding Swiss universities. To facilitate the flow of information, each university named a “communicator” who provided content to be translated and uploaded to Weibo by a swissnex representative. Upon evaluating the success of the initiative, participants indicated that “having a dedicated person within the swissnex office in Shanghai allowed a rapid response to the sending of content from the universities. The proactivity and re-activity of the Shanghai team also contributed to maintaining the supply of content either by looking for information on the partner universities’ websites or by posting

[67] Ibid.
[70] Ibid., p. 11.
content from social media pages.” Overall, the participants offered the following recommendations to other institutions seeking to connect with potential applicants using Chinese social media:72

- Ensure that a push-pull mechanism is in place whereas institutions push out content in regular and structured way while ensuring that timely and appropriate content feeds the individual Sina Weibo accounts.
- Build a library of material appealing to the targeted Chinese audiences (e.g. dream projects, rankings, lifestyle).
- Have a dedicated person/team within maintain the Sina Weibo accounts; appoint a substitute to the “account manager” to ensure continuity of service in case of absence; build on common processes to convey messages via dedicated channels.
- Ensure continuous learning regarding the developments of the social media landscape, in particular of the chosen social media channel.
- Set up a bi-monthly reporting mechanism to inform the institutions on the latest developments regarding its Sina Weibo account; the report could either be conveyed in verbal (e.g. via Skype/phone) or written form.
- Remain up-to-date on the developments within the chosen social media and more importantly outside of the chosen media (e.g. understand the implications of WeChat for the institutions communication strategy). Whereas Twitter, Facebook, or Google+ is relatively stable social media channels, the situation is very much different in China. Forecasting the usage levels and popularity of Chinese social media in the medium term is extremely hard.

71 Ibid., pp. 17-18.
72 Ibid., pp. 19-21. (Bullets quoted verbatim or with slight variation)
SECTION II: PROFILES OF MARKET LEADERS

In this section, we look at higher education institutions that are considered to be key international players in the use of Chinese social media. We examine the following types of information for each institution:

- The specific Chinese social media platforms used (with links to pages as available)
- How the platforms are used and by whom
- How social media is integrated with marketing activity
- Messaging systems used
- Information on data collection and how success is measured

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA, CANADA

- **Platform(s):** [Youku](https://www.youku.com), [Renren](https://www.renren.com)
- **Utilization of platform(s):** The University created an International Office with a director, assistant director and six recruiters. The Office used focus groups of international students and alumni to evaluate the website.
- **Integration of marketing activity:** The social media sites help answer questions and direct traffic to the University’s website, which provides translated material.
- **Type of messaging:** The Youku site offers virtual tours in Mandarin, and translated brochures are available for download on the University’s website.
- **Data collection:** The University identified internationalization as a key priority in 2006 and set a goal of increasing enrollment to 15 percent of the undergraduate student body by 2015. \(^{73}\)

BROCK UNIVERSITY, CANADA

- **Platform(s):** [Renren](https://www.renren.com), [QQ](https://www.qq.com), and [Sina Weibo](https://weibo.com)
- **Utilization of platform(s):** The International Market Development office hired student representatives who speak Mandarin to reach out to potential applicants. The office switched the Renren page from personal to public to allow for “validation and a broader reach.”
- **Integration of marketing activity:** The representatives spend approximately two hours each day informally chatting with prospective students and answering their questions. Most questions are related to courses, tuition, accommodations, and other logistics (e.g., transportation).

- **Type of messaging:** Informal chat in Mandarin.
- **Data collection:** Success is measured by the number of QQ and Renren users interested in the University.\(^{74}\)

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**Fresno Pacific University, United States**

- **Platform(s):** QQ
- **Utilization of platform(s):** The admissions office hired a Chinese student assistant to field questions from Mandarin-speaking prospective students and admitted students.
- **Integration of marketing activity:** Connecting one-on-one with prospective students. Admissions staff members include contact information for all three platforms (QQ plus Viber and Skype) in their email signatures and encourage prospective students to contact them.
- **Type of messaging:** Voice and text communication with Mandarin-speaking students in Mandarin.
- **Data collection:** Success is measured by the number of applicants from China (1 in 2011 to 10 in 2012).\(^{75}\)

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**University of Huddersfield, United Kingdom**

- **Platform(s):** Sina Weibo
- **Utilization of platform(s):** The Weibo site is operated by an alumnus who runs the University’s China office. The University also has an international marketing team in the UK.
- **Integration of marketing activity:** The University provides the China office with information and pictures to be turned into content for the Weibo page.
- **Type of messaging:** The Weibo page serves as a “steady and constant stream of information” to keep followers interested.
- **Data collection:** With over 30,000 followers, University of Huddersfield is regarded as one of the most successful UK universities at using Weibo.\(^{76}\)

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\(^{74}\) “Brock uses China’s vast social media to recruit students.” *The Brock News*, May 19, 2011.  
http://www.brocku.ca/brock-news/?p=9864  
**University of Kentucky, United States**

- **Platform(s):** Renren and Sina Weibo
- **Utilization of platform(s):** The public relations department created a social media management position and hired a current student who is fluent in Chinese.
- **Integration of marketing activity:** Material from the A&S website that may be relevant or interesting to Chinese students is posted on social media pages.
- **Type of messaging:** News items from the A&S website are summarized and posted in Chinese with a link to the English story.
- **Data collection:** Success is measured by the number of Chinese students (350 in 2000 to 600 in 2010) and comments on social media posts.\(^77\)

**Memorial University, Canada**

- **Platform(s):** Renren, Mixi (social media network in Japan), and Naver (search portal and blog in South Korea)
- **Utilization of platform(s):** The School of Graduate Studies (SGS) hired three graduate students to target potential students using the three social media platforms. The students provide assistance with navigating the application process.
- **Integration of marketing activity:** The social media sites are used to advertise Memorial University and provide free and accurate information about the application process without using an agent.
- **Type of messaging:** Direct interaction in prospective students’ native languages.
- **Data collection:** Success appears to be measured by the number of applicants.\(^78\)

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