"You’ve made our day!": University recruitment as an institutional encounter on Twitter.

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Within the communicative locus of the social media, increasingly present as a medium of interaction in the process of student recruitment, the nature of engagement between prospective students and recruitment teams is radically changing the public voice of UK universities. In this paper I examine Twitter as an emerging discursive space for new forms of institutional interaction between university admissions teams and students looking for places. Specifically, I examine the changes in the language practices of higher education recruitment in this digital environment through an analysis of the social actions and interactions on the Twitter sites of 5 UK universities. I examine the tweeting activity between students and universities in a data sample taken from the first day of the process traditionally known as ‘clearing’, in August 2012 and 2013. Drawing on the theoretical notions of interactional footing, and structural adjacency in institutional contexts for interaction, as well as personalisation and the fragmenting boundaries of public discourse and private virtual spaces, I show that in addition to making use of the overtly promotional function of Twitter, some of the characteristic linguistic features of tweeting as an interactional encounter between institutions and students enable a range of informal discourses to be co-opted towards the contextual goal of student recruitment to undergraduate courses. I will argue that as the institutional ‘voice’ moves further into the domain of the personal during these digital encounters, so the relationship between universities and students is also being reconfigured in ways that are only just starting to be examined.

Keywords: interaction, Twitter, institution.