Social Media Trends and Effects on Student Recruitment

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the use of social media affects recruitment at the University of North Texas. A large number of young adults today use Snapchat and Instagram as platforms for consumer engagement in addition to civic and social engagement. The purpose of this study is to determine how the use of social media is shaping the ways students select universities given that 18-24-year-olds use Snapchat 78%, Instagram 71% and YouTube 94% (Pew Research Center, 2018). A twelve-month qualitative investigation will measure social media engagement on YouTube. The questions this study proposes to answer include: (1) Will supplier-generated content increase student engagement?; (2) Will social media engagement increase student application numbers?

Keywords: recruitment, social media, engagement, enrollment

The Office of Undergraduate Admissions at the University of North Texas (UNT) is dedicated to providing quality customer service to prospective applicants. UNT implements traditional recruitment strategies such as school visits, university website, and content marketing. In addition to traditional marketing strategies, the Admissions Office implements social media channels to influence and attract prospective students. Currently, the office actively engages with students via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube.

At present, most of the posts revolve around social interaction with some informational announcements between student engagement. The post consists of user-generated content, visual media evoking positive emotions with limited infographic and interactive content. The admissions YouTube channel was created in August 2015 and has only three subscribers. In comparison to the other social media platforms, the YouTube channel is being underutilized, with only two produced videos posted just recently. According to the Pew Research Center, three-quarters of US adults are using YouTube. Although the most abundant use of YouTube is among 18-24-year-olds, 85% of 30-49 years olds are using this particular type of social media (Pew Research Center, 2018).

Review of Literature

Social media marketing is fast becoming a way to attract and engage students interested in attending universities in the US and abroad (Costantinides & Stago, 2011). The study by Constantinides and Stago (2011), show that prospective students are interested in social interaction in addition to seeking information while using social media. Rutter, Roper & Lettice (2016) refer to higher education institutions as a marketplace where the student is seen as the customer. Universities around the globe are acutely aware of the impact branding, image and reputation have on their marketing power to attract future students (Rutter, Roper & Lettice, 2016). The marketing environment on social media is consumer driven, where “word of mouse...” could make or break your brand (p. 3097).

One of the more exciting parts of marketing is the ability to tap into a human's natural instinct to be socially engaged and a part of something greater than themselves. “Belongingness appears to have multiple and strong effects on emotional patterns and on cognitive processes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).” This has long been a strategy utilized by people who market products and I dare say now in education, where we are looking at the student more like a customer in business. For example, in the summer of 2010, Domino’s Pizza ran a campaign called Show Us Your Pizza. The marketing genius had the consumer creating the content, therefore investing them in the product, growth, and branding of the company. The campaign envokes that strong need of belongingness which is intrinsic to human behavior. The company saw a 14% market share increase as a result of this marketing strategy. Constantinides & Stagno propose

that it would be of importance to monitor social media behaviors of students entering colleges and universities as a matter of recruitment and information trends (p.22, 2011).

More recent studies indicate that students have a positive feeling and a stronger relationship bond when they engage in social media relationships with universities (Clark, Fine & Scheuer, 2017). Among the 2010-2911 Best Colleges Ranking, 92% of those institutions used social media in conjunction with traditional recruitment strategies (Greenwood, 2012). Clark, Fine and Scheuer propose that relationship satisfaction and quality, are vital when discussing the interactions that the university has with its prospective students. The researchers of this study concluded that universities should invest resources in building a high-quality social media presence to improve the quality of relationships with students (Clark, Fine & Scheuer, 2017).

Significance of Study (or Purpose)

Social Media engagement for recruitment has not been widely researched as a potential tool for marketing in higher education. This study seeks to uncover how social media use can effects student interest in the University of North Texas (UNT). More questions will come from this study and with that more answers to the social media trends of students looking to enter the university. Understanding the patterns of these prospective students will help the university to deliver content reflective of the needs of students.

Research Questions or Hypothesis

This investigation will attempt to answer the following:

1. Does creating and posting UNT videos on YouTube create engagement?
2. Does YouTube engagement affect recruitment?

I propose that the increased production of YouTube content will influence students to apply at the University of North Texas.

Methods

Type of Design

The research design of this study will be a quantitative non-experimental correlational investigation.

Procedures/Data Collection

The study will involve a voluntary survey and collect correlational data using YouTube analytics. A YouTube video will be produced to engage students. Students will be contacted via email and invited to watch a YouTube video regarding admission into UNT. After viewing the YouTube video, students will be asked to complete a survey and subscribe to the UNT channel. The survey will collect basic demographic information and ask three fundamental questions: 1. Have you started applying to universities or colleges? 2. If so, what are the top five schools you have applied with? 3. Have you applied to UNT? The survey will be offered again after the 12-month cycle. Students will be invited to watch a monthly video with YouTube cards which can be used to collect

additional information. At the end of the 12-month cycle, students should be entering their junior year in high school. Target student lists will be obtained from UNT's customer relationship management system (CRM) by SalesForce. Additional target information can be collected from recruiter campus visits, events or purchased student data lists. The email net will be cast to 3,000 potential students. Information regarding their use of YouTube will be collected from August of their sophomore year to August of their junior year. Data collection will be used to create a social media strategic plan for the Undergraduate Office of Admissions at UNT.

Sample

The study will be quantitative, targeting entering U.S. high school sophomores, for 12 months as the survey population. Any student who shows interest in the UNT YouTube channel will be invited to participate.

Independent Variable

The independent variable will be the approximately 3,000 high school sophomores invited to participate. After we eliminate nonrespondents, incomplete or faulty surveys, cases that do not fit the defined population and students who completed the first survey after watching the first video, we can expect a sample size of N=400. According to the Pew Research center, participants averaged an average 27% completion rate of surveys using a mobile device (Pew Research Center, 2015). The final yield of the sample from 3,000 prospective students is estimated to be N=800, but I take a more

conservative value of N=400. Demographic information collected in this research will be gender and location, each can be obtained via survey or YouTube analytics.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variables measured will be engagement and recruitment.

Engagement will be measured in the following ways:

1. Views: Determine how many people started watching the video and the duration of viewing.
2. Subscribers: Collect the number of participants who subscribed to the YouTube Channel.
3. Likes and Dislikes: Determine how viewers are reacting to video content.
4. Favorites: Determine which content is bookmarked for future access.
5. Comments: Collect comments for future qualitative study.

Recruitment will be measured in the following way:

The survey collected before and after will have a key question about their application status to UNT. The status of the students can further be evaluated by using our CRM to determine at what point they completed the application process. We can also pull data for students who started the application but never completed the process. The number of students that applied to the university will be collected.

Data Analysis Procedures

Bivariate Correlations (Pearson product-moment) will be used to determine any relationships between the individual measures of engagement and recruitment. Positive

and negative associations will be analyzed between engagement and recruitment. A scattergram will be produced to calculate a correlational coefficient. In this case, each correlational coefficient expresses the nature of the relationship between engagement and recruitment. For example, what is the relationship between views and application completion? Application completion is going to be the measure of recruitment. Additionally, the correlational coefficient between the applicants and engagement (subscribers, likes, dislikes, and favorites) can be determined as well.

Factors Jeopardizing Internal and External Validity

The quality and appropriateness of the measurement can be jeopardized by extraneous or confounding variables. History can be a jeopardizing factor for internal validity. For example, during the investigation, UNT could have a very negative situation occur on campus that could go viral, therefore affecting the dependent variable. One recent example would be the situation at the Union Krispy Krunch restaurant. A student ordered food and the cook placed a derogatory term on the receipt in place of her name. The students Tweeted a picture of the receipt, and the post resulted in a response from the UNT president and the firing of the employee. Instances like these could affect the internal validity of this study.

Maturation in this age group could significantly influence internal validity. Time and maturity can change the way a student responds or doesn't just as a matter of time. This includes physical, mental and social maturation all of which could affect the

dependent variables. For example, as a teacher, I observed students who would return after summer break more mentally developed in just a matter of months.

Subject attrition would also be a factor jeopardizing internal validity. The 12-month cycle is a long time to keep a student engaged. The video progression on YouTube would need to be engaging enough to keep them coming back for more. Students also lead very busy lives and what might be important today, will be forgotten in the future. Getting students to stay engaged during extended holidays would be a challenge in retaining participants.

A factor affecting external validity is if the generalizations can be made for other educational institutions, sample age groups, cultural differences such as international students and income brackets. The validity of this study could be significantly influenced by any of the aforementioned variables. For example, what may be true for our domestic students might not be valid for our international population. The university often implements different approaches to content marketing based on the demographics of the population being targeted.

Conclusion

The study begins with two primary questions to be answered, but I think that one cannot be explained without the other. Does social media engagement help universities recruit more students? This question will be answered by the number of applicants we collect at the end of the 12-month cycle. The investigation only provides a small snapshot of the contributing factors of school selection for students that are college bound. I am not confident that this study would lead to conclusions regarding the quality of engagement

and the resulting selection of UNT as a school of choice. Perhaps over a more extended period and an established social media strategic plan, one could begin to make strong predictive correlations between the use of social media and the connections students make to the University. In effect does the sense of engagement and belonging encourage students to select UNT over other schools.

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