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An Examination of Indicators Regarding Student Choice in Social Media Marketing and Platforms of Higher Education Institutions in Missouri

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Platforms of Higher Education Institutions in Missouri

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by

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Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work here at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree here or elsewhere.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate relationships between social media marketing, social media platforms, and student choice of higher education institutions. Through evaluating current research, this study addresses potential changes needed to ensure colleges' and universities' marketing and admissions teams are using social media in ways that increase return on investment (ROI) and attract students to institutions. Previous research exposed social media marketing as a relatively untested method of reach for students' college choice; therefore, the study will be original in nature. Previous studies provided data from an admissions counselor's perspective, notably, a study by Barnes and Jacobsen (2013), which examined familiarity, usage, and attitudes toward social media at four-year higher education institutions. Researchers posited higher education institutions were increasingly making use of social media tools to research and recruit students while noting evidence of enthusiasm and eagerness of admissions teams to embrace new communication tools. In addition, many higher education institutions continued the use of social media due to increasingly important role played in the 21st-century world. As enrollment practices increased to keep up with enrollment demands, higher education institutions needed to design social media marketing, which would contribute to student choice (Moogan, 2011). Colleges and universities that applied marketing to the recruiting process experienced improvements and showed to be effective in reaching enrollment goals (Kotler & Fox, 1985). Continued evaluation and processing of marketing results will continue to provide colleges and universities the ability to target and reach prospective students.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Colleges and universities have reached out to prospective students to achieve enrollment goals (Savoye, 1983) since colleges and universities began. Higher education institutions conducted various outreach efforts, which are considered marketing. The use of marketing attracted prospective students to institutions while offering a sense of belonging and providing reasons why a person should be involved (Hatch & Schultz, 2008). In previous years, only after a student visited a campus, did admissions representatives become involved (Kotler & Fox, 1985). According to Fuller, (2014), on account of the GI Bill; a government program implemented to assist with funding as a benefit to returning WWII soldiers to obtain college educations, the admissions process changed. The GI Bill's outcomes gave admissions representatives the daunting task of sorting, evaluating, and choosing from a plethora of prospective students to enroll before ever visiting campuses. Recent studies confirmed a reduction in prospective student enrollment leaving colleges and universities to scramble to achieve enrollment goals (Ali-Choudhury et al., 2009). Indeed, reductions in prospective students seeking out enrollment to colleges and universities has stemmed from newly imposed societal demands. Demands, such as those discussed in Hanover Research (2019), included declining international enrollments, due to political indecision and higher education's financial instability.

In an advancing nation, colleges and universities accept prospective students to enroll regardless of socioeconomic status (Avci et al., 2015; Leveille, 2005). Posited by the researcher's, higher education's mission was to provide quality education to anyone, regardless of whatever demands colleges and universities live by. An outcome producing

residual effects, such as an educated, elevated economy, society, and culture (Niessen et al., 2017; Scott-Clayton, 2017). As per Brown (2017), demands forced colleges and universities to succumb to rigorous accountability set upon them by stakeholders, students, parents, communities, and governments. Declining enrollments, as shared by Brown (2017), are attributed to undervalued education provided by colleges and universities, which led to a competitive market when obtaining prospective students. To be sustainable in the current market, colleges and universities acknowledged the desired market themselves to gain position in obtaining prospective students through recruitment (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012; Hayes et al., 2009). A prospective student's short list in a lucrative and competitive market created barriers for higher education institutions to even make the cut and get on the list (Shields & Peruta, 2019).

In an effort for admissions representatives to re-evaluate recruitment practices, the first steps, included researching and identifying prospective students to make connections using targeted marketing strategies. "Marketing is a central activity of modern institutions" (Kotler & Fox, 1985, p. 7). The newest marketing techniques, once placed into practice, as conveyed by Kotler and Fox (1985), gave colleges and universities confidence, and showed improvements to prospective students' recruitment. In other words, marketing outreach adoption led to social media marketing (SMM) techniques concerning colleges and universities.

Colleges and universities continuously exhibited a decrease in student enrollments in The United States (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). Fain (2019) posited the decrease in numbers stretched for eight years nationwide. This fate extended to Missouri higher education institutions (National Student Clearinghouse

Research Center, 2019). Missouri showed at 12% enrollment decline, from 2014 to 2019 (Missouri Economic Research and Information Center, 2019). Social media marketing (SMM) is considered the newest technique placed in practice to assist admissions representatives in the process of recruiting prospective students to colleges and universities (Alves et al., 2016), and nearly every institution uses SMM (Hanover Research, 2014). Previous research attempted to provide admissions representatives the ability to look beyond initial student contact with social media's visual marketing elements to discover new marketing knowledge from evaluating procedures, including cost-effective strategies, and offer a revised plan to reach additional prospective students efficiently.

Rationale of the Study

Surveying students to learn how SMM affected their college choice is relatively untested; therefore, this is an original study. Previous researchers studied marketing from an admissions representative's perspective. A notable study by Barnes and Jacobsen (2013) examined familiarity, usage, and attitudes toward social media at four-year higher education institutions in the United States. Barnes and Jacobsen (2013) posited higher education institutions increased use of SMM tools to research and recruit prospective students, noting evidence of enthusiasm and admissions representative's eagerness to embrace new communication tools. As per Henry and Pieren (2014), many higher education institutions continue to use social media due to increasingly important role played in the 21st-century world. As enrollment practices increase to maintain enrollment demands, higher education institutions design SMM, which contribute to student choice (Moogan, 2011). Colleges and universities that had applied marketing to recruiting

processes had experienced improvements, which was useful in reaching enrollment goals (Kotler & Fox, 1985). In other words, evaluated and processed marketing results continue to provide colleges and universities the ability to target and reach prospective students.

The purpose of the research study will be to provide valuable feedback regarding SMM's ability to influence student's choice when selecting a higher education institution. An implementation of a full examination of the best SMM practices used by higher education institutions when reaching out to 21st-century prospective students, born with technology in hand. Through investigation, the researcher attempted to identify a need regarding focused SMM strategies to reach and target prospective students. Studies conducted by Hayes et al., (2009), along with Peruta and Shields (2018), confirmed SMM presence at an increased rate of usage in higher education institutions. Therefore, both studies showed agreeance, an imperative desire to strengthen SMM practices to reach prospective students in a targeted and direct manner, thus fulfilling enrollment need while bolstering enrollment rates caused partially from decreased state funding (Ali-Choudhury et al., 2009; Constantinides & Stagno, 2012; McKibben, 2005; Melchiorre & Johnson, 2017; Rutter et al., 2016). Admissions representatives review and make use of new marketing methods to increase enrollment numbers in an effort to keep the doors open at higher education institutions for students. Where Bock et al. (2014) theorized, directly targeting prospective students provides colleges and universities more focused and specific student body, cutting attrition rates and raising graduation percentages.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate effects of SMM had on students' college or university choice in Missouri-based higher education institutions. Through

evaluating enrolled students' higher education institution choice, the study aimed to address potential changes needed regarding marketing, via social media platforms, to prepare admission representatives' ability to target prospective students adequately. A survey instrument with a 5-point Likert scale was administered to gather data to evaluate college and university juniors' and seniors' higher education choice in Missouri. Survey data was examined to discern which, if any, SMM helped guide prospective students to select where to attend a college or university. Quantitative data collected went through an analysis to determine how students viewed social media to be a helpful tool in finalizing their decision to select a college or university.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Research questions stemmed from the desire to comprehend effects of colleges' and universities' social media marketing (SMM) development and implementation had been perceived by students to determine school choice. Data obtained provide admissions representatives with a better look at SMM's future in recruiting prospective students.

Research Question 1: Will social media platforms serve as a predictor of student choice of higher education institutions in Missouri?

Research Question 2: Will social media marketing serve as a predictor of student choice of higher education institutions in Missouri?

Research Question 3: What is the relationship between social media marketing, social media platforms, and student choice of higher education institutions in Missouri?

Hypothesis 1: Social media platforms will have a relationship with student's choice of higher education institutions in Missouri.

Hypothesis 2: Social media marketing will have a relationship with student choice of higher education institutions in Missouri.

Hypothesis 3: Social media marketing and social media platforms will have a relationship with each other and with student choice of higher education institutions in Missouri.

Study Limitations

Study participants were limited to junior and senior students attending stratified and randomly sampled colleges and universities. Student participation in the study was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential and assumed participants responded to the questionnaires with complete honesty without bias. Chosen colleges and universities to participate were selected by random stratified sampling, delivering a significantly higher number of private than public institutions. From the randomly sampled results, the selection provided more suburban/urban institutions versus rural institutions. The researcher assumed randomly selected institutions' students were willing to participate in the study. Social media marketing produced, per institution effects outcomes for the randomly selected higher education institutions. Sampled institutions provided an overview of colleges' and universities' social media practices in Missouri.

Definition of Terms

21st Century Student: 21st-century students are students possessing specific skills, such as adaptability to change, problem-solving, critical-thinking, reinventing themselves in numerous situations, and being a continuous learner (Kay, 2010).

Comment: happens when an individual on social media clicks the "comment" link and responds to posts (Peruta & Shields, 2017).

Engagement: how organizations strengthen relationships with customers through social media via likes, comments, shares, or other forms of interaction per platform (Lund, 2019; Peruta & Shields, 2017)

Engagement Rate: all your likes, comments, and saves divided by the number of followers at the time of the post (Rabo, 2019). (Likes + Comments) / Followers x 10 (Sonnenberg, 2020, para 3).

Enrollment Demand: Enrollment demand regarding higher education is the competition to secure students and the pressure felt to reach a specific number of enrolled to satisfy budget requirements (Rutter et al., 2016).

Facebook: Facebook, a social media interface which allows users to create individual personal profiles to interact with others by communicating interests, discovering similar characteristics, and building and maintaining connections (Davis et al., 2012).

Instagram: Instagram, a mobile application where users can take photos, add filters, and share with connected friends (Lytle, 2012).

Likes: happens when an individual on social media clicks the "like" link on a post (Peruta & Shields, 2017).

LinkedIn: LinkedIn, a social media platform organized to be used by career and business professionals to establish a network while obtaining resources, support, and building prospective relationships with customers, clients, and partners (Duermyer, 2018).

Market: Market is made up of individuals with a common interest in products or services (Kotler & Fox, 1985).

Marketing: Marketing, the processes to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange valued offerings to individuals (AMA, 2018).

Method of Reach: Method of reach establishes which social media outlets students use to find information about colleges and universities (Brown, 2004).

Shares: happens when an individual on social media user clicks the "share" link on a post and shares the original post on a personal page (Peruta & Shields, 2017).

Re-tweet: a post type which happens when a user reposts another individuals' tweet on Twitter (Majmundar et al., 2018).

Snapchat: Snapchat is a mobile; iPhone or Android, friendly application that utilizes 'Snap' (photo or video) sharing where users interact with friends quickly and in a non-permanent manner (Liaison, 2017).

Social Media: Social media consists of websites and applications; Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Snap Chat, that enables users to create and share content (Social Media, 2018).

Student Recruitment: Student recruitment is "the process of adding new individuals (students) to a population (higher educational institution)" (Recruitment, 2018, para 1).

Target Market: Target markets narrow down the market into one or more segments where marketing efforts focus and tailor to fulfill specific needs (Kotler & Fox, 1985).

Twitter: Twitter is a social media interface enabling users to share limited content/tweets to countless users (Davis et al., 2012).

YouTube: YouTube is a site to share public video files, including product demonstrations, short video clips, TV shows, commercials, movie clips, and music (Othman, 2018).

Summary

      The remainder of the study includes four additional chapters, appendices, and a definitive reference list. Readers will find an encompassing current literature review, associated with higher education admissions' SMM use to connect with prospective students, in Chapter Two. Quantitative methodology for the study, including research tool creation, procedures to obtain data, and data reliability and validity, are included in Chapter Three. Appendices include a copy of the data collection tool. Chapter Four deciphers study results. The study concludes in Chapter Five, which describing implications for further SMM research regarding higher education admissions representatives.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Chapter One explained higher education's expansion, resulting from society's desire to establish an educated populace, leading to student's substantial influx to colleges and universities. Consequently, student influx faltered from varied circumstances, thus placing institutions in the new position of seeking out prospective students. Prior research generally confirms colleges' and universities' obligations to continuously evolve social media marketing (SMM) practices to reach prospective students on platforms they use, based on issues of higher education. Chapter Two reviews literature hitherto showing higher education marketing progression, from traditional marketing materials to SMM implementation on various platforms, as well as connections between institutions and students in today's technologically savvy world.

Previous research produced discussions regarding administrators' opinions and views on SMM use in higher education, focusing more on return on investment (ROI). Prior research also substantiates demand to understand generational students'; Generation Y & Z, college choices to gain valuable insights applicable to future SMM efforts. Previous researchers provided rich, invaluable insight, and knowledge; however, provided data concentrated on financial aspects and why students choose a college, rather than student choice from connections made on SMM. In other words, prior studies failed to evaluate connections made through SMM with prospective students in the recruitment process, as well as reactions to social media. Combined concepts from previous research offer colleges and universities more applicable perceptions of generational students' college choice patterns based on SMM. Study outcomes offer admissions representatives a comprehensive view into SMM efforts from a student's viewpoint, to reveal where

improvements could be beneficial in increasing enrollments and optimizing institution's return on investment.

This literature review investigated several aspects that play an essential role in SMM development for admissions in higher education. First is a discussion covering historical marketing significance in higher education. Next a long look at social and purchasing theories about college choice. Additionally, generational theory provided background information, focused on the importance of generational students' marketing perception and institutional effect of choosing a college or university. The literature review concluded with a section discussing marketing barriers, creating a disconnection between colleges and universities and generational students.

Historical Marketing in Higher Education

Fay and Zavattaro (2016) believed communication to be the beginning step to marketing, while Kotler and Fox (1985), believed it to be the exchange between colleges and universities with prospective students. A process, widely accepted and rooted in a medieval university system, began when family sought out professional educators/professors for older children directly (Fuller, 2014). Professors communicated offerings between communities served through an antiquated and timeless marketing technique, word of mouth (WOM). A form of target marketing existed, where professors created accommodating offerings to the public, that were relevant to the local prospective students, taught their subject areas with gusto and supported communities they served. There were standard methods, still accurately portrayed in higher education marketing, where colleges and universities competed to obtain prospective students.

Previous studies substantiate higher education's primary concern and longstanding goals were to increase the populace's social and cultural lives (Scott-Clayton, 2017). Kotler and Fox (1985) theorized:

A societal marketing orientation holds that the main task of the institution is to determine the needs, wants, and interests of its consumers and to adapt the institution to deliver satisfactions that preserve or enhance the consumer's and society's well-being and long-term interests (p. 11).

Several researchers agreed the use of target marketing by colleges and universities attracted prospective students and fulfilled the institutions' set goals. Likewise, with social media analytical data and targeting abilities, colleges and universities employ additional outlets to connect with prospective students. Research of Kotler and Fox (1985) presented increased enrollments for colleges and universities with marketing implementation, thus becoming administrative developments pivotal moment. Additionally, Fay and Zavattaro (2016) agreed; when enrollments declined, admissions representatives responded with marketing plans to remediate the issue. A change in operations, proposed by Fay and Zavattaro (2016) bolstered low enrollments due to uniformed institutions' need for improved marketing.

Renowned marketing professor, E. Jerome McCarthy (1960), implemented the four Ps of marketing: product, price, place, and promotion. To adapt the theory to colleges and universities, from McCarthy's (1960) definitions, would require one to do the following:

Product: Colleges and universities establish course offerings reflecting ecological, social, and cultural needs in the institution's surrounding area.

Price: Colleges or universities establish a tuition package, which would be attractive and competitive when presented to prospective students.

Place: Regarding colleges and universities, the place established within a geographical location or locations.

Promotion: A college's or university's ability to communicate with the populace about offerings available.

Historically, institutions use promotions to reach out to prospective students. Promotions produced by colleges and universities consisted of, written materials, audiovisual materials, branding, news, speeches, telephone communications, and personal contact creating a cross promotable marking plan. (Crayon, 2018; Fay & Zavattaro, 2016; Kotler & Fox, 1985). Each cross promotion enhanced the institutions' ability to increase brand approval with prospective students by evoking desires when selecting a specific college or university to attend. As per Kotler and Fox (1985), colleges and universities used written materials - for example, annual reports, catalogs, employee newsletters, alumni magazines, posters, and flyers - as a method to reach for prospective students. Furthermore, presentations implemented audiovisual tools; for instance, films, slides, and audio cassettes showed campus life and described available offerings.

With social media's addition as a cross promotable marketing tool, Melchiorre and Johnson (2017) added another P, participation to McCarthy's (1960) 4 P's marketing theory. Melchiorre and Johnson (2017) advocated participation as an essential aspect attributable to the interaction needed between institutions and prospective students to create a relational healthy marketing plan. Social media offers users the capability to participate in two-way conversations with colleges and universities, whereas other

marketing types only offer one-way conversations (Hou, 2016; Moogan, 2011). However, cross promotable, coordinated, and authentic SMM elevated their marketing efforts.

Sevier (2002), Stamats Senior Vice President, a higher education consulting firm, described branding as individualized components, such as easily identifiable items: name, trademark, symbol, look or icon, and much more. Additionally, Sevier (2002) considered a brand to be similar to an individual's ability to establish a personality, with qualities and characteristics, making themselves distinguishable from one another. A brand, as described by Ali-Choudhury et al., (2009), had the ability to do the following: (a) reflect how institutions can satisfy students' needs; (b) instill trustworthiness; (c) give stakeholders a spirit of excellence; and (d) encourage prospective students to consider enrollment. To sum up, the way others view colleges' and universities' reputations become a vital recruitment and marketing tool to attract prospective students. According to Sevier (2007), a well-branded college or university; as shown in Figure 1, attracts "more and better students, more full and fuller-paying students, more persistent students, better faculty and staff." (p. 46). In other words, colleges and universities implementing a marketing strategy would bolster enrollment numbers. A plan best suited to reach prospective students, includes, but is not limited to, SMM.
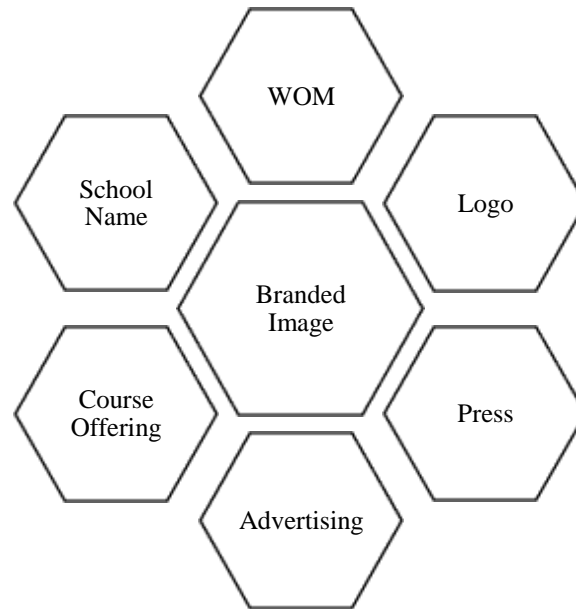
Figure 1. Channels to Deliver Branded Marketing

Note. Several channels can deliver a branded image. Adapted from *Building a brand that matters: Helping colleges and universities capitalize on the four essential elements of a block-buster brand,* by R. A. Sevier, 2002, Strategy Publishing, Hiawatha: IL, p. 26.

Intent to Purchase/College Choice

When contemplating a college or university, a prospective student will not merely choose a school, but a lifelong relationship where an institution's name will forever be associated with them (Peruta & Shields, 2018; Rutter et al., 2016). The choice established a need for marketing and recognizing what leads individuals to purchase a product, or regarding this study, why prospective students select colleges and universities. Constantinides and Stagno (2012) and Galan et al. (2015) considered how social media influenced prospective students' study choice. Griffiths and Wall (2011) studied colleges' and universities' communications with prospective students contemplating a study option. Also, Johnston (2010) examined influential connections and what persuaded college and university choice, while Joseph et al. (2012) examined branding's effect on

student choice. Lastly, Rogers (2015) evaluated how students reached decisions, while

Turner (2017) conducted a survey on social media influence on college choice, and Wang

et al. (2012) inspected consumer socialization on purchase decisions. Each researchers'

ideas played an important role in understanding prospective students' college or

university choice.

College and university marketing implementation encompassed many intended

purposes; however, reaching prospective students tops the list. A well planned and

developed marketing strategy directly reflects a college or university. It is a visible

reflection, evident in prospective students' college or university choice (Joseph et al.,

2012). The researcher also proposed the marketing strategy aided prospective students in

decreasing confusion and increasing choice ease. Further, conveying applicable

procedures and, using marketing materials, connected with prospective students to build

trusted relationships on an emotional level. Trusted connection resulted in prospective

students becoming enrolled students with little encouragement. Research of Ali-

Choudhury et al. (2009) and Brown (2004) posited the need for a well-established

marketing plan, incorporating knowledge about prospective students' needs, interests,

motivating factors, barriers, and desired communication styles.

Zhang et al. (2017) insisted a student's choice is dependent on his or her family's

opinions about a college or university. One example is parents' perceptions of

educational quality (Sauder & Lancaster, 2006). However, actions set forth by colleges

and universities marketing established positivity toward institutions. A process described

by Duffett (2015a), where positivity led to an increased desire for prospective student to

enroll based solely on their family's opinion regarding a higher education institution,

rather than their own.

Stages	AIDA Model	Hierarchy of Effects Model	Innovation-Adoption Model	Information Processing Model	Operational Model
Cognitive Stage	Attention	Awareness Knowledge	Awareness	Presentation Attention Comprehension	Non-Evaluative Thinking
Affective Stage	Interest Desire	Liking Preference Conviction	Interest Evaluation	Yielding Retention	Evaluative Thinking
Behavior Stage	Action	Purchase	Trial Adoption	Behavior	Action

Figure 2. Various Hierarchy Response Models Regarding Purchase/Choice Decisions

Note. Adapted from "Response Hierarchy Models," by *StudiousGuy*, Retrieved from

https://studiousguy.com/response-hierarchy-models/. Copyright 2019 by StudiousGuy.

As illustrated in Figure 2, several purchasing or decision-making theories

exhibited dependency on individuals first becoming aware or visualizing the intended

purchase/experience. In other words, prospective students would have to first recognize

colleges' and universities' actual existence before considering making a choice.

However, without hierarchy response models' first stage, enrollments would be less

likely to happen. Hierarchy response models described decision-making processes

regarding purchases (StudiousGuy, 2019). Figure 2 illustrates an array of response

models, which follows similar ideologies; for example, awareness, knowledge, interest,

preference, and purchase/choice (Duffett, 2015a). Additionally, Duffett (2015a) insisted,

to achieve a sound decision, completion of all stages was needed. The researcher believed

marketing communications aided in the stages to confirm decisions. Thus, increasing an

individual's thoughts of trust and positivity toward organizations led to relationships between student and institution as an outcome.

Berry (1985) introduced a new conceptualization to an old idea, relationship marketing. The researcher described relationship marketing as "attracting, maintaining, and…. enhancing customer relationships" (p. 236). Relationship marketing is a concept developed to fulfill generational students' requirements for more personal, real-time engagement between prospective students and colleges and universities, rather than traditional marketing efforts (Davis et al., 2012; Hanover Research, 2019; Lazarevic, 2012; Zhang et al., 2017). Berry's (1985) relationship marketing strategy encompassed five elements; regarding higher education, only two are relevant. The two elements were: (a) developed services; admissions and student services, to build customer relationships; and (b) individualized financial aid packages; scholarships and grants. Relationship marketing would be able to address prospective students' informational needs, quality issues, and expectations during recruitment, as well as days following enrollment (Moogan, 2011; Nusair et al., 2013). Boateng and Okoe (2015) believed traditional one-way marketing methods to be a drawback of relationship marketing, due to failing to influence prospective students' choice. However, continued contact, as described by the researcher Hou (2016), with critical two-way conversations, would capitalize on opportunities for engagement aiding in instilling trust and ensuring a desired fit within the institution.

Instilled trust between prospective students and colleges and universities established collaborative relationships, building value, and creating long term loyalty (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012; Nusair et al., 2013). Colleges and universities gained

value, as defined by Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005), from portraying an institution's worth. Moogan (2011) recommended implementing relationship marketing in higher education, with similar intentions as Berry (1985) and Constantinides and Stagno (2012) implied. Moogan (2011) saw relationship marketing as a beneficial method to attract prospective students in the recruitment process, where admissions representatives would build relationships to remain in contact with a prospective student.

Social exchange theory (SET) plays an essential role in creating a connection with prospective students. Findings of Zhang et al. (2017) suggested reciprocity as a series of exchange interactions. Several studies considered SET a central point to relationship building (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Zhang et al., 2017). Homans (1958), an American Sociologist, defined SET as, "an exchange of goods, material goods and non-material ones, for instance, the symbols of approval or prestige" (p. 606). The theory relied heavily on interactions between individuals and groups, taking into consideration the ability to influence others while instilling trust, loyalty, and mutual commitments, enhancing relationships created (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Johnston, 2010). Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) added to make social exchange affect feelings, personal obligations, gratitude, and trust should be evident, to display success. In SET creation, Homans (1958) resolved to answer the question, "What happens when two or three persons are in a position to influence one another" (p. 597). Homans (1958) believed individuals receiving much from others reflected giving much, producing an outcome of exchange balance, although establishing equal reciprocity could not forever be the case, creating a value system within the theory. A connection the researcher considered, brought economics and sociology together with one theory.

Social Exchange Theory, more properly named in economics as Law of Supply and Demand or Law of Demand, analogously follows the same concepts, where both deal with goods regarding rewards and reciprocity (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Homans, 1958). Homans (1958) contemplated how communications and interactions took place in a person's everyday life. Interaction, a point made clear with the research of Back (1950), which aimed to demonstrate in the research The Exertion of Influence through Social Communication, where "an individual tries to influence others to accept his beliefs and may be willing to be influenced" (p.21). The desired outcome of SET theory would be a prospective student's college or university selection, considering their established relationship with an admissions representative. Also, SMM use provided a brand-new avenue in supporting relationship exchanges, where both parties had an unprecedented role in being actively involved in the recruitment process (Martinez-Lopez et al., 2005). To sum up, SET led to more significant developments in marketing practices involving relationship building between commercial and individual entities, including higher education and prospective students.

Influence through social media communications is noticeable through word of mouth (WOM), a process where individuals share thoughts, feelings on services, and experiences to others going through similar events (Zhang et al., (2017), and the influence level would depend on relationships between sharing parties. In other words, a close friend or family member had a firmer influence amount than college admission representatives (Johnston, 2010). Providing value-building marketing to influential individuals in a target market was shown to be beneficial in producing positive WOM.

Given 21st-century technology influx, WOM evolved from person to person contact to screen contact, termed electronic WOM or e-WOM (Galan et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2013). The researchers suggested WOM as a naturally occurring social event; however, the nature of the shared media can vary by things on an individual's mind. In other words, with social media use, colleges and universities had many opportunities to share highly influential, media providing quality e-WOM sharing between individuals. An appealing concept, e-WOM offers colleges and universities the ability to overcome social media boundaries with a fast, low-cost tool, supporting engagement growth with prospective students (Zhang et al., 2017). Additionally, Zhang et al., (2017) posited, with e-WOM, when prospective students are engaged on social media with a college and university, they retrospectively influence peers. With WOM or e-WOM implementation via social media, Galan et al., (2015) stated an individual's willingness to notice family and friends/peer; strong ties, engagement -- likes, comments, and shares, and the feeling of comfort knowing the level of trust instilled.

Strong ties, as described by Johnston (2010), limited a person's ability to discover new information. Scheepers et al. (2014) revealed social media's capability to offer enhanced communications increasing connections between weak ties. Weak ties, a term described by Johnston (2010) as contacts with accountancies or strangers, offer a more comprehensive informational view. Individuals, as disclosed by Scheepers et al., (2014), acquire weak ties with other individuals through social media group platforms and community pages, based on shared interests, thus evoking belonging and trust in new areas not received from strong ties. Strong ties encourage robust social circles and local cohesion, while, as Davis et al., (2012) posited, weak ties bridge outside networks. Lund

(2019) agreed social media ties indicate to higher education institutions sharing behaviors of followers and ensure marketing efforts are making the greatest effect on prospective students. Additionally, when using social media, an individual's social needs are fulfilled with both strong and weak ties

Marketing professionals believe individuals both need and desire gratification and seek out social media as a fulfillment (Constantinides, 2008; Whiting & Williams, 2013). Individuals used social media to build identities, social positions, and emotional lives while providing informational and interactive needs (Constantinides, 2008; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). Scheepers et al., (2014) and Wu et al., (2013) postulated individuals use social media in various ways, such as information sharing, making strong or weak ties, and knowledge advancement. Research of Whiting and Williams (2013) revealed met needs as the main impetus, ensuring individuals' return to specific social media platforms. Whiting and Williams (2013) provided the following ten themes or reasons why individuals turn to social media.

- Social interaction; strong and weak ties: 88%

- Information seeking; sales, events, business information: 80%

- Pass time; boredom, waiting: 76%

- Entertainment; playing games, movies: 64%

- Relaxation; escape from reality: 60%

- Opinion expression; liking, commenting, venting on posts: 56%

- Communicatory utility; conversation starters: 56%

- Convenience utility; accessible anytime, anywhere: 52%

- Information sharing, posting updates, advertising: 40%

- Surveillance/knowledge about others; people watching: 32% (p.367).

Colleges and universities connect with and are being contacted by prospective students daily. To fulfill goals set by colleges and universities, admissions representatives establish admittance guidelines concerning right; criteria compatible, and wrong; academically unprepared, prospective student-types. (Bock et al., 2014; Newman, 2002). Upon established admittance guidelines, segmentation and target marketing can occur. Prior researchers extrapolated market segmentation as a process conducted by admissions representatives for identifying and profiling prospective students into groupings defining target markets with specific characteristics to improve the position of colleges and universities while addressing immediate needs of the community. Segmentation allows colleges and universities to address diverse groups in the target market, aiding marketing strategies designed to apply to desired prospective students (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012). However, targeting, and segmenting markets had not been confirmed to increase matriculation and graduation rates and necessitated further research to fill knowledge gaps (Chen & DiVall, 2018).

Assisting with target marketing, admission representatives took into consideration the theory of developmental ecology. Patton et al. (2016) described how ecology theory models helped student affairs personnel to be more familiar with how students develop and perceive environments. This theoretical framework fits marketing criteria for identifying prospective students' individual needs in the admission process where prospective students face an overload of factors, which influence opinions and outlooks. Likewise, admissions representatives' ability to recognize and be familiar with prospective students' environments means they know the most suitable times to reach

out. Bronfenbrenner (1979) theorized environmental forces determined influential factors

over a person's life or environment, stating:

> Most of the building blocks in the environmental aspect of the theory are familiar
>
> concepts in the behavioral and social sciences: molar activity, dyad, role, setting,
>
> social network, institution, sub-culture, culture. What is new is the way in which
>
> these entities are related to each other and to the course of development. In short,
>
> as far as the external world is concerned, what is presented here is a theory of
>
> environmental interconnections and their impact on the forces directly affecting
>
> psychological growth (p. 8).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory suggested four components, which aided in an

individual's social development: process, person, context, and time (as cited in Patton et

al., 2016). Process is related to personal interactions over time where development occurs

gradually. The component, person, is a bit more involved and described how

surroundings affect a person. Context described how individual growth occurs. This

theoretical framework of Ecology Theory explained how daily activities affect an

individual's environmental growth where each component builds on itself, describing

college students' experiences. The final component, time, demonstrated progression of

life events, and effects on an individual's development throughout a lifetime. To sum up

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory, the components individuals encounter shape life

outcomes visible in prospective students' decisions made when considering a college or

university to call home. Likewise, Bronfenbrenner's theory assists admissions

representatives in obtaining admission goals proficiently, with target marketing.

In 1960, Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen developed Theory of Reasoned Action,

also known to marketing professionals as Theory of Attitude Toward Advertising (Ajzen,

2012; Duffett, 2017). Duffett (2017) posited Theory of Attitude, regarding marketing, as

having two key concepts. Concept one offered products associated with a specific desired

result. The second concept introduced is geared toward relationship foundations such as

those previously discussed (Pringle & Fritz, 2018; Yang, 2012). As per Wang et al.,

(2012) and Lukka and James (2014), communication with a peer has held the strongest

influential attitude predictor towards purchase intentions. Duffett (2017) described

attitude theory as a six-phased, multicomponent model, adapted to reach prospective

students: (a) institution's existence awareness; (b) knowledge offerings; (c) preference of

or liking; (d) sharing positive relation; (e) demonstrating confidence; and (f) choosing to

attend. Additionally, attitude theory aids marketer's ability to realize when an individual

"likes or dislikes" a higher education institution, and the effect on purchase decisions

(Duffett, 2017). However, regarding SMM, attitude effected an individual's purchase

decisions by viewing posted media and perceiving value (Boateng & Okoe, 2015; Ko et

al., 2005; Yang, 2012). Attitude theory plays heavily in decisions made by generational

students entering college, a process explained more in the generational studies section.

Colleges and universities seek engagement through SMM, with a primary goal to

influence any newcomer or prospective student through communications (Wang et al.,

2012). Increasing involvement with prospective students through SMM boosts a college's

or university's perceived value and their reach to further audiences (Nusair et al., 2013;

Wang et al., 2012; Yang et al., 12). Perceived value, a way to increase engagement, better

known by Yang (2012) as conceived value, is an essential part of the decision-making

process, as well as a purchase choice indicator. Thus, Yang (2012) counted consumer's needs, conceived value, and a general interest in a product, leading to their involvement with an institution. Using social media, prospective students interacted directly with colleges and universities, offering others with similar interests in institutions is perceived value (Jisana, 2014; Peruta & Shields, 2018). This is a process admissions representatives and marketing managers deemed a central marketing concept (Sandlin & Pena, 2014). Furthermore, when contemplating ideas aimed at colleges and universities, Davis et al. (2012), Joseph et al., (2012), and Peruta and Shields (2017) explicated increased involvement and engagement gave prospective students a sense of belonging to campus culture and community, resulting in higher achievement, retention from year to year, and at long last, graduation, a process featured in Customer Socialization Theory.

Customer Socialization Theory, as defined by Wang et al., 2012, could be considered a way to comprehend how communications among individuals affect intentions to purchase and make decisions. Moschis and Churchill (1978) viewed the theory to be a social process, incorporating an antecedent variable framework, socialization processes, and outcomes, with antecedent framework: sex, age, and social class, affect outcomes, both directly and indirectly. The researchers believed socialization process to be fueled by influential entities such as parents, mass media, school, and peers, through learned relationships (Jisana, 2014). Rogers (2015) posited parents and family members as fundamental influential entity for prospective students' decision for higher education attendance. Current research, conducted by Wang et al. (2012), added social media to the influential entity's realm, including learning properties; for example, attitude, skill, and knowledge when making purchasing decisions (Moschis & Churchill,

1978). Wang et al. (2012) posited socialization could happen between previously

connected individuals or strangers. To sum up, prospective students' likelihood to

formulate connections before making a college and university choice are beneficial with

social media use; however, relationship building is a necessity to establish profitable

results to support an institution.

Theories discussed on social development, directly linked to marketing, reflect the

need to comprehend target markets, ensuring college and university recruitment success

(Yaakop et al., 2013). Theoretical frameworks enhanced institutions' ability to generate

informed decisions considering criteria set for prospective students they wish to connect

with. Technology implementation, with theory application in the admissions process,

made prospective students easier to reach. Social media offered valued marketing

assistance in a competitive field to research and target specific markets (Chen & DiVall,

2018; Joseph et al., 2012). The next section discusses how college and university

admissions representatives previously used, and continue to use, social media to

implement theoretical concepts to reach prospective students.

Generational Theory

Generational Theory groups individuals into age sets, which share experiences

and include similar influences, beliefs, and attitudes (Lazarevic, 2012). Hou (2016) and

Peruta and Shields (2017) considered social media the best marketing practice in reaching

generational students based solely on their upbringing with technology at hand. Without

marketers adding substantial relevant value to visuals delivered on social media, the

researcher posited 21st-century generational students would not consider viewing or

interacting with presented media (Duffett, (2015b). Twenty-first-century prospective

students want to be engaged with, sought after, and made to believe they are already a part of a campus environment. However, 51% of generational students, as described by Peruta and Shields (2018), would be willing to generate decisions considering user-generated content from social media outlets. A communications advisor from the research of Hou (2016) stated, "Engagement is opposed to a poster saying, 'here is a brand'. We are not selling a brand. We are working with students to build a multi-faceted life, a living thing, and a shared ownership" (p. 6). To sum up, prospective students reject being sold to and demonstrate a desire to fit in and feel special once accepted.

Institutions establish a clear picture as to what 21st-century generational students desired when being pursued by colleges and universities to complete prospective student enrollment task. Twenty-first-century students' value everything differently, including the way they communicate, research, and socialize (Ratliff, 2011). To compete for prospective students, colleges and universities spent additional time studying how generational students receive information and communicate through social media. Communication gave colleges and universities the ability to reach them on their terms. Subsequent sections address the needs representing Generation Y and Z, regarding social media preferences.

Generation Y

A portion of today's youth, labeled Generation Y (GY), are active social media users (Zhang et al., 2017). Approximately two-thirds of GY students are enrolled or will enroll at a college or university (Peruta & Shields, 2017). Generation Y, as described by the researcher, consists of any young person born between 1981 and 1994, where they cannot remember a time in their lives where they socialized without social media. Zhang

et al., (2017) had described GY students as having a "third hand" or "second brain," with extensive use of technology (p. 736). As one of the first generations to embrace social media, GY students are comfortable sharing opinions which they feel could be helpful to others. Likewise, GY will heed peers and acquaintances' advice when making important decisions (Duffett, 2015b; Zhang et al., 2017).

Additionally, GY students gravitate to brands and organizations they find value in and match self-values and self-image (Lazarevic, 2012). Directly linked to attitude theory, where an individual's belief about products will determine attitude toward purchase decisions (Ajzen, 2012). In addition, Ajzen (2012) confirmed empirical evidence supporting connection between beliefs and social pressures. In other words, GY students will instill high trust levels in thoughts and pressures from peers when making purchase decisions.

Generation Y students display self-learned marketing knowledge. Lazarevic (2012) added and Hanover Research (2019) agreed, GY students demonstrated strong resistance to traditional marketing efforts. Lazarevic (2012) expressed GY students placed a more substantial value on corporate marketing when presented across multiple social media platforms, a process described by Lazarevic (2012) as part of integrated marketing communications, a marketing process where an organization posts consistent messages on several social media platforms. Postings create a consistently strong brand, instilling trust, and increasing positive attitudes toward organizations (McKibben, 2005; Wu et al., 2013). In addition to seeking approval from peers, their confidence also increases with personal, authentic, real-time engagement with marketing organizations, enabling them to generate well-informed decisions about their futures (Davis et al., 2012;

Zhang et al., 2017). As Koughan and Rushkoff (2014) posited, GY has used this process to project what they felt as cool to peers, with "social currency" as likes, follows, friends, and retweets on social media; hence, this becomes their identity.

In addition, GY students had a unique thought process vis-à-vis social media, stemming from growing up with everything branded as a visual extension of themselves giving worth to their identities (Lazarevic, 2012; Zhang et al., 2017). When it came to social media, GY students are well versed and are more technologically savvy than previous generations (Hayes et al., 2009; Rutter et al., 2016). Additionally, GY students ordinarily respond well to humor, satire, and honesty, while steering far away from past SMM persuasion techniques (Zhang et al., 2017). In other words, GY students felt connected when pursued on social media with relationship marketing, to a college and university, hence potentially leading to change prospective student to an attendee.

Generation Z

In contrast to GY students, Generation Z (GZ) were youth born after 1995 to present, and they present a different social media perspective (Zhang et al., 2017). Generation Z is an entirely diverse generation, with many biracial and multicultural students reaching college age (Turner, 2015), described as "I-generation", "net-gen," or "digital natives" (p. 104). Duffett (2017) named GZ students as "screenaddicts" or "screenagers" (p. 22). Generation Z's most defining characteristic is never going through life before the internet and experiencing continuous instant access, including social media (Davis et al., 2012; Duffett, 2017; Ratliff, 2011). Many GZ students grew up faced with the 2008 financial crisis, considering their parents experiencing great hardships where money management became a learned outcome (Turner, 2015) with responsible fiscal

characteristics and valued education and flexibility in employment and networking. To no surprise, GY are accustomed to social media interactions and communications, growing up in an ever-connected world where the only other activity they perform longer would be sleeping. They are heavy social media users, with 72% of GZ students online via mobile devices, a central entertainment hub with instant access to information at their fingertips (Duffett, 2017; Turner, 2015; Yaakop et al., 2013). Additionally, GZ students display the capacity to spot unreliable information from organizations and focus on more creative brands (Duffett, 2017; Turner, 2015). To sum up, GZ students are fast-paced individuals refusing to waste time with false, untrustworthy information. Seeking facts, they prefer to obtain information about decisions online. Generation Z students avoid life struggles, with 50% talking to others online (Turner, 2015, p. 108). To sum up, relationship marketing tools over various social media platforms made connections between colleges and universities and GZ students easier.

Social Media Marketing (SMM)

To fully comprehend consumer socialization with social media, an individual would need marketing knowledge on various platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Snapchat. Moschis and Churchill (1978) posited, "Consumer socialization is the process by which young people develop consumer-related skills, knowledge, and attitudes" (p. 599). Marketing changed when SMM implemented connections with peers instantaneously, which became increasingly popular among each age group (Wang et al., 2012). Marketing through social media is an ideal, attributed to the nature of platforms as collaborative and interactive (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012), and asserted prospective students are currently engaged in some way (Sandlin & Pena,

2014). As presented previously, being social can be accomplished with many methods. In other words, SMM implementation combined being social and marketing almost seamlessly**.**

Regarding colleges and universities, Kotler and Fox (1985) defined marketing as, "a central activity of modern institutions, growing out of their quest to effectively serve some area of human need" (p. 7), a prime factor of SMM's current state. Social media marketing, the number one communications platform and a vital information exchange component, is crucial to a customer's experience and a vital part to each institution (Hayta, 2013; Whiting & Williams, 2013; Zhang et al., 2017). Communications are leading social media to become the forerunner in the business world, as a part of organization's marketing strategies and as a college and university recruiting tool (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012; Hayes et al., 2009). When used by colleges and universities, Rutter et al., (2016) believed SMM showed success when they, "acquire prospective students [followers], engage with them [interaction], drive them to submit inquiries and applications [links], and ultimately convert them into enrolments" (p. 8). Pairing previous techniques with relationship marketing practices, SMM, as a recruiting tool, could raise a college and university's branded environment to be most desirable in an ever-competitive market. Rutter et al. (2016) added colleges and universities with developed strong interactive communications with followers produce a better chance of increased recruitment.

The study's purpose is to highlight the importance of recognizing young individuals' perceptions on how SMM affected college choice (Duffett, 2017; Rogers, 2015). Ali-Choudhury et al., (2009) and Brown, (2004) posited the need for colleges and

universities to recognize prospective students' opinions about institutions' marketing and how they perceived efforts presented as recruitment tools. As discussed previously, generations Y and Z's needs and wants are different and reflect on the researchers' implication, in that 21st-century marketers must continually stream relevant and exciting content to maintain and attract prospective students' attention. Social media can influence many aspects of a consumer's decisions to purchase and has the potential to immensely affect more prospective students faster (Hayes et al., 2009; Hayta, 2013; Pringle & Fritz, 2018; Yaakop et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2017). Social media, used to influence or sway a customer/prospective students' decision making, could be accomplished through peer communications in two ways as per Wang et al., (2012), directly (peer influence), and indirectly (relationships with admission representatives). The research of Alves et al. (2016) asserted individuals found information gathered from peers through social media as more reliable than information coming directly from institutions. The following sections highlight SMM in higher education in further detail.

The internet has exceeded three billion users and affects many aspects of young students' daily lives (Duffett, 2017), where SMM is not a new part of human nature's socialization need; instead, it is an extension. Social media networking platforms offer a place where millions of users log on and communicate with others from anywhere in the world (Hayta, 2013; Wang et al., 2012). It is a connection which gives users the ability to be an influencer to numerous individuals by "liking" or "re-tweeting" and vice versa (John et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2013), using images, videos, and links (Yaakop et al., 2013). Hence, making social media the perfect tool to assist colleges and universities in improving awareness through interactions with marketing messages to a far-reaching

representation of prospective students. In the belief of Hayes et al., (2009), a social

network had been considered thriving at high levels, where human interactions are

increasing reach to additional prospective students for recruitment with marketing. This is

a direct linking to SET theory, where interactions are dependent on other actions

(Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In other words, admissions representatives build

relationships with prospective students through social media engagement, evoking trust,

or personal obligation, while creating symbolic value and fulfilling generational students'

approval, prestige needs, and results in more significant spending/support, as stated

previously.

Using SMM positively affected colleges and universities with the implementation

of a well-planned marketing design and target/segmented marketing (Ratliff, 2011).

Social media platforms can classify and distinguish users giving higher education

institutions exclusive ability to strategically target desired market to reach prospective

students with predetermined criteria (Hayta, 2013). However, Hayta (2013) asserted that

connecting to anyone through social media platforms' functional aspects with specific

criteria used with targeted/segmented marking, was an imperative technique implemented

when institutions seek to maximize recruitment efforts. In other words, colleges and

universities can reach more prospective students with the use of targeted/segmented

marking; however, the reach can be increased with both strong and weak social media

ties.

The full intention of social media use by higher education institutions as described

by Liu et al. (2015) and Griffiths and Wall (2011), is seen when individuals share

personal opinions on world aspects, including life views, transactions, and services, a

type of sharing known to evoke strong and weak ties between social media users. Hou (2016) believed, higher education institutions marketing efforts "need to be engaging enough for the students to spread and share within communities and networks, and be willing to repost without prompting" (p. 6). This leads admissions representatives to reach out to prospective students, enhancing colleges' and universities' abilities to build lasting relationships, through continuous contact on social media platforms. In addition, they present increased influences on other prospective students with the same interest through both weak and strong ties (Griffiths & Wall, 2011; Hou, 2016; Rutter et al., 2016). Social media, as a recruitment tool, grew beyond being a simple, one-way, marketing platform into a brand experience for prospective students, encouraging connectivity long before thinking about a visit to campus (Griffiths & Wall, 2011; Pringle & Fritz, 2018). To sum up, SMM comprises beginning communications, fostering a bond between colleges and universities with prospective student body. Further research of Lund (2019) agreed and posited engagement practices of higher education institutions fostered relationships, resulting in greater spending/support/attendance.

Relationships with prospective students showed imperative to colleges' and universities' recruitment success. However, connections failed to come to fruition without developed marketing strategies and up-to-date content implementation on social media platforms due to fickle generational students' weariness of traditional marketing practices (Duffett, 2017). Liu et al., (2015) believed having educated college and university marketers on SMM platforms ensured prepared media distribution enticed the intended prospective student. Duffett (2017) described marketing to prospective students as an art form in recognizing generational students' attitudes toward social media.

Generational students participate in varied social media platforms daily (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Moreover, GY considered time spent on social media relevant, to where, if given a choice, they would choose other punishments rather than losing their cell phone (Turner, 2017). In other words, a generational student regards social media as an active part of their lives, affecting daily happenings, regardless of being related to decision making or pure entertainment.

Prior research on consumer attitudes towards SMM played an essential role in understanding generational students' college or university choice. Identifying consumer's outlook on SMM led to recognizing the best way to communicate with social media and through which platforms (Duffett, 2017; Melchiorre & Johnson, 2017). Table 1 outlined data from Pew Research Center, revealing how many social media users partake in more than one social media platform, adding up to nearly three-quarters of the public (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Then again, from research, 78% of younger users; 18-24, are more apt to use Snapchat and maintain accounts on Instagram and Twitter, as well. Data further revealed users ordinarily check platforms at least once daily, with 49% stating they check multiple times a day.

Table 1

Substantial 'Reciprocity' Across Major Social Media Platforms Percent of Users

	Use Twitter	Use Instagram	Use Facebook	Use Snapchat	Use YouTube	Use Pinterest	Use LinkedIn
Twitter	-	73%	90%	54%	95%	49%	50%
Instagram	50	-	91	60	95	47	41
Facebook	32	47	-	35	87	37	33
Snapchat	48	77	89	-	95	44	37
YouTube	31	45	81	35	-	36	32
Pinterest	41	56	89	41	92	-	42
LinkedIn	47	57	90	40	94	49	-

Note. Adapted from "Social Media Use in 2018" by A. Smith and M. Anderson, 2018, *Pew Research Center.* Copyright 2018 by Pew Research Center.

Social media allows users to create pages, communicate with others, and exchange content in media form by "liking" and/or "following" (Duffett, 2017; Griffiths & Wall, 2011). The researchers described media as hyperlinked graphics for example, images, videos, and audio. Prior research substantiates beliefs of video graphics being top-choice media regarding marketing to prospective students. Video graphics' interactivity enticed prospective students' connections with colleges and universities.

Pew Research Center's social media investigation conducted by Smith and Anderson (2018) revealed Facebook and YouTube as dominating social media platforms in the United States. Data presented in Table 2 presented results on adult's average social media usage per platform. Regarding data from Table 2, traditional college-aged students

engage in social media; however, college and universities have no way to know if prospective students see marketing materials produced, although college and university marketing managers and admission representatives felt enrollment increases stemmed directly from using SMM (Turner, 2017). In reviewing data presented in Table 2, the preferred social media platforms, after Facebook and YouTube, was Instagram and Snapchat with the 18-29 age group. Regardless of time spent on the two platforms, Turner (2017) believed students used social media as entertainment, rather than a place to gather knowledge about colleges and universities. Results indicated how prospective students are using various platforms to conduct a college search (Lukka & James, 2014).

Table 2

Use of Different Online Platforms by Demographic Groups. % of U. S. Adults Who Say They Use…

	Facebook	YouTube	Pinterest	Instagram	Snapchat	LinkedIn	Twitter
Total	68%	73%	29%	35%	27%	25%	24%
Men	62	75	16	30	23	25	23
Women	74	72	41	39	31	25	24
White	67	71	32	32	24	26	24
Black	70	76	23	43	36	28	26
Hispanic	73	78	23	38	31	13	20
Ages 18-29	81	91	34	64	68	29	40
18-24	80	94	31	71	78	25	45
25-29	82	88	39	54	54	34	33
30-49	78	85	34	40	26	33	27
50-64	65	68	26	21	10	24	19
65+	41	40	16	10	3	9	8
<$30,000	66	68	20	30	23	13	20
$30,000-$49,000	74	78	32	42	33	20	21
$50,000-$74,000	70	77	34	32	26	24	26
$75,000+	75	84	39	42	30	45	32
High school or less	60	65	18	29	24	9	18
Some college	71	74	32	36	31	22	25
College+	77	85	40	42	26	50	32
Urban	75	80	29	42	32	30	29
Suburban	67	74	31	34	26	27	23
Rural	58	59	28	25	18	13	17

Note. Adapted from "Social Media Use in 2018" by A. Smith and M. Anderson, 2018, *Pew Research Center.* Copyright 2018 by Pew Research Center.

Viewing data provided about individual's content type preferences on social media demonstrated a need for colleges and universities to provide a solid marketing strategy (Melchiorre & Johnson, 2017). Shields and Peruta (2019) considered social media to be a starting point for prospective student engagement. Considering the study by

Chen and DiVall (2018), the first procedure would be a strategy compilation, establishing set goals and objectives. Having a clear focus on social media efforts, with established parameters, instilled success, as suggested by Faust and Householder (2009), and added enhanced value and authenticity, followed a recommendation by Chen and DiVall (2018), for primary and secondary market identification. Chen and DiVall (2018) posited market segmentation or targeting on social media enabled colleges and universities, "to aim content toward audiences of certain demographics, location, education level, occupation, political affiliation, particular interests, and more, while simultaneously enhancing the reach" (p. 355). Several researchers agreed, conducting a methodical analysis on competing colleges and universities as the next procedure (Chen & DiVall, 2018; Faust & Householder, 2009). A process completed via online resources, such as Sprout or Simply Measured, would assess competitions' content to determine what media worked versus what were deemed unsuccessful.

A channel study follows to determine advantageous media placement and timeframes to place on social media platforms (Chen & DiVall, 2018; Davis et al., 2012). Activity planning and role identification, as described by Chen and DiVall (2018), dealt with staffing and training regarding posting to social media platforms. Planning and identification steps remained imperative to media dispersal. As suggested by Griffiths and Wall (2011), producing content through SMM required substantial time and effort to maintain interactivity between colleges and universities and target market hence, the need for a specific budget set exclusively for SMM, to reflect marketing plans goals and objectives (Chen & DiVall, 2018). As Lund (2019) posited, standalone posts lack the ability to obtain new followers; however, interaction/engagement amplifies posted

content to spark interest of prospective students. Chen and DiVall (2018) suggested social media platforms offered flexibility with costs allowing colleges and universities to achieve set goals and objectives regarding return on investment. Finally, ongoing social media platform investigations measure ongoing performance; for instance, goal progression and working strategies.

Social media platforms, as described by Chen and DiVall (2018), offer analytical tools, such as actionable metrics: engagement rates, audience growth, site traffic, post clicks, shares, communication, and interactions. The process should be thorough, on account of young generational students' required need making connections. Brown's (2004) data indicated more than half the enrolled college students had learned about desired degree offerings from an online platform. Recent studies by Yang (2012) revealed social media platforms' power in attracting more than 90 percent of young people with diverse messages encouraging involvement swaying decisions (Chen & DiVall, 2018). During the process, awareness increased, relationships developed, and in general, there was a reduction of marketing costs (Carpenter et al., 2016). Marketing now reaches further than any traditional marketing as described by researchers (Brown, 2004; Scheepers et al., 2014), and colleges and universities obtained abilities to blur geographical lines, increasing the ability to attract the targeted market. As Barnes and Jacobsen (2013) suggested, colleges and universities had a new capability with SMM tools to research target market, identified as applicable prospective students, thus enhancing recruitment efforts.

Marketing Barriers

Colleges and universities are vying to obtain prospective students in a geographical location (Fay & Zavattaro, 2016). Colleges and universities addressed and fulfilled surrounding communities' immediate needs by created customized offerings (Bock et al., 2014). In other words, colleges and universities re-evaluate offerings to remain competitive with other institutions and to fulfill prospective students' needs in their market, causing colleges and universities to spread themselves too thin, regarding marketing to the masses' needs (Yaakop et al., 2013). Melchiorre and Johnson (2017), believed the old saying, "if you build it, they will come" was a mentality that failed. Thus, knowing individuals and their purchasing intentions assisted in solving the problem, as well as a well-developed marketing plan to reach prospective students would be a necessity to overcome marketing barriers. Without marketing planning, media distributed to entice could dissuade prospective students. As suggested by Yaakop et al., (2013), colleges and universities would "shoot blindly" at prospective students, with messages deemed irrelevant, or would go unviewed by those most desired. Several studies agreed data confirmed prospective students lacked interest in colleges' and universities' SMM, indicating understudied and under planned marketing strategies (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012; Galan et al., 2015).

As seen in research, social media engulfs many aspects of prospective students' lives. Several studies agree GZ students struggle with instant gratification when interest in social media is lost (Duffett, 2017; Turner, 2015; Yaakop et al., 2013). However, with insignificant purchase intentions exploration and social media platforms usage, Carpenter et al., (2016) theorized a prospective student would stumble upon a college or

university's SMM, rather than pursue it intentionally. Griffiths and Wall's (2011) data agreed and divulged thoughts on social media doing a great job engaging those already interested in a college and university; however, the tool fell short at creating interest in the first place. Additionally, Hanover Research (2019) posited colleges' and universities' increased targeted social media use to bridge the gap connecting underinformed prospective students with engaging media and two-way conversations. In short, a sound theoretical framework encompassing SMM requires heightened results sought after in colleges' and universities' marketing plans.

Several researchers agreed social media growth had affected individuals' daily lives with many facets; for example, rapid, efficient contact acquisition, relationship building, and obtaining information (Duffett, 2017; Scheepers et al., 2014; Turner, 2015). Considering the ever-changing technological world and generational student's demands, many colleges and universities fell behind on SMM trends, leaving an already struggling admissions representative team to actively reach prospective students on their terms and desired platforms (Liu et al., 2015). An online presence for colleges and universities is more important now than ever before (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013).

Colleges and universities contemplate whether students view SMM produced for recruitment on social media platforms as a barrier. Ali-Choudhury et al., (2009) posited visual imagery of SMM was a massive influencer for prospective students. Consequently, Liu et al., (2015) believed SMM on each platform was the most challenging task to reach prospective students; however, it is also the most important for increasing visibility and engagement. Peruta and Shields (2018) believed engagement and viewability depend strongly on who, what, when, where, and how of SMM posts.

Students' perceptions of college and university SMM is limited (Bannister et al., 2013). Literature does not identify which SMM avenues influence prospective students (Lazarevic, 2012). A prospective student will not perceive anything about colleges or universities without having SMM experiences tailored to them, showing importance with direct engagement (Nusair et al., 2013; Rogers, 2015). Additionally, prospective students' high expectations and technology savviness require well-developed SMM for effectiveness (McKibben, 2005). In other words, students' opinions on SMM is limited; however, an implemented marketing plan would serve needs and gain recognition for colleges and universities. Sandlin and Pena (2014) believed prospective students' perceptions shaped expectations of colleges and universities. A direct option research survey would give optimal results for admission representatives to accurately implement SMM strategy for colleges and universities to recruit prospective students.

A college or university SMM reputation can be considered a barrier in attracting prospective students. Social media marketing is fast-paced and keeping up is crucial. Boateng and Okoe (2015) stated: "corporate reputation is an aggregation of a single stakeholder's perception on how well organizational responses are meeting demands and expectations of many organizational stakeholders" (p. 302). Lukka and James (2014) and Turner (2017) agreed prospective students would only see SMM as which is most appealing rather than annoying. Posting to social media too much is considered by prospective students as overwhelming and ignored altogether (Peruta & Shields, 2017) with post over-saturation on social media platforms putting off prospective students. This means the amount of activity produced on social media platforms is critical in making a difference in prospective student's experience with colleges or universities online

(Sandlin & Pena, 2014) with real authentic information. Even more, to be ethically responsible, an institution would need to be real and authentic in the production of SMM (Sandlin & Pena, 2014; Sauder & Lancaster, 2006). Sandlin and Pena (2014) believed reputation of a college or university would instill a statement such as, "If others who are like me can enjoy college life at this university, I can see myself there, too" (p. 343). To sum up, how a college or university highlights itself through SMM directly affects prospective students' choice for attendance.

The final barrier not given much attention thus far, is social media platforms. Social media changes every day and prospective students are keeping up while colleges and universities may falter at the pace. Liu et al., (2015) discussed the critical nature of product or post placement on social media platforms. Melchiorre and Johnson (2017) posited the key to SMM was adapting to unique needs of prospective students and each of the elements entailed in the platforms available online. Colleges' and universities' SMM plans should show activity in platforms where they can reach prospective students tailored to them with posting times when they would most likely be watching, relevant content, and on the most used platform (Liu et al., 2015; Melchiorre & Johnson, 2017). In other words, colleges and universities analyze information posted to learn stakeholders' viewing posts, decide where improvements are needed, and adjust to prospective student's needs and where they are online.

Summary

Theories discussed in chapter two explained a direct connection between social media marketing and social theories, describing prospective students' decision-making process when thinking about colleges and universities. Social aspects are encompassed in

social media marketing to build relationships between colleges and universities and followers (strong ties), while reaching farther (weak ties), with interactions and engagement through various social media platforms. Each theory discussed presented information on the socialization process and what happens in people's lives, especially now, more than ever, with social media use. However, social media can far outreach college and university boundaries (Hanover Research, 2019); making reach, with simple social procedures; relationships, engagement, and reciprocity, more applicable to obtain new prospective students, increasing colleges' and universities' chances to reach enrollment goals each year.

Chapter Three: Research Method and Design

Introduction

To make connections in the 21st-century, organizations implement social media marketing (SMM). This is a technique used daily at higher education institutions to make connections to prospective students. College and university admissions and marketing teams work together, producing engaging social media to attract students. As discussed in the previous chapter, SMM connected prospective students with colleges and universities easier with the use of e-word of mouth (e-WOM) on social media. Target marketing also increased colleges' or universities' ability to broaden their reach of prospective students outside geographical locations. Understanding generation Y & Z students' needs and wants gives a college or university the unique ability to make connections stronger, increasing the bond felt for a higher education institution. An effective SMM plan incorporates prospective students' wants and needs to customize connections affecting decisions for choosing a college or university for attendance.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there were no prior reviews of SMM on effects of a student's choice of college from the perspective of students. Participating students are considered the unit of analysis for this study. This makes the research outcomes for this study a relevant contribution to the higher education's admissions field, due to its direct representation of what students are looking at when choosing a higher education institution.

Chapter Three introduces research methodology for a quantitative study regarding what motivates prospective students to choose a college or university for attendance, based on perceptions of SMM on various social media platforms. The approach allowed

for a deeper understanding of prospective students' potential engagement with colleges'

and universities' SMM. A theory was developed from research data to understand

motivators of college or university selection by prospective students. Featured in the

chapter are applications of a combination of the realism and positivism approach for the

study. A research study, including methodology, participants, procedures, analysis,

validity threats, and ethical concerns, are components of this chapter. The following

questions guided the study.

Independent variables: Social Media Platforms and Social Media Marketing

Dependent variable: Student Choice of colleges and universities

Unit of Analysis: Missouri College and University Junior and Senior Students

Questions and Hypotheses

Research Question 1: Will social media platforms serve as a predictor of student

choice of higher education institutions in Missouri?

Research Question 2: Will social media marketing serve as a predictor of

student choice of higher education institutions in Missouri?

Research Question 3: What is the relationship between social media marketing,

social media platforms, and student choice of higher education institutions in Missouri?

Hypothesis 1: Social media platforms will have a relationship with student's

choice of higher education institutions in Missouri.

Hypothesis 2: Social media marketing will have a relationship with student

choice of higher education institutions in Missouri.

Hypothesis 3: Social media marketing and social media platforms will have a relationship with each other and with student choice of higher education institutions in Missouri.

Research Study

A quantitative study has a logical approach and is considered appropriate when research goals are to explain results from an individual's point of view regarding what they think - based on statistical and numerical data (Elwan, 2012; Simon, n.d.). Researchers posited quantitative method of researching data in a structured way, such as surveying large numbers of participants, provided reliable statistical facts. This was summarized by Creswell and Creswell (2018), deeming quantitative approaches appropriate when a researcher attempted to discover variable relationships. The purpose of this study was to examine the use of SMM on various social media platforms based on the viewpoint of the student. A survey will provide data directly from students offering their views on SMM and social media platforms. A content analysis of SMM and social media platforms will show what types of media was produced for public view. An evaluation of both sets of data will offer understanding of SMM effectiveness when motivating a prospective students' choice of attendance at a college or university.

Realist and positivist approaches were used to determine connections between SMM and prospective students' choice of higher education institutions for attendance. As described by Sobh and Perry (2005), a positivist approach offers a study of general statistical data about a population by examining easily accessible observations about an individual's reality. To accomplish the positivist approach, a survey administered to current juniors and seniors provided data on what students view on SMM and the level of

engagement they have with the media produced on colleges' and universities' social media platforms. A comprehensive content analysis evaluated colleges' and universities' official social media sites to determine what types of post level media was presented and the amount of engagement with SMM. A realist approach, as described by Sobh and Perry (2005), presented, "the findings of one study extended by analytical generalization shows how the empirical findings of a research project nestle within theories" (p. 1195). By analyzing SMM on both sides, the study sought to understand the persuasiveness colleges' and universities' SMM had on prospective student's choice of a higher education institution as this constituted use of a realist approach. Research methodology provided an opportunity to uncover a connection of prospective student's choice, based on presented SMM.

Previous realist approach studies were shown as insubstantial and produced inaccuracies for replication in social science of marketing, where aspects are causal and contingent on an individual's surroundings (Sobh & Perry, 2005). Researchers posited, exploring beyond data, with a realist approach, generated valuable data results. However, Sobh and Perry (2005) divulged that the positivism approach showed an inability to handle social science research singularly, completely, and accurately. For this study, implementation of both realist and positivist approaches will heighten social science research offering thorough data outcomes for marketing fields in higher education.

Data analysis focused on how eight Missouri colleges' and institutions' SMM produced engaging media to sway a prospective student's choice of attendance. Content analysis study took place over four months from July - October 2019, collecting data each month. Collected data were coded and analyzed to determine the level of

interaction/engagement with users and prospective students to affect college choice for enrollment.

The student survey administered from November 2019 to February 2020 had a window for completion of two weeks. An extension of collection dates transpired due to timing of the study originating during certain institution's holiday breaks. Parties involved, which included; participating institutions, the researcher, and dissertation committee, believed students would be more inclined to answer survey questions while on campus, rather than during break. Collected data were coded and analyzed to determine if SMM and particular social media platforms affected college and university choice of current students. The two studies determined a connection between SMM, and which social media platform affected student's choice of higher education institutions.

Data Samples

Application of stratified sampling determined strata of Missouri colleges and universities included in the study. A strata selection consisted of 16 colleges and universities based on Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (n.d.), defined by institution size and geographical setting. Institution strata were categorized from Large to Very Small, with primary or high residency to a primary nonresident. Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (n.d.) classified institutions as: large had at least 10,000, medium had 3,000 – 9,999, small had 1,000 – 2,999, and very small had less than 1,000 full time enrollment (FTE). In addition to institution sizes, the institutions were classified by residency status: highly residential where half the students live on campus and 80% attend full time, primary residential where 25 - 49% of students live on campus and 50% attend full time, and non-residential where less than

25% of students live on campus, with 50% attending full time. Once strata were grouped

by size and setting, institutions were randomly selected using Simple Random Sampling

(SRS) to select two colleges and universities from each category. Higher education

institutions were selected reflecting the process produced in Thornton's (2017) research.

> The 16 institutions studied included two four-year, large primarily residential
>
> universities; two four-year, large, nonresidential universities, two four-year
>
> medium, primarily residential universities; two four-year, medium, nonresidential
>
> universities; two four-year, small, primarily residential universities; two four-
>
> year, small, nonresidential universities; two four-year, very small, primarily
>
> residential universities; and two four-year, very small, nonresidential universities
>
> (p. 85).

Stratified groupings varied, based on participants from Public, Private, and For-

Profit higher education institutions. Final sample encompassed eight willing higher

education institutions to participate in research and permitted the researcher to survey

their junior and senior students. Categorization of each institution was based on size and

location, and were completed as follows. In the category of four-year large primary

nonresidential, one urban public institution participated. One four-year medium

primary/high residential, public urban institution also participated. A private urban

institution participated in the category of four-year medium primarily nonresidential.

Two institutions participated from the category of four-year small, primarily

nonresidential. Both institutions were private; however, one classified as urban, and one

as rural. In the category of four-year very small primarily/highly residential, two

institutions participated. Again, both institutions were private, with one being urban and

one rural. The last category represented were four-year very small primarily

nonresidential institution, which were private and urban. A total count of five urban

institutions participating in the research, while only three were classified rural. Initially,

there were two institutions in each category of public, private, and not for profit;

however, with limited participation from institutions, no not-for-profit institutions were

represented in the sample. Inclusion in the survey was limited to only junior and senior

students from the eight participating institutions.

The Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development (2018) data

reports provided institution's college student populations for Missouri. In 2018, a total

number of enrolled students at the 16 selected institutions equaled approximately 67,000.

Within the institutions, students were grouped into grade levels of freshmen, sophomore,

junior, and senior. Cluster sampling sampled participants from a sampling framework.

The year in school determined cluster sample of juniors and seniors from each of the

eight institutions.

Participants

The sample included the student populations of participating Missouri colleges

and universities. To ensure all participants were over 18 years of age only, junior and

senior students were the targeted population for survey participation. The researcher

made initial contact via email with the 16 institutions in efforts to recruit students for

inclusion in the research study, based on set criteria. The return response from the initial

16 institutions rendered study adjustments to institution participant list. In keeping within

stratified sampling, any institution's declining participation resulted in selecting the next

institution for inclusion. Specific reasonings given by institutions for opting out, were

kept confidential per the nature of the study, where all data would not implicate any

institution directly. In four-year large classification, only one institution remained in the

study, while others opted out. In four-year medium and small classification, two

institutions opted out of participation, and no others were substituted. For institutions in

four-year very small classification, one institution, required a staff member to be a

contributing member to the research study for institution participation. For these reasons,

the researcher chose to eliminate the institution from the research study. Subsequently,

the next institution from stratified sampling was chosen and participated. The researcher,

an adjunct instructor for one institution at a remote campus, otherwise had no affiliation

with the 16 higher education institutions prior to research.

Data Collection

Two types of data collection were conducted for the research study on the

participating eight Missouri higher education institutions. First discussed is the survey,

which was designed to obtain substantial quantitative data on how students viewed SMM

and social media platforms when considering a higher education institution for

attendance. Second a comprehensive content analysis was performed on the top-ranking

social media platforms (Smith & Anderson, 2018) and the content produced as SMM.

Data was categorized and counted to show the total amounts of page level and post level

(Peruta & Shields, 2018) engagements produced on each platform.

Survey

This study used a survey method to learn and understand how students viewed

SMM while searching for a higher education institution. The survey can be viewed in

Appendix A. Students first responded to a brief demographic questionnaire before survey

completion, covering SMM, as shown in Appendix B, via email to inform the researcher of diversity levels in the study. The survey began with questions about participants' perceptions of SMM on various platforms. A list of social media platforms and types of SMM gauged levels of student acknowledgment of SMM on each platform and types of presented media. The survey concluded with open-ended questions, framed to invite more in-depth understanding regarding student's previous connection to higher education institutions before choosing attendance.

Delivery of surveys was via email, either through individual institution's email system or by purchasing open records and distribution through online survey platform approved for use by Lindenwood University, Qualtrics. Each participant had two weeks to complete surveys once received. Students receiving emailed surveys via their institutions' email system received reminders at the will of the individual within the institution who agreed to assist the researcher with emailing surveys to the student body. Institutions who choose to send out surveys for the researcher corresponded, via email to solidify processes for distribution. Students who received surveys via email through Qualtrics were sent reminders after two weeks to any participants opening the survey without completion to entice more participation. Qualtrics collected survey results.

Content Analysis

Content analysis methodology used analyzed data collected from eight participating higher education institutions' official social media platforms. Content analysis followed parameters set forth for research by Rahman et al., 2016, where the researcher conducted a content analysis of 17 global electronic brand fanpages.

Researchers recorded post amounts for nine months, classifying each as those shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Classification of Social Media Posts for Global Electronic Brands Fanpages

Variable Name	Characteristics
Only Image post	• Products' image post • Profile/cover pictures post
Image with Details post	• Image with details text about product • Image with a link to products' details • Image with a link to other social site • Image with a link to company website
Feature Video	• Video demonstrating all parts of a product • Video about tips and user manual • Video describing products' technical issues • Video related to upgrading issues
Entertaining video	• Videos that do not show product features exactly • Video demonstrating company image • Other entertaining video not related to products

Note. Adapted from "Social Media Content Analysis – A Study on Fanpages of Electronics Companies" by Rohman et al., 2016, *International Journal of Global Business Management and Research.* Copyright 2016 by the International Journal of Global Business Management and Research.

For use in higher education, classification/coding required adjustments for relevance to higher education and per each social media platform. Each social media platform generates posted material similarly; however, there are a few variations to note. One Peruta and Shields (2018) noted the need for higher education institutions to include posts on social media platforms regarding current events and newsworthy content to positively connect with each stakeholder, including prospective students, which instilled a need to add editorial classification. The Entertainment category was changed to not include videos; however, it included every other type of post reflecting some type of

entertainment posted by institutions. Table 4 shows an adapted version of Rahman et

al.'s, (2016) social media posts classifications to address needed changes to be relevant to

higher education institutions and per social media platform. Social media platforms

included in content analysis were Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and

Snap Chat.

Table 4

Adaptation of Classification of Social Media Posts

Social Media Posts	Characteristics
Image Only post • Facebook • Instagram • LinkedIn • Twitter • SnapChat	• Image involving the institution; campus, students, classrooms, with some details about the photograph, no link present • Profile/cover pictures post • Memes • Gifs
Image with Details post • Facebook • LinkedIn • Twitter	• Image with a link to institutions' website • Image with a link to institutions' blog • Image with a link to another social site • Image with a link to any outside source website • Image with link to a video
Video • Facebook • Instagram • LinkedIn • Twitter • SnapChat • YouTube	• Video showing any part of the institution • Video about tips or college life • Video about sporting events/homecoming • Video related to attending the institution • All videos over 3 seconds in length
Editorial Post • Facebook	• Posts covering news stories • Posts highlighting faculty/staff achievements • Posts highlighting institution achievement
Entertainment Post • Facebook	• Posts that do not show the institution exactly • Post about a campus event • Other entertaining post not related to products
Dialogue • Twitter	• Post containing only words, no images, or videos
Re-Tweet • Twitter	• Tweet of previously tweeted data from the institution • Tweet of previously tweeted data from outside sources

Note. Adapted from "Social Media Content Analysis – A Study on Fanpages of

Electronics Companies" by Rohman et al., 2016, *International Journal of Global*

Business Management and Research. Copyright 2016 by the International Journal of

Global Business Management and Research.

Data collection was performed over four months, from July to October 2019.

Based on approval dates for research from Institutional Review Board (IRB), various

posts from participating institutions' social media pages were outdated and no longer

viewable to the public. Content analysis looked at SMM posts on each institution's social

media platforms to determine the amount of interaction/engagement; likes, comments,

and shares, with different types of postings. Each platform, while similar, was comprised

of certain engagement techniques. Social media platforms, apart from SnapChat, include

the like option. Social media platforms include a comment option; however, SnapChat's

was limited by only allowing original posters to see comments. The share option can be

found on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter as a re-tweet. YouTube gives users options to

like and dislike a video. Each video on YouTube displayed a view count. Additionally, a

view count shows for videos on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram. Data were collected,

analyzed, and coded to identify interaction/engagement.

Procedures Followed

The researcher obtained International Research Board (IRB) approval through

Lindenwood University. Once approved, the researcher emailed 16 selected colleges and

universities for study approval of the institution's participation and to survey the student

body (see Appendix C). Additionally, IRB approval required obtaining IRB approval

from included institutions prior to final approval for the study. Of the eight participating

institutions, five required a full IRB application and review prior to approval to survey

students. To ensure confidentiality, details of IRB approval process were not presented.

Two institutions required no IRB approval, while one requested to review IRB approval

from Lindenwood University before approving the research study to be completed with

students. The remaining eight institutions contacted opted out of participating based on

various reasons; students surveyed too much, bad timing, and no response to requests.

A voluntary consent form, as shown in Appendix B, was required for each student

participant before contributing and was part of the survey introduction. Participants from

six of the participating institutions were emailed surveys via the internet from their

institutions' email platforms. Two participating institutions required the researcher to

obtain email addresses of their students from open records databases, maintained by

institutions at a cost to the researcher. Emails sent to these student participants were sent

via the built-in email system of Qualtrics anonymously. The researcher had no contact

with student participants. An additional part of the survey introduction was a

demographic section confirming student participant school year classification as either a

junior or senior at their institution. Each student participant surveyed had a two-week

window to complete the survey online. Participating institutions sent emailed reminders.

The program sent students originally emailed the survey through Qualtrics reminders to

those who failed to complete the survey previously. Qualtrics collected all surveys

through the online survey platform.

Once all surveys were collected, researcher pulled data from Qualtrics and

imported into Excel (version 2010) for further analysis. Data was de-identified from

Qualtrics when imported into Excel, so no need for further attempts at confidentiality at

the participant level. Researcher used descriptive analysis to separate data into specific

categories of Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, SnapChat, and YouTube. From

these categories tables and charts were made in Excel to illustrate the descriptive data

from the survey. Excel was also used to catalogue data collected from researcher's

observations of and coding of each platforms data of participating institutions. Once

again, Excel was used to create tables and charts to illustrate descriptive data from the

content analysis.

Data Analysis

The study's purpose was to show relationships between students' choice of

college or university, based on viewing institutions' SMM (Mason, 2014). Previous

research had not shown SMM to have any influence on choice of colleges or universities

based on students' viewpoints. Thus, providing a relatively untested and unknown entity

which called for data analysis to show connections/relationships between the variables of

college choice, SMM, and social media platforms. The researcher took a realism

approach presented by Sobh and Perry (2006) of examining data from various sources to

determine triangulation between variables, revealing how SMM and social media

platforms influenced college or university choice of prospective students. Data tabulated

and recorded from student participants' surveys, combined with the entireties of the

content analysis from SMM and social media platforms students viewed showed the

discovery of causal relationships and connection between the variables (Kocyigit, 2013).

Data analyses of the research results gave a clear understanding of the population and

confirmed or rejected research questions (Gay, 1996; Mason, 2014). Essentially, a

descriptive analysis was conducted of the survey data, then a descriptive analysis was

performed on the content analysis data gathered online, with a final comparison of the survey data and content analysis data to examine any possible relationships which would show whether social media marketing affected student choice.

Threat to Validity

Assessment of quantitative research trustworthiness and validity analyzes relationships between variables in four ways: (a) internal validity, (b) external validity, (c) reliability, and (d) objectivity (Stumpfegger, 2017). Gay (1996) posited internal validity was deemed as the ability to determine a relationship between one or more dependent and independent variables and not anything else, and external validity refers to the study's ability to be generalized to any other population. Stumpfegger (2017) believed poor decisions regarding participants, location, and timeframe to be threats to external validity. Gay (1996) and Stumpfegger (2017) agreed; reliability required consistent outcomes on what were measured. Statistical tests create a greater sense of reliability in collected data and can alleviate claiming results too much (Mason, 2014). Stumpfegger (2017) believed objectivity was researchers being personally distanced from research to alleviate bias and keeping the studies' nature at the forefront.

Data collection from students' surveys and data triangulation from content analysis may provide internal validity. The study could be generalized to other populations with a change to location. Reliability will be proven by only measuring data about colleges' and universities' SMM presented on various institutions' official platforms. The researcher had only one affiliation with an institution on a remote campus, instilling study objectivity.

A weakness of content analysis arises in the design process of sampling and coding, where interpretation can encompass researcher bias (Rose et al., 2015). However, data collection was based on previous research of Rahman et al. (2016), which is replicable to this study and minimized researchers' bias. Rudestam and Newton (2007) posited the use of a modified instrument could deem parts invalid, putting reliability and validity at risk; however, the only changes made were justified to fit the study at hand.

Ethical Concerns

Ethics remained a great concern to the researcher during the study. Due to voluntary and anonymous nature of the study, the researcher administered a blind survey to student participants. Before starting the survey, student participants would acknowledge; with a button click their anonymous voluntary participation, the studies' purpose, and data use (See Appendix B). Student participants were over 18 years of age and did not demonstrate any impaired mental capacity, as determined by the ability to perform in a college or university setting, which qualified them as participants in this study. Following outlined methods became vital in guaranteeing the study's validity and reliability.

Summary

The goal of chapter three outlined research methods used to answer research questions. A discussion of the procedure, study participants, data collection, and survey outlined research specifics. Literature reviewed indicated several influential factors for a student's choice of higher education; however, none reviewed the advantageous viewpoint of a student on the use of SMM on various social media platforms. The goal of Chapter Four is to provide study results and ensure the researcher followed the

methodology described in Chapter Three. The following section will provide detailed

information describing the student's point of view of SMM, a content analysis of what

colleges and universities are posting on social media platforms, and a connection between

student opinion on SMM and posted materials. Result findings present themes, trends,

extensions of current literature, and triangulation of data. Interpretation of findings will

emphasize transferability of results. The findings will describe suggestions for SMM

change and provide recommended actions for future research.

Chapter Four: Analysis

Results

The results of the theory developed from research data to understand social media motivators of college or university selection by prospective students were used to answer research questions: A discussion begins the chapter, covering analysis conducted and showing consistency with the theory developed. The chapter also shows sample demographics, using tables as complements to the summary. Processes were used to analyze surveys from eight higher education institutions to uncover codes and themes described in detail in this chapter.

Sample

The survey was administered to juniors and senior at eight higher education institutions. Appendix D indicates that participant demographics represented minimum requirements sought, as described in Chapter Three. Represented in the sample were 157 (56%) seniors and 121 (44%) juniors. All but five of 278 participants shared gender information, identifying as female, male, or transgender. Ages of participants varied. Participants 41 years or older represented 5% of the sample, 1% were between 36 and 40, 3% were between ages of 31 and 35, and 3% were between ages 26 and 30. The age group between 21 and 25 was the largest group at 64% of the sample, and 24% of participants were between the ages of 21 and 25. Appendix E provides a graphic representation of age and gender demographics.

Data Collection

To formulate a relationship connection, the researcher implemented two types of research. First was a survey inquiring students' opinions regarding higher educations' use

of social media as a tool to persuade potential students' attendance choice. Secondly, a content analysis examined social media data produced on various platforms. Data were collected, analyzed, coded, and interpreted to demonstrate an institution's ability to produce relevant SMM data to stakeholders and prospective students. A complete explanation of each social media platform and survey responses detailed findings and limitations.

Hypothesis Testing

To test the three hypotheses of the study, descriptive analysis was used for the survey data and content analysis data when looking at both independent variables and the dependent variable. When examining the survey data with the content analysis data, descriptive analysis was used again employing the realism approach presented by Sobh and Perry (2006). The aim was to examine the relationships of the independent variables on the dependent variable.

Hypothesis 1

H1: Social media marketing and social media platforms will have a relationship with each other and with student choice of higher education institution in Missouri.

$H1_0$: Relationships are not shown to have influence on student's choice of a higher education institution in Missouri based on social media platforms.

Hypothesis 1, which predicted social media platforms would have a relationship with student choice of higher education institution, lacked supporting evidence from the content analysis data. As will be discussed, social media platforms overperformed on many platforms and the content presented online. To further show the lack of relationship, the triangulation of the content analysis data and survey data further

provided evidence that prospective students prefer the least used platform, SnapChat over the most used platform Facebook. In addition, students stated the most influential post as Videos; however, the most prominently used post type was Image Only. Therefore, contrary to hypothesis 1, there was no influential relationships between social media platforms and student choice of higher education institutions in Missouri. To examine all possible relationships between, social media platforms and student choice of higher education institution, descriptive analysis were completed.

Content Analysis – Analysis of Data

The researcher conducted a thorough content analysis looking at eight higher education institutions' social media production for the research study. Data collection took place over a four-month period from July 2019 to October 2019. Each institution had different variations of social media, which they posted to regularly. Social media platforms included in the research study were official social media platforms of each institution, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and SnapChat. Table 5 shows official social media sites listed on each participating institutions' websites. An additional search on each social media platform found additional social media platforms were used instead of the listed platforms found on institution's websites, also shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Sample Data of Participating Institutions Social Media Platforms

Institution	FB	IG	TW	YT	LI	SC	Other
#1	X	X	X	X	X	X	N/A
#2	X	X	X	X	X	N/A	N/A
#3	X	X	X	X	X	N/A	N/A
#4	X	X	X	X	X	X	N/A
#5	X	X	X	X	X	X	Pinterest Flicker
#6	X	X	X	X	X	X	N/A
#7	X	X	X	x	X	N/A	N/A
#8	X	X	X	X	X	N/A	Flicker

Note: X signifies an active social media account, and highlighted boxes represent social media platforms currently listed on the institutions' websites.

For each platform, a variety of variables were analyzed and coded, such as page level data; school name and number of page likes, and post level data; media type, number of likes, comments, and shares. Facebook pages were analyzed and coded with types of posts: Image Only, Image with Details, Editorial, Entertainment, and Video, number of followers, and number of post engagements; likes, comments, and shares. Instagram pages were analyzed and coded with types of posts: Image Only and Video, number of followers, and number of post engagements; likes, and comments. Twitter, a similar platform to Facebook regarding engagement, could be coded the same other than 'shares,' where on Twitter, a re-tweet resembles a share. Coding of YouTube content, a video only platform, required recording numbers of followers, number of engagements;

likes and dislikes, and number of views. LinkedIn, another similar platform to Facebook, required coding, such as types of posts; Image Only, Image with Details, Dialogue, and Videos, number of followers, and number of engagements; likes, comments, and shares. SnapChat happened to be an extremely different type of platform, posting only Images and Videos. On SnapChat, engagement is only visible to original posting entities.

Content Analysis - Presentation of Data

Each social media platform produced a variety of data to enhance engagement with prospective students. The researcher tabulated the various engagement types from all the participating institutions' official social media platforms. Data listed reflects a cumulative total for participating institutions in the research study at the time of data collection. No data reflects any one specific institution. Peruta and Shields' (2017) research results stated Facebook as the most used social media platform. However, the content analysis of this research study asserted differently; indicating SnapChat as the most used social media platform, based solely on participating institutions' surveyed students. A result of the research, Twitter was determined to be the most actively used social media platform, with a total of 2,346 posts in the four-month period. Figure 3 illustrates how active participating institutions produced SMM posts on each social media platform. SnapChat reads as the least used platform with zero postings. This was a disingenuous number, as discussed in the SnapChat section.
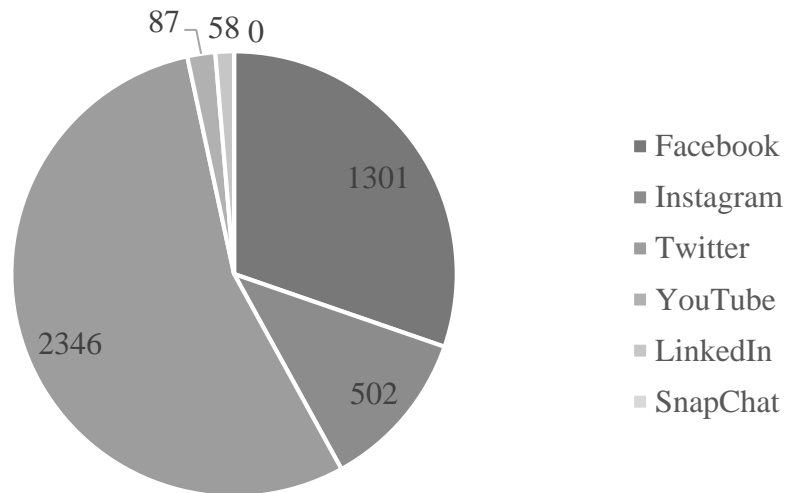
*Figure 3.* Total SMM Posts in a 4 Month Period

Note: The graph illustrates SMM posted to each social media platform during the

research studies 4-month period.

Facebook. According to Peruta and Shields (2017), Facebook is the top-

performing social media platform globally; a detail shown true for the current study with

the most followed platform being Facebook. The platforms' page level data totaled

490,000 followers and 507,000 page likes for the eight participating institutions. Peruta

and Shields (2017) asserted, "Page level data collected included the school name and

number of page likes" (p. 136), with the researcher adding followers, due to the paper

likely being written before *followers* were an option in the platform.

Figure 4 illustrates the most used post type as an Image Only Post consisting of

any type image including: memes, gifs, photographs with overlaid text, with or without

text in the post, exhibiting 411 posts. The second most posted media data type, with a

total of 388 posts, fell to category Image with Details or a picture with a link to a website,

blog, or any other outside source. Lowest ranking post media type, Editorial Posts, such

as newsworthy posts about faculty or institution achievements, produced 174 posts.

Additional two post media types totaled 210 for Video posts, including videos longer

than three seconds, and 268 posts were Entertainment, such as events on campus, or posts

about things not directly linked to the institution. This gives Facebook a total of 1,303

posts during the four-month research period.
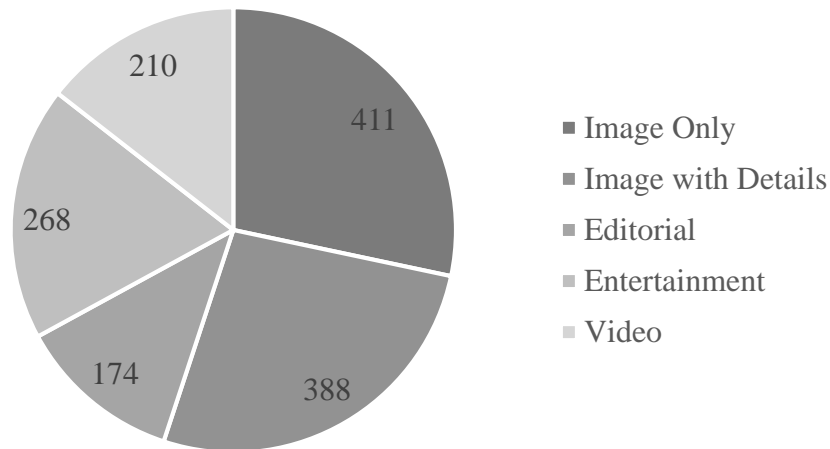
Figure 4. Facebook Only – Post Media Data Total Number of Posts

Note: The graph shown illustrates the total number of posts available for preview on the

public official Facebook pages of the participating institutions.

As previously discussed, engagement, also described by Peruta and Shields

(2017) as post level data on social media, consisting of action on a post such as likes;

including the six different reactions of like, love, haha, wow, sad, and angry (Stinson,

2016), comments, and shares. Figure 5 shows engagement results from each type of post

produced for SMM on Facebook by participating institutions. Image Only posts carried

significant numbers of engagements. Image Only posts led with 60,927, which is almost

twice as large as the second category, Image with Details posts, producing 33,609

engagement. The top two types of posts led with number of posts, as well as most

engagement. Results for the following categories varied on place values. For instance, the

last category for engagement falls to Entertainment posts, at a total of 8,306, when they

were not the least type of media posted. Editorial posts showed least number of posts

produced; however, they ranked higher in engagement, at 11,724. Engagement on Video

posts totaled 26,466 and were a middle producer, equivalent to the number of posts

produced.
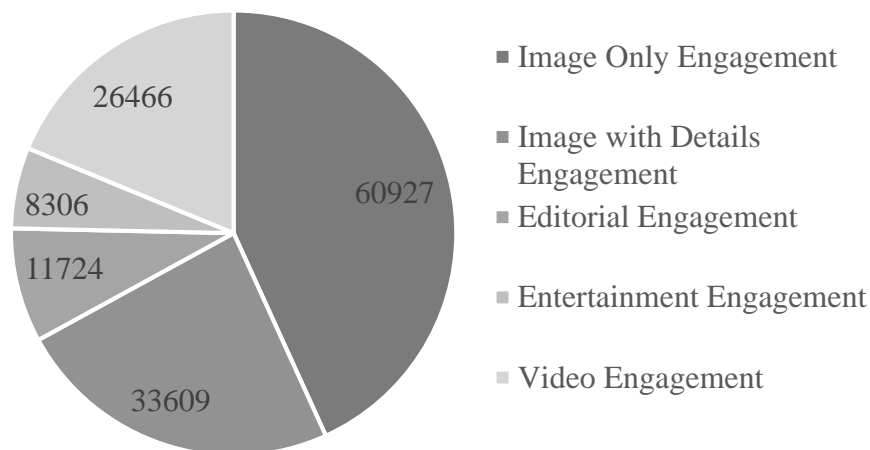
Figure 5. Facebook Only - Total Engagements Per Type of Post

Note: The graph illustrates the most popular type of Facebook posting per engagement

with the followers of the included institutions.

Followers of participating higher education institutions showed various

engagement with SMM produced. Type of engagement displaying most significant

number, regardless of type of posted media presented, were likes, at 11,147. A video

view on Facebook has many variables to contend with to register as being viewed. For

instance, Facebook (2020) stated: "If a video has been shared as Public, the number of

views will be displayed below the video" (para 1). Moreover, a video must be viewed for

a minimum of three seconds to register as viewed (Lua, 2017), proving numbers for

views could be skewed. This statistic was observed by the researcher during the content

analysis of Facebook pages. Data revealed 9,278 video views; however, video views

remain closely related to Video post level data for the type of post and total engagements

produced. Data revealed shares out-produced comments substantially. Research of

Rothman (n.d.) revealed individuals like posts eight times more than commenting or

sharing. Additionally, social media posts typically receive 80% likes, 10% comments,

and 10% shares. Based on Rothmans' (n.d.) research, compared to data from the

participating institutions official Facebook pages, data illustrated in Figure 6 shows a

slightly skewed variation of percentages. The content analysis produced comments

equaling 4,678, which contrasted Rothmans' (n.d.) results, with the total of shares being

slightly higher than 10%, with 15,929 times the posts were shared.
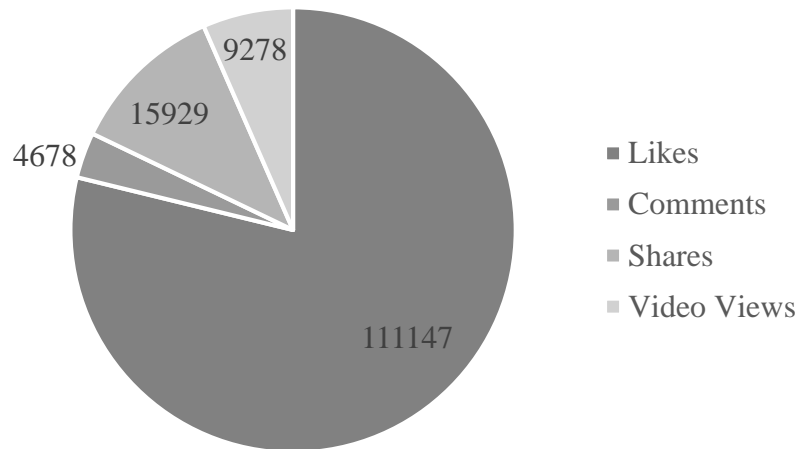
Figure 6. Facebook Only – Engagement Totals

Note: The graph illustrates the most popular type of Facebook engagement of the followers of the included institutions.

Twitter. Participating institutions' Twitter page level data revealed approximately 289 thousand followers. Twitter, a microblogging social media platform, produced short messages likely to reach potential students globally (Mohammadi et al., 2018). Looking closer into post media data collected revealed 916 re-tweets as the most utilized function of Twitter for SMM posts. Two categories of post media utilizing images were close, with 600 Image Only and 542 Image with Details posts. Data revealed Videos, with only 78 posts, as least used post media type. Figure 7 illustrates research outcomes of post media data types.
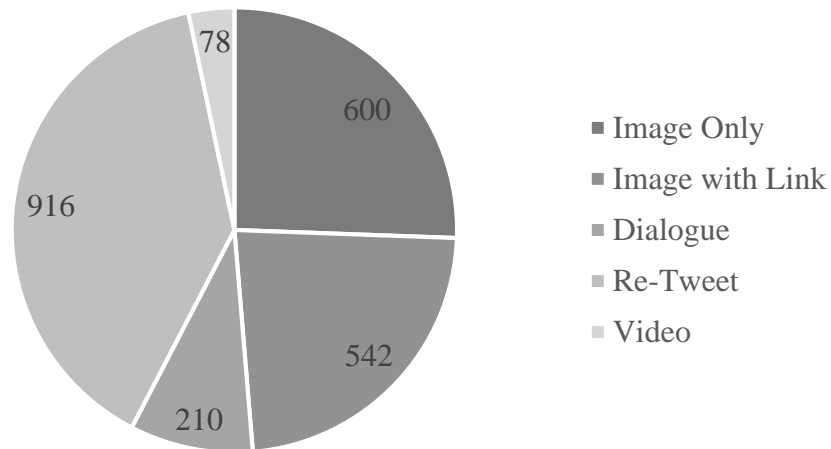
Figure 7. Twitter Only – Post Media Data Total Number of Posts

Note: The graph shown illustrates the total number of posts available for preview on the public official Twitter pages of the participating institutions.

Twitter engagement data collected revealed re-tweets being the top performer, with a total of 65,098. Re-tweeting, also a type of sharing, promoted original tweets for more natural data acquisition (Majmundar et al., 2018; Mohammadi et al., 2018). In other words, every re-tweet enhanced the chances for other posts to receive additional engagement opportunities. Figure 8 illustrates Image Only posts receiving the next highest engagement total, at 20,254. The least engagement came from Dialogue posts, which were one of the lowest utilized types of posts, as well.
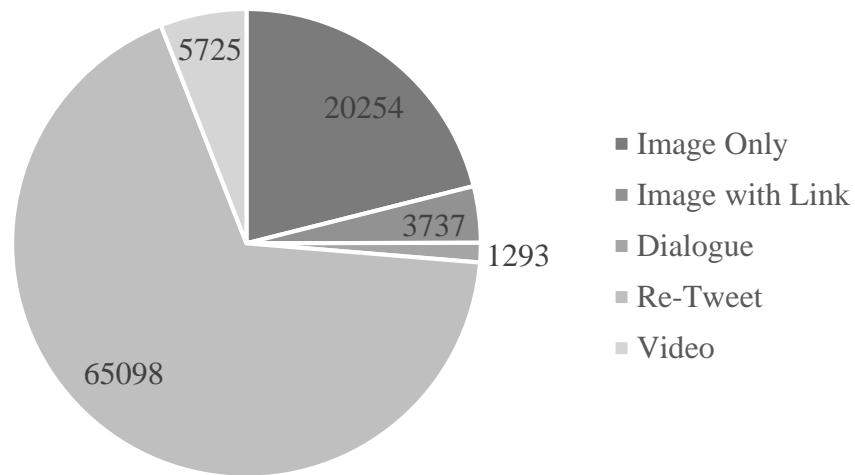
Figure 8. Twitter Only – Total Engagement per Type of Post

Note: The graph illustrates the most popular type of Twitter posting per engagement with the followers of the included institutions.

The act of liking a post on social media entails making a conscious decision to confirm how an individual felt about a post publicly. Rothman (n.d.) posited the importance of likes and shares on social media platforms and how they heighten a post's ability to outreach existing followers. Data produced and illustrated in Figure 9 revealed 81,216 total likes on institutions' Twitter pages. Substantially lower, but still affective, are 13,960 re-tweets and 1,193 comments collected from data. Regardless, any type of engagement boosts a posts' view potential by prospective students via strong and weak ties.
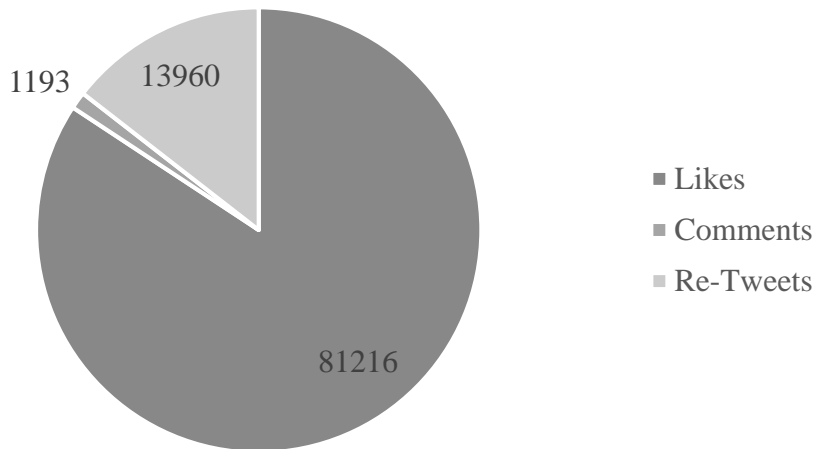
Figure 9. Twitter Only - Engagement Totals

Note: The graph illustrates the most popular type of Twitter engagement of the followers

of the included institutions.

Instagram. Instagram is a relatively new social media platform, although growth

in popularity is seen in the number of users (Hu et al., 2014). Platform users, also known

as followers, totaled approximately 86 thousand for participating institutions, even

though one institution had no posts to their page during the four-month period. Followers

on Instagram scroll through pages, better known as feeds, and have options of showing

their favorite or making a comment on posts, subsequently categorized as likes and

comments to the original poster and the public (Hu et al., 2014). The total number of post

media data produced on Instagram during the four-month period totaled 502. Figure 10

illustrates that majority of SMM posts were classified as Image Only; on the other hand,

the Video category had a tremendously lower amount. In contrast, NewsWhip, (2017)

described how less is more, concerning Video posts on Instagram based on users pausing

through the feed to view it, instilling a more substantial period for engagement

opportunities.
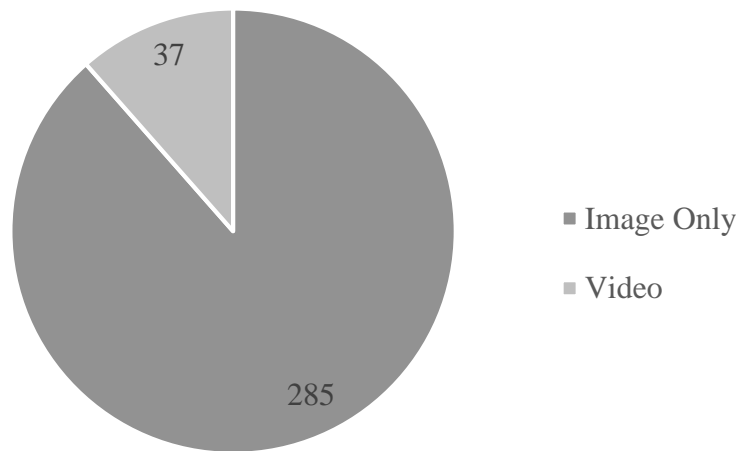
Figure 10. Instagram Only - Post Media Data Total Number of Posts

Note: The graph shown illustrates the total number of posts available for preview on the

public official Instagram pages of the participating institutions.

Engagement on Instagram, illustrated in Figure 11, follows ideas of NewsWhip

(2017), showing Video engagement as almost half as low as Image Only. This further

demonstrates that followers on Instagram pause to watch videos in a feed, hence

producing an increased chance of additional engagement. Total engagement on both

types of media posts determines the total engagement rate. The number is determined by

averaging the amount of media posts presented per engagement and dividing per follower

base. Instagram presented an engagement rate of one percent, obtaining a "good"

classification as set by standards set by Instazood (2019) with an engagement rate falling

between one and three percent.
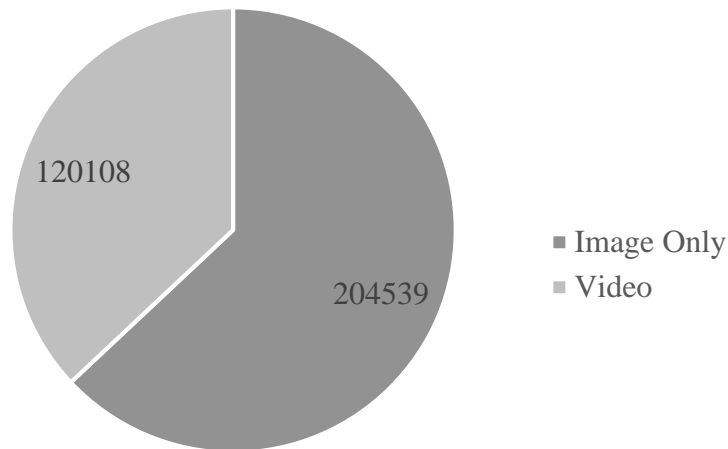
Figure 11. Instagram Only – Total Engagement per Type of Post

Note: The graph illustrates the most popular type of Instagram posting per engagement with the followers of the included institutions.

Instagram offers followers abilities to favorite/like presented media with a simple double click on a post. Commenting takes a few more movements to complete. Thus, Figure 12 shows the vast divide between likes and comments for participating institutions. While there were several comments made on media posts, there were still far more likes. However, a media post that instills conversation/comments will inherently receive additional opportunities for more engagement: a scenario comparable to the discussion on video engagement previously discussed. Both types of engagement increase chances of being noticed by prospective students at a higher level.

1673

322974

- Likes
- Comments
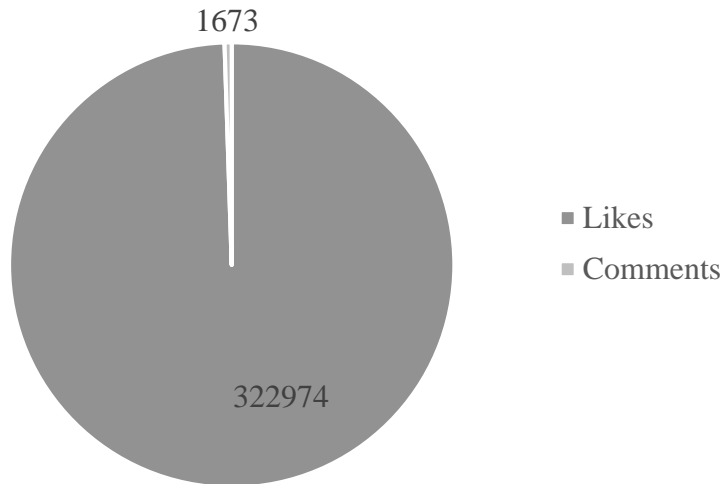
Figure 12. Instagram Only - Engagement Totals

Note: The graph illustrates the most popular type of Instagram engagement of the followers of the included institutions.

YouTube. YouTube is an inherently different version of social media with a video-only platform for individuals to follow. The total amount of page level data for participating institutions totaled 29,426 followers, a total substantially lower than other social media platforms used by institutions. YouTube followers can view any public videos on a playlist; however, for this study, videos posted during the research study time frame were included. There is no way of knowing when a follower would have produced engagement with a video outside of the research studies parameters. Data presented in Figure 13 shows three types of engagement; however, a follower can comment on YouTube videos, as well. In this case, no comments showed on videos during the research period. Video's view count is the most substantial type of engagement for YouTube videos. Like and dislikes together comprise engagement and have no positive or negative effect on a video's viewability.

Engagement totals

Figure 13. YouTube Only - Engagement Totals

Note: The graph illustrates the most popular type of Instagram engagement of the followers of the included institutions.
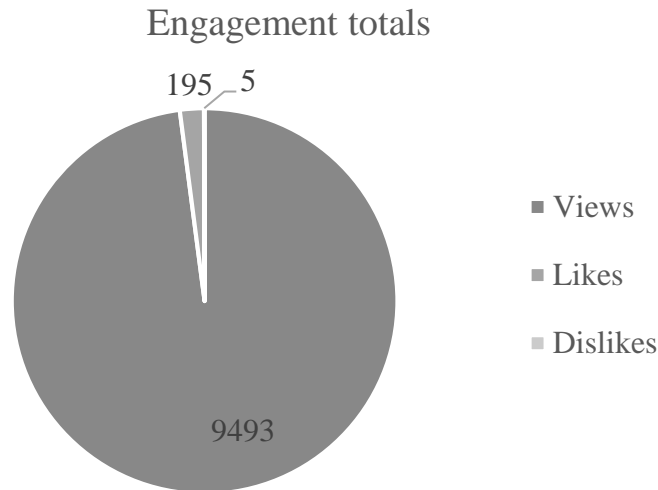
LinkedIn. LinkedIn is a similar platform to Facebook; however, the platform displays a more career oriented, professional set up. Page level data for included institutions totaled approximately 312 thousand followers. Each participating institution had a LinkedIn page; however, three of the eight had no posts to show during the four-month research period. For one institution, post media data would only go back to a part of October and would not load additional outdated posts. With the formality of LinkedIn, numbers of followers and engagement are not as prevalent as many other social media platforms. However, engagement is visible; as shown in Figure 14, the leading post media data presented were Image with Details, totaling 29 posts. The classification of a Dialogue media type showed the lowest amount of posts with only two. Image Only and Video had similar results, as shown.
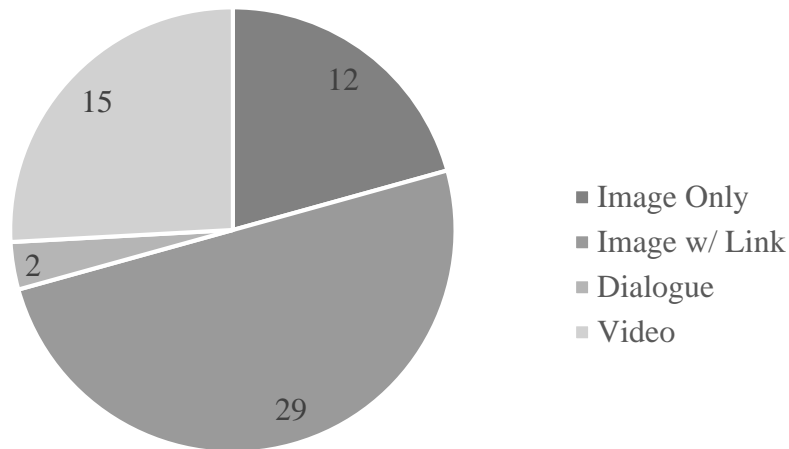
Figure 14. LinkedIn Only - Post Media Data Total Number of Posts

Note: The graph shown illustrates the total number of posts available for preview on the public official LinkedIn pages of the participating institutions.

Image Only post media data equals almost half of the engagement on the platform. Video is the second most notable media posted, offering a larger engagement possibility. NewsWhip (2017) identified Image Only posts could produce more likes per post; in contrast, Videos provided on average more comments.
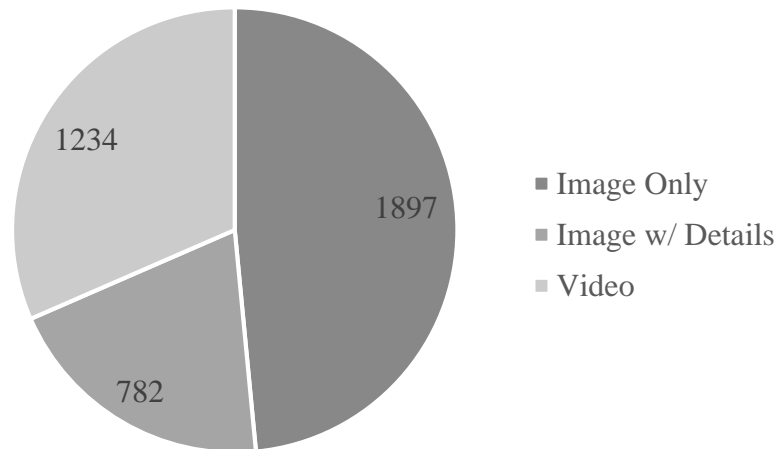
Figure 15. LinkedIn Only – Total Engagement per Type of Post

Note: The graph illustrates the most popular type of LinkedIn posting per engagement with the followers of the included institutions.

The type of engagement on LinkedIn consists of likes, comments, shares, and video views. However, number of shares does not show to public viewers. Figure 16 demonstrates the point that there were no shares tabulated in the illustration. Video views add to engagement totals, although total shown can be misleading, due to how LinkedIn tallies views. LinkedIn considers a video viewed when watched for three or more seconds on a native video. A native video per Espirian, (2018) must be posted directly to LinkedIn to obtain classification. The total number of video view results far outweigh other categories.

107

3871

44606

■ Likes
■ Video Views
■ Comments
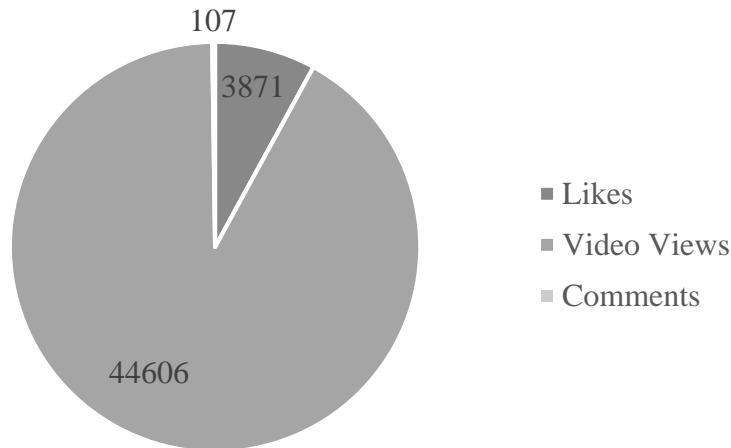
Figure 16. LinkedIn Only - Engagement Totals

Note: The graph illustrates the most popular type of LinkedIn engagement of the followers of the included institutions.

Snap Chat. A few of the participating institutions had active SnapChat accounts. Clements (2016) described workings of SnapChat as:

Snapchat was and is an image and video messaging application on mobile platforms. The app includes the "story" feature which always [sic] users to post images or up to a 10 second video, with captions or filters. Stories can be viewed by anybody that you follow on Snapchat and disappears in 24 hours. (p. 4)

Unfortunately, due to the nature of the social media platform and set research dates, data could not be collected.

Content Analysis - Interpretation of Findings

Participating institutions typically used SMM to post engaging media to their official social media platforms. Engagement ratings are tabulated from the social media produced in the following ways per Semeraro (2019):

- Instagram: Likes, comments and followers at time of post

- YouTube: Likes, comments, shares and video views at time of analysis

- Facebook: Reactions, comments, shares and followers at time of post

- Twitter: Likes, replies, retweets and followers at time of post. (para. 4)

Four of the six social media platforms showed to have average or low engagement rates per classifications set by industry standards (Divakaran, 2020; Instazood, 2019; Marketing Charts, 2020; ThriveHive, 2018), where satisfactory engagement rates vary among platforms. The highest engagement rate achieved of the eight participating institutions was on the Instagram platform with an engagement rate equated to at least one percent or better producing a good rating (Instazood, 2019). Engagement rate for Facebook totals showed an average rating equating 0.5% to 0.99% (ThriveHive, 2018). Twitter scored a good rating, which fell between the required 0.5% and two percent (ThriveHive, 2018). YouTube had an engagement rating of less than one percent. Ratings vary per follower size on YouTube, where smaller accounts typically will have 0.11% to 0.15% engagement rates (Marketing Charts, 2020). LinkedIn did not receive an engagement rate of at least one percent or higher; however, the engagement rates of 0.54 are classified as average (Divakaran, 2020). Snap Chat remained excluded in engagement rate due to absence of data.

Engagement, as previously defined is the way an organization strengthens relationships with customers through social media via likes, comments, shares, or other forms of interaction per platform (Lund, 2019; Peruta & Shields, 2017). Higher education institutions utilize exceptional engagement techniques through social media, involving many theoretical frameworks previously discussed to reach stakeholders and potential

students. Implementation of relationship marketing--in other words,

engagement/involvement with followers via social media--addressed the primary goal,

influencing prospective students to choose a college or university to attend. Yang (2012)

believed engagement/involvement to be a high-level indicator of an individual's purchase

choice indicator.

Content analysis data showed one social media platform with a good rating, while

all others excluding SnapChat showed low rates of engagement with institutions'

followers. This was a contradiction to research produced on the subject matter.

Engagement happens when media posted on social media sites entices a follower to

connect/click one of the engagement options. McKibben (2005) believed SMM had to be

well-developed and effective for prospective students to engage. Unfortunately, colleges

and universities typically "shoot blindly" at prospective students (Yaakop et al., 2013),

with understudied and under planned marketing strategies (Constantinides & Stagno,

2012; Galan et al., 2015). Additionally, colleges and universities had no way to know if

prospective students view social media marketing materials produced (Turner, 2017).

This leaves prospective students to stumble upon a college or university on social media

platforms instead of intentionally seeking out information (Carpenter et al., 2016).

Griffiths and Wall (2011) outlined how social media does well at engaging already

interested followers; consequently, interest lacked in the first place.

The background from the previous researchers and results from the current

content analysis proves SMM could still be an unacceptable tool to prospective students

who are looking for a more tailored method of contact. Social media marketing produced

by the included higher education institutions resulted in the inability to reach additional

new engagements with limited one-way connections, the type of connection dominating

social media platforms. Colleges and universities may be coming close to reaching new

student quotas with current marketing plans; however, added efforts could expand reach

with additional, comprehensive knowledge about their SMM and engagement attempts.

The use of SnapChat is a relatively untapped SMM tool by participating

institutions. Only two participating institutions maintain a SnapChat account. SnapChat is

considered the preferred social media platform with 78% of younger users (Smith &

Anderson, 2018). Unfortunately, due to the temporary nature of the platform, data could

not be collected. Reach to a considerably more substantial percentage of younger users

involves proper planning and implementation of SMM.

Hypothesis 2 *Survey Data – Analysis of Data*

Survey data produced profound information about higher education students'

opinions on social media marketing produced. Data, when broken down by individual

questions, showed enlightening outcomes. Each question revealed answers contradicting

previous research.

The survey began with general demographic information for the first three

questions. Questions four and five asked general questions about respondent's social

media use and which platforms they frequently utilized. The next questions inquired

whether survey participants considered any social media marketing produced by colleges

or universities to be effective when making a final decision to attend their institution. In

questions seven through twelve, participants answered questions regarding each social

media platform. Survey participants were asked to share which type of posts, if any, were

effective to their college or university choice. Each question had various options to

choose from, such as Image Only, Image with Details, Dialogue, Videos, Snaps, Editorial, and Entertainment media types. The first open-ended question asked participants' thoughts on what grabbed their attention, regarding the types of posts from the previous five questions. Coding and tabulations on open-ended question responses gave a deeper look for respondent's similar opinions on the subject. Survey respondents ranked most effective marketing practices encountered when considering a college or university in question 14. As part of question 14, respondents had the option of expressing other as an answer, where data were again coded and tabulated. Additionally, survey participants ranked social media platforms they found most effective in their choice in question 15. Survey respondents expound upon their answers to question 15 in question 16, which were also coded and tabulated. The final question asked survey participants if social media was a factor in helping to choose a college or university with an option to explain answers regardless of a yes or no answer, with responses coded and tabulated.

Survey Data – Presentation of Data

The survey of Missouri higher education institutions' juniors and seniors served as the unit of analysis, as well as the primary source of research data. Surveys were emailed one of two ways, as stated previously. The number of participants receiving the survey via direct email through Qualtrics consisted of 205. The remaining 73 were contacted on behalf of the researcher by their institutions. One student declared they did not use any type of social media. The remaining portion of students surveyed showed extensive use of social media platforms, illustrated in Figure 17. SnapChat remained top choice of 247 students who use popular social media platforms. Instagram and YouTube

tied for second-most used social media platform, just as Turner (2018), stated that younger individuals prefer the top chosen platforms. Facebook had a close following with students surveyed. Twitter and LinkedIn were the least used social media platforms. However, they still had large numbers of users from students who participated in the survey.
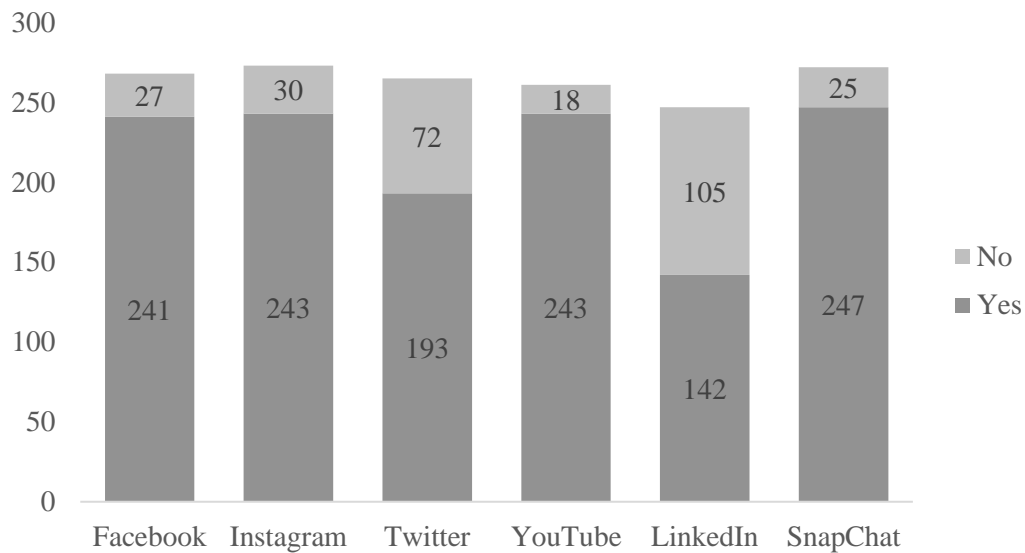
Figure 17. Surveyed Students Social Media Platform Use

Note. The graph represents the social media platforms currently used by the surveyed students.

Contrary to the overwhelming amount of social media platforms utilized by survey participants, the number using social media for college or university research were low. Social media platforms failed to receive half of the surveyed participants who stated they viewed SMM to assist in making a college or university choice. Numerous students who expressed using social media to assist in choosing college or university did so to verify community, feel, and environment of the campus. A few examples are:

"It was because it let me imagine myself being at the university. Seeing how the students lived at the university through instagram [*sic*] and twitter [*sic*] made me want to go there."

"Yes, because a lot of people would post about how great it is."

"Yes, it was, social media allowed me to see the academic and social sides of campus and allowed me to make a decision on whether or not that school was a good fit for me."

The most used social media platform, Facebook, reflected a discouraging number, regardless of showing highest number of students who stated they used the platform for college or university research. A participant stated, "Social media did not influence where I went to school, but it did provide me with more information to decide my choice, as most schools have a dedicated Facebook page to scroll through." In contrast one respondent felt,

> if there wasn't [*sic*] any information about an institution on social media i [*sic*] would be discouraged from applying, because it makes the institution seem more impersonal. However, institutions trying to cater to the youth in social media often comes across forced, and isn't [sic] widely accepted. Especially with mediums like snapchat, [*sic*] prospective students are very unlikely to keep up with an official school snapchat [*sic*] account.

SnapChat, used most by surveyed students, and illustrated in Figure 18, had the least number of students state they used the platform for college or university research. In contrast, a surveyed student stated, "The natural aspect of Snapchat was attention grabbing also the images of the college landscaping." In addition, another participant

mentioned why so many younger individuals enjoy the platform, "So many kids are too much involved in snapchat [*sic*] and when you post on their that is interesting than the kids are gonna [*sic*] look at that more than the other types of social media." One participant had the following opinion on using social media when making a college or university choice. They felt, "Attending a college or university is a serious financial commitment and social media is not a good indicator of any of the important aspects regarding that specific college."
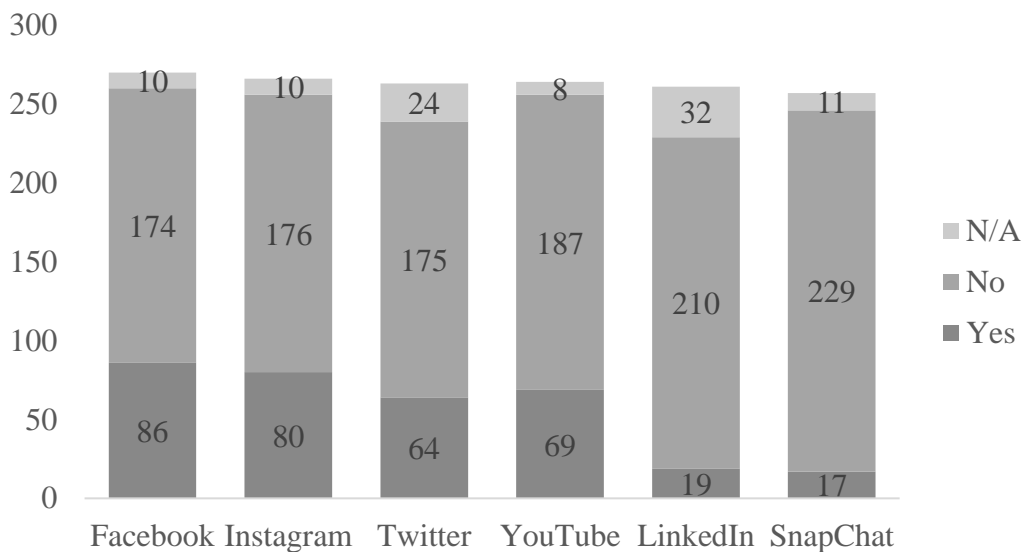
Figure 18. Social Media Use – College or University Research

Note. The graph represents the social media platforms used for the research of a college or university for attendance.

Participants ranked various types of marketing techniques which assisted in choosing a college or university. Choices were SMM, traditional marketing; brochures, billboard, television advertisement, radio advertisement, direct contact from college/university official, parent's persuasion or choice, friend's persuasion, and other. Participants elaborated on the other category. Survey data revealed that students prefer

direct contact from colleges or universities. Traditional marketing techniques were the second most persuasive method chosen, followed by SMM. Parents and friends showed a lower ability to persuade students to choose a college. The category other was last, with participants stating cost and institutions' website as top-ranked effective methods for their choice of another category.

Additionally, respondents ranked social media platforms for which they felt were most effective in choosing a college or university and elaborated on their answers. The most effective option selected was Facebook. A few reasons why Facebook ranked highest were:

"Facebook seems more reliable so if I was looking into a college I would start there."

"I look at tons of articles on Facebook. The other sites are for personal posting and friends, not news gathering."

"on [*sic*] facebook [*sic*] there are many options to share information, video, photo, interview I think its most complex and used platform."

Instagram ranked second as being effective in making a college or university choice. A respondent stated, "I feel like Instagram [*sic*] is more popular, and older teens use it the most. I would be more likely to research a school through instagram [sic] than anything else." Another used the platform differently, stating, "Instagram you can see upperclassman that you follow from hs [*sic*]that went there and it makes you want to go and have fun like them. Facebook you can see alumni events."

Videos show various information about a college or university, and students understand the power within the platform. Respondents returned with the following thoughts on YouTube:

"I looked up campus tours and student life at the universities I was interested in on Youtube [*sic*]. It gave me a better view of what it would be like there."

"I would often click links when researching the university that would take me to youtube [*sic*] videos. These were always interesting to watch."

Youtube [*sic*] provides the great source to see the inside of the certain college experience."

SnapChat, the respondent's top choice of social media platform, showed a significant ability to effect a student's choice of college or university. The use of SnapChat is different in how the respondents viewed the platform. One response,

I specifically remember looking at the location snapchat [*sic*] stories to see what kind of stuff goes on in the college town and it looked like a lot of fun! That point of view helped me feel comfortable with my decision.

Students do not necessarily look at what a college or university posts but what students and community itself post, following the idea of the environment as a large deciding factor for choosing a college as stated previously.

Twitter and LinkedIn were the last two social media platforms to be selected as effective for college choice. Regardless of the number of Twitter users, they still did not feel the media presented were relevant enough to help with choosing college or university. Respondents labeled LinkedIn as more career-driven and not a beneficial input toward a college or university choice. Thirty-three respondents stated social media

of any type had no bearing on their college or university choice at all. Most respondents made a similar statement to the following statement, "I never checked any of them before choosing my college. It does not apply."

Survey participants responded to the following question for each platform type included in the research study: "Thinking about (social media platform) only…In your opinion, what were the type of posts viewed which helped with your college choice if any at all? Select all that apply." Not applicable (N/A) dominated responses for each platform other than Instagram. Data revealed the top choice for Instagram, with 40% of respondents stating Videos helped them make a college or university choice. Additionally, Videos helped respondents make a college or university choice when viewed from Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. LinkedIn's most influential media type was Image with Details/Link posts, with 13% of respondents. Whereas 17% of respondents stated that SnapChat's snaps had assisted them in choosing college or university.

Survey Data – Interpretation of Findings

Outcomes of the survey uncovered mixed results. Data revealed that survey participants were not completely against the idea of social media affecting their choice of a college or university. However, results identified that social media had little influence on prospective students' choice of a college or university. The leading answer of participants was the choice of not applicable (N/A); however, many respondents continued to answer questions with invaluable data.

The number of participating students who use social media were almost everyone; only one individual had no accounts. This number directly reflected generational theories

presented in the research. In contrast, theories presented on purchase decisions based on

social media did not reflect well with survey respondents' opinions about social media.

Many theories presented stated social media as a viable resource when making purchase

decisions. Purchase decisions are direct reflections of social media engagement rates with

electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), strong and weak ties, attitudes toward advertising,

and general customer socialization. Survey participants overwhelmingly disclosed that

social media did not affect their overall decision to attend a college or university.

Survey participants selected SnapChat as the most used social media platform.

However, 89% said they do not use the platform for researching a college or university

with 22% of survey participants stating media posted to SnapChat is effective when

making a college or university choice. Potential students look at stories of current

students and community members, based on location, to learn more about community and

environment before choosing a college or university. A survey participant shared, "The

natural aspect of Snapchat was attention grabbing also the images of the college

landscaping." With only two participating institutions with active SnapChat accounts,

higher education could be losing out on potential students for attendance, based on lack

of snaps and how community appears in individual stories. Even though no data was able

to be collected during the research dates, the two participating institutions rarely posted

any media to the platform. One participant stated their institution at one time had an

active SnapChat story, which they missed.

YouTube and Instagram both had 88% of surveyed participants state they used

social media platforms. The use of Instagram to research a college or university was

chosen by 30% of survey participants, while 35% stated they would consider media

produced to assist them in making a choice. Instagram also has the story by location options like SnapChat, where survey participants stated they viewed posts to learn about community and environment. Though they did claim the media did not directly assist in a college or university choice, posted media did consolidate their choice based on feel of the institution. Participants classified Videos as being most effective when deciding on a college or university.

The video social media platform YouTube had many survey participants who stated they were active on the platform. However, only 26% would consider using the platform when deciding on a college or university. Either way, data shown through YouTube provided information needed to assist in making a college choice; however, again, a majority stated they viewed Videos to ensure a good fit with community and environment of the college or university. This makes any platform posting Videos a viable tool for assisting in prospective college student's choice.

Seventy percent of student participants chose Twitter as a social media platform they actively use. The percent of survey participants who viewed media produced for researching and choosing a college or university were only 26. Again, media shown to be most persuasive were Videos. Images were chosen by 16% of surveyed participants as effective. Bright, vibrant images made participants feel involved in daily happenings of colleges or universities, increasing their desire to choose the institution.

The least effective platform showed to be LinkedIn, the lowest number, with 51% of participants expressing they utilized the platform at all. Media produced confirmed a lower level of effect, based on only seven percent of participants selecting the platform. Collectively, only 31% of survey participants stated media produced on the platform was

persuasive when making a college or university choice. Participants believed the platform

displayed a professional or career driven impression, rather than a place to learn about

higher education institutions.

Hypothesis 3

H3: Social media marketing and social media platforms will have a relationship

with each other and with student choice of higher education institution in Missouri.

$H3_0$: There are no influential relationships between social media marketing, social

media platforms, and student choice of higher education institutions in Missouri.

Hypothesis 3, which predicted social media marketing and social media platforms

would have a relationship with each other and with student choice of higher education

institution, was not supported. As will be discussed, social media marketing did not have

a relationship with social media platforms or with student choice of higher education

institution in Missouri. Social media platforms also showed not to have a relationship

with student choice of higher education institution in Missouri. Therefore, contrary to

hypothesis 3, there were no influential relationships between social media marketing. In

order to examine all possible relationships between social media marketing, social media

platforms, and student choice of higher education institution, two iterations of descriptive

analysis were completed.

Connection – Analysis of Data

Data collected from student participants served as the focus of the research.

However, content analysis of higher education institutions' social media platforms over a

four-month period served as supporting data and expanded the study. Two data sources

were evaluated and combined to show media produced on social media platforms and a

student's opinion on what types of posted media produced an effect on a choice of

college. The following figures illustrate connection between actual posted media and

what students revealed as effective. Data for the connection study, illustrated by the bar

in graphs, totals the number of social media posts for participating institutions. Line data

showed survey data results of students' opinions in the total amount of participants who

selected the item. Data for connection shows all data except for the N/A option. The lack

of content analysis data from the platform SnapChat prohibited a graphical connection.

Connection – Presentation of Data

The most effective type of social media produced were Videos on Facebook when

choosing a college or university with 92 participants choosing the option, shown in

Figure 19. Content analysis data for the platform revealed production of 210 Video posts.

Survey participants divulged Images with Details to be the second choice of influence.

The number of Images with Details posts totaled 388. In contrast, the platform delivered

a plentiful number of 411 Image Only posts, a type of media deemed moderately

effective by survey participants. In addition, Entertainment media type outperformed

Videos with 268 posts. This was a type of media survey participants also found

moderately effective. Finally, Editorial posts produced totaled 174, with only 18 survey

participants stating they were an effective media type when making college or university

choices.
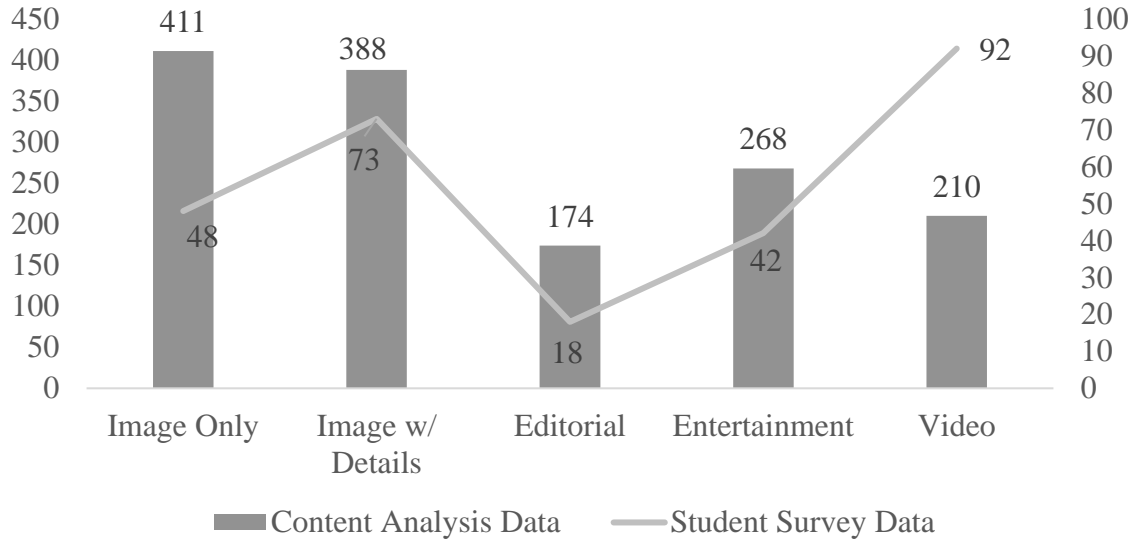
Figure 19. Facebook Only – Relationship Connection

Note. The graph illustrates Facebook to student opinion connection.

In comparison to Facebook, Videos were selected as the most effective type of media on Instagram, illustrated in Figure 20. The number of Videos produced totaled 37 posts. Sixty-nine survey participants deemed Images posted on Instagram as a less influential type of media. In contrast, the number of Images posted totaled 285 posts, and substantially higher than Videos.
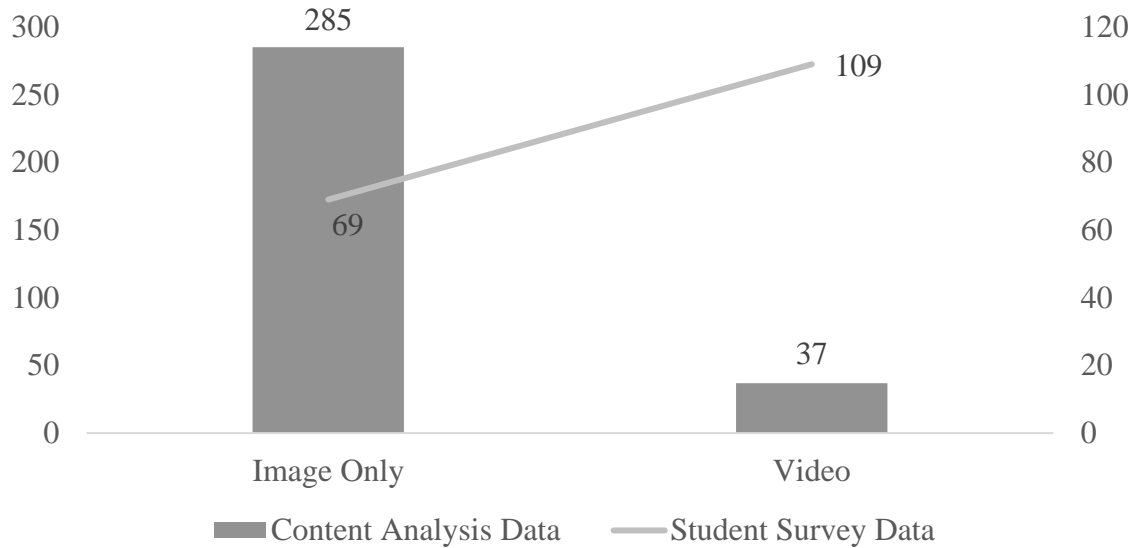
Figure 20. Instagram Only – Relationship Connection

Note. The graph illustrates Instagram to student opinion connection.

Data displayed a sharp slope for the platform of Twitter, shown in Figure 21. Re-tweets were the top produced media, with 916 posts. The number of survey participants selecting Re-tweets were second to lowest media, totaling 26. Next ranking media types posed were Image Only and Image with Details/Link. Image Only was participant's second choice of effective media. Images with a Link posts ranked as the third most effective type of media posts, selected 42 times. Videos were least produced media along with Dialogue posts. Participants selected Video posts as the most effective type of media while Dialogue ranked last, with only 22 selecting the media type.
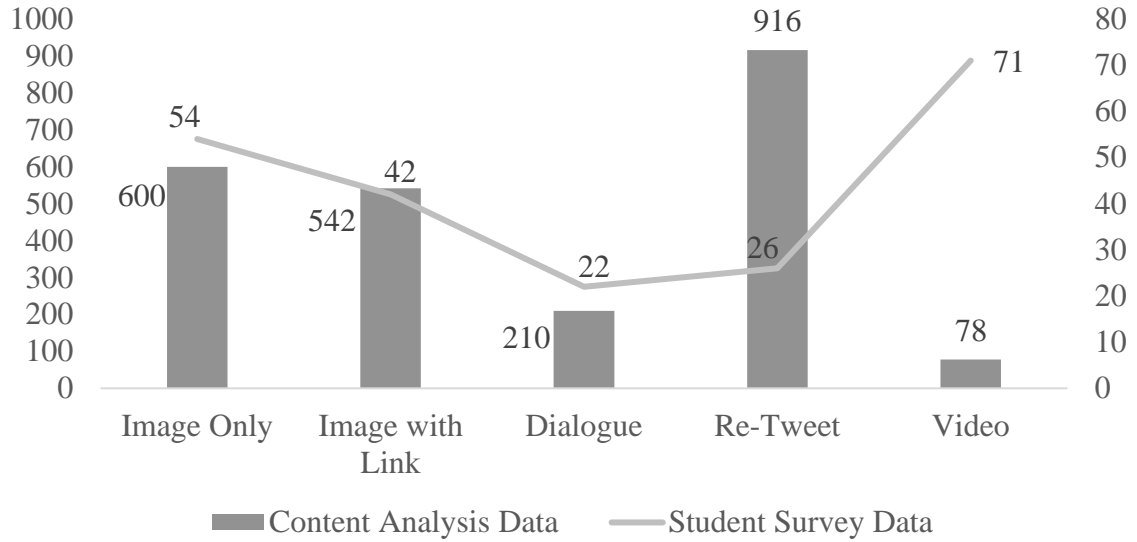
Figure 21. Twitter Only – Relationship Connection

Note. The graph illustrates Twitter to student opinion connection.

Data in Figure 22 for YouTube illustrates respondents considered Video posts a highly effective media type when making a college or university choice. The number of Video posts presented by participating institutions totaled 87. As stated previously, Video posts assist with college or university choice when considering environmental and overall campus feel. Consequently, Video posts are deficient based on lacking any ability to have additional effect toward college or university choice.
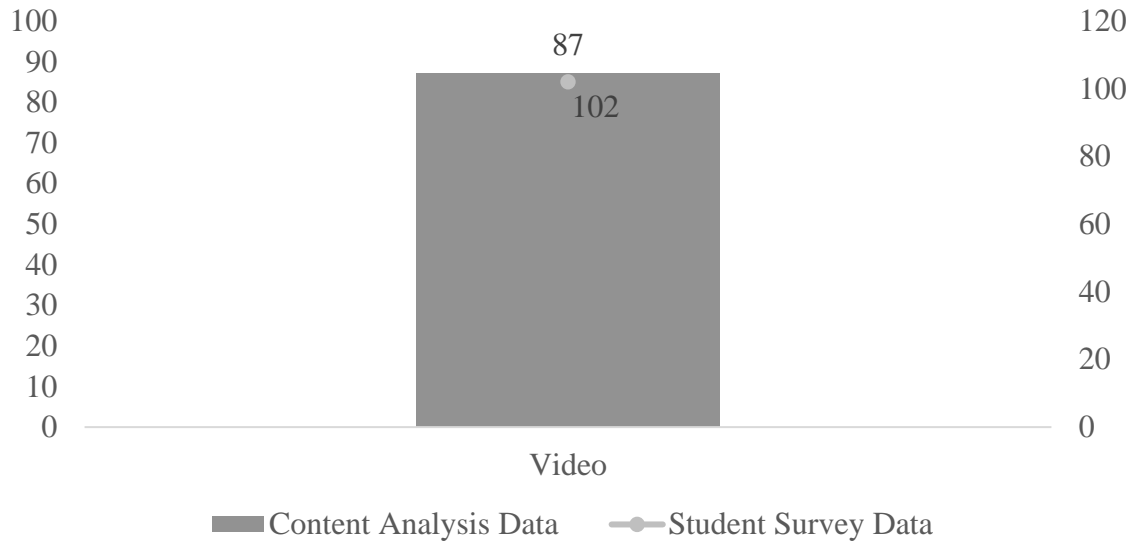
Figure 22. YouTube Only – Relationship Connection

Note. The graph illustrates YouTube to student opinion connection.

The final platform, LinkedIn, exhibited similar connections to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, as shown in Figure 23. However, a noticeable difference from data showed participants preferred Image with Details media posts when making a college or university choice. Video media produced ranked high totaling 15 posts. In contrast, 27 participants revealed Video media as the second most effective media type. Image Only posts production occurred at a lower rate with a total of 12 posts. Participants moderately indicated Image Only posts as effective in college or university decision-making process.
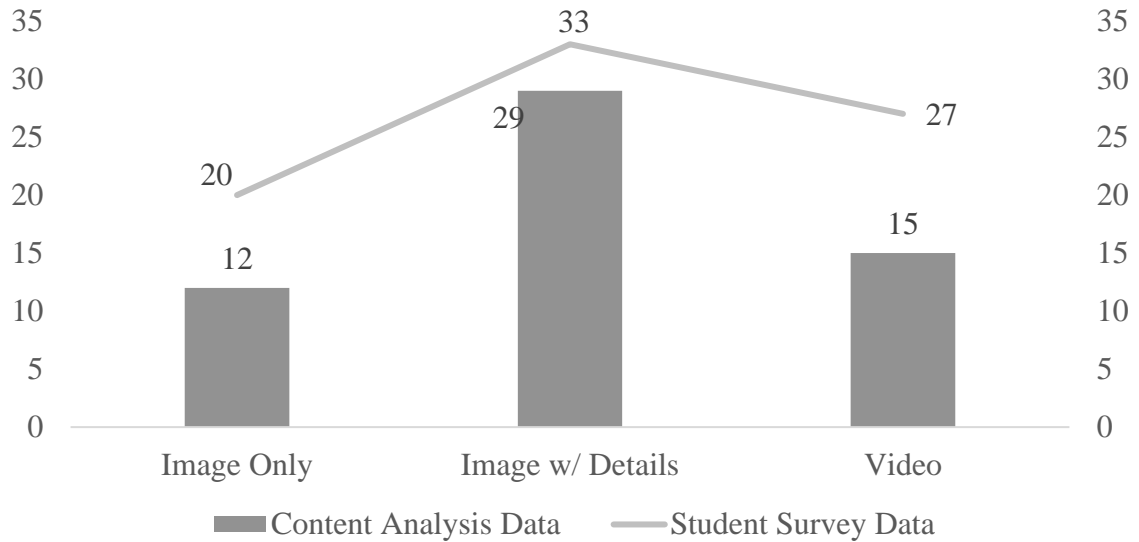
Figure 23. LinkedIn Only – Relationship Connection

Note. The graph illustrates LinkedIn to student opinion connection.

Connection – Interpretation of Findings

A connection happens when one variable influence another, with no reasonable explanation for the relationship. The following data will show a correlating relationship between SMM, social media platforms, and student choice of higher education institutions. Figure 24 illustrates the tabulation of total media posts for each social media platform, active usage of each platform by survey participants, and number of survey participants who considered social media posted to be effective on their college or university choice.
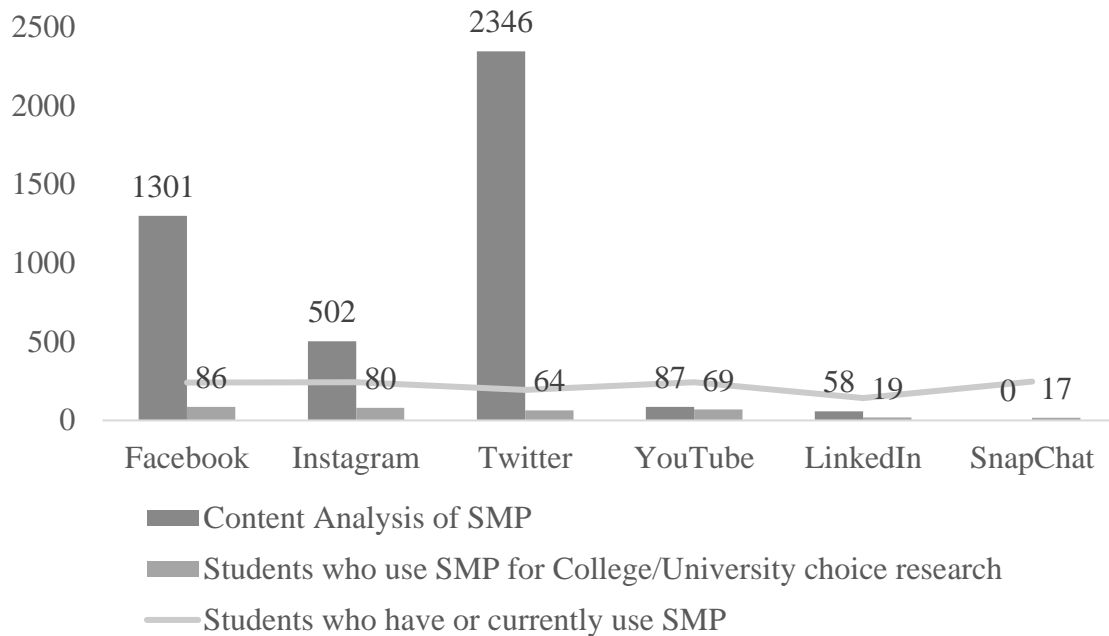
Figure 24. Social Media Platforms (SMP) Output Compared to Student Survey Data

Note. The graph illustrates the outpost of media on social media platforms in connection to students who viewed SMM to make a college choice and who use each social media platform.

Data confirms that most participants use social media; however, data revealed insignificance of social media when making a college choice. The amount of media posted to various social media platforms far outweighed the number of students who view media to choose college or university. For instance, data from Facebook revealed Video media production fell short of meeting student's desire to view videos on social media. Other categories on Facebook received opposing outcomes, such as Image with Details, and Image Only media. Participants felt Image with Details media to be effective, and postings from the content analysis resembled the demand. In contrast, Image Only media far surpassed the amount of posts which survey participants believed to be moderately effective. Editorial and Entertainment media types had similar outcomes

of Image with Details media with just the right amount of posts. Several survey participants believed Editorial and Entertainment posts to be influential. The mismatch of data deemed Facebook posting sequence to higher education institutions in Missouri as a failed attempt to be influential to prospective students they are hoping to reach.

Unfortunately, Instagram shared equivalent outcome of Facebook, with a mismatched number of posts produced. Survey participants believed Video media to be most influential, while Image Only posts are the highest media produced on Instagram. Subsequently, media produced on Twitter undoubtedly did not match what survey participants stated as being considered effective when making a college or university choice. Re-Tweets were the most used media type with survey results displaying students' interest in Re-Tweets tremendously low in comparison to Videos, a more effective media for making a college or university choice.

YouTube, solely being a video-based platform, closely matched what survey participants considered effective for choosing a higher education institution. The number of Videos presented on YouTube strongly correlates to the media preference to help prospective students choose higher education institutions. LinkedIn, the least used platform by survey participants, showed the closest connection over all media types. The media produced has an effect on a few users who view media. Finally, the least available data available for collection were from SnapChat, the most favored social media platform by survey participants.

Limitations

Content Analysis

Social media platforms for included institutions were public data and obtainable to the researcher. Unfortunately, a selection of data was unavailable for viewing from institutions' social media platforms. The dilemma stemmed from data failing to load through the researchers' network past dating back to July due to slow or low connection through the internet provider or numerous posts from participating institution. However, there are no specific limitations set by social media platforms for expiring media posts.

Platforms affected by failed media posts loading were from Twitter and LinkedIn. Media posts on Twitter had a loading failure for one institution. On LinkedIn, one institutions' page ceased loading media post data past October. Two other institutions' pages stopped loading media post data past August. The lack of data affected results for the platform's engagement rates in the study. On the other hand, by failing to utilize SMM tools available from the platform and lacking media posts for their followers to view, many institutions limited types of posts produced. This was a direct effect to engagement rates for social media platforms.

Peruta and Shields (2017) posited viewers have a better chance of seeing boosted versus organic media posted by institutions. Boosted media on social media consists of any post by an organization paying for more users to see the presented media (Kanuri et al., 2018). Organic reach as defined by Kanuri et al. (2018) is "the total number of unique social media users viewing the content platform's posts in their newsfeed for free" (p6). The level of data analyzed was limited to what is viewable by the public. The researcher

was limited to public data from each of the institution's official social media pages and had no knowledge of the classification of boosted or organic posts.

Survey Data

Email delivery was a limitation, due to being dependent on the individual at institutions who assisted in the process of emailing the student body the first time and with reminders. When emailing participants through institutional systems, many outside emails have a chance of being caught in spam filters. A hindrance was the number of emails received by participants when sent via Qualtrics. A low rate of college students opens emails in their official institution email account (Straumsheim, 2016), limiting the number of participants completing the survey.

Connection

Data reflects only survey participants who selected social media as a possible influencer to their choice of a college or university and did not select N/A option.

Summary

This chapter contained survey results and social media platform content analysis. Connections to theoretical research and research questions failed to demonstrate consistency of analysis with grounded theory methodology. Eight Missouri higher education institutions' junior and senior populations were surveyed for this study. Survey questions were put together to discover factors, if any, that contributed to a college or university choice from media presented through SMM and on each social media platform. All participants except one, used social media in their daily lives. Open ended questions elaborated on survey participants' answers for better understanding on SMM and social media platforms ability to affect college or university choice. Content analysis

searched social media platforms of participating institutions for post engagement such as likes, comments, and shares, vis-à-vis to each platform. Two data sources revealed a break between what potential students want to see from social media versus what was presented. These factors prove current SMM practices to be unsuccessful in influencing prospective students' choice of a higher education institution. While great strides have been made to create SMM to persuade prospective students to choose a college or university, learning what affects prospective students regarding social media recruitment will be beneficial for future endeavors. Chapter Five includes critical analysis summary and future study discussion.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The purpose of this quantitative study was to identify deciding factors employed, if any, by potential students when selecting a college or university, based solely on social media marketing (SMM) and social media platforms. Findings included in this chapter relate to literature on historical marketing practices, intent to purchase/college choice, generational theory, and SMM, and what implications may be valuable for use by admissions teams for future student recruitment in higher education. Furthermore, the chapter concludes with a discussion of limitations of the study, future research, and a summary.

Summary of Findings

One finding revealed relationships are present between SMM, social media platforms and student's choice of higher education institutions in Missouri. The relations were solidified by 32% of survey participants claiming SMM on social media platforms did have a positive effect on their college or university choice. The extent of the relationship is unknown or assumed at this time based on not having access to details such as how SMM and social media platforms specifically influenced their higher education decisions. So, while SMM and social media platforms did show a relationship to higher education choice, the lower number of 32% was not extensive, suggesting the results must be interpreted cautiously due to the region studied.

A finding showed a lack of relationship between SMM, social media platforms and student choice of higher education institutions in Missouri where 78% of survey participants were not influenced. This lacking stemmed from the two key findings. The first was revealed by the survey results and content analysis. When comparing the two data sources, a misuse of post level SMM was found, such as overuse of Image posts and

lack of Video posts. The second finding again shown in both the survey results and content analysis was the underuse of highly sought-after social media platforms used by survey participants, such as Snap Chat. Creating two large opportunity gaps when attempting to reach prospective students. Data revealed students are on social media, where only one survey participant was not actively engaged. Incorporating Video posts across all social media platforms will narrow the gap. Increasing the potential for prospective students to view posts they deem relevant when viewing social media either actively or inadvertently looking for a college or university to attend. Since the lack of Video posts was not the only issue, SnapChat usage by higher education institutions must be increased to go where the potential students are when engaged with social media.

SMM does not significantly predict student choice of higher education institutions in Missouri. At the current degree of social media produced, and only 32% of survey participants considering looking at social media to assist them in selecting a college or university, the researcher cannot confidently confirm SMM to be a predictor. Based on the survey results many potential students are not even looking to social media when making college or university attendance choices, due to the findings previously posited. The content analysis showed 4294 SMM posts on all platforms combined. These postings can engage users creating E-word of mouth (E-WOM) with strong and weak ties, however, if students are not looking, the chance of seeing the media presented is reduced. The lack of SMM post engagements on all the social media platforms was lower than a one percent rating which limited the use of SMM to predict college choice.

Social media platforms reviewed for this study showed they do not significantly predict student choice of higher education institutions. Data from the content analysis showed Twitter to be the top used social media platform by Missouri colleges and universities.

Survey results indicated SnapChat with 91% of survey participants to the be most desired social media platform used. However, 89% of survey participants stated they did not use SnapChat to assist them when choosing a higher education institution. Resulting from the lack of official SnapChat accounts; with only four participating institutions using the social media platform, and the lack of SMM presented. The underuse of SnapChat reduces colleges' and universities' chances of connecting with potential students regularly, clearly indicating the use of social media platforms in the current study will not be a predictor for choice of higher education institutions in Missouri.

Theoretical Implications

College and university recruitment process, attested as a competitive market by Constantinides and Stango, (2012); and Hayes et al. (2009), encourages admissions representatives to be creative when reaching out to prospective students. Joseph et al., (2012) encouraged the use of marketing techniques to assist potential students when choosing a college or university. With target marketing, presented by Kotler and Fox (1985), colleges and universities seek to fit into what the populace required. SMM, as presented by participating institutions, did not fit the desired media type "Videos" of surveyed participants. This revealed colleges' and universities' underuse of Videos to increase desirability, while presenting visually how a potential student could 'fit' within an institution without even visiting campus.

Purchasing intention or college choice depended heavily on response hierarchy models (StudiousGuy, 2019) and the completion of each step set forth (Duffett, 2015a). Models started with various forms of acknowledgment. As revealed by survey results, few participants used any type of social media to research colleges and universities. This revealed a nullification of the following steps within the models entirely. However, the

survey revealed that participants did choose to follow their institution on social media after making their decision to attend.

Few survey participants used social media to research colleges and universities prior to choice. These individuals were looking for information and to others who were already involved with the college or university to solidify a choice. Hou (2016) believed two-way conversations of relationship marketing would increase desirability of a college or university to a potential student. Interaction, including two-way conversations through social media, were made either through strong or weak ties (Scheepers et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2013) to influence potential students. Additionally, principles described in Social exchange theory (SET), such as instilling trust and loyalty (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Johnston, 2010) and through Backs' (1950) Exertion of Influence through Social Communication, would benefit colleges and universities for those who did turn to social media to learn about colleges and universities when considering a higher education institution to attend. However, when a potential student does not consider social media as a tool for use when researching a college or university, media presented will not have any power of influence if never viewed in the first place.

The Ecology Theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) explained how daily activities affect an individual's growth. Survey participants, excluding one, use social media daily and, per Pew research, multiple times a day (Smith & Anderson, 2018). However, daily use of social media had no effect on college or university choice. Results showed that SMM presented did not fit desired type "Videos" to affect potential student's choice of higher education institutions. In addition, misuse of social media platforms, per desires of

potential students, is a result evident by survey participants stating the usage of SnapChat and lack of institutions implementing SMM on the platform altogether.

Attitude Theory (Duffett, 2017) enhanced a marketer's ability to recognize when individuals like or dislike, resembling, Hierarchy Response Models. However, the use of the theory showed no evidence of being used by participating institutions. Results showed a lack of knowledge of what potential students would like or dislike through an unbalanced use of SMM and platforms. Potential students want to see more Videos and SnapChat stories used to take notice of efforts put forth by higher education institutions.

Lazarevic (2012) posited Generational Theory grouped individuals based on age, with shared experiences, beliefs, and attitudes, which was demonstrated by similarity of responses given by survey participants. Prospective students are those born between 1981 and present-day, encompassing both Generation Y and Z. Given that 88% of respondents in the study were ages 18 – 25, institutions are aware they are recruiting students from Generation Z. Simply put, students being recruited today are generational students who have grown up with technology in hand, revealing social media as the best method of reaching prospective students (Davis et al., 2012; Duffett, 2017; Hou, 2016; Peruta & Shields, 2017; Ratliff, 2011). However, results divulge a different outcome. Institutions' admissions representatives establish marketing plans implemented for optimal outcomes, observable with relevant visuals on social media (Hou, 2016; Peruta & Shields, 2017). In contrast, proven results from survey data revealed students want to see visually stimulating SMM, such as Videos; however, delivery platforms potential students prefer were underutilized, making presented data less like to be viewed.

In addition to visually stimulating marketing, generational students remain neutral to unreliable information online and gravitate to more reliable, creative SMM (Duffett, 2017; Turner, 2015). This is a conclusion drawn from the survey respondents as to why social media is not considered a potential outlet for students seeking information when selecting a college or university for attendance. Survey results made strides in proving Alves' et al. (2016) posited theory, which demonstrated individuals believed friends' and families' social media postings as more reliable than those coming directly from the institution. A number of survey participants expressed Videos as their preferred choice for advertising marketing. Additionally, they chose SnapChat as their top currently used social media platform.

Hayta (2013) believed the process of using specific criteria to bolster recruitment efforts is an imperative practice. Unfortunately, survey results revealed a different perspective. Survey participants showed little interest in SMM presented by colleges or universities when considering their higher education choice. Choosing the most used social media platform to present SMM to potential students would increase chances of Hayta's (2013) theory being beneficial. Content analysis data revealed a close resemblance to Yaakops's et al., (2013) theory, stating blind attempts of colleges' and universities' use of SMM with irrelevant messages leads to a high potential of those expected to view never viewing in the first place. Pew Research Centers data revealed 78% of users 18-24 use SnapChat (Smith & Anderson, 2018), a social media platform extremely underutilized by participating institutions, noted as well by survey participants, while Smith and Andersons' (2018) research stated that individuals 18-29 years of age preferred Facebook, contradicting survey data with 89% of participants who use the

social media platform. Griffiths and Wall (2011) believed SMM currently presented on

social media platforms as being able to currently engage followers; however, it lacked the

ability to gain new followers or potential students. This was a point presented by survey

participants who revealed following their chosen institution only after they had made

their choice for attendance.

Melchiorre and Johnson (2017) believed that SMM needed to be ever evolving

and changing to meet needs of potential students. Peruta and Shields (2018) viewed

engagement and viewability of SMM dependent on contents: who, what, when, where,

and how, a result, shown from content analysis and survey, as factor not observed by

participating institutions. In addition, Peruta and Shields (2018) also posited potential

students felt overwhelmed with SMM posts of the wrong type. Underuse of Videos on all

platforms, excluding YouTube, were shown from survey results and content analysis

data. Admission representatives and marketing managers should evaluate what potential

students are looking for when choosing a college.

Practical Implications

Social media marketing's most noted trend and most effective post type were

Videos. Data showed Videos as the most underutilized type of media. Survey participants

want to see Videos, per survey results; however, the number of videos as social media

posts produced on social media platforms were inadequate. As previously stated, Videos

can obtain good engagement, as well as promote additional engagement from additional

individuals who may not follow the institution. Based on survey participants, Videos of

any kind and on any platform will assist a prospective student to make a choice, solely

based on environment and feel of the institution.

When considering Facebook only, Image Only posts far surpassed survey participants' demand for post types. Survey participants preferred Image with Details over Image Only posts. Links produced on social media go to outside websites such as Videos and institution websites, leaving Image with Details as a less effective tool when choosing a college or university. Leading potential students to other outside information to better meet needs for choosing a higher education institution.

For Instagram to have a better representation of posts to affect prospective students, Video and Image Only posts need to switch frequency of use. Survey participants deemed Videos as most effective when choosing a college or university; regrettably, the number of Image Only posts were greater. As data stands, posts on Instagram will be less likely to affect a potential student's desire to choose a specific college or university for attendance.

A rebalance of postings on Twitter needs to happen to produce effective social media posts. Two most notable posts which need rebalancing are Re-Tweets and Videos. Potential students respond best to Videos; unfortunately, the post type lacked in quantity. Re-tweets were highly posted with a low amount of engagement, presenting a need for post type rebalancing. Frequency of Image Only and Image with Details posts produced were just right. In other words, prospective students would find the type of media effective to their decision when choosing a college or university.

The most noted trend on platform usage showed SnapChat as being underutilized by colleges and universities as an effective tool when reaching out to potential students. SnapChat, the preferred platform of survey participants, showed as underutilized by colleges and universities as a form of reaching potential students. The nature of the

platform appeals to potential students, with quick bursts of images and videos to influence one's choice of a college or university. Unlike all other platforms, SnapChat does not rely on engagement to obtain followers; an individual would have to seek out each institutions' feed or the institution would need to advertise through other media for a prospective student to follow.

The remainder of platforms, YouTube, and LinkedIn produce adequate media to be effective to a follower to choose a college or university. YouTube, a video platform, has the best opportunity to assist a potential student when choosing higher education. Half of the survey participants use LinkedIn; however, they find the platform to lack ability to affect choice when selecting a higher education institution. Frequency of posts to affect choice was closest in connection between posts and survey participants, who said media was effective in their college or university choice.

This study concludes SMM and social media platforms failed to motivate prospective students to choose a higher education institution, a strong contradiction to theories presented on target marketing, relationship marketing, and SET theory (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012; Duffett, 2015a; Hou, 2016; Kotler & Fox, 1985; Peruta & Shields, 2017). College or university choice relates solely to an individual's interest in other deciding factors, parents and friends, traditional marketing, and campus visits. While one can use social media daily, the chance of viewing a college or university posts without prior exposure is limited (Carpenter et al., 2016). Regardless, colleges and universities are using marketing to reach prospective students (Fuller, 2014; Hatch & Schultz, 2008), encouraging a sense of belonging, proven as achievable through Videos, a media method underutilized through SMM and on each social media platform excluding

YouTube. While some participants did admit SMM on various social media platforms had assisted in a choice of higher education institution, their interest did not come from outside social media sources such as e-word of mouth (e-WOM), although word of mouth (WOM) showed as a factor in decision process (Zhang et al., 2017). Results prove Whiting and Williams (2013) theory regarding why people turn to social media first with 88% looking for social interaction, rather than only 40% who use social media for information sharing and advertising. Only 77% of respondents stated not using social media to assist with their college or university choice.

Recommendations and Future Research

Results of this study prove SnapChat use for SMM by participating institutions is lacking. SnapChat is where today's students spend their time online. SnapChat offers more relevant content, such as Images and Videos. Users produce media and send to selected followers/friends. Images and Videos can have embedded 32 characters-long text messages or finger-drawn 'doodles', layered on the top (Piwek & Joinson, 2016). Additionally, researchers stated an availability of Video chat, where users can engage with active friends while on the application. This makes SnapChat a targeted marketing location to reach prospective students deemed generational students, looking specifically for tailored connections to assist them when making life decisions. Joseph et al., (2012) stated online marketing strategies assisted potential students to alleviate confusion and bolster decisions, such as where to attend higher education. Future research could look closer at SnapChat and the platform's ability to reach potential students with SMM. This was a limitation to the current study, based on time restrictions and the nature of the social media platform.

Student survey participants stated overwhelmingly that they preferred viewing Videos on all platforms. However, media produced on each platform, except YouTube, resulted in the lack of Video production. Bolstering the number of relevant Videos would increase potential students' desire to learn more about a college or university and, in the end, make a choice to attend institutions. A decision would be based on overwhelming feelings produced by viewing Videos, which makes them feel they are already a part of the culture and would be a good fit within the institution.

One recommendation for increasing the value of SMM is to obtain student's thoughts and opinions before creating a marketing plan. Colleges and universities are attempting to reach out, and who better to understand what potential students are looking for, than looking to their peer group. As this study showed, many research theories do not match what is desired by potential students, limiting understanding of what types of SMM and which platforms give the most return on investment boosting the amount of connections made with potential students in turn providing increased attendance rates. The fifth P of marketing, participation (Melchiorre & Johnson, 2017), was evident in the content analysis with engagement: likes, comments, and shares; however, there is no way of knowing which stakeholder/demographic were engaged. Future research needs to consider reviewing actual conversation taking place through social media platforms to increase understanding of who engages with the SMM presented. This study only looked at engagement; however, it is unknown if engagements were two-way conversations about the institution. An additional content analysis, evaluating only conversations, would give a deeper understanding of what followers and the institution are conducting, to increase potential student's choice of a higher education institution.

Limitations

A few constraints of the study prohibited the results beyond the sample studied. First, the truthfulness and sincerity of the participants in completing and returning the survey was relied upon. The sample size was considered a limitation; although, the minimum number of higher education students participated, the researcher had intended on a larger number of returned surveys. The location of the participating institutions who limited the diversity of students, being that most of the institutions were private urban or suburban. The researcher had intended on 16 institutions participating; however, only eight granted the researcher permission to perform the study. Time constraints for observing participating institutions social media platforms hindered the amount of data acquired. Such as the date constrictions inhibiting the researcher from viewing SnapChat posts during the research period, due to research approval needed prior to viewing the SMM presented. However, replication to any other state should be done with caution.

Conclusion

The state of higher education changes just as fast as social media. Ensuring prospective students stay connected in some way with colleges and universities takes constant evolution. Desires of potential students can change on a whim based on their environment, including what they view on social media platforms. Staying abreast of those desires will take patience and skill to produce SMM, which will affect a potential student in a way for them to make a choice to attend a college or university ultimately. Currently, potential students are looking to social media as a way of staying connected with their friends, family, and things they find desirable. Colleges and universities have their work cut out for them to keep on top of potential students' desires and to make

valuable connections to be of assistance when potential students are considering

attending. Results of this study prove increased use of Videos for SMM will ensure

potential students feel connected before they ever visit an institution. Due to

overabundant use by potential students the use of Snapchat will increase the number of

times a potential student views SMM about a college or university. Further studies will

provide a new in-depth understanding of what students view through social media when

making any future choices of a college or university for their higher education needs.

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Appendix A

Q1. To which gender identity do you most identify?

Female

Male

Transgender

Not Listed

Prefer Not to Answer

Q2. What is your age?

17 or younger

18-20 21-25

26-30

31-35

36-40

41+

Q3. What year in college are you currently?

Freshman

Sophomore

Junior

Senior or Above

Q4. Do you currently or have you ever used social media of any kind?

Yes

No

Q5. Please tell me if you ever use any of the following social media sites online or on your cellphone?

	Social Media Use	
	Yes	No
Facebook	☐	☐
Instagram	☐	☐
SnapChat	☐	☐
Twitter	☐	☐
YouTube	☐	☐
LinkedIn	☐	☐

Q6. Please tell me if you ever use any of the following social media sites online or on your cellphone to research colleges or universities prior to selecting the institution you currently attend?

	Research a College/University		
	Yes	No	N/A

Facebook	☐	☐	☐
Instagram	☐	☐	☐
SnapChat	☐	☐	☐
Twitter	☐	☐	☐
YouTube	☐	☐	☐
LinkedIn	☐	☐	☐

Q7. Thinking about Facebook only…In your opinion, what was the type of posts viewed which helped with your college choice if any at all? Select all that apply. (Images are examples only)

Video about

College/University

	Image Only Post	Image with Details Post		Editorial Post	Entertainment Post	N/A
Facebook	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q8. Thinking about Instagram only…In your opinion, what was the type of posts viewed which helped with your college choice if any at all? Select all that apply. (Images are examples only)

Image Only Post

Video about
College/University
Post

N/A

Instagram ☐ ☐ ☐

Q9. Thinking about Twitter only…In your opinion, what was the type of posts viewed which helped with your choice of college if any at all? Select all that apply. (Images are examples only)

Image
Only
Post

Link
Post

Video about
College/University
Post

Dialogue
Post

Retweet
Post

N/A

Twitter ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Q10. Thinking about SnapChat only…In your opinion, did the snaps viewed help with

your college choice? (Image is an example only)

Snap Chat   Snap   N/A

☐   ☐

Q11. Thinking about LinkedIn only…In your opinion, what was the type of posts viewed

which helped with your college choice if any at all? Select all that apply. (Images are

examples only)

Image Only Post   Image with Link Post   Video about College/University

N/A

LinkedIn   ☐   ☐   ☐   ☐

Q12. Thinking about YouTube only…In your opinion, did the posted videos help with your
college choice? (Image is an example only)

Video about College/University

N/A

YouTube ☐

Q13. Based on questions 7 - 12, what grabbed your attention most from the posts presented by ☐ your college or university's social media platforms?

[   ]

Q14. In your opinion what was the most persuasive form of contact in your choice of

college or university? Please rank the options. Number one being most persuasive,

number being least persuasive. Please fill out "other" if appropriate option is not listed.

- Social Media Marketing including any or all listed above

- Traditional Marketing (Brochures, Billboard, TV Advertisement, Radio

    Advertisement, etc.)

- Direct contact from college/university official

- Parent's persuasion or choice

- Friends persuasion

- Other [   ]

Q15. In your opinion which social media platforms were most impactful to your decision

of college attendance? Please rank the choices, one being the most impactful.

- Instagram

- Facebook

- SnapChat

- YouTube

- Twitter

- LinkedIn

Q16. Please elaborate more on why you made your top two choices of social media platforms from question 15?

Q17. Was social media a factor at all in your college or university selection? If yes, please explain how. If not, please explain what did play a role in your college or university selection.

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Appendix B

LINDENWOOD

Survey Research Information Sheet

You are being asked to participate in a survey conducted by Emmy Zimmerman, Researcher and Dr. Nicole Vaux, Committee Chair from Lindenwood University. We are conducting this study to learn how college students' views were influenced by social media when choosing a college or university to attend. The survey asks several questions about social media marketing and the platforms which may have impacted your decision on which college or university you chose to attend. It will take roughly 5-7 minutes to complete this survey.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate or withdraw at any time by simply not completing the survey or closing the browser window.

There are no risks from participating in this project. We will not collect any information that may identify you. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study.

<u>WHO CAN I CONTACT WITH QUESTIONS?</u>

If you have concerns or complaints about this project, please use the following contact information:

Emmy Zimmerman emmyjoz@yahoo.com

Dr. Nicole Vaux nvaux@lindenwood.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a participant or concerns about the project and wish to talk to someone outside the research team, you can contact Michael Leary (Director - Institutional Review Board) at 636-949-4730 or mleary@lindenwood.edu.

By clicking the link below, I confirm that I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be required to do, and the risks involved. I understand that I can discontinue participation at any time by closing the survey browser. My consent also indicates that I am at least 18 years of age.

https://lindenwood.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0NF2FEZ1EDnArXL

You can withdraw from this study at any time by simply closing the browser window. Please feel free to print a copy of this information sheet.

Appendix C

LINDENWOOD

November 2019

Dear Registrar or Dean of Students,

I am writing to request permission to survey your college or university's juniors and seniors, for my doctoral dissertation research project at Lindenwood University. I believe the information gathered through this study will positively contribute to the body of knowledge regarding how colleges and universities use social media to market to potential students.

Previous research from Turner, (2017); Melchiorre & Johnson, (2017); Sandlin & Vallejo Pena, (2014); Scheepers, Scheepers, Stockdale, & Nurdin, (2014) supported the belief that research lacked a student's perspective on social media marketing promoted by colleges and universities. The purpose of the survey is to gain quantitative data about the relationships among the variable's social media marketing, social media platforms, and student choice of college or university for attendance. In total I hope to have 5400 college/university juniors and seniors participate across the state to have a robust study, and your institution's participation would greatly help in this endeavor.
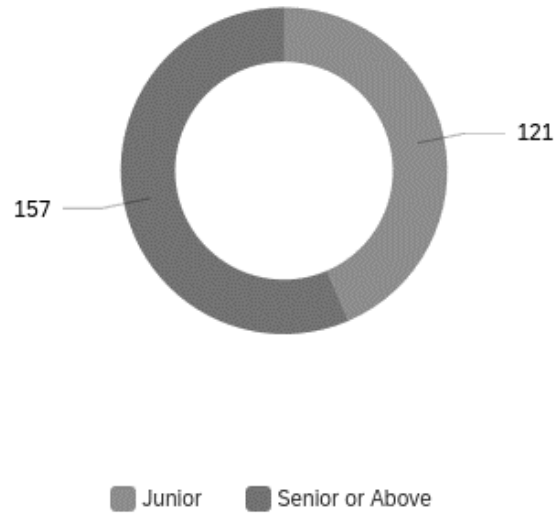
Attached to this document is the survey to be distributed, as well as the student letter and Lindenwood University's consent form. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time. Confidentiality is assured as the survey will be administered through Qualtrics; specific data related to colleges or universities will be coded and kept locked up at all times. Students' consent to participate in this study is given by either completing the survey or with a non-response.

If you have any questions, you may contact me at emmyjoz@yahoo.com or my dissertation chair, Dr. Nicole Vaux, at nvaux@lindenwood.edu. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Emmy Zimmerman
Doctoral Candidate
Lindenwood University

Appendix D

Appendix E