A Study of the Line Official Account in University Public Relations

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Abstract
A 2014 survey indicated that 77.8% of Taiwanese individuals over 12 years of age were mobile Internet users, and that the most commonly used App was LINE. Given the increasing popularity of mobile Internet devices, as evidenced by the widespread use of smartphones, the dissemination of information mainly through traditional media is no longer adequate. Nevertheless, the marketing and public relations strategies of Taiwanese universities and colleges still largely rely on traditional media, venturing online only to establish official websites, and investing very little in mobile social media. This study has adopted a case study approach by focusing on Hungkuang University, which has set up a LINE Official Account that has attracted more " LINE friends" than any other university or college account in Taiwan. By analyzing and discussing this case study, we hope to present information on both the benefits that universities and colleges can derive—and the operational strategies they can employ—by using LINE Official Accounts as part of their marketing and public relations strategies. These findings will provide reliable strategic guidance on marketing and public relations practices in universities and colleges.

This study introduces the LINE Official Account as a new option that works differently from traditional media. It not only retains the advantages of traditional media in relation to mass communications, but also functions as a unique channel for two-way, independent communications. It is therefore a new and effective mobile marketing tool for school and university marketing and public relations strategies. The seven key strengths of a LINE Official Account for educational marketing and public relations are as follows: 1) it uses the latest mobile Internet apps to establish an organizational image of high-quality service; 2) it employs a large number of media editors to provide efficient and comprehensive information services; 3) it reinforces marketing communications through both one-to-many and one-to-one approaches; 4) it uses mobile Internet social events to increase a sense of participation among friends; 5) it reinforces the horizontal connections between different units and disseminates information to maintain internal and external relationships; 6) it constantly recruits new friends through physical enrolment activities and advertising; and 7) it provides crisis management by taking advantage of widespread mobile Internet use.
Keywords: LINE Official Account, university marketing, public relations strategies

Introduction

Social media help to fulfill the human need for interaction. By transforming traditional "one-to-many" into "many-to-many" communications via social media, members of the general public are transformed from content consumers into content producers. For this reason, social media content can be characterized as "user-generated" content (UGC) (OMD, 2009). Given the increasing popularity of mobile network devices, as evidenced by the wide use of smartphones, information dissemination models that rely mainly on traditional media are becoming increasingly inadequate.

According to a 2015 "Survey on Broadband Internet Usage in Taiwan" conducted by the Taiwan Network Information Center (TWNIC), the percentage of Internet users in the Taiwanese population increased from 75.6% in 2014 to 80.3% in 2015, with the number of Internet users in Taiwan now estimated at about 18.83 million. Within this group, 100% of people between the ages of 18 and 30 years are Internet users, making this the dominant group of Internet users in Taiwan. A total of 16,372,581 Taiwanese individuals over 12 years old (78.2%) have Internet experience. Among those with Internet experience, 77.8% are mobile Internet users. The majority of people interviewed were using 3G or 3.5G, while 94% use smartphones to access the Internet. The top three most common reasons for using mobile Internet services are as follows: to access Internet communities (53.5%), to use instant messaging software (50.1%), and to browse websites (47%). The top three most commonly used types of apps are social networking services (68.4%), games (38.9%), and transportation/navigation apps (14.1%).

The smartphone application program, LINE, developed by NHN Japan Corporation, was launched in June 2011. LINE users can make voice calls to other users or send texts through the Internet. LINE's greatest advantage is that it uses the ubiquitous Internet to replace fee-based texts and phone calls. In 2013, the NHN Japan Corporation announced that the number of global registered users of LINE officially exceeded 300 million and was likely to continue to increase; in Taiwan, the number of registered users has reached 17 million. Reflecting the rapid increase in LINE users and their frequency of use, there are currently about 3 million new users every week, and the proportion of active users remains around 80.3%. Among smartphone apps, the ten most commonly used apps include four that involve instant messaging software: LINE (1st), WhatsApp (4th), Facebook Messenger (8th), and WeChat (10th) (TWNIC, 2013). The pioneering Taiwanese app review website APP01 conducted a survey of 100,000 smartphone users, which indicated that 67% of users were using LINE. LINE is the most popular instant messaging software in Taiwan, especially among young people. The penetration rate of LINE on smartphones is 92%, far higher than any other messaging software (INSIGHTXPLORER, 2014).

The marketing and public relations strategies of universities and colleges in Taiwan rely mainly on traditional media, using Internet-based operations only to establish official websites. Very little money has been invested in mobile social media. Currently, fewer than 10% of Taiwan's universities and colleges have LINE Official Accounts, and the number of active users is even smaller. The marketing and public relations strategies of universities and colleges aim to enhance their prestige and influence; practical measures are designed to maintain good interactions with

interested parties. Mobile social media are currently the best tools for such interactions, and LINE has been rated the most popular tool in Taiwan. We selected Hungkuang University, located in the central region of Taiwan, as our case study because it has the most active LINE Official Account and the largest number of friends of any university or college in Taiwan. Since the launch of the Hungkuang University LINE Official Account, the university has accumulated more than 7000 fans within half a year and has been ranked the most effective university or college in Taiwan.

We hope that by analyzing and discussing this case study, we can offer new information on the benefits of an operational strategy that uses a LINE Official Account to underpin college or university marketing and public relations, thus providing reliable strategic suggestions about marketing and public relations in universities and colleges. This study has focused on two questions:
1. What are the differences between a LINE Official Account and traditional tools for marketing and public relations?
2. What marketing and public relations strategies are employed by universities and colleges?

Research Method

This study has adopted a case study approach. The research data includes previous literature, survey and interview data, and analyses of case and second-hand data on LINE Official Accounts, including press releases, announcements, and questions from members. In June 2015, LINE announcements were used to invite members to participate in an online questionnaire survey; 1470 individuals participated. In addition, the researchers designed an open-ended questionnaire and (between May and June 2015) interviewed six individuals, including the Hungkuang University Public Relations Director and administrative officials responsible for the university's strategy.

Literature Review

Armstrong & Kolter (2000) have defined relationship marketing as the process of creating, maintaining, and enhancing the relationship with customers and other stakeholders, in order to obtain customer satisfaction and loyalty in the long term.

According to Cheng (2014), relationship marketing is gradually attracting more attention for the following reasons. Firstly, the cost of maintaining regular customers is far less than the cost of acquiring new customers. Secondly, mass media is expensive to use, and its impact is difficult to measure. Thirdly, customers and service-providers interact more closely than ever before. Fourthly, advances in information technology have contributed to the implementation of new approaches to relationship marketing. Successful relationship marketing involves providing specialized and targeted services and maintaining good interactions with customers, thus continuing to improve customers' impressions of the organization, enhancing their brand loyalty, and maintaining and sustaining bilateral relations. In an article entitled, "A Study on Relationship Marketing and Loyalty—An Example of Eastern Home Shopping (EHS)," Jao (2005) conducted qualitative interviews and collected

case data to investigate the extent to which relationship marketing strategies executed at different levels by a company could enhance customer loyalty and willingness to repeat purchase. This study showed that the following four factors were needed to achieve optimal relationship marketing: 1) services that offered constant innovation; 2) comprehensive and diverse channels for services; 3) comprehensive management of customer relations; and 4) continuous relationship marketing. Since the emergence of the Internet, social communities have gradually become the functional core of the Internet; not only does the Internet allow individuals with a shared interest to come together across time and space, it also facilitates the establishment of relationships between the members and administrators of social communities. When the number of members, transactions, and the amount of information in a virtual community exceed "critical mass," transaction activities, content attractiveness, and friend profile information or loyalties are likely to drive and reinforce a positive feedback loop, following the principle of "increasing returns" in network economics. Hagel & Armstrong (1997) have defined the following four types of participation among virtual community members based on degree and participation value.

1) Browser: New community members, who often browse communities casually. Some may stay, but the majority are likely to leave the community; thus, they are the least valued community members.

2) Lurker: Members who spend more time in the community than Browsers, but do not actively make content contributions as Contributors do. Due to their length of stay, useful information can be gathered from them (e.g., browsing paths, personal information) to attract advertisers to purchase advertising space. They are therefore more highly valued than Browsers.

3) Contributor: After a period of time, Browsers who chose to stay are likely to become Contributors who contribute content to the community actively and passionately. They also stay in communities for a relatively long time. They are the second most highly valued members in a community.

4) Shopper: Active members who actively participate in communities, and also purchase products and services. They have the highest value of all members. "Purchases" are not limited to transactions within communities, but also include exchanges and discussions of product information through mutual communications between members, which promote product transactions.

"Public relations (PR)" are planned communications designed to achieve mutual understanding between an organization and the general public. This definition, which is commonly accepted by scholars and professionals in the field, demonstrates that public relations involves the management of communication between organizations and the general public, and the achievement of mutually acceptable negotiation results through two-way communications. In the two-way communication model, surveys of opinions and attitudes can be used in public relations to assist administrative and managerial personnel to understand the needs of individuals related to the organization, and the possible outcomes of particular organizational behaviors. In addition, through implementing a public relations program, the thoughts and concrete organizational decisions of managers can be communicated to the public to build support. For this reason, the ideal public relations model is characterized by two-way, dialogic communications that create a communication environment of truth, tolerance, mutual trust, equality, and support (Grunig, 2001).

Most previous studies have been based on the principle of dialogic communications proposed by Kent and Taylor (1998), which has been widely applied to public relations strategies on the Internet and recognized as a basis for establishing more effective communication strategies. Zhang (2010) has argued that companies ought to use entertaining content to make their brands appealing and to attract the attention of their target audience. This study has analyzed 89 company fan pages, most of which have used marketing events such as downloads and competitions, and some of which have even provided reward mechanisms. Though a series of experiments on "relational maintenance strategies in different situations," Kelleher & Miller (2006) discovered that social media was the best way to build a relationship between an organization and the public. Lovejoy & Saxton (2012) analyzed the Twitter usage of 100 large-scale NGOs across the United States, and discovered that tweets could be grouped into three categories: information, community, and action. In contrast to traditional websites, Twitter established relationships with stakeholders through dialogic and community-building approaches. Furthermore, Wright & Hinson (2009) have pointed out that most public relations professionals believe that developing the relationship between organizations and their target audiences through social media is cost effective. These views not only highlight the value and significance of social media in public relations, but also their contribution toward establishing interactive relationships, which create opportunities for public relations professionals to influence and build relationships with their target audience. PR professionals have already started to use social media to interact with the public. However, finding optimal ways to integrate social media functions into organizational communication strategies is an area that needs further research (Alikilic & Atabek, 2012).

Research Results

1. The LINE Official Account is a new and effective mobile marketing tool for school and university marketing and public relations strategies.

The advantages for users of a LINE Official Account include directly receiving a company's marketing information, easily browsing received messages, and having access to various kinds of information once they have joined the Official Account as friends. As is the case in managing Facebook fan pages, posting good quality articles daily on the News Feed, creating events, and actively sending private group messages are methods that comply with LINE's official regulations for managing fans. Group messages are only sent to fans who have joined the Official Account as friends. For marketing professionals, therefore, finding ways to market an Official Account, invite new visitors to become active fans, and achieve acceptance for messages and marketed products have become key focal points. The Hungkuang University Director of Public Relations commented that, "LINE is an instant communication medium; when fans receive messages, they can immediately click on them and begin interactions. It also has breadth and messages can be sent to all our friends, which has helped us connect to new friends who were not familiar with the university as well to as old friends with lower cohesion."
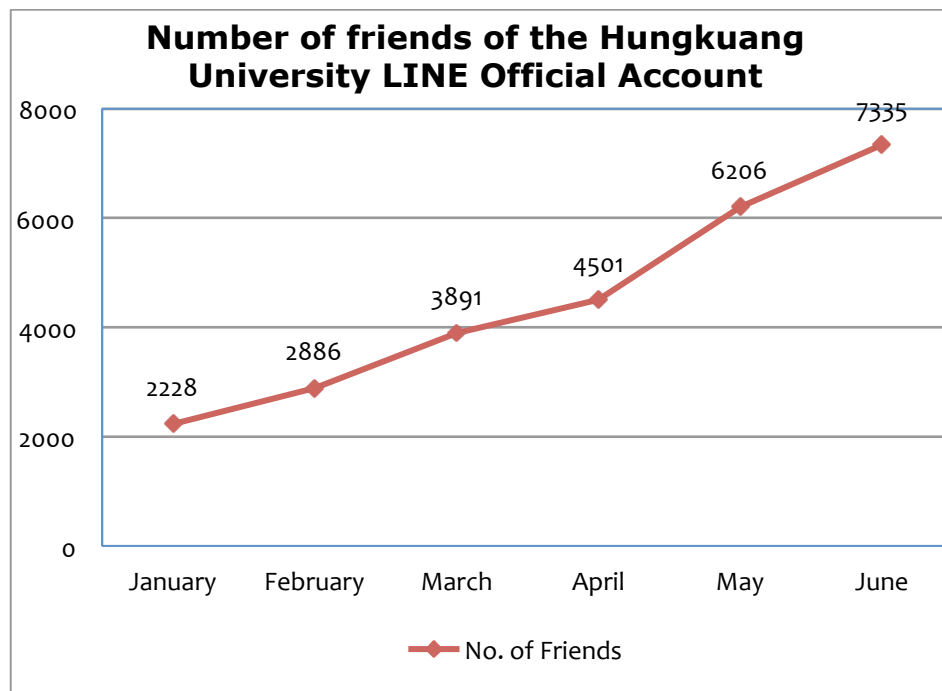
Figure 1. The growing number of friends of the Hungkuang University LINE Official Account

2. A LINE Official Account is a new option that differs from traditional marketing and public relations tools.

Traditional tools for marketing and public relations include traditional media and communication methods. The former include television, newspapers, and broadcasting, while the latter include information sessions and news conferences. Based on the direction and goals of PR communication models, further information can be obtained on the applicability of the Internet in public relations programs. When it comes to direction, one-way organizational Internet communications indicate that an organization is interested only in distributing information to the public or persuading them to accept organizational behaviors; feedback from the public is not a key consideration. As for goals, when organizations use news agents and broadcasting PR models, they tend to post information that benefits themselves. Organizations using the public information model, on the other hand, generally provide Internet users with more objective and useful information. A preference for two-way Internet communications shows that an organization wants to understand the views of the public through Internet technology, both to pursue its own interests, and to establish an equal, mutually-dependent relationship with the public, thus achieving win-win results.

LINE Official Accounts begin by adopting a "passive approach" to advertising (i.e., waiting for consumers to voluntarily add them as friends). After consumers have become friends, these accounts employ an "interactive approach" (i.e., companies disseminate information and consumers can connect to their websites) to establish relationships with consumers. As long as the consumers do not reject the information, marketing and public relations can achieve significant results. In addition, LINE does not connect consumers to other websites without their consent, thus ensuring consumer flexibility, making Official Accounts more acceptable to the public, and

enabling participants to be proactive and interactive. In this way, LINE has rapidly developed into a new option for marketing and public relations strategies.

3. A LINE Official Account enables schools and universities to use the following seven marketing and public relations strategies:
1) Using the latest mobile Internet apps to give themselves a reputation for (and image related to) high-quality service.

Corporate image is an intangible asset. Communicating a good image to the public has become a crucial issue: the key to organizational success. Public relations is the magician who creates this image, exploiting the competitive nature of organizations and building bridges for external communications. As mentioned previously, LINE is the most popular mobile app among young people in Taiwan. According to a survey conducted by the Public Relations Office of Hungkuang University before launching its LINE Official Account, almost 100% of students who use smartphones are LINE users. Given that its most important stakeholders were already using this tool, it was clearly to the university's advantage to create a friendly image through an Official Account. In addition, employing the latest mobile Internet tool made the university seem modern and fashionable, thereby effectively enhancing its image among students.

2) Employing a large number of media editors to provide efficient, comprehensive information services.

Online information is known as a "digital asset," which belongs to the category of intangible and non-material organizational assets. It is usually stored and transmitted through computers, and includes information on the organization's framework, products, and services. This information is a type of public property, characterized by non-exclusivity. The Hungkuang University Director of Public Relations, Mr. Lin, explained that, "in order to achieve the integration of virtual and physical customer services, it is necessary for behind-the-scene editors to be assigned to each administrative office in the university. When there is any problem involving university affairs, these editors must try to respond within 24 hours; in case of emergency, the university will immediately send someone to resolve it." Given such seamless communications, it is not surprising that Hungkuang University is ranked top among all universities and colleges in Taiwan for its number of users; it is also the only university that offers a wide range of different services. Although the university has extremely high labor costs, Mr. Lin commented, "We think it is very worthwhile."
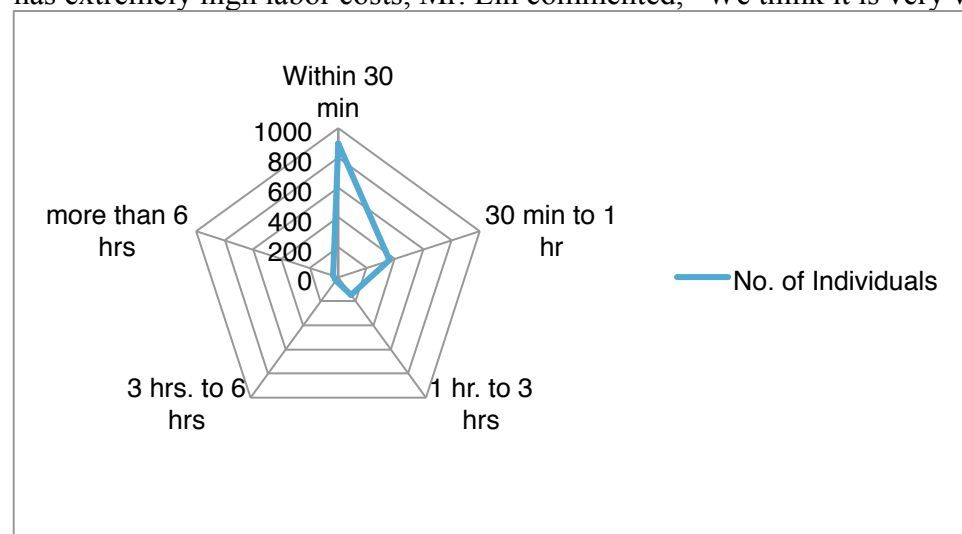
Figure 2. Response time of editors to problems

3) Applying one-to-many or one-to-one approaches to reinforce marketing communications.

The greatest difference between traditional and Internet public relations lies in the fact that public relations in the real world depends on professional management and operations to maintain a good relationships with journalists. In the virtual world, public relations enables key personnel to communicate more directly with customers through organizational websites, emails, and community discussions, without any need to curry favor with journalists or invest heavily in advertising strategies. Open one-to-one dialogues are akin to having exclusive mobile secretaries responsible for students. According to the online survey, 72% of respondents gave the editors the highest possible rating of "5 stars."
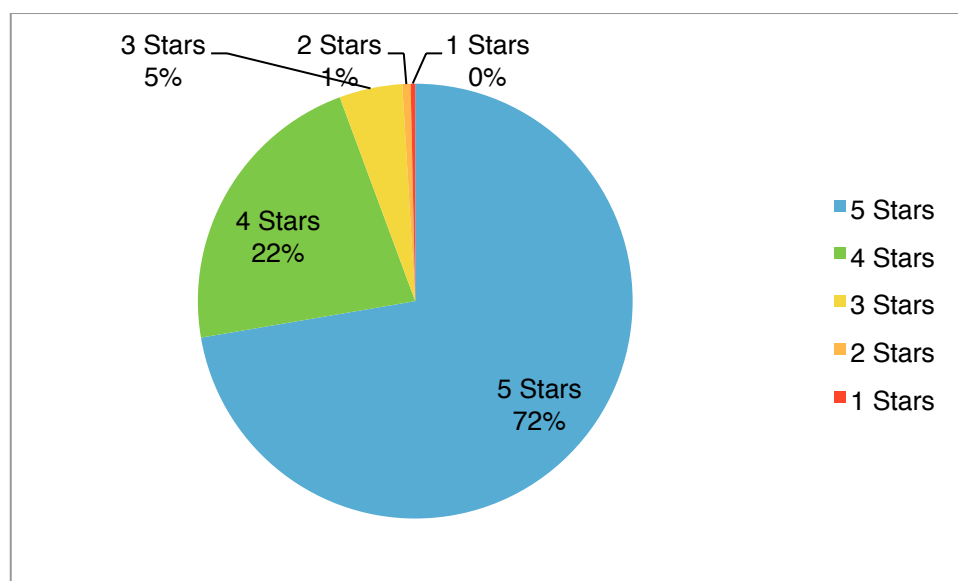

Figure 3. Ratings for Editor Services

4) Using social events on the mobile Internet to increase a sense of participation among friends.

Planning online events can attract attention and generate discussions about certain topics; this is the key to success in public relations. A powerful ability to disseminate information and a high degree of investment among netizens have made possible the low-cost support of public relations events through the Internet. This online survey shows that the most helpful information involves announcements about sporadic lottery draw activities posted on the Official Account.
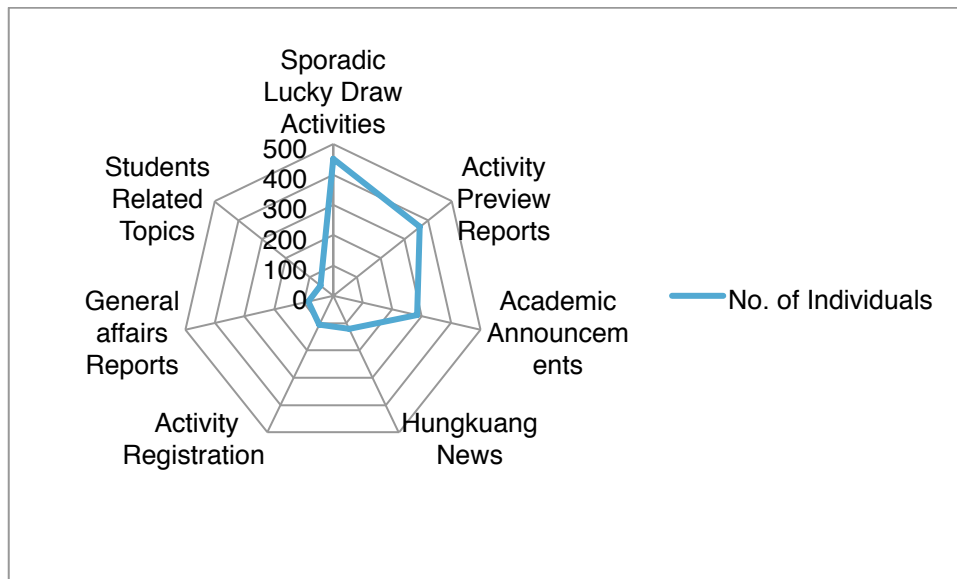
Figure 4. Friends' Favorite Types of Information

5) Reinforcing the horizontal connections between different units and publicizing information to maintain internal and external relations.

The main purpose of public relations is to conduct two-way communications between organizations and the public, with the goal of establishing reciprocal relationships. The interactive nature of the Internet enables both organizations and the public to receive instant responses to avert misunderstanding. For this reason, public relations on the Internet does not simply involve the publication of press releases online; it is a communication model that promotes and permits interaction with the public. The LINE Official Account has been able to achieve timely, two-way, and diverse interactions.

6) Constantly recruiting friends through physical enrolment activities and advertising.

Obtaining the loyalty of the target audience to consolidate the brand's status in the market is another important goal for public relations personnel to incorporate into their information strategies. Organizations can adopt approaches such as actively sending messages, regularly distributing e-newsletters and media reports, and inviting people to attend education exhibitions to encourage the target audience to obtain information about the school or university, and to join as friends.
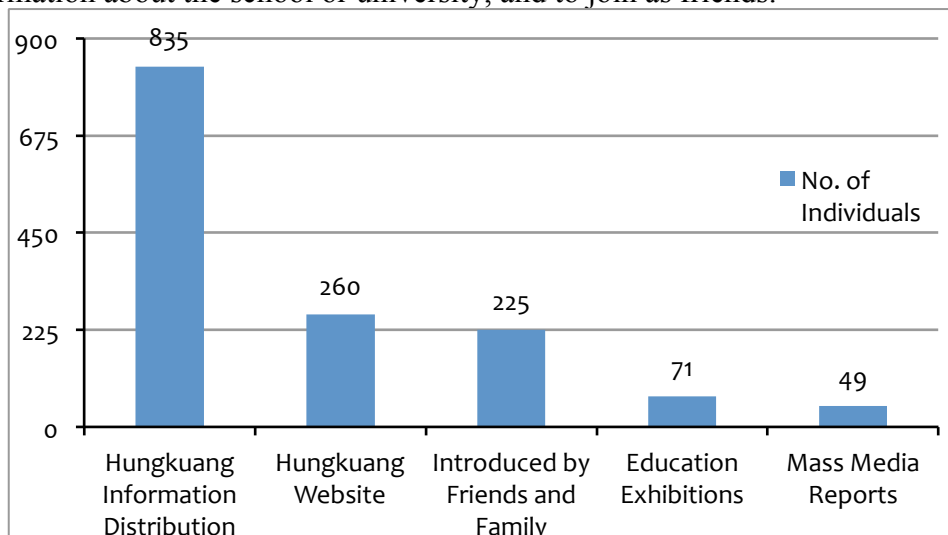
Figure 5. Information Channels for Those Added as Friends

7) Conducting crisis management by taking advantage of the ubiquity of the mobile Internet.

When it comes to crisis management, the field of online public relations has an incomparable advantage over conventional public relations. The key to crisis management is making public relations the default response and adopting the right public relations strategy. The ability to determine whether a response or strategy is correct depends on quick feedback and accurate information. Many crises are managed unsuccessfully as a result of wrong decisions made at the wrong time; feedback speed and information accuracy are therefore particularly significant. Lin Haoqun illustrated this point with an example. Recently, the university encountered significant resistance in implementing a carbon emissions reduction policy. In particular, many students complained that having no electricity at noon was unreasonable. Given that "there were students complaining during almost every class," the university immediately held a discussion and proposed a compromise: as soon as the temperature in a classroom exceeded 28°, the university would turn on the air conditioners in those classrooms; these would be identified by room numbers sent in by students using LINE messages. In another case, the power supply was interrupted by the Taiwan Power Company without notice, and many campus buildings had no power at 7 AM. The university used LINE to notify students that they should immediately change classroom; this was done to avoid confusion when the students arrived at school. Many students joked about it, saying, "We can't find an excuse for not attending school."

4. The key to success lay in the proactive approach of the LINE Official Account operation team and the effectiveness of the feedback mechanism.

In response to the increasing use of smartphones and online social media apps, Hungkuang University launched its LINE Official Account in November 2011. Within six months, the number of friends exceeded 5000; during the past three months, there has been an increase of 1000 friends per month. The university's LINE Official Account is coordinated by the Director of the Public Relations Office, along with personnel recommended by each administrative unit, for 22 members in the management team for the response window. The individuals in charge of the response window are all known anonymously as "editors." The organizational framework is illustrated by the figure below:

Figure 6. Organizational Framework of Hungkuang University's

All editors can simultaneously view a question from any friend via the back-end management platform. Editors then decide whether or not to respond to questions based on their categories. If a message has not been replied to by the editors after 24 hours, the coordinating director will remind relevant units of the need to respond or reply to the message directly. Editors have demonstrated high initiative and judgment in this process. All editors are expected to actively check messages and to decide whether to reply to them. As Editor A mentioned, "this is a job that requires passion." As can be seen from the figure below, within the month of June alone, there were 612 questions from friends. Of these questions, 54.25% were about enrolment, 18.95% were teaching-related, 6.86% involved advice about daily activities, 5.07% were about school maintenance, 3.43% involved on-campus residence, and the remaining 3% involved library use or information use, continuing studies, and administrative procedures. Thus, although there are 22 editors in total, around 7 of them are proactive, answering questions every day.
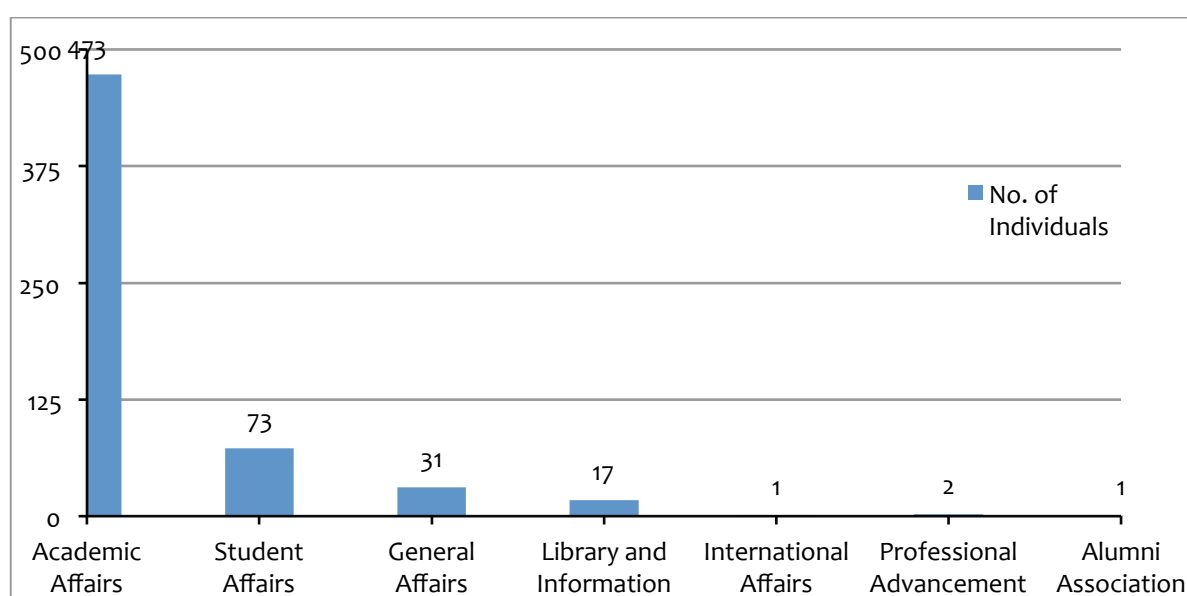

Table 7. Categories of Questions Asked by Friends of the Hungkuang University LINE Official Account in June

Discussion and Conclusion

This study shows that LINE Official Accounts are indeed effective tools for school and university marketing and public relations. The operation strategies developed by one institution can also be transferred to others. However, the following questions merit discussion. The first concerns costs and benefits. In terms of cost analysis, the tools used in the past for public relations communications, such as traditional media, the telephone, and marketing activities require more manpower and expensive resources to achieve timely and interactive communications. The strengths of most traditional marketing and public relations models involve one-way communications, while models based on LINE Official Accounts can be either one-way or two-way, a far more effective approach to communications than any of the traditional models. No registration fees are charged at present, and the only fees required are for information

distribution; however, operation costs could be higher in the future if the Line Corporation adjusts its fee policy.

Second, in order to keep a LINE Official Account functioning efficiently, a substantial amount of professional labor is required. Institutions to select and train personnel must be set up to ensure its long-term development. In order to successfully build on the existing foundations, managers must move towards "institutionalization." Professional advisors or advisory teams should be in charge of operations, while spokespeople decide matters that relate to overall directions and supervision. Facebook fan pages should be promoted; more involvement is also required to build advertising strategies to promote important issues. In addition, the operation of fan pages must be institutionalized. To give one example, if one person replaces another in managing a page, will the organization risk discontinuity in its policies? It is proposed that advisory teams be responsible for operations, providing guidance on supervisory roles, in order to ensure the sustainable development of this platform.

The third issue relates to the education, training, recognition, and discipline of personnel. Behind-the-scenes LINE Official Accounts personnel should have expertise in professional fields and proficiency in using apps; they should also be able to use terms and expressions that young people use to communicate with friends. Taking this case study as an example, there is no unified standard for selecting the editors. The majority are experienced professionals with an average of 8 years working experience. Since these editors are passionate about their work, they can easily manage without institutionalized rewards, and do not need to be reprimanded for not responding to messages seriously. It thus remains to be seen whether this system can be sustained for long without a well-established mechanism for reward and punishment.

Lastly, LINE Official Accounts can function only as a supplementary mechanism, and will never replace formal communication channels. Outside the group of friends with interactions, LINE does not make it possible to obtain much information about friends who have joined, but do not ask or respond to questions. Although this study has investigated cases of successful crisis management using instant communications (for example, in responding to power cuts on campus), it should be noted that not all stakeholders have joined. Thus, the LINE Official Account is still an informal channel for communication, and formal events are still managed in accordance with traditional models.

Despite the problems and difficulties mentioned above, this study demonstrates the enormous future potential of LINE Official Accounts; universities and colleges are advised to invest in and establish such accounts. Its advantages of mobility and convenience enable a LINE Official Account to function as a tool for marketing and public relations in this new era, introducing additional benefits to communications between universities and their stakeholders. Furthermore, this new tool has untapped potential for development; by incorporating the commercial circles that surround a particular university or school, a LINE Official Account can extend its circle of influence, uncover revenue resources, develop downloaded images, and generate non-business income. For this reason, universities that have invested in managing LINE Official Accounts are encouraged to continue developing this resource, while those that have not are recommended to rapidly evaluate the potential benefits and follow suit.

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