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Social Media and Marketing of Higher Education: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

The emergence of social media has revolutionized the practice of communication in two fundamental ways. First, social media have made it possible for one person to send an instant message to millions of others worldwide. Second and perhaps more important, social media make it possible to establish a two-way communication channel between the sender and receivers or simply between receivers or "followers" outside the control of the original sender. Social media, therefore, transcend the traditional bureaucracy when it comes to marketing or seeking information from an institution. We conducted a review of the literature to find out how institutions of higher education are leveraging social media for recruitment and admissions purposes, and whether prospective students use social media in their college search process. Our findings indicate that social media use by institutions of higher education is on the rise, yet it is unclear whether content on university social media pages influences prospects’ choice-making processes.

Keywords

Social Media; Marketing; Recruitment; Admissions; Higher Education

Introduction

The development of new information and communication technology has altered human life in many ways. Education is one of the fields that has witnessed a significant revolution in recent years due to the emergence of Web 2.0 tools. Web 2.0 tools such as wikis, blogs, and social media differ from regular websites (Web 1.0) in the sense that they allow for two-way communication between reader and writer. More specifically, the reader has the ability of not only consuming but also producing information, for example by responding to a post on a blog, uploading and sharing a video, or adding content to an existing wiki. These affordances of Web 2.0 tools have several positive implications for higher education. Instructors are finding ways to use Web 2.0 tools to foster a media-rich environment where learners interact and construct knowledge. Various studies have highlighted the important role that Web 2.0 tools play in higher education. The use of blogging, for instance, promotes self-expression, self-reflection, and reflective dialogue among learners. In addition, team blogging has the potential to enhance learners’ social skills (Coutinho, 2007; Deng & Yuen, 2011). Similarly, wikis provide a platform that both instructors and students can use for sharing and collaboration on projects (Parker and Chao, 2007).

Instructors are not the only people in higher education who are taking advantage of Web 2.0 tools, however. Higher education administrators, especially admissions officers at various institutions, are
finding ways to reach out to potential students through the use of social media. The recent emergence of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn, and their popularity especially among young people, has contributed to a growing interest of admissions officers in their use for marketing purposes.

There are two concepts in social media lexicon worth distinguishing: social network sites and social networking sites. Social network sites, according to Boyd & Ellison (2008), are web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (p. 211)

As such, social network sites establish an online connection between people who already share an offline connection. Social networking sites, on the other hand, are social sites that are often used to initiate relationships between strangers.

This paper takes a broad approach to the definition of social networking sites. For our purposes, these types of sites include both social networking and social networks, as we are interested in the use of social networking tools to establish a connection between complete strangers as well as people who already share connections. Our broad approach to the concept of social networking is consistent with the way institutions of higher education use social media, as they not only try to establish a connection with people they already know (current students and alumni), but are also interested in establishing relationships with complete strangers who may be interested in their institutions (e.g. prospective students). For reasons of simplicity, we use the term social networking sites to refer to both social network and social networking sites in this article. The key element of interest here is the idea of networking and building connections.

Social networking sites were originally designed for college students to build and maintain a network of friends. Facebook is an example of a social networking site that was initially designed for college students. Later on, however, the site became popular outside of higher education and was made available to anybody with an email address. Other sites such as Twitter and LinkedIn soon followed. As the use of these sites expanded to include high school students, admissions officers began to look for ways to use them as marketing tools to connect with and recruit potential students.

Within this context, our article reviews literature related to the use of social media in higher education from two perspectives. We begin with an administrative perspective as we review how institutions of higher education, particularly admissions officers, use social media for recruitment and admissions purposes. Relevant literature reveals that the majority of admissions officers prefer creating and maintaining accounts on various social media sites, because these allow them “direct contact” with potential prospective students as opposed to traditional marketing strategies. Next, we glean from the literature the extent to which prospective students use social media to find schools during their college search process. In other words, we investigated whether social media play a role in a prospective student’s college search and eventual decision-making.

Thus, this review aims to achieve a dual purpose - to provide policy makers in institutions of higher education and admissions officers with insights into how social media are currently being used as a tool for marketing, recruitment, and admission of potential students, and to suggest ways to improve current practice. To that end, our review was guided by two research questions:

1. How do college admissions officers use social media for recruitment purposes?
2. To what extent do students use social media to search for information about universities and colleges, and do social media play a role in their decision which institution to attend?
Methodology

We utilized a systematic review approach to search for literature that would answer our research questions. This approach entails collecting empirical and theoretical studies that provide answers to pertinent research questions (Booth, 2001; Hemsley-Brown & Sharp, 2003; Sheldon & Chalmers, 1994). While the systematic review approach was initially developed in the medical field, its application has also been adopted in the social sciences. Key elements of the systematic review include: an explicit research question to be addressed; transparency of methods used for searching for studies; exhaustive searches which look for unpublished as well as published studies; clear criteria for assessing the quality of studies (both qualitative and quantitative); clear criteria for including or excluding studies based on the scope of the review and quality assessment; joint reviewing to reduce bias; and a clear statement of the findings of the review (Evans & Benefield, 2001). A systematic review should not be confused with a meta-analysis. A meta-analysis, according to Glass (1977), is a statistical technique primarily used for reviewing, summarizing, and combining or integrating the findings of quantitative studies. A meta-analysis, therefore, uses measures such as effect size or number of characteristics to mathematically combine results of several studies. If effect sizes or number of characteristics are similar, then a meta-analysis of several articles may be performed with the intent of improving the reliability of the results; if the measures are different, then a meta-analysis can be used to explain the variations.

For this study, the systematic review included extensive searches of relevant educational databases including Academic Search Complete, Academic Search Premier, Educational Research Complete, and Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC). We extended our searches beyond databases to include Internet queries using search engines such as Google Scholar. We identified prior publications as well as secondary references by authors identified in the original searches to perform further searches. We performed these searches using various terms which we combined with “higher education” or “universities” or “colleges.” Some examples of the search terms we used include “universities use social media to reach potential students”; “institutions of higher education use social networking sites to advertise their programs to potential students”; “college admissions officers use social media to recruit new students”; “social media and higher education marketing”; “social media and higher education”; “social media and student recruitment”; and “universities using social media to reach out to potential students.”

We did not limit our search to a particular time frame because literature on social media, a relatively recent phenomenon, dates back only a few years. Instead, we prioritized our search to scholarly articles reporting empirical research relating to our questions. Our searches returned 24 articles and 3 unpublished theses. We read the articles and unpublished theses independent of each other, and then met to compare notes on the pertinence of each of these to our research questions, excluding any articles or opinion pieces that were not relevant to our research questions. In the end, we selected 11 articles (Barnes & Lescault, 2011; Barnes & Mattson, 2009, 2010; Cappex.com, 2011; Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Fusch, 2011a, 2011b; Merrill, 2010; PBP Executive Reports, 2010; Spraggon, 2011; Varsity Outreach, 2011) and the 3 unpublished theses (Glassford, 2010; Stageman, 2011; Stagno, 2010). We then reviewed each piece thoroughly to extract key findings relevant to our research questions.

Next, we used a “thematic analysis” to analyze, synthesize, and report our findings. Thematic analysis involves aggregating empirical research as well as theoretical literature around a research topic or area to achieve two goals: (1) to illuminate what has been established about that particular research topic, and (2) to highlight consensus across the various themes identified (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). We present our findings and a summary of our review in the sections that follow.

Social Media and Recruitment of Future Students

The use of social media by institutions of higher education to market themselves to potential students is a relatively new phenomenon, and as a result, not much academic literature exists on this issue. One of the most comprehensive and recent studies in the field was conducted by Barnes and Mattson (2009), who compared social media use by admissions officers at American colleges from 2007 to 2008. Using a list
generated from a directory compiled by the University of Texas, the researchers conducted a telephone survey of admissions officers of all accredited four-year institutions in the United States. A total of 453 phone interviews were conducted with admissions officers in 2007, followed by 536 additional interviews in 2008. Data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively, and the findings reveal that admissions officers:

- are increasingly using social media to recruit and research potential students;
- are increasingly familiar with social media (63% in 2008 as compared to 55% in 2007);
- are using different types of media platforms such as blogging, video blogging, and social networking sites to market their institutions. For example, institutions of higher education use videos to give virtual tours of campuses, showcase their dorms, or show prospective students sample lectures;
- feel that social media are important to their future admissions strategy (89%).

The researchers concluded that there is genuine enthusiasm among admissions officers concerning the use of social media for recruiting potential students. However, they also found that admissions officers need to learn the rules of engagement in online environments in order to be effective.

Barnes and Mattson (2010) conducted a follow-up study in order to further investigate social media use by admissions officers at institutions of higher education. A total of 478 admissions officers responded to a telephone survey concerning their use of social media for institutional marketing. Findings confirmed previous results in that:

- social media use by admissions officers continues to increase;
- social media familiarity continues to increase (83% in 2009 as compared to 63% in 2008);
- 95% of admissions officers use at least one form of social media, up from 85% in 2008;
- 91% of participants reported that social media is “somewhat important” to their future recruitment strategy, an increase of 3% from 2008.

In a more recent study, Barnes and Lescault (2011) also investigated the adoption of social media among higher education admissions officers for marketing purposes. Using purposeful sampling of accredited colleges and universities in the United States, they conducted a total of 456 telephone surveys with admissions officers at sample colleges and universities. The data were analyzed quantitatively and the results confirmed the findings of Barnes and Mattson (2009; 2010): Admissions officers at colleges and universities in the U.S. are utilizing social media to research and recruit potential students. The findings also revealed that Facebook is the most widely used, with 98% of respondents indicating that their institutions were taking advantage of it as a recruitment tool. Other social media platforms used include YouTube (86%), Twitter (84%), and blogs (66%). These results represent a substantial increase compared to previous years. The study also reported that institutions that use social media platforms tend to have social media policies in place, indicating who is in charge of maintaining their accounts.

Cappex.com (2010) conducted a study on the use of social media by admissions officers in private and public institutions of higher education. A total of 170 college admissions officers participated in the study; 119 came from private and 51 from public institutions. Consistent with previous findings, the results of this study revealed that social media use by admissions officers is on the rise. In addition, 62% of the participants said that they would dedicate more resources to social media use in the future. Among the major social networking sites, Facebook was the most widely used (66%), followed by Twitter (41%), and YouTube (27%). Facebook seemed to be the social networking site of choice for advertising, because the site affords institutions the opportunity to create a fan page, and a forum that allows them to connect with potential students through updates on admissions and current events on campus. For social media to be effective, however, Capex.com recommends that institutions of higher education make the contents of their Facebook pages engaging, and maintain a social presence in order for this platform to be an effective marketing strategy. Finally, increased use of social media platforms has not diminished use of
traditional methods of recruitment, as 97% of admissions officers still prefer traditional fairs as their main recruitment method.

In similar fashion, Spraggon (2011) investigated the use of social media as marketing tools for undergraduate business schools, collecting data from 20 undergraduate business school websites and conducting interviews with marketing officers at selected institutions. The data were analyzed qualitatively. The findings of this study suggest that a disconnect exists between theory and practice when it comes to marketing on social media platforms. While the main websites of the institutions tended to be linked to university-branded social networking sites, most homepages of undergraduate programs were not. This problem, according to the author, is due to the fact that institutions of higher education do not take the time to develop a social network marketing strategy before adopting the tools. Based on these findings, Spraggon recommended admissions officers draft a strategy that takes into consideration audience, objectives, tactics, tools, and metrics before engaging in social media marketing.

A survey conducted by Merrill (2010) sought to determine if universities are utilizing social media for international recruitment and outreach efforts. Thirty institutions of higher education responded to an online survey, including some from Germany, New Zealand, and Canada. Similar to other studies, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn were the social media tools of choice for Internet recruiting and international outreach. The respondents indicated that social media provide greater potential than traditional methods, such as international travel, for recruitment events and direct mailings. In other words, advertising on social media is more cost-effective as compared to traditional methods. Admissions officers also preferred social media as a recruitment strategy because (1) it allows them ‘direct contact’ with prospects, and (2) it expands the recruitment base, especially with respect to international students.

Varsity Outreach (2011) surveyed 2,000 colleges and universities to determine if they were using Facebook to recruit new students. A total of 150 colleges and universities completed the survey. Despite the low response rate (7.5%), the results were consistent with findings from previous studies pointing towards growth regarding the use of social media in recruitment. College admissions officers and marketing staff are increasingly utilizing social media platforms to reach out to potential students. Of the institutions that responded, 93% had a Facebook presence, while nearly 80% of those used the social networking site as one of its recruitment tools. Also, more than half of the respondents considered Facebook a “very important” admissions tool. Colleges and universities further reported using other social networking platforms including Twitter, YouTube, and blogs. Finally, the findings also provided some reasons as to why institutions of higher education are not using Facebook as a recruiting tool: 69% of respondents did not know enough about Facebook; 50% did not see much potential for student recruitment; 47% reported fear of losing control/brand; 28% reported concerns about invading privacy; and 16% cited a lack of resources. Fear of losing brand perhaps stems from the fact that conversations on social media are very fluid, and as such, an institution may not have control over what users post on their profiles. A student who has had an unpleasant experience with an institution, for example, may take to ranting on social media and under such circumstances, an institution can essentially lose control of the conversation.

Finally, in a more focused study, Glassford (2010) investigated how Bowling Green State University is leveraging social and digital media for recruitment purposes. An online survey was administered to 6,450 members of the 2009 and 2010 freshman classes. The majority of respondents found Facebook and YouTube “somewhat effective” in obtaining admission-related information. However, the response rate for this study was only 3.8%, thus raising questions regarding its representativeness.

The various studies discussed above illustrate a growing trend in adopting social media for recruitment and admissions purposes in higher education. It has therefore become imperative to review the efficacy of specific social networking tools to provide administrators with adequate knowledge to select the tools that meet their specific needs. Accordingly, PBP Executive Reports (2010) conducted a review of major social network sites in order to identify ways in which institutions of higher education can use these tools to market themselves to potential students. The review found that both Facebook and Twitter can be effective tools for marketing higher education to potential students. Facebook, with its fan pages, personal
page, and group features, provides institutions of higher education with an opportunity to maintain a vibrant online social presence. Twitter can be used to provide quick, admissions-related information to students and direct them to the main university website for further details. Some institutions also use Twitter functions such as ‘re-tweet’ to broadcast tweets received from former or prospective students. The report concluded that while both Facebook and Twitter can be effective tools for marketing higher education, Facebook provides more affordances than Twitter.

In two similar articles, Fusch (2011a, 2011b) interviewed three social media and marketing experts to find out how specific digital tools can be used to achieve specific marketing purposes. He found that different tools can be used for different purposes. Online video sharing sites, such as YouTube, provide institutions of higher education with invaluable platforms to reach out to prospective students; Facebook can be used to generate desires for campus visits; and Twitter allows admissions officers to provide personalized services to prospective students who are in advanced stages of the application process. Another tool discussed by Fusch is Quora, a website that allows institutions to promote their academic strengths in the public domain. According to the author, an institution’s reputation can rise quickly if faculty from that institution provide quick and high-quality responses to questions posed on Quora.

In short, the relatively small body of currently existing literature indicates that social media are slowly altering marketing, recruitment, and admissions practices in institutions of higher education. However, these platforms are relatively new and still evolving, and as a result, not all institutions have adopted their use. In those institutions that are using them, social media are only one component of comprehensive marketing, recruitment, and admissions strategies. We present a summary of our key findings in Table 1 below.

### Table 1: Social Media Use by Admissions Officers: Summary of Key Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Instruments</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Key Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barnes &amp; Lescault</td>
<td>Social media use by admissions officers</td>
<td>Telephone surveys</td>
<td>Admissions officers at U.S. colleges and universities $n = 456$</td>
<td>Admissions officers are using social media to recruit Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Blogs are the most widely used tools Some institutions have social media policies in place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2011)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fusch (2011a; 2011b)</td>
<td>affordances of different social media tools</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Social media and marketing experts $n = 3$</td>
<td>Different tools can be used to achieve different purposes Facebook can be used for generating interest in campus visits; YouTube for reaching out to students; and Twitter for providing personalized services to individual students</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Table 1: Social Media Use by Admissions Officers: Summary of Key Findings (Continued)

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Participants</th>
<th>Key Findings</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spraggon (2011)</td>
<td>Social media use for marketing undergraduate business programs</td>
<td>Document analysis (websites) Interviews</td>
<td>Marketing officers from 20 undergraduate business schools</td>
<td>Theory-practice disconnect University social networking sites only link to university homepages, not to individual program pages Universities do not take the time to develop social network marketing plans before adopting the tools Recommends universities develop a plan before adopting social networking tools for marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varsity Outreach (2011)</td>
<td>Facebook use by admissions officers to recruit students</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Admissions officers from 150 universities and colleges</td>
<td>Facebook use to recruit students is increasing 93% have a Facebook page or group Privacy concerns related to Facebook use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnes &amp; Mattson (2010)</td>
<td>Social media and college admissions</td>
<td>Telephone surveys</td>
<td>Admissions officers from 4-year accredited institutions in the U.S. n = 478</td>
<td>Higher education institutions outpace Fortune 500 companies in adoption of blogging Admissions officers are using social media to research and recruit students Social media use by admissions officers for marketing their institution is increasing 83% are familiar with social networking sites 95% use at least one form of social media 91% think that social media is &quot;somewhat important&quot; to their future recruitment strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cappex.com (2010)</td>
<td>Social media use by admissions officers in private and public institutions</td>
<td>Online survey</td>
<td>College admissions officers at U.S. colleges and universities n = 170; (119 from private, 51 from public institutions)</td>
<td>Social media use is on the rise Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are the most popular tools Traditional recruitment methods, such as fairs, are still popular Engagement and social presence needed on university pages on social networking sites</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: Social Media Use by Admissions Officers: Summary of Key Findings (Continued)

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Participants</th>
<th>Key Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Merrill (2010)</td>
<td>Social media and international students recruitment</td>
<td>Online survey</td>
<td>Officers from 30 institutions mostly from Germany, Canada, and New Zealand</td>
<td>Most popular social media used are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn. Social media preferred method for recruiting international students compared to travel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBP Executive Reports (2010)</td>
<td>Review of social networking sites as tools for advertising higher education</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Facebook and Twitter can be effective tools for marketing higher education. Facebook provides more affordances than Twitter through its “fan page” and “group” features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnes &amp; Mattson (2009)</td>
<td>Social media and college admissions</td>
<td>Telephone surveys</td>
<td>Admissions officers from 4-year accredited institutions in the U.S. n = 453 (2007) n = 536 (2008)</td>
<td>Social media use by admissions officers for recruitment purposes is on the rise. 89% of admissions officers say social media is somewhat important to their future admissions strategy. Use of blogging, video-blogging, and social networking sites. Need to learn rules of engagement in online environments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Social Media Use by Students for College Search

As described so far, most research on the usefulness of social media for marketing and recruitment by institutions of higher education has been conducted from an administrative perspective. However, it is just as important to find out the role social media may play in prospective students’ decision-making processes.

Institutions of higher education use social media to reach out to potential students, because the assumption is that many prospective students use these tools. Stagno (2010) carried out a study to empirically test this assumption, investigating the use of social media by 403 prospective students in the Netherlands and the role that these media play in their decision-making process for choosing a particular college or university. The results showed that 95% of the participants had at least one social media profile. The most widely used social networking site was Hyves (88.4%), followed by YouTube (60.1%), and Facebook (40.3%). Interestingly, however, the study reported that social networking sites were last on the list of resources potential students rely on to find information about institutions of higher education. Instead, students still use traditional methods including campus visits, university websites, and brochures as primary sources of information. Stagno perceived this apparent discrepancy as a marketing strategy problem. Put differently, having a presence on a social networking site is not a marketing strategy in itself; instead institutions of higher education should develop a clear marketing strategy for social networking sites, define their goals, and make decisions based on them (see also Spraggon, 2011).
Within the same line of research, Constantinides & Stagno (2011) surveyed 400 Dutch students in their last two years of high school to determine the impact that social media have on their decision to attend a particular college. The findings of this study confirmed those reported in Stagno (2010), as the majority of students ranked social media last on a list of information sources that affect their college decisions.

Stageman (2011) conducted a case study to understand how prospective students use social media to communicate with higher education institutions from the beginning of the application process up to the decision-making point. Thirteen incoming freshmen at Marquette University participated in focus group interviews to get a better understanding of their experiences while going through the application process. The findings of the study were eye-opening as the university’s social media sites did not appear to have had a substantial influence on the participants’ decision to attend. However, Stageman’s study also revealed that incoming freshmen find university-sponsored social media useful in helping them to establish two-way communication with university officials, build a network of friends, establish a personal identity, and make a smooth transition from home life to campus life. These findings imply that social media may not be important in the college search process, but become important once prospective students have made the decision to attend a particular institution.

There is lack of consensus in the limited literature available regarding whether prospects use social media for college-search and decision-making processes. Two issues became quite clear during our research, however: (1) that prospects do not seem to use social media for obtaining admissions-related information as they still rely on traditional methods such as campus visits, fairs, and email, and (2) that social media become important after prospects have made the decision to attend. We present a summary of our findings in this area in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Social Media Use by Prospective Students: Summary of Key Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Instruments</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Key Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Constantinides &  | Social media and marketing of higher education                      | Survey                | Dutch students in their last two years of high school $n = 400$ | The majority of students have a profile on social media sites  
Social media rank last on the list of information sources that influence students’ decisions to attend a particular college |
| Stagno (2011)      |                                                                      |                       |                                               |                                                                                                                                                    |
| Stageman (2011)    | Social media use by incoming freshmen in admissions process         | Focus group interview | Incoming freshmen at Marquette U. $n = 13$    | University social network sites did not affect participants’ decisions to attend a particular college  
Once admission decision is made, incoming freshmen use university-sponsored social media to build a network of friends, connect with school officials, and make a smooth transition from home life to school life |
Table 2: Social Media Use by Prospective Students: Summary of Key Findings (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Instruments</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Key Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glassford (2010)</td>
<td>The impact of social media on enrollment</td>
<td>Online survey</td>
<td>Incoming freshmen in 2009 and 2010 $n = 242$</td>
<td>The majority of respondents found Facebook and YouTube &quot;somewhat effective&quot; in getting admissions-related information. The participants found Twitter not effective. Respondents were either satisfied with the social media of the university or they didn’t use them at all.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stagno (2010)</td>
<td>Social media use by prospective students for college search</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Prospective students in the Netherlands $n = 403$</td>
<td>95% of participants had a social media page. Hyves, YouTube, and Facebook were the most popular. Social networking sites were last on the list of resources potential students use to search for college and obtain information. Campus visits, university websites, and brochures were top. Need for marketing strategy that uses social networking sites.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The dual purpose of this literature review was to illuminate how institutions of higher education are leveraging social media to reach out to potential students and whether these same students use social media in their college search process. This section draws together our findings, builds on the literature to make recommendations for institutions of higher education, and points out future areas of research. Consistent with the overall approach we took in our search, this section is divided into two parts; the first focuses on findings that speak to our first research question: How do college admissions officers use social media for recruitment and admissions purposes? In the same way, the second section highlights findings that illuminate the extent to which prospective students use social media to search for information about universities and colleges and whether social media play a role in their decision to attend.

The findings of our literature review reveal that both admissions officers and prospective students are actively using social media, albeit for different purposes. Admissions officers at various institutions of higher education are using social media to connect with potential students and market their institutions (Barnes & Lescault, 2011; Barnes & Mattson, 2010; Cappex.com, 2010; Glassford, 2010; Merrill, 2010; Varsity Outreach, 2011). The majority of the institutions surveyed had created a profile or page on popular social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. In addition, institutions of higher education are increasingly using blogs and social media platforms such as YouTube to share digital information with prospective students. Barnes and Mattson (2010), for instance, found that some universities use videos to give virtual tours of campuses or simply to showcase their residence halls or sample lectures.
The literature indicates that Facebook is currently the most widely used social media tool, followed by Twitter (Barnes & Lescault, 2011; Cappex.com, 2010; Glassford, 2010; Varsity Outreach, 2011). Facebook is the most popular platform because of its features. Admissions-specific fan pages, for example, afford universities a forum that can be leveraged to maintain a vibrant online presence through regular updates (Cappex.com, 2010; Fusch, 2011a, 2011b; PBP Executive Reports, 2010; Varsity Outreach, 2011). In addition, Facebook’s fan pages allow institutions to target not only prospective students who “like” the institution’s profile or page, but also the friends of these prospective students.

Twitter seems to be more effective in providing bite-sized admissions-related information and driving prospective students to the university’s main page. As Fusch (2011b) points out, Twitter allows admissions officers to provide more tailored services to prospective students during the admission process. As a further marketing strategy, institutions use Twitter’s ‘re-tweet’ function to selectively broadcast positive experiences from prospective and current students (PBP executive Reports, 2010).

Going forward, most institutions plan to invest more resources into social media marketing, perhaps pointing to a growing popularity of social media as an effective marketing tool for higher education institutions (Barnes & Mattson, 2010; Cappex.com, 2010). In this respect, the literature reviewed here shows a growing awareness and perceived importance of social media (Barnes & Mattson, 2009, 2010; Barnes & Lescault, 2011). However, despite the growing use of social media for recruitment purposes, admissions officers still prefer traditional methods of marketing and recruitment such as fairs and direct mailings.

Regardless of their immense potential and widespread use, social media present new challenges for institutions of higher education. Two issues came to the fore during our research. The first involves a lack of clear policies that guide interactions between prospective students and admissions officers on social media (Barnes & Mattson, 2009). This lack of ethical guidelines opens the door to potential abuse and the associated public relations disasters for the institutions involved. For one, a prospective student may, for instance, “friend” an admissions officer (or the other way around) during the course of their interactions on social media sites, potentially leading to inappropriate contact beyond the official relationship. Such contact may lead to ethical violations that will in turn compromise the entire admissions process. Moreover, it is not clear whether admissions officers can deny a prospect admission based on ‘private’ information obtained from that prospect’s personal profile. Yet, admitting a student who clearly exhibits social issues, based on information on his or her profile at the time of admission, is likely to expose an institution to potential law suits related to negligence should that student eventually cause harm to other students, faculty, or staff.

The second challenge relates to the approach taken by institutions of higher education in adopting the use of social media for marketing, recruitment, and admissions. Institutions of higher education appear to be in a race to adopt social media without doing the necessary groundwork. In other words, adoption of social media seems to be ad hoc and unsystematic, without prior development of coherent marketing strategies or clear goals (Spraggon, 2011). Most admissions offices just create a space on popular social media sites, upload admissions-related information and pictures of their institutions, and expect results in the form of increased enrollment rates. However, to leverage the potential of social media effectively, institutions of higher education will need to shift from this ad hoc approach to a more methodical one that systematically integrates social media tools into the overall marketing, recruitment, and admissions strategy. To ensure effective and successful social media marketing and recruitment campaigns, institutions of higher education should begin by developing a coherent marketing strategy with specific target audiences in mind and clear, measurable goals.

Social media expand the recruitment base tremendously by transcending both space and time, and all a prospect needs to “meet” with an institution’s admissions officer is an Internet-capable device. To tap this potential, we suggest that institutions increase the number of hours spent online responding to questions from potential prospects in both asynchronous and synchronous digital spaces. For example, admissions departments could develop formal online advising schedules and post these to the institution’s admissions pages on social media and encourage prospects to sign up. Those interested can then sign
up to “meet” and chat one-on-one with admissions officers in real-time. This way, admissions officers will be able to provide prospects personalized and focused responses to their questions.

In addition, colleges and universities should maintain consistency in all elements of their online environment so as to successfully transition a prospect from a social media site to the institution’s program page. If an institution is advertising its nursing program on social media, for example, then that institution’s marketing strategy should be such that a single click on the program’s icon on a social media site transports prospective students to that program’s homepage. In so doing, the prospect immediately gets a “feel” for the program he or she is interested in, as opposed to having to find it after having been taken to the institution’s main landing page (PBP Executive Report, 2010). Regardless, it is difficult for institutions of higher education to evaluate the impact of social media for marketing, recruitment, and admissions on enrollment, especially when a clear framework or metrics to measure success have not been developed.

The second section of this literature review sought to determine the extent to which prospective students use social media in their college search process and whether social media play a role in their decision to attend. As we found out during our search, there is a dearth of empirical work in this area, and we uncovered only three studies that specifically addressed this question (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Stageman, 2011; Stagno, 2010). The studies found that social media use is prevalent among prospective students, but there is no indication yet that these media are being used to seek information directly related to college admission.

In sum, the literature shows that admissions officers are using social media for recruitment and admissions purposes, but because the practice of using such tools for recruitment campaigns and admissions is relatively new and inconsistent, there are still many grey areas. Based on our review, we recommend that institutions:

- draft clear policies regarding the use of private information accessed via prospects’ personal profiles;
- develop systematic marketing strategies with clear target audiences, realistic goals, and metrics to measure the extent to which these goals are being reached; and
- invest more resources into social media to leverage the full potential of these tools and offer students an online experience that is consistent across platforms and motivates them to use social media tools as avenues of information gathering during the college search process.

Future research should focus on creating a framework or metrics for evaluating the impact marketing on social media has on students’ decisions to attend and enrollment numbers. Such measures should help clarify which social media tools are the most effective and why, thus ensuring better targeting of already limited resources. In addition, the impact of social media marketing and recruitment campaigns on prospective students’ decision-making processes should be more carefully and systematically studied. This will help illuminate not only the efficacy of advertising on social media platforms, but also has the potential to transform the ways in which institutions of higher education advertise their programs.

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