A Thematic Analysis of the use of Social Media Marketing in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

A review of the empirical, peer-reviewed literature related to marketing in higher education was conducted to examine the use and effectiveness of social media in higher education institutions. Results from twelve peer-reviewed, empirical studies were thematically analyzed. Findings were outlined in a thematic map with three emergent themes: (a) why social media marketing is used in higher education, (b) the purposes for which social media marketing is being used in higher education, and (c) the effectiveness of the use of social media marketing in higher education. Results suggested prospective students still rely on the traditional forms of marketing, such as institutional web and print materials, although there is some evidence that social media is gaining prominence in their decision-making process. In summary, findings imply university marketers should strategically plan, including assessing student preference regarding social media communication, in order to embed social media marketing as an institution-wide tactic taking into account the collection of measurable analytics on the effectiveness of the effort.

Keywords: social media, marketing, higher education, effective use, critical review, thematic analysis

Introduction

The role of social media in marketing has the potential to encumber almost every e-aspect in a person's life regardless of their age or background. University officials have embraced the wealth of marketing information gleaned from social media and consider social networking a vital part of their business plans. Prospective college students comprise a significant portion of social media users with 75% reporting researching potential college choices through institutions' social media platforms (Croke, 2013). Realizing this statistic, higher education administrators are utilizing social media as a means to increase enrollment, endowment, and establish brand awareness. Institutions of higher education increasingly use social media to connect with parents, alumni, donors, faculty, staff, and prospective, former, and current students (Gardner, 2013).

College-aged students are using multiple forms of social media including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and others. Progressive institutional officials who acknowledge the need to appeal to their constituents work to ensure a presence on social media. Moreover, higher education administrations are keenly aware of the low cost and wide marketing scope of social media (Arnett, 2012; Joly, 2009a; Masterson, 2010) as a means to connect with traditional and non-traditional students as well as potential donors. Effective social media marketing plans utilize solid strategic reasoning. Organizations understand a clear, concise strategy must be employed, as well as, a dynamic public presence maintained (Fusch, 2011a) in order to increase their enrollment and revenue through the use of those platforms (Mahaney, 2012; "The Council for Advancement," 2013).

The use of social media as a marketing tool presents both challenges and opportunities. Benefits include the ability of the university to engage prospective student in a more casual atmosphere better targeting the interest of perspective college students. This also allows perspective students to gage their "fit" to the university, which could lead to higher retention rates ("PBP Executive Reports," 2010). Whereas, challenges include refining methods to evaluate the effectiveness of relatively new market platforms and campaigns. In addition, the measurement of success and outcomes varies from one educational institution to another. Campaign strategies include quantifying return on investment in terms of time, but tracking social media can be problematic and is often reduced to counting the number of "likes" on the university's Facebook page (Gardner, 2013).

The lack of quantitative data and empirical studies related to marketing in higher education and effectiveness of social media as a marketing tool presents a need for greater research on this topic. The overall literature suggests institutions are embracing social media as a strong communications tool with students and other constituents. However, the empirical, peer-reviewed literature is still sparse on critically-reviewed research and measurements of effective specific social media campaigns. The purpose of this study was to review the empirical, peer-reviewed research base regarding the effectiveness of social media as a marketing tool in higher education. The research questions guiding this study included:

1. How is social media used in marketing in higher education as reported in peer-reviewed, empirical studies?

2. How effective is the use of social media and marketing in higher education as documented in peer-reviewed, empirical studies?

METHODOLOGY

Thematic analysis was used to systematically identify, analyze, synthesize, and interpret the themes that emerged from the data. We followed the six steps of thematic analysis outlined by Braun & Clarke (2012): (a) familiarizing oneself with the data, (b) creating initial codes, (c) looking for themes, (d) reviewing potential themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report. The thematic analysis methodology outlined by Nyangau and Bado (2012) was adapted slightly to include the development of research questions, outlining clearly the methods used to search for studies, executing meticulous investigative methods, and utilizing well-defined criteria for assessing the quality of studies for inclusion in this dissertation.

According to Braun & Clarke (2012), thematic analysis brings insight into a collective experience. The purpose, state Braun & Clarke (2012), "is to answer a particular research question and this is why thematic analysis is so accessible and flexible – it is a method of data analysis, rather than being a strict approach to conducting qualitative research" (p. 58). There are several choices a researcher can make when it comes to the way to conduct a thematic analysis. For the purposes of this study, which did not involve first-person data collection such as interviews, but rather a theme interpretation of previously-published peer-reviewed articles (of which there were very few), the process was more of a deductive approach to the data coding and analysis.

Data Collection

A theoretical sampling procedure was used (Creswell, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The data collection process began with a comprehensive search of applicable educational databases that included Academic Search Complete, Chronicle of Higher Education, EBSCO

databases, Educational Research Complete, Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC),

JSTOR, Lexis-Nexis Academic, New York Times, ProQuest, and Sage Journals Online, Google,

and Google Scholar. Search terms included: "social network marketing and higher education,"

"social media and higher education," "social marketing and college students," "social media and

admissions and higher education," and "social media and student recruitment." Resulting

articles were identified, collected, and reviewed to verify they encompassed the strict protocol

for inclusion.

Twelve peer-reviewed, empirical studies met the criteria for inclusion in this synthesis.

Although the sample size is seemingly small, the 12 studies represent the universe of peer-

reviewed articles returned from the search using the social marketing terms cited above.

Although sampling error is a risk, the systematic procedure that was employed to derive the

sample lends credibility that the 12 article sample was adequately representative of the literature

on social media in higher education marketing. Additionally, because the articles represent the

universe of articles on the topic, one could be confident that the articles yielded theoretical

saturation of the topic. Theoretical *saturation* is the point at which qualitative data is complete,

and nothing new could be added with additional data (Bowen, 2008; Creswell, 2012; Strauss &

Corbin, 1990). Various studies have achieved theoretical saturation in thematic analyses with

similar sample sizes (cf. Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010; Harden, A., Brunton, G.,

Fletcher, A, Oakley, A., 2009; Morton, Tong, Howard, Snelling, & Webster, 2010; Shields,

Pratt, & Hunter, 2006). Table 1 displays the articles' titles, authors, the scholarly journals in

which they were published, and the publish dates. The studies involved various methods ranging

from mixed to quantitative to qualitative and included one literature review critique. Table 2

presents the study information.

Selection of Participants/Sample

The 12 studies were found to be eligible for inclusion in the data analysis after meeting

the following review standards:

1. To ensure the information was not dated, none of the studies was older than 2009

   (See Table 1). Social media is constantly evolving and therefore an article that was

   relevant just a few years earlier might not have current information.

2. The articles selected were carefully appraised to ensure the focus stayed within the

   margins of social media and marketing in higher education.

3. The articles had to be peer-reviewed. These included international studies on the

   subject. Due to the paucity of peer-reviewed research on this particular subject and

   the global reach of social media, these studies encompassed international exploration

   in social media marketing and institutions of higher education. Analysis that had

   been conducted on student recruitment in countries such as the United Kingdom, the

   Netherlands, and others were encompassed in this report. These studies have been

   published in peer-reviewed journals as required in this methodology.

Data Analyses

The 12 peer-reviewed, empirical articles were thoroughly reviewed, and several different

syntheses of each article were created. Table 3 presents the matrix that documented the author,

the purpose, the instruments and participants, and the key findings of each article. Another

synthesis document created for the authors' use contained a summary of each article and was

used to generate matching codes and themes from the 12 articles. From that synthesis document, unifying themes were developed, and a thematic map was drafted. An additional synthesis document provided the researchers with a quick condensed version of each article for cross-referencing purposes. Figure 1 outlines this process. The deductive approach to the data coding and analysis was a top-down approach; during it, "the researcher brings to the data a series of concepts, ideas, or topics that they use to code and interpret the data" (Burke & Clarke, 2012, p. 58). Deductive thematic analysis was considered by Burke & Clarke (2012) to be textual in its orientation but utilized constructionist and experiential learning to come up with a theoretical framework to understand the world.

Following the phases outlined by Burke & Clarke (2012), the first phase was to familiarize oneself with the data so the 12 articles were read and reread. Notes were made in the margins, and areas were highlighted that were considered important for future reference. One page summaries were written and numbered, with corresponding numbers marked on the matching article for quick reference.

The second phase consisted of creating initial codes. That began the systematic analysis of the data. Braun & Clark (2012) called the codes the "building blocks" of analysis (p. 61). These codes classified and delivered a brand for the characteristic of the data that was applicable to the research questions. This required another exhaustive reading through of the articles with each area coded to identify something that was potentially relevant to the research questions. A coding system was utilized at that point to ensure that each article and each code was properly filed for quick, systematic, future reference.

Phase three began the theme search. During this step the coded data was reviewed in order to identify similar areas and overlap. This helped to capture what was important in the data that related to the research questions and represented some type of pattern. These themes needed to work together to tell an overall story about the data and were mapped out.

This map was of help during the fourth phase where potential themes were reviewed. That step was essential, according to Burke & Clarke (2012), to ensure quality checking. During that process, the developing themes were checked in relation to the coded data and data set in order to determine if the theme worked in relation to the data. Burke & Clarke (2012) provided key questions to ask during this stage, such as: was there enough meaningful data to support this theme and did it describe something useful about the research questions? This stage included several revisions or discarding.

Finally, in phase five and six, themes were defined, named and produced in a report. "A good thematic analysis will have themes that (a) do not try to do too much, as themes ideally have a singular focus; (b) are related but do not overlap, so they are not repetitive, although they may build on previous themes; and (c) directly address your research question (Burke & Clarke, 2012, p. 66). This phase was what made up the thematic analysis. The data was interpreted and connected to the research questions. See Figure 1 for a summary of these steps.

Results

As a result of the six-step review process, three main themes and nine subthemes were established. Table 4 presents the final thematic map. The three main themes that were established from the 12 articles were (1) why social media marketing is being used in higher education, (2) the purposes for which social media marketing is being used in higher education,

and (3) the effectiveness of the use of social media marketing in higher education. Each of the

themes had subthemes emerge to further explicate the findings.

Theme 1: Why Social Media Marketing is Being Used in Higher Education

The synthesized study results addressed the reasons social media is used for marketing

purposes in higher education. The main reasons for its use were discussed in seven of the

articles (58%); results of these articles support the following three subthemes:

1. Social media use is predominant in the traditionally-aged prospective students

    (individuals between the ages of 18-22), also known as Digital Natives and members of

    Generation Y, and the Millennial Generation.

2. Social media has revolutionized the way university officials communicate with

    prospective students.

3. Among college students, social media is the preferred method of communication today.

Generational Use.

Seven of the 12 articles suggested that social media is frequently used by the Digital

native generation. Lindbeck & Fodrey (2010) characterized the digital native generation as

being born between 1982 and 2000, having a constant need to be connected through their social

pipelines, enjoying easy access to digital information, and fully expecting to always have that

access.

Two studies found that the digital native age group (i.e. teenagers and adults between the

ages of 14-32) frequented at least one form of a social network site (Constantinides & Zinck

Stagno, 2011; Tkalac Verčič & Verčič, 2013). In fact, both Constantinides & Zinck Stagno

(2011) and Tkalac Verčič & Verčič (2013) discovered the majority of their survey respondents

maintained multiple social media website profiles and performed frequent site visits each day.

Tkalac Verčič & Verčič (2013) surveyed 308 undergraduate students; 91.5% responded they interacted with some form of social networking platform, with 90% indicating that they use social media more than once a day. In a study of 403 future university students in the Netherlands by Constantinides & Zinck Stagno (2011), the respondents were categorized into three groups: beginners (low-levels users of social media that comprised 29.5% of respondents), social users (characterized as passive users that comprised 40.7% of respondents; these users were on social media mainly for the entertainment and social activities), and informational users (while also interested in the entertainment value of social media, these users were much more engaged in information-seeking activities; 29.8% comprised this category). Results suggested that social and informational users were more likely to maintain multiple social media profiles and log in regularly throughout each day. A large portion of all users, however, (78%) visited their social media site(s) at least once a day.

A case study by Hayes et al. (2009) investigated the use of a customized social networking site that was developed by Xavier University, explicitly to e-recruit potential traditionally-aged students (students who attend college directly from high school, enroll full-time, and live on campus). By tracking the site visits from accepted students, the university was able to assess which of those Digital Natives ended up enrolling. The university created a customized website directed at potential students with a partner site designed to appeal to parents. Once a student or parent logged on, they received personalized communications and were able to conduct research about the university all in one location. Results showed a correlation between participation in the site and eventual matriculation, indicating the site was

popular among students of that age. Results from Lindbeck & Fodrey (2010) reinforced the

findings of Hayes et al. (2009); survey outcomes from Generation Y students (95% of

respondents were 18 or 19 years old) implied that newer technologies (like social media) were at

least somewhat influential in students' decisions to enroll at a particular university.

Study results suggested that higher education marketers were particularly interested in

using social media to reach out to members of the digital native generation because that

generation comprises students who are of the age to matriculate to universities. Lubbe et al.

(2013) found in their study of South African educators (n=80) that due to only 10% of the survey

respondents reporting using SNS to market their programs, they were failing to reach out to

prospective students that consisted of Digital Natives. Lubbe et al. (2013) concluded that the use

of social media is important as Generation Y comprises the students who need to be recruited.

Communications Revolution.

Overwhelmingly, study results suggest that social media has revolutionized the way

universities are communicating with students. In an analysis of the top 100 colleges websites (as

named by *The U.S. News*) Greenwood (2012) found that 92% used social media in conjunction

with their institutional websites resulting in an average of 3.7 social networking systems (SNS)

per college with 77% linking those SNS to their homepages (as opposed to linking the SNS on

another page). Based on the results, Greenwood (2012) concluded that the colleges who did not

take advantage of social media and also provide easy access to those sites needed to adjust their

recruiting techniques. Palmer (2013) concurred with Greenwood. Palmer (2013) found three of

the six Australian universities he studied provided indirect links (links that required further web

navigation) to their Twitter accounts on their websites rather than direct links, which could

possibly detract potential students from following them on social media.

Students do consider social media outlets to be important communications tools (Tkalac

Verčič & Verčič, 2013). In the survey performed by Tkalac Verčič & Verčič (2013), findings

(n=308) revealed that 88% of students communicated about their college program through social

media, and 62% felt it was important to receive information about their school through social

media. Lindbeck & Fodrey (2010) found somewhat similar results from survey results of

freshmen at two state universities in the Midwest region of the United States (n=746). Results

revealed that although websites and emails were rated as somewhat to very useful by the

majority of respondents, newer technologies (such as mobile options and social networking)

were ranked as also having the potential to be somewhat useful (Lindbeck & Fodrey, 2010). The

researchers concluded that colleges' recruitment strategies needed to evolve to the changing

desires of potential students (Lindbeck & Fodrey, 2010).

DeAndrea et al. (2012) studied first-year students at a large Midwestern university

(n=265) to learn the impact of participation in a customized online social media site on student

expectations of their campus experience and academic success. Results indicated that high

activity on the site and the number of Facebook friends located within their residence halls

predicted students' expectations of discovering and using a diverse support network on campus

(DeAndrea et al., 2012). The study concluded that creating a social media site for incoming

students could increase the students' connections to the university and one another (DeAndrea et

al., 2012).

A comparable study conducted by Palmer & Koenig-Lewis (2011) investigated the relationship between social media, emotional connection and students' satisfaction with their chosen institution. In the study from the United Kingdom, undergraduate students (n=504), were administered a questionnaire one month before enrollment; 326 of those respondents also completed a follow-up survey one month after the start of their first semester. Palmer & Koenig-Lewis (2011) found that higher levels of interaction in institutional social networks by students who had enrolled there were generally associated with higher positive anticipated emotions towards their college experience (β=.420, p<.01). Palmer & Koenig-Lewis (2011) concluded that the changing nature of the institutional market place required university marketers to understand the benefits of providing social media outlets to students.

Social media relies on interaction. Fagerstrøm & Ghinea (2013) conducted a field study to examine how a university college in Norway used specialized Facebook groups to recruit students. One hundred and twenty-eight prospective students joined the Facebook groups connected to their programs of interest. Subsequent matriculation rates of applicants was 88.8% as compared to just 43.3% among the applicants who did not join a specialized Facebook group (Fagerstrøm & Ghinea, 2013). The authors concluded that making use of the opportunities provided by social networks can allow institutions to facilitate interactions that create a valuable experiences for students, which can lead to a greater conversion rate among applicants.

Communication Preferences.

This new digital pathway of social media was found to be the preferred method of communication in one-fourth of 12 studies, which led to the development of this third subtheme.

Colleges and universities need to consider the communications preferences of the students they want to recruit. Millennials have a preference for collaborative and the latest technological communications tools, but most colleges still use the more established marketing tools of emails and printed materials (Lindbeck & Fodrey, 2010). In a survey completed by 746 students, Lindbeck & Fodrey (2010) asked respondents to list the technologies they most often encountered during the admission process. More than 85% named the school websites and emails as the technologies they experienced the most often, which according to Lindbeck & Fodrey (2010), showed a division between students' common use of newer technology (mobile and social networking) and what they were experiencing during their college search.

Studies report that encouraging students to join a specialized social media group before, during, and after their time on campus can be a potentially good return on investment for institutions (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2011). Palmer & Koenig-Lewis (2011) conducted a study with UK students and found that social media allowed prospective students to talk about their emotions, which likely resulted in a positive connection with the institution. Results of the case study from Xavier University support those findings; the specialized website launched in 2006 engaged students by giving them access to other students, games, and university forms and information, which likely helped lead to a 44% enrollment increase in just three years and a cost savings of over $8,000 a year in printing and mailing fees (Hayes et al., 2009).

Theme 2: Purposes for Which Social Media Marketing is Being Used in Higher Education

Study articles highlighted the numerous purposes for which higher education marketers are incorporating social media into their marketing campaigns; three subthemes emerged from the analysis:

1. Recruiting

2. Information-sharing purposes

3. To improve the higher education experience for prospective students

Recruiting Use.

Half of the 12 articles include discussions on how social media use is an opportunity for admission personnel to reinvent how they recruit college-bound students. University officials are clearly utilizing social media in specific ways to e-recruit. Effective use of these new platforms could create innovative and competitive admission strategies to integrate technology in order to do a better job of serving the informational needs of prospective students (Lindbeck & Fodrey, 2010). Lindbeck & Fodrey (2010) found that only 27% of students (*n*=746) reported social media as a part of the recruitment process they experienced. But interestingly, students generally ranked the potential usefulness of social media in marketing higher education institutions as a two out of a scale of three (indicating it as 'somewhat useful') (Lindbeck & Fodrey, 2010).

Xavier University's use of a customized online site offered another example of a recruitment campaign where 364 additional students enrolled within three years of the launch of that site, and thousands of dollars were saved in marketing materials (Hayes et al., 2009). Hayes et al. (2009) suggested that institutions of higher education would be wise to use social media in recruitment practices based on the success of Xavier University's e-site. The social network campaign conducted by Fagerstrøm & Ghinea (2013) found similar results to Hayes et al. (2009). Potential students were encouraged to join Facebook groups dedicated to their programs of interest. The strategy likely resulted in an increase in conversion rate and a substantial financial

contribution to the university (over one million dollars) from the addition of those matriculated

students (Fagerstrøm & Ghinea, 2013).

The articles encourage educational institutions to be familiar with how potential students

incorporate social media into their decision-making processes in order to successfully

incorporate customized campaigns into their recruiting strategies. To provide a better

understanding of that issue, Constantinides & Zinck Stagno (2011) asked future university

students (*n*=403) how they used social media. Results indicated that future students ranked

social media last in a list of information channels that influenced their college choices - a finding

that Constantinides & Zinck Stagno (2011) found to be in contrast to what one would expect

given the popularity of social media among that age group. The authors considered whether low

rankings of social media could be from the lack of participation of university recruiters with

social media, and/or the lack of relevant and engaging content on the university social media

sites (Constantinides & Zinick Stagno, 2011). Constantinides & Zinick Stagno (2011) also

discovered that 100% of their sample population used some form of social media as either a

beginner (low level users, social user (passive users) or informational user (more highly engaged

in information-seeking activities). Given the widespread use of social media in the college-going

age group, educational recruiters could likely conclude that engaging in social media as part of a

university marketing plan could contribute to increased enrollment and help students make more

informed choices about what the best fit would be for them (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno,

2011).

A study of 500 first-year, undergraduate students conducted by Parrot & Tipton (2010)

resulted in similar findings to Constantinides & Zinck Stagno (2011), in which only 18% of the

students named social networking sites as important sources of information in their application

decisions. It is important to note that low number was actually an increase from the previous

year when only 12% indicated social media as important (Parrot & Tipton, 2010). In addition,

when students were asked to rank what was important in the *enrollment* process, 26% said social

media was important. This led Parrot & Tipton (2010) to conclude that while in the early stages

of the decision-making process, students search for key factual institutional material outside of

social media, but when it comes to final enrollment choices, students believed that social

networking sites could provide important insight into which college or university they ultimately

decided to attend.

   Use for Other Purposes.

   In addition to recruiting efforts, colleges and universities also use social media to

provide information to all constituents along with prospective students. Using SNS to provide

information serves dual purposes - it distributes necessary news to a mass market, and it is

another way for potential candidates to get to know the institution (Palmer, 2013). Palmer

(2013) studied the Twitter usage among six Australian universities to determine how the

institutions were interacting with followers on the platform. Like Greenwood (2012), Palmer

(2013) discussed the importance of providing a quick and clear link to Twitter from the

university's main website. In addition, the results from the Twitter data analysis showed that the

majority of tweets were directed one-way from the university to the customer, which was not as

effective as two-way interactions with Twitter followers (Palmer, 2013). Two-way interactions

can encourage retweeting – an activity that can expand a university's reach and impact of their

twitter messages (Palmer, 2013). The three universities that had the highest amount of retweets

(715, 194, and 138) also had higher numbers of Twitter followers (17,129; 3,843; and 2,701, respectively) (Palmer, 2013). Since there was a tentative association between the level of retweets and the number of followers, Palmer (2013) cautiously concluded that it was likely important to have a large number of followers and facilitate their active participation. To that end, study articles suggested that institutions provide easy access to social media platforms, by providing, at the very least, a SNS link on their university's official webpage (Greenwood, 2012). The majority of university webpage traffic is from students - both potential and current students looking for official information - which means providing a link to the social media sites has the ability to reach a lot of traffic (Greenwood, 2012). Institutions that do not provide a social network link on their official webpage are likely missing out on marketing and recruiting opportunities (Greenwood, 2012).

In an interesting yet understandable twist, some universities linked social media use with emotional connections to their institutions and used that to improve the higher educational experience for prospective students. To capitalize on research that showed young people experienced positive feelings from feeling connected with others online, social media campaigns were created with the purpose of ensuring that incoming students were provided with an emotional digital platform (DeAndrea et al., 2012; Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2011). Goals of these campaigns were to boost the retention rate of students who would arrive on campus already feeling emotionally attached with their institution (DeAndrea et al., 2012) and to boost students' satisfaction (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2011). Findings outlined in themes one and two demonstrated how social media sites can likely lead to students' positive feelings toward a university, which suggested that social networking can provide emotional as well as functional

support during decision-making. The support could then lead to students getting more out of their university experience and feeling a greater part of the overall community (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2011).

Theme 3: The Effectiveness of the Use of Social Media Marketing in Higher Education

Research has shown that young people frequently use social media, and many universities maintain an SNS to recruit prospective students. But perhaps the most important question is whether or not the expenditure of resources into SNS is working. Are marketing campaign goals reached when university personnel utilize social media to attract students? Are students using social media as a factor in their decision-making process? Three subthemes were developed in response to this particular main theme:

1. Students still seem to prefer the more traditional forms of university marketing, but influence of social media on students' decision-making processes is rising.

2. The value of social media is in how universities use social media - not just simply maintain a presence on SNS platforms.

3. Suggestions for improvement on best practices in implementing social media marketing.

Traditional Marketing is Still the Preference but Social Media Should not be Ignored.

In Parrot & Tipton's (2010) national survey of first-year undergraduates (*n*=500), 81% of participants listed the college website and 62% named admissions publications as important factors in their application decisions. Only 18% said social networking sites were important (Parrot & Tipton, 2010). This did, however, represent an increase from the previous year's study, and with nearly 60% relying on digital information over print materials, the authors

concluded that social media would become more influential in the future in regards to helping

students make important higher education choices (Parrot & Tipton, 2010)

As discovered through a review of literature by Nyangau and Bado (2012), empirical

studies pointed out that prospects were still relying on traditional marketing materials (such as

emails, direct mailing, campus visits, and college fairs) when obtaining admission-related

information. Admission officers preferred and utilized traditional methods, which could be one

explanation for why they remain popular among potential students (Nyangau & Bado, 2012). A

study conducted by Tkalac Verčič & Verčič (2013) that surveyed Digital Natives (*n*=308) to

learn their social media preferences, found most respondents were on social media (91.5%) and

most (62%) agreed it was important to receive information about their school via that medium.

When needed to obtain official information, however, 95% named the university website as their

preferred source and only 32% referenced social network sites (Tkalac Verčič & Verčič, 2013).

It is important to note that the results still suggest that students think of social media outlets as

important communication tools, a fact that university officials should not ignore (Tkalac Verčič

& Verčič, 2013).

Lindbeck & Fodrey (2010) found similar results when students (*n*=746) were asked

which technologies were the most useful during the admission process, and the top three were

the more established ones of the school websites, email, and cell phones. The technologies that

made up the bottom of the list were social networking, blogging, and video and audio content

(Lindbeck & Fodrey, 2010). As was discussed in Nyangau & Bado's (2012) study, Lindbeck &

Fodrey (2010) speculated that these findings could be from admission offices intentionally using

more proven technologies out of familiarity with those media and not being knowledgeable

about the newer technologies. Constantinides & Zinick Stagno (2011) came to the same

conclusions; study results showed that future students ranked social media last in a list of

information channels that influenced their choice of study or university. Study investigators

pointed to possible explanations such as having lack of relevant content and low engagement on

official university social media sites (Constantinides & Zinick Stagno, 2011).

The Value is in how Social Media is Used.

Seventy-five percent of the 12 articles discussed the importance in how social media is

used by recruiters. Authors cite that the value of social media marketing came from how it was

used, and use should vary depending on what kind of institution it is and their social media

presence (Palmer, 2013). Palmer (2013) found that of six Australian universities studied, only

one university had linked its Twitter account to the popular academic news Twitter feed and that

linkage resulted in significant additional publicity for the university. The author concluded that

universities that leveraged external accounts had the ability to amplify their reach and impact of

their messages (Palmer, 2013). A clear plan for social media use is needed to be effective. For

example, Nyangau & Bado (2012) found higher education organizations that rushed to

implement SNS without clear strategic plans did not necessarily see effective results or higher

enrollment numbers. Indeed, to successfully leverage the potential of social media, admissions

offices cannot skip the methodological step of creating a coherent marketing plan with specific

target audiences and measurable goals (Nyangau & Bado, 2012). In addition, academic

institutions should keep in mind they are marketing on a global stage in which their constituents

and potential stakeholders are evaluating the quality of their college or university (Tkalac Verčič

& Verčič, 2013). When students from marketing classes (n=308) were surveyed about their

perceptions of their school, 66% said there was no official forum to address students' problems,

and 82% believed social media could help with that issue (Tkalac Verčič & Verčič, 2013).

Results from Parrot & Tipton (2010) showed increases in the influence of social media, from

which the authors determined that investments in digital networking should be integrated into a

clear social media strategy that reflects an institution's goals.

Lindbeck & Fodrey (2010) concluded that the potential for social media could be

considered useful in recruiting Generation Y members based on responses (n=746) in which

students ranked social media as being somewhat useful in admissions procedures. The authors

said "by making a conscious effort to increase the use of newer technologies and integrating

them into the admission process we have the potential to offer information and features about our

institutions in a way that the Milennia student prefers to consume it, making it easier for the

student to connect with our institutions" (Lindbeck & Fodrey, 2010, p. 15). But the increases in

newer technology must be strategic as having a mere presence on social media will not be

enough to efficiently drive students into the admissions process, rather marketers should use SNS

to build relationships between students and admission counselors (Lindbeck & Fodrey, 2010).

It is a delicate line that university officials must walk. Too much management of their

social networks could take away the trust of prospective students in the content posted, yet too

little management has the potential to leave a user with a bad impression of their institution if

they are unresponsive (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2011). Managing social networks is important

as online experiences have the potential to affect a student's relationship with that university

(Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2011). Although potentially challenging, institutions should try to

stimulate influential users to create a vital, engaging social media presence and recruitment

officers should plan to be active and consistently interact, along with developing a clear

understanding of the online behavior of potential students (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno,

2011).

Best Practices.

There were a number of suggestions in the 12 study articles of best practices in the

implementation of social media within higher education marketing methods. As illuminated in

the previous subtheme, while it is important to be on social media, it is more important to know

how to properly use social media. The following is a list of the best practice recommendations

that consistently emerged throughout the 12 articles:

a. Be sure to have a presence on social media, and be committed to using it properly.

b. Link the SNS to the university homepage.

c. Have a strategic plan.

d. Measure for goal achievement.

e. Monitor the online conversations being held about the institution.

As explained in the previous subtheme, being on social media is important to ensure that

the communication channels are open with prospective students, but it is also vital that

universities participate in those channels properly. Tkalac Verčič & Verčič (2013) studied how

students preferred to receive formal information about their university. Most believed it was

important to receive information on their institution via social media channels (Tkalac Verčič &

Verčič, 2013). Somewhat opposite results were discovered by Lubbe et al. (2013) when only

eight percent of university respondents (n=80) were found to be on social media, and only 42.5%

believed social media was important in the recruiting of students. The authors suggested the

academic community needed to progress in a changing technological environment where social

media plays a more significant role in recruiting candidates (Lubbe et al., 2013).

Once a university has a presence on a social network (or networks), students need to

know those platforms exist. One of the easiest ways to "advertise" an institution's presence on

social media is by linking the SNS on the official homepage of the website (Greenwood, 2012).

There is plenty of room on a webpage to add social media links and doing so ensures the largest

web traffic will see those links (Greenwood, 2012).

According to many of these articles, being on social media is pointless unless it is done

strategically, as part of a larger coordinated marketing effort that measures outcomes. Drafting

clear policies and developing systematic marketing techniques with target audiences, goals, and

measurement metrics will help be effective, as will investing more resources into social media to

be sure the experience is consistent and informative for prospective students (Nyangua & Bado,

2012). Implementing the new technologies into any recruiting strategy requires an

understanding of the current generation of prospective students, performing the proper research

on how to best serve those potential students, and being willing to make internal changes to an

institution's culture (Lindbeck & Fodrey, 2010). Social networking tools are most effective

when they are employed strategically, with a specific intent that includes predetermined

measurable outcomes and knowing exactly what to do with the collected data (Hayes et al.,

2009).

Knowing that, it can be a challenge to create attractive social media applications that

connect with students. It "requires the allocation of resources, an organizational structure, and a

consistent policy that keeps these applications up-to-date and utilizes the customer input"

(Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011, pp. 20-21). Social network marketing should be an extension of an institution's digital planning with the investment of time and money. Furthermore, institutions should devote resources to develop extensive knowledge of social media platforms and the audience that frequents them (Parrot & Tipton, 2010).

Lastly, some studies suggested that institutional officials monitor the digital conversations about their organizations. Keeping an electronic eye on what is being said about a university online requires some time, but there are tools that can help with this effort, like Google alerts (Hayes et al., 2009). Doing this keeps higher education leaders aware of any potential issues and able to strategically respond (Hayes et al., 2009; Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2011).   Because social media has the power to circulate information rapidly and to a large audience, institutions need to be prepared to rapidly react to redirect any negative social media attention (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2011).

Discussion

Social media is a tool used for both personal and professional purposes – one that higher education administrators seem interested in using to connect with their constituents. Because social marketing campaigns have the potential to be an effective promotional tool to increase a university's enrollment, endowment, and brand awareness, there is a need to understand exactly how universities are utilizing these tools and how successful those campaigns have been. With that understanding, the partnership between higher education and social media marketing is much more likely to be fruitful and produce the desired results that are beneficial to both higher education officials and their constituents.

While there are numerous empirical studies that discuss social media and marketing in higher education, the quantity of peer-reviewed studies on that subject is quite limited. Without the assurance that an article has been through a systematic process to assess its accuracy, quality, and validity, its findings cannot be considered conclusive.

Interpretations of the Findings

The majority of the college-aged population is increasingly using social media not only to communicate with others but also as a primary source of information. Members of this generation spend more time engaging with digital information than they do with printed materials. This paradigm shift is of great significance to higher education officials who are interested in recruiting prospective students. Traditionally university marketing revolved around proven resources such as campus visits, printed publications, and the official website. Although studies suggest that these are still effective for recruiting prospective students, it is clear that a change is coming where social media could impact the decision-making process of prospective students.

With this change on the horizon, colleges and universities should likely be operating in the social media marketing field. Social media has already transformed the way higher education personnel communicate with incoming students, and data points to the continued influence of social media in higher education recruiting. A presence on the popular platforms is necessary; at the very least, an institution should have an official site on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. That presence needs to be accompanied with an overall strategic plan that has clearly defined goals and measurable outcomes that are in line with the institution's mission. Investments will be required in staff, time, and money to ensure that those sites are active,

interactive, engaging, up-to-date, and incorporate an all-encompassing marketing approach to bring new students into the mix. University recruiters would be wise to incorporate social media into a mix of recruitment tools as the majority of peer-reviewed studies have concluded that traditional marketing methods are still the preferred way for students to seek information and make educational choices.

Conclusions

Studies regarding social media and marketing in higher education are vital for teaching professionals how to utilize these important tools effectively. An important practical implication of this research is providing direction towards using social media and marketing successfully. Social networking requires more than just a presence; it is fundamental that recruiters be informed, prepared, and interactive to use social media successfully in their integrated marketing plans.

While potential students seem to still prefer the traditional and time-tested information-gathering methods of perusing university websites, talking to admissions officers, and reading printed publications about the university, at this point in time, there are indications that may change as university personnel become more adept at using technology and social media sites that traditional-aged recruited students prefer. Marketing directors are urged to become knowledgeable about the peer-reviewed and the empirical studies that have been conducted on this subject in order to ensure they are up to date on the latest technology and tracking tools in this field. Most important to note is that social media is about connecting and engaging and learning about an institution in an informal, interactive manner that will help students reach the important life decision of where to attend college. This method of communicating with

prospective students is different from the more traditional form of marketing where the

university provides information and the student passively accepts it. Social media marketing has

the potential to allow students to be active "shoppers" who ultimately can help spread the digital

word about an institution.

Table 1

Publication Dates of the 12 Empirical, Peer-Reviewed Articles that Comprised the Study Sample

Date & Author(s)	Titles	Journal
2013 Palmer	Characterisation of the use of Twitter by Australian universities	*Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management*
2013 Fagerstrøm & &Ghinea	Co-creation of value in higher education: using social network marketing in the recruitment of students	*Journal of Higher Education Policy Management*
2013 Tkalac Verčič & Verčič	Digital natives and social media	*Public Relations Review*
2013 Lubbe, Roets, van Tonder, & Wilkinson	Social media: A method to recruit students into undergraduate nursing programmes	*Gender & Behaviour*
2012 DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield, & Fiore	Serious social media: On the use of social media for improving students' adjustment to college	*Internet & Higher Education*
2012 Nyangau & Bado	Social media and marketing of higher education: A review of the literature	*Journal of the Research Center for Educational Technology*
2012 Greenwood	Examining the presence of social media on university web sites	*Journal of College Admission*
2011 Constantinides & Zinck Stagno	Potential of the social media as instruments of higher education marketing: A segmentation study	*Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*
2011 Palmer & Koenig-Lewis	The effects of pre-enrolment emotions and peer group interaction on students' satisfaction	*Journal of Marketing Management*
2010 Parrot & Tipton	Using social media "smartly" in the admissions process	*College & University*
2010 Lindbeck & Fodrey	Using technology in undergraduate admission: A student perspective	*Journal of College Admission*
2009 Hayes, Ruschman, & Walker	Social networking as an admission tool: A case study in success	*Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*

Table 2

Types of Research Approaches and Publications Identified From the 12 Studies

Research approaches/publications	No. of studies	Percentage of sample
Mixed Methods	2	17%
Qualitative	1	8%
Quantitative	8	67%
Reviews or reflection	1	8%

Table 3

Summary of Key Findings of Sample Studies

Author(s)	Purpose	Instruments	Participants	Key findings
Palmer (2013)	This study was an investigation into the use of Twitter by Australian universities over a two-year period to provide insight into how institutions might more effectively use the platform to achieve their individual objectives for social media communications.	Publically-available Twitter data were collected from a two-year period between Dec 1, 2010 to Nov 30, 2012.	Six randomly selected Australian universities to represent one from each of the five recognized institutional groupings and one private.	Achieving most social media objectives requires having a critical mass of followers. University 1 had the most followers (17,129), the most tweets (2,421) and the most retweets (715). A tentative association was observed between the level of retweets and the number of followers; retweeting is an interaction with another user and may promote following in return. Organizational value results from interaction on social media, not from just having a presence on a platform.
Fagerstrøm & Ghinea (2013)	This study examined a marketing campaign performed by a Norway College with the intent to increase its matriculation rate by interacting with applicants on specially designed Facebook groups.	Field study – a Facebook group was created for each program & each group was given a contact person who engaged the participants in conversations.	Applicants for each of the six bachelor's program at The Norwegian School of Information Technology (NITH) were invited to join Facebook specializations groups corresponding with their programs. (n=128).	The conversion rate of applicants among those who chose to not join a Facebook group remained the same as the conversion rate among all applicants the year before when Facebook groups were not offered (43%). The conversion rate of applicants who joined a Facebook group increased over 100% (88.8%). 49 more students enrolled due to being given an opportunity to join a Facebook group for their program as an applicant.

Author(s)	Purpose	Instruments	Participants	Key findings
Tkalac Verčič & Verčič (2013)	This study addressed students' communications platform preferences of where they'd like to receive formal information about their university.	Survey	Fourth-year undergraduate students in four marketing classes at a Croatian University (*n*=308).	71% followed the news on the web; 50% read newspapers online; only 11% read printed papers. 91.5% used some form of SNS; only 2.6% did not. 90% used social media more than once a day; 56% were connected to a company or an organization through social media. 88% communicated about the school through social media; most believed it was important to receive info on their classes through social media although 94% said they sought official information on the school's web page. Social media outlets are perceived as an important communications tool and schools should be aware that academic social media presence is globally competitive.
Lubbe, Roets, van Tonder, & Wilkinson (2013)	This study sought to explore why social media was not being utilized to recruit nursing students.	Survey	Nurse educators in South Africa, including head nurse educators in honor societies, Nursing deans and nurse educator groups on LinkedIn (*n*=80).	75% of respondents were 45 or older and did not grow up in a social media environment. 42.5% said social media was important to recruiting tool, although only 14.7% were on Facebook and fewer than 6% were on other social media sites. Study concluded that the nursing fraternity needs to progress and adapt to a changing educational environment by evaluating and increasing its social media presence to recruit capable students.

Author(s)	Purpose	Instruments	Participants	Key findings
DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield, & Fiore (2012)	This study examined whether a targeted social media site can affect the intellectual and social lives of students transitioning from high school to college.	Survey given before students arrived on campus and a follow-up survey given two weeks after arrival. Multiple regression was conducted on the data.	First-year students at a large Midwestern University were given access to a social media site for university interaction the summer before they moved into a residence hall on campus (n=265) (70% female, 80% Caucasian).	The link between the number of Facebook friends in their hall, website activity, and their social capital (their perception that useful ties would be formed at college) was statistically significant (p<.01) at predicting bridging self-efficacy. There was no direct relationship between use of the website and academic self-efficacy (p<1.0). Facilitating social media connections for incoming students can have a positive impact on their first-year college experience.
Nyangau & Bado (2012)	This study conducted a review of the literature to find out how higher education was using social media for recruitment and admissions purposes, and whether prospective students use social media in their college search process.	A systematic review and thematic analysis.	11 empirical articles and three unpublished theses (n=14).	Both admissions officers and students are actively using social media, but for different purposes; Facebook is the most popular platform, followed by Twitter. There is a growing awareness among universities of the importance of social media as a marketing tool; in the future, most institutions planned to invest more resources into social media. Two challenges: (1) there are a lack of universal social media guidelines, and (2) there is a lack of understanding among institutions on the most effective ways to utilize social media marketing. Their findings indicated that social media use by institutions of higher education is on the rise, yet it was unclear whether content on university social media pages influenced how prospective students chose where to attend college.

Author(s)	Purpose	Instruments	Participants	Key findings
Greenwood (2012)	This study investigated how universities were harnessing SNS to bolster recruiting and marketing efforts.	College home web sites were analyzed (n=100).	The top institutions listed in the U.S. News, 2010-2011 Best Colleges: National Rankings. All were four-year, degree-granting institutions offering a full-range of degrees. (n=100).	Ninety-two percent of colleges use SNS in conjunction with their homepage.

35 of the colleges provided dedicated SNS pages, but those were only useful if they were one click away from the homepage (if there were any more clicks needed to reach it, the page was considered difficult to locate).

Colleges using social media in tandem with their sites averaged four SNS per colleges; The most popular were: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and iTunes. |
| Constantinides & Zinck Stagno (2011) | This study was conducted to understand how potential students use social media, including how it's used to choose a program of study, university, or college. | National survey | Future university students in the Netherlands (i.e. pupils from the last 2 years of secondary education) (n=403). | 95% of the future students maintained a social media profile; 77.5% use SNS at least once per day; over 50% maintain multiple SNS profiles.

Future students rank social media last in a list of information channels that influence their choice of study and university, possibly due to lack of relevant content (universities not using social media in a way that is appealing to future students).

Social media still plays a secondary role in the students' choice; more traditional forms of university marketing and word of mouth have a greater impact in the choice of study and institution. |
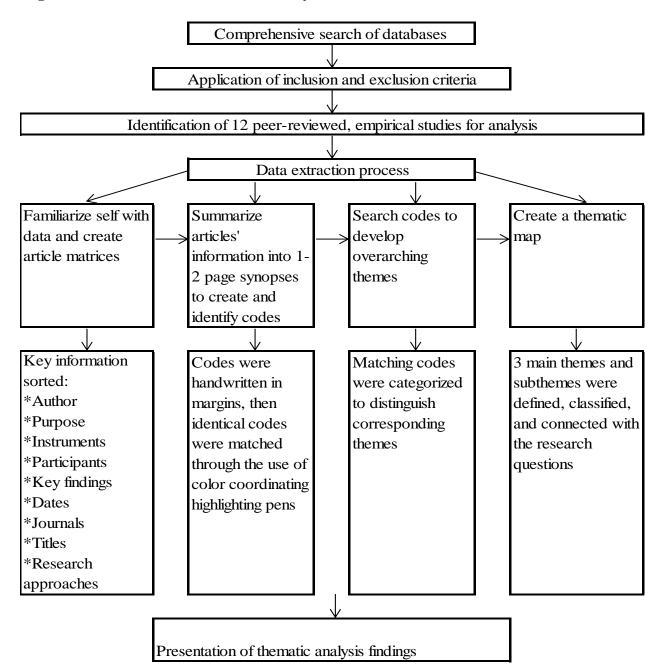
Author(s)	Purpose	Instruments	Participants	Key findings
Palmer & Koenig-Lewis (2011)	This study investigated the role of social media in regards to pre-enrollment emotions and student satisfaction.	Students took an online survey one month before enrollment and a follow-up survey one month after the start of their first term.	Prospective students from a UK higher education institution (*n*=504).	Emotions were a better predictor of the likelihood of students' recommending their institution than satisfaction. Positive emotions created during the pre-enrollment stage led to positive emotions post-enrollment. There was a positive association between prospective students' level of online involvement pre-enrollment and their level of evoked positive emotions ($\beta = .420$, $p < .01$).
Lindbeck & Fodrey (2010)	This study explored how prospective students were influenced by various technologies they experienced during the undergraduate recruiting process and whether those technologies affected their decision to enroll.	Surveys	Freshmen from two state schools in the Midwest region of the U.S. (*n*=746).	Two themes emerged: (1) the quantity of technologies experienced (the ones most seen by students in the admission process were the website, email, & cell phone) and, (2) the quality (did students rate those technologies as useful). Web, email & cell were listed as the most seen by students, possibly because those are the ones most often used by admission officers. This could be a division between Millennial students' preference for newer technologies (i.e. text, social media). However, even for the technologies used most often, there was still need for improvement; students rated their experiences as mixed on all technologies. Findings concluded there is room for improving the usefulness of more established technologies and the need to integrate newer technologies into the recruitment process.

Author(s)	Purpose	Instruments	Participants	Key findings
Parrot & Tipton (2010)	This 2009 study was conducted to learn more about how prospective students use social media in the admissions process.	Survey	A national sample of students from public and private, and two-and-four-year institutions (n=500).	81% said web site was most important in their decision; 62% said admission publication. 18% said social media was an important source of information in their application decision. The study concluded that despite the low result for social media, it was an increase over the previous year of 2008 which suggested digital media use was on the rise.
Hayes, Ruschman, & Walker (2009)	A case study on how one university used SNS for online recruiting and gave tips for the effective use of social media as an admission tool.	Case Study	Xavier University Cincinnati, Ohio	Xavier's customized social networking site was launched in 2006 for recruiting purposes. Strategic goals were to: (1) enhance yield stats, (2) provide online forms, (3) heighten interest, and (4) influence perceptions. Saved institution over $8,000 a year in printing & mailing costs; won awards; led to a 50% increase in matriculation in students who accepted who had logged onto the "Road to Xavier" SNS.

Table 4

Themes That Emerged From the Thematic Analysis Process

Themes	Subthemes
1. Why social media marketing is being used in higher education	1a. The traditionally-aged prospective students are using social media
	1b. Social media has revolutionized the way universities communicate with students
	1c. Social media is the current preferred method of communications among college students
2. Purposes for which social media marketing is being used in higher education	2a. Recruiting
	2b. Information-sharing
	2c. To improve the higher education experience for students
3. The effectiveness of the use of social media marketing in higher education	3a. Students still rely on the more traditional forms of marketing, but social media influence is rising
	3b. The value is in how social media is used by institutions
	3c. Suggestions for improvements

Figure 1: Review of the Thematic Analysis Procedure

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                  │   Comprehensive search of databases          │
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              │   Application of inclusion and exclusion criteria    │
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      ┌───────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
      │   Identification of 12 peer-reviewed, empirical studies for analysis│
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                      ┌─────────────────────────────┐
                      │   Data extraction process    │
                      └─────────────────────────────┘
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Familiarize self with data and create article matrices	Summarize articles' information into 1-2 page synopses to create and identify codes	Search codes to develop overarching themes	Create a thematic map
Key information sorted: *Author *Purpose *Instruments *Participants *Key findings *Dates *Journals *Titles *Research approaches	Codes were handwritten in margins, then identical codes were matched through the use of color coordinating highlighting pens	Matching codes were categorized to distinguish corresponding themes	3 main themes and subthemes were defined, classified, and connected with the research questions

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                  ┌─────────────────────────────────────────────┐
                  │   Presentation of thematic analysis findings │
                  └─────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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