

Does Social Media Matter? How Prospective and Current Students use Social Media to Connect with Schools

Authors: Alison Shields, Ithaca College; Adam Peruta, Syracuse University,

Affiliations:

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The current generation of college students and prospective college students are considered to be digital natives and tend to use social media as a common or even preferred way to learn about schools and universities they are interested in attending. Current research suggests that a significant percentage of prospective students will use social media, in particular Facebook, as a resource when trying to decide which college or university to attend (Hesel 2013). Further research has examined the ways in which colleges and universities manage their Facebook accounts finds that there are “ideal mixes” of content, between photos, links and text and that schools who have mastered this mix tend to have higher levels of involvement from their followers (Peruta and Shields, 2014). Very little work has been done, however, examining how students use social media specifically to make decisions about where to attend school and how they continue to use social media while they are attending. At a time when social media managers are often held responsible for creating a cohesive and compelling marketing message, they are often doing so with little or no practical or theoretical guidance (M. O’Neill, personal communication, March, 2013). This project seeks to increase the understanding of how today’s traditional college age students use social media when deciding where to attend schools.

In this paper, we conducted in-depth interviews with twelve undergraduate students, discussing the ways in which the students used social media when deciding which schools to apply to and which schools to attend. Insights from these interviews include preferred social media platforms for making these decisions, student perception of the validity of the content, frequency of visiting sites and preference for official, school-run social media pages, compared to unsanctioned pages. Subjects further discussed the degree to which social media played a roll in their final school decision and any continual involvement, now that they attend the school.

We then take these findings and apply them to a sample of Facebook content from 66 of the top public, private and liberal arts schools in the United States. A comparison between what students report as their preferences and usage patterns and the content posted by these top schools should shed light on what these schools are doing well and how they can improve their pages to better attract top students. Further, as research has indicated that students often reach out to social media in order to maintain a sense of connection with their current school (Wilson and Gore 2013), we will develop further recommendations for social media managers to better reach their target audience.

References

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