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Social Media & College Admissions: An Analysis of Facebook's Role in College Admissions & Higher Education Marketing

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**SOCIAL MEDIA & COLLEGE ADMISSIONS:
AN ANALYSIS OF FACEBOOK'S ROLE IN COLLEGE ADMISSIONS & HIGHER
EDUCATION MARKETING**

By

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Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
at Seton Hall University
2014

South Orange, New Jersey

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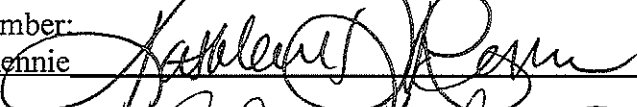
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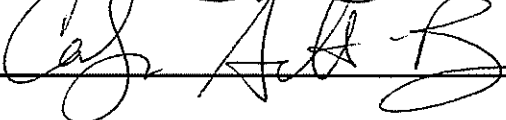
APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE

Doctoral Candidate, **Michael Dooney**, has successfully defended and made the required modifications to the text of the doctoral dissertation for the **Ph.D.** during this **Fall Semester 2014**.

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The mentor and any other committee members who wish to review revisions will sign and date this document only when revisions have been completed. Please return this form to the Office of Graduate Studies, where it will be placed in the candidate's file and submit a copy with your final dissertation to be bound as page number two.

Abstract

College admissions offices have developed and evolved to include increasingly sophisticated mechanisms for recruiting classes sufficient for meeting the financial needs of their respective institutions, and social media has rapidly become a popular tool for admissions offices in their efforts to meet enrollment goals. However, while social media is now used by practically every admissions office in the United States, little research exists that examines how universities use social media in this context. This qualitative study examines the use of a private Facebook group at a private university and incorporates observational study of the Facebook group and interviews with administrators. The researcher's research questions are: 1) how does a university use Facebook to communicate with prospective students?, 2) why does a university decide to use Facebook in its admissions and recruitment processes?, and 3) how do universities determine if their social media strategy is successful for the recruitment of prospective students? The researcher found that the university used the group primarily as a way of allowing students to interact with each other with minimal administrative interference and this approach effectively allowed the students to recruit each other for the university. The university considers this initiative to be a success and evaluates it with a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods, but also admits that it is difficult to establish causation between any single factor and enrollment outcomes. The researcher concluded that the university's passive, student-driven approach is effective with prospective students but that developments in social media must be closely monitored in order to maintain engagement with prospective students on appropriate platforms.

Dedicated to my mother, Eileen Dooney

Acknowledgements

When reflecting upon the long road toward a difficult accomplishment, it's a time-honored tradition to thank those who helped you along the way. As cliché as such statements of gratitude may be, they are also true and I'm grateful that it's finally my time to compose one.

I doubt that any doctoral student has ever failed to mention their committee in one of these sections, and I will not be the first exception. However, I want to emphasize that the inclusion of my committee here is not a matter of formality or implied obligation. The greatest thing that a doctoral student can have is a supportive and responsive committee, and I can't imagine having a better one. I would first like to acknowledge my mentor, Dr. Eunyoung Kim. I don't think the word "mentor" truly encapsulates everything that she has done for me. She has been my biggest fan, my harshest critic, my collaborator and, when things didn't go well, my therapist. Dr. Kathleen Rennie has been with me since I was an undergraduate here at Seton Hall. Before I met her, I never imagined attending graduate school, let alone getting a doctorate. I thank her for being there at both the beginning and the end of my career as a college student and I know that not a word of this document would have been written if she had not taken an interest in me all those years ago. This dissertation would have also been very different if I had never met Dr. Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj. I had the general idea for a dissertation for years, but had no idea what methodological approach to take with it. That changed when I took Dr. Sattin-Bajaj's qualitative research class and the gears started turning in my head (slowly at first, but they sped up with her guidance). Much like my other committee members, she spent more time with me than she had any obligation to and helped me develop the ideas that eventually saw fruition in this dissertation. I am grateful and honored to say that I was a student under each of them.

This project would have been impossible without the cooperation and support of Uiversity. I especially want to thank Dr. Alexandra Sigillo, Uiversity's data analyst, without whom this project would have been logistically impossible.

I have gone to great lengths to conceal the true identity of Quint University in the rest of these pages. This is the one time that I wish I could identify them because I can't thank them enough. They not only volunteered for this study, but were also incredibly cooperative throughout the whole process. I can't name you, but you know who you are and I thank you.

Of course, I must acknowledge my family. My mother, Eileen Dooney, has probably been more enthusiastic about my education than I have ever been. I have been a student non-stop since I was four years old, and she has been there for me every step of the way, no matter how hard I made it for her. It was 26 years ago that she dropped me off for my first day of kindergarten and, as I complete this document, I hope that she is proud that I finally finished school. My father, Edward Dooney, stressed the value of education and hard work to me since I was a small child and always pushed me to go further. When I got my bachelor's degree, he asked me what I wanted as a graduation present and I replied with a new car. He said that the only way I was getting that was if the graduation put the word "doctor" in front of my name. So, in a sense, this manuscript is a monument to the lengths that I will go in the name of spite. Thanks, dad, now I want the car. As for my brother, Jason Dooney, I can't relate any stories that would be appropriate for these pages. But I will say that I struggled with whether to count him among my family or my friends. That probably says more than anything else would.

Lastly, I want to thank my friends (Rob, Tom, Geve, Kraeuter and their respective significant others), without whom this document would have undoubtedly been finished much sooner. But I also would have had a lot less fun in the process. Thanks for keeping me sane and

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Chapter I

Introduction

Problem Statement

Student recruitment is an expensive process for college admissions offices. On average, the recruitment of each college applicant costs \$585, the recruitment of each admitted student costs \$806 and the recruitment of each enrolled student costs \$2,408 (Chace, 2013). Over the years, the student recruitment process has involved various tools and strategies, including college fairs, direct mailings and various forms of print advertising. In recent years, social media has played an increasingly important role in shaping the landscape of college admissions and recruitment.

Recent studies have shown that social media is now commonly used among prospective college students during the college-choice process. In a survey of 11,000 high school seniors entering college in 2013, 72.8% researched colleges using social media and 75% used social media as a resource when deciding which college to enroll in. Among those surveyed, Facebook was the most popular platform with a reported usage rate of nearly 90% (Uversity, 2013a).

This trend has not gone unnoticed by college admissions professionals. The University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth Center for Marketing Research conducted a longitudinal study by interviewing 456 admissions administrators from schools across the United States. The results showed the rapid and widespread adoption of social media among admissions offices: 61% of admissions offices reported using social media in their recruitment efforts in 2007 (Barnes & Lescault, 2011). In subsequent years, the number rose to 85% in 2008 (Barnes & Mattson, 2009) and 100% in 2011 (Barnes & Lescault, 2011).

Considering the expensive nature of student recruitment and the current popularity of social media in this arena, the use of social media in college admissions and student recruitment

is a timely and important issue for admissions administrators. If social media is now the most popular search mechanism for prospective students in the college-choice process, then the viability of social media as an admissions tool is a concern that has financial repercussions for higher education institutions. Since each enrolled student costs \$2,408 in marketing expenses (Chace, 2013) and social media is now used as a marketing tool by all American universities (Barnes & Lescault, 2011), the misuse of social media for this purpose would be a significant misallocation of institutional funding and effort. However, despite the abundance of available data regarding the popularity of social media in this context, there is little research on social media's role and value as an interactive bridge between admissions offices and prospective students (for a noteworthy exception, see the doctoral dissertation of Ferguson, 2010).

This void in the research is likely caused by a couple of factors. First, the results of using social media are difficult to measure and assess because many of the users are anonymous. A university's YouTube video could be the deciding factor for a prospective student's decision to attend that particular institution. But unless that student explicitly tells the university that the video influenced his/her decision, the school would have no way of knowing. Consequently, such recruitment initiatives are difficult to study.

A second factor contributes to the difficulty inherent in conducting a quantitative analysis of social media as a recruitment tool: it is difficult to determine the strength of causality between social media and quantitative outcomes (such as enrollment and yield rates). In a case study of the University of Denver, it was found that applicants who joined the university's private Facebook group were 6.3 times more likely to enroll in the university than those who didn't join the group (Uversity, 2013b). However, this does not necessarily mean that the Facebook group was the cause of the difference in the yield rate, as any number of other factors (financial aid

packages or other marketing initiatives, for example) could have influenced the decisions of the students who joined the group. Consequently, quantitative measures may not be the most suitable method for assessing social media recruitment initiatives.

There is also an ethical problem with using information-sharing sites for recruitment and marketing. For review-sharing sites like College Prowler and Rate My Professors, anonymity is an important part of the experience as students are supposedly posting their genuine feelings without fear of repercussions. Therefore, it would violate the trust, and potentially the entire purpose of these sites, if universities were to strategically use them to represent themselves in a positive light. Similarly, universities could manipulate the voting mechanism on book-marking sites like Digg and Delicious to promote information, links and stories related to the schools. But, again, that would be highly manipulative and could potentially cause controversy if discovered by other users. Such potential ambiguity and dishonesty could make such sites difficult to study in the context of student recruitment.

Regardless of the causes, a distinct lack of literature empirically examines the use of social media as a recruitment tool. The majority of the available literature merely describes how social media has been used by admissions offices without empirically studying the processes and outcomes in such initiatives (for examples of such anecdotal discussions, see Anton, 2006; Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar & Canche, 2012; Johnson, 2011; Kessler, 2011a; Lavrusik, 2009; Wiseman, 2011). Only one study (Ferguson, 2010) presents an empirical examination of social media's value as a college recruitment tool, but that study was limited to internal networking sites unique to individual institutions. No studies have empirically studied public networking sites in such a context.

Given that most prospective college students are now using Facebook and almost all college admissions offices are also using Facebook (Barnes & Lescault, 2011), the use of Facebook in college recruitment is an area that is ripe for further inquiry. Furthermore, a qualitative, ethnographic approach to this topic would address several concerns with the existing literature.

First, a qualitative approach would allow for an opportunity to examine the process of using social media to interact with prospective students rather than emphasizing quantitative outcomes (such as enrollment figures). It would enable the gathering of insights from users (i.e., members of the Facebook groups being analyzed) regarding the usefulness of social media in the admissions process. Such qualitative data would allow for an assessment of social media initiatives without relying upon quantitative outcomes that can be influenced by confounding variables.

Second, an observational and qualitative study of a Facebook admissions page (as opposed to any other kind of social media) would remove concerns about the purpose of the group being studied. Such pages are established for the purpose of facilitating student admissions decisions and recruiting students and, therefore, researchers could be confident that they are studying interactions that are directly relevant to the recruitment process.

Based upon the existing research and the identified problems therein, I have conducted a qualitative and ethnographic study of the use of Facebook in college admissions and student recruitment. This study (a) fills a gap in the literature by providing the first qualitative, empirical study of public networking sites in this context and (b) provides admissions administrators with new information to guide the use of social media in the expensive student recruitment process. As this is a study of internet-based communication, it is a virtual ethnography, which is a study

of online behavior. I provide more information about virtual ethnography and my specific methodology in the third chapter of this dissertation.

Theoretical Framework

The study of student recruitment is the study of the transfer of information. A university transfers information to prospective students, who then use that information to decide if they want to enroll in that institution. Social media is a mechanism for the transfer of that information.

Stinchcombe (1990) made several proposals about the role and nature of information in the decision-making processes. First, “information about the uncertain future becomes progressively available in distinct social situations” (Stinchcombe, 1990, p.4). Second, the uncertainty of individuals is resolved by the “earliest available information” that is available (Stinchcombe, 1990, p.4). Finally, individuals will take tentative initial steps toward a decision if those steps will bring further information to reduce uncertainty regarding the decision. Collectively, these points imply that organizations must effectively gather and distribute information to remove uncertainty in consumers.

This conception of information is applicable to the study of social media in student recruitment in the following way: Social media can possibly provide a distinct social situation for prospective students to gather the earliest available information about a university’s community to decide if they want to join that community. The joining of a Facebook admissions group can be considered a tentative initial step taken to reduce uncertainty about the eventual decision to enroll in a particular institution.

Stinchcombe (1990) stressed that uncertainty can mean different things depending on an organization’s specific situation and context. In the context of social media and college

admissions, uncertainty has two meanings depending on perspective. From a prospective student's perspective, it is the uncertainty of whether a particular university is a good fit for them. From a university's perspective, it is the uncertainty of the size and nature of an incoming class. In Stinchcombe's (1990) conception, social media is the mechanism for receiving information (from the student perspective) and distributing information (from the university's perspective) to remove this uncertainty.

Purpose of the Study

Taking a virtual ethnographic approach, this qualitative study seeks to understand how and why universities are using Facebook as an admissions tool and if such Facebook usage is aligned with the expectations and needs of prospective students.

Research Questions

1. How does a university use Facebook to communicate with prospective students?
 - 1a. How does a university decide what content to post on Facebook?
 - 1b. Who manages the Facebook group for the university?
2. Why does a university decide to use Facebook in its admissions and recruitment processes?
 - 2a. Is the university's motivation for using Facebook aligned with its actual use of Facebook?
 - 2b. If there are discrepancies between the actual activity and the motivation, how do university administrators explain them?
3. How do universities determine if their social media strategy is successful for the

recruitment of prospective students?

3a. Does the university's determination of success align with the actual activity in the Facebook group?

3b. If there are discrepancies between the university's determination of success and the actual activity, how do university administrators explain them?

Significance of the Study

This study holds professional significance for college admissions administrators and methodological significance for the higher education literature.

Professional Significance

As discussed, student recruitment is an expensive process and the ability to attract students is integral to the success of universities. Consequently, a dramatic shift in the landscape of student recruitment is a matter of great importance to college admissions administrators. With 75% of prospective students now using social media in their college-search process, it is critical that administrators understand how social media is being used in that process for two reasons. First, universities will need to be able to harness social media in order to attract students and remain competitive with their peer institutions. A failure to adapt to emerging technologies could be detrimental to the financial health of universities, particularly those that are highly dependent on tuition revenue. Second, the increased importance of social media calls for admissions administrators to develop new skills and knowledge. The ability to successfully design and implement social media strategies will be indispensable for admissions administrators. In short, both institutions and administrators risk becoming outdated and obsolete if they do not develop an understanding of social media's role in the admissions process.

This study represents one of the first empirical attempts to examine the use of social media in the college admissions process. Therefore, it will provide insight for administrators who seek a greater understanding of how social media can be used to successfully recruit students and increase yield rates.

Methodological Significance

As a virtual ethnography, this study is among the first (if not the first) to apply such a methodology to the analysis of college admissions and social media. The existing literature either takes a quantitative approach (see Ferguson, 2010; Uversity, 2013b) or a purely descriptive approach (see Anton, 2006; Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar & Canche, 2012; Johnson, 2011; Kessler, 2011a; Lavrusik, 2009; Wiseman, 2011) when addressing this topic. By taking a qualitative approach, this study will make a unique contribution to the higher education literature by emphasizing process over outcomes. While some studies have chronicled the quantitative outcomes of using social media in college admissions (Ferguson, 2010; Uversity, 2013b), this study is the first attempt to understand the process that leads to those quantitative outcomes by qualitatively examining the interactions that take place within social media and to empirically illustrate how social media is used in the college admissions process.

Key Terms

The following terms are used frequently throughout this paper and warrant specific definitions. Further definitions for terms related to social media are found in Chapter 2 and virtual ethnography is explored in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Social Media: Websites that consist primarily of user-generated content and encourage interaction between users (Abedin, 2011; Dooney & Kim, In Press; Henderson & Bowley, 2010).

Virtual Ethnography: The act of conducting ethnographic research by studying online behavior and computer-mediated interactions (Lopez-Rocha, 2010).

Yield Rate: The percentage of students accepted by an institution that enroll in that institution.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. The first chapter introduces the research problem, research questions, theoretical framework and key terms. The second chapter is a review of literature that provides an overview of college admissions and social media. The third chapter further defines virtual ethnography and explains my methodological procedures. The fourth chapter summarizes the results. The fifth chapter discusses the implications of the results and makes suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review of literature covers three broad areas. First, it provides a historical overview of how college admissions developed as a profession discussing (a) the development of American college admissions from the colonial period to the twentieth century and (b) the emergence of modern admissions offices after World War II. Second, it defines social media and its various sub-categories and provides an overview of the historical development of social networking sites. Third, it reviews how social media has been used by colleges and how that usage has been studied thus far.

The Evolution of American College Admissions

Colonial Period – Early 20th Century

College admissions were originally a straightforward process. In the colonial period, each college had a single entrance exam typically administered by the president of the college (Thelin, 2004). Applicants had to pass the exam by displaying sufficient knowledge of the subjects that the school deemed necessary for collegiate study (Levine, 1986). As time progressed, this process became increasingly complicated due to two historical trends in American higher education: an expansion of the subjects covered by college entrance exams and the development of multiple curricula leading to various, newly-created academic degrees.

College entrance exams in the United States originally only required the applicant to display an understanding of Latin and Greek. For example, when Harvard College opened as the first American college in 1636, its only admissions requirements called for applicants to display knowledge of Latin and Greek grammar and literature and these requirements remained

unchanged until the middle of the eighteenth century (Broome, 1903). Prior to the Revolutionary War, eight other American colleges were founded that still exist today: the College of William and Mary in 1693, the Collegiate School in 1701 (now known as Yale University), the College of Philadelphia in 1740 (now known as the University of Pennsylvania), the College of New Jersey in 1746 (now Princeton University), King's College in 1754 (now Columbia University), the College of Rhode Island in 1764 (now Brown University), Queen's College in 1766 (now Rutgers University) and Dartmouth College in 1769 (Goodchild, 2002). In the pre-revolution days of higher education, all of these schools shared admissions requirements nearly identical to those of Harvard (Broome, 1903). The only significant change during this period was a gradual shift toward the inclusion of arithmetic as an admissions requirement. The subject was first mentioned in such a context in the 1745 rules of Yale, which stated that a student must be familiar with "common Arithmetic" (Broome, 1903, p. 30). The subject was added to the admissions requirements of Princeton in 1760 when the board of trustees declared that students "shall be acquainted with Vulgar Arithmetic" (Broome, 1903, p. 32). By the time of the war, all of these schools (with the notable exception of Harvard) required basic arithmetic as an admission requirement (Broome, 1903).

Following the war, admissions requirements began to expand and become increasingly complex. Harvard became the first school to require mathematics beyond arithmetic when it added algebra as an admissions requirement in 1820 (Broome, 1903). Harvard then added geometry in 1844 and Stanford became the first school to require trigonometry in 1894 (Broome, 1903). Geography appeared in admissions tests for the first time at Harvard in 1807. French first appeared at Columbia in 1830. The sciences also began a steady process of introduction. Harvard introduced botany, physics, chemistry and astronomy in 1876. Cornell introduced physiology in

1877 and Michigan adopted botany from Harvard in 1890 (Broome, 1903). The increase in acceptable admissions subjects continued until Stanford University (founded in 1891) accelerated the process. By 1901, Stanford's list of admissions subjects included such newcomers as zoology, freehand drawing, American history and Spanish (Broome, 1903). In short, the dominance of Latin and Greek as the gateways to a college education was in its final days at the dawn of the twentieth century.

While admissions requirements were encompassing more and more subjects, college curricula started to change to reflect the newly-added academic disciplines. Originally, the curriculum of the colonial colleges was rigid. Each student studied the same sequence of courses in pursuit of the same degree (i.e., the Bachelor of Arts). However, by 1873 the addition of new subjects beyond Latin and Greek led to the creation of two new undergraduate degrees across the country: Ph.B (Bachelor of Philosophy, offered by Brown, Columbia and Amherst) and the B.S. (Bachelor of Science, offered by Harvard, Dartmouth, Rochester, Michigan, Amherst, Cornell and Princeton) (Broome, 1903). Cornell went several steps further by offering nine different degree paths in 1875. By 1880, the University of Michigan began offering five different undergraduate degrees: B.A. (which was often given the reverse abbreviation of A.B. during this period), Ph.B., B.S., B.L. (Bachelor of Letters) and C.E. (a civil engineering degree) (Broome, 1903). Generally speaking, three common types of degree paths were offered by most American colleges by the end of the nineteenth century; "A full classical course leading to the degree of Bachelor of Arts, a semi-classical course leading to the degree of Bachelor of Philosophy or of Letters and a more strictly scientific course with the degree of Bachelor of Science" (Broome, 1903, p. 77). It should be noted that this expansion primarily dealt with undergraduate education,

but graduate education was added into the mix when Yale awarded the first Ph.D. in the United States in 1861 (Veysey, 1965).

During the colonial period, there is no evidence that any college ever enrolled more than 100 students in a year (Thelin, 2004). Yale was founded in 1701 and conferred a total of 18 degrees by 1707. The College of Rhode Island opened in 1765 with only a single student and the enrollment grew to ten students in 1767 (Thelin, 2004). The University of Connecticut opened in 1881 with only 12 students (Johnson, 1981). The University of Nevada never exceeded 35 students in its first twenty years of existence (Johnson, 1981). Those schools all fared better than the University of New Hampshire and the University of Missouri. Both of those schools opened without any enrolled students in 1877 and 1866, respectively (Johnson, 1981). Several schools (including Cornell, Minnesota, Vermont and California) experienced substantial enrollment declines from their already modest numbers in the 1800s (Johnson, 1981; Veysey, 1965). The low enrollments during this period were largely due to the public's growing disinterest in the classical curriculum (Veysey, 1965), but America's colleges experienced a massive expansion in degrees, curricula courses and subjects in the years leading up to the twentieth century. This expansion brought an increased public interest in higher education and, consequently, college enrollments began to rise.

The gradual introduction of more practical subjects and the decline of Latin and Greek (though still required at many colleges in the early 1900s) started attracting more and more students to higher education (Broome, 1903). Consequently, college enrollments began steadily increasing by the start of the twentieth century (Levine, 1986). However, the colleges were not adequately prepared for the increased numbers of applicants and students. This fact is illustrated by an incident that occurred on the campus of Dartmouth College in 1919.

In 1919, Dartmouth's faculty held a committee meeting in response to a growing problem: the number of applications received by the college had exceeded the number of students that the school could comfortably enroll. In response to this development, the committee proposed limiting the college's enrollment and rejecting applicants. Mr. Streeter, a member of Dartmouth's Board of Trustees, was particularly skeptical of this concept. After the meeting, he turned to his associate and asked "do I understand rightly that you seriously propose sometime in the future to decline the application of somebody who really wants to enter Dartmouth?" (Levine, 1986, p. 459).

Despite these concerns, Dartmouth College forged ahead with the plan and began rejecting applicants. The nation's other colleges started the same practice and the concept of selectivity in American college admissions was born. The trend toward selective admissions was solidified by the boom in college enrollments after World War II.

College Admissions and the Federal Government

Despite the newfound need for selective admission in the early 1900s, college enrollment remained relatively low in the years leading up to World War II. The war effort, reliant on college-aged soldiers, caused college enrollment to decline by 45.8% during World War II (Cardozier, 1993). However, this downward trend was reversed shortly after the war. In 1939, just prior to the war, colleges in the United States enrolled an approximate total of 1.3 million students (Bound & Turner, 1999). In 1947, a couple of years after the war, enrollment reached 2.4 million (Trow, 1988). By 1986, that number had grown to 12.4 million (Trow, 1988). By 2011, that number had expanded to 21.5 million (Lederman, 2012). This drastic increase in college enrollment was fueled by the federal government's increasing efforts to both incentivize

higher education (Kimball, 2011) and increase college enrollment among minority groups (Redd, 1998).

The federal government's first major intervention in higher education was the National Land-Grant Colleges Act of 1862 (also known as the First Morrill Act), which provided land and financing for the establishment of new colleges to provide higher education to the low and middle classes (Redd, 1998). The government's first attempt to directly encourage college enrollment (beyond the creation of new colleges) was the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the GI Bill. For veterans returning from World War II who wished to attend college, the GI Bill provided tuition payments of up to \$500 per year and a monthly cash allowance (Turner & Bound, 2003). The government expected that between 10% and 20% of veterans would take advantage of the education benefit, but over 50% of World War II veterans actually used the benefit (Mettler, 2005). The extent to which this directly impacted overall college enrollment is debatable, as the nation's overall college enrollment increased only by 5% between 1940 and 1948 (Kimball, 2011). After examining census data, Bound and Turner (2002) concluded that the GI Bill only "led to a moderate gain in the postsecondary educational attainment of World War II veterans" (p. 2), suggesting that those veterans who did enroll in college may not have ultimately attained degrees. Despite its limited initial impact, the GI Bill had a lasting effect on higher education for at least two reasons. First, the bill's education benefits remained applicable to veterans of all wars and conflicts subsequent to World War II and, therefore, the law provides veterans with a path to higher education to this day. Second, the GI Bill was the federal government's first major attempt to influence college enrollment, and it established a precedent for future laws in that vein (Kimball, 2011).

In 1965, the government further intervened in the higher education landscape with the passage of the Higher Education Act (HEA). Unlike the GI Bill, the HEA provided tuition assistance (in the form of Pell Grants) based upon a student's income rather than their prior service (Thelin, 2003; Kimball, 2011). Additionally, the law provided funding to financially struggling universities and sought to increase college enrollment among minority groups (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). The law was renewed in 1972 with additional provisions for tuition funding for low-income students (Kimball, 2011). The Middle Income Student Assistance Act (MISAA) of 1978 further expanded the government's attempt to make college accessible to all students regardless of their socioeconomic status. MISAA extended federal financial aid to middle-income students who had been excluded from the provisions of HEA in 1965 (Baker & Velez, 1996). The law was a response to the growing concern that middle class students were being excluded from prestigious institutions because they weren't poor enough to receive federal assistance, but they weren't wealthy enough to pay expensive tuition bills (Kimball, 2011). The combination of the MISAA and the HEA practically ensured that all students could attain funding and attend college regardless of their socioeconomic status, assuming that they met minimum academic standards.

The National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 provided tuition support for college students to support educational programs in science, mathematics and languages (Flemming, 1960; Kimball, 2011). Unlike the GI Bill and the HEA, the NDEA provided funding for students based on their academic interests instead of their past service or income level (Kimball, 2011). Written and passed in response to the Soviet launch of Sputnik, this was the federal government's first attempt to increase enrollment in specific academic disciplines in order to serve the nation's interests (Flemming, 1960; Kimball, 2011). In other words, the federal

government feared that the Soviet Union was technologically surpassing the United States, and its response was to strategically manipulate college enrollments to prevent the country from falling behind its eastern rival.

The cumulative effect of all of these laws was twofold. First, the quantity of college applicants and college students increased rapidly because the government had largely removed race and socioeconomic status as insurmountable barriers to a college education. Second, the number of colleges also increased rapidly because of increased federal support for struggling institutions and because more schools were needed to accommodate the newly enlarged pool of prospective students. Between 1969 and 1975, the number of colleges in the United States increased by 500 (Trow, 1988). However, the increase in the number of colleges in the United States was not just a necessary response to the increase in students, but also an attempt to take advantage of a newly guaranteed revenue stream. By providing loans to students who couldn't otherwise pay for college, the federal government had created a "guaranteed funding base" for all students, as high-income students could pay with their own funds while low-income and middle-income students were now being covered by government loans (Kimball, 2011). Such federal guarantees turned higher education into big business and turned students of all social classes into revenue streams. The creation of a college could now be seen as an opportunistic financial venture and new institutions appeared by the hundreds in the 1960s and 1970s (Trow, 1988).

The growth of college enrollments after World War II was also fueled by the growing numbers of African Americans attending college. The government first attempted to increase college enrollment among African Americans with the National Land-Grant Colleges Act of 1862, also known as the First Morrill Act, which provided funding and land for the establishment

of new public colleges (Redd, 1988). Although the First Morrill Act produced some black colleges (such as Alcorn State University), most of the schools produced by the law primarily enrolled white students. This was somewhat corrected by the passing of the Second Morrill Act in 1890, which required states to create and maintain segregated systems of higher education for black and white students and required states to establish at least one land-grant college specifically for black students (Redd, 1998). These schools became known as historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

By 1960, about 70% of African American students enrolled in higher education attended HBCUs. This was changed with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made it illegal to operate segregated schools (Redd, 1998). Following the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the enrollment of African Americans in college increased while the percentage of African Americans enrolled in HBCUs declined. In 1976, the percentage of African American college students enrolled in HBCUs was 17.8%, and the total number of African Americans attending college was 1,033,000. By 1994, the percentage attending HBCUs declined further to 15.9%, but total enrollment rose to 1,448,600. These data trends indicate that the Civil Rights Act both increased college enrollment among African Americans and increased the number of institutions that were accessible to black students.

College enrollment among women also soared following World War II, although this trend doesn't directly coincide with any government legislature. In the colonial period, it was understood (if not explicitly stated) that colleges were only for men. During that early period, women were rarely even permitted to take college entrance exams (Thelin, 2004). In the rare instances when they did take the exams, high scores were rewarded with documentation stating that they would have been admitted to college if they had been male (Thelin, 2004). However,

college enrollment among women gradually became less taboo over the years and, by 1960, women accounted for 35% of all earned bachelor's degrees. In 1982, women accounted for half of all college students (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006) and then surpassed men, accounting for 56% of the college population by 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

In summary, higher education enrollment in the period following World War II was greatly influenced by the federal government. New laws largely eliminated income level, social class, and race as insurmountable barriers to a college education. Combined with the increasing presence of women on college campuses, the demographic diversification of college campuses created an enlarged pool of prospective students for America's universities.

The Rising Importance of Selectivity

Despite the fact that the number of people receiving tuition assistance and overall enrollment figures were rising, student yield rates (i.e., the percentage of accepted students that actually enroll) were steadily declining at many schools in the second half of the twentieth century because the growth in institutions had outpaced the growth in students (Kimball, 2011). Between 1982 and 1992, the average yield rate at public institutions declined by 14% and the average yield rate at private institutions declined by 9%. During this same period, the acceptance rate at private institutions declined by only 2%, and the acceptance rate at public institutions actually increased by 1% (Berland, 1995). In response to the declining yield rates and the guaranteed revenue represented by students, colleges in the 1970s started to strategically invest in student recruitment, marketing, financial aid and admissions in order to attract the largest and best incoming classes (Kimball, 2011). Thus, the modern college admissions office was born.

College admissions offices became even more important in 1988 when *US News and World Report* released the second iteration of its college rankings. Although the rankings had

been done previously in 1983, the 1988 list was the first to factor acceptance rates into the ranking system. In response, colleges started to seek excess applicants for the purpose of rejecting them, which would lower their acceptance rate and, in turn, raise their ranking.

Selectivity, which was a fairly unknown concept in American college admissions prior to the Dartmouth meeting in 1919, had now become the norm and college admissions offices were now an integral part of any college for two reasons. First, government policies (such as the GI Bill, the HEA, the MISAA and the NDEA) had ensured that the sheer number of college applicants would require a strategic and organized approach by the colleges to deal with the admissions process. Second, admissions data (particularly selectivity as measured by admissions rates) had become a public measure of prestige that could be harnessed and manipulated in order to change a school's overall image and, more specifically, its ranking in *US News and World Report* (Kimball, 2011). Consequently, admissions offices play a pivotal role in generating and altering a school's image, which can, in turn, affect the number of applications it receives, allowing it to further lower its acceptance rate so that the cycle can continue. Additionally, the government's efforts to provide universal college education for its citizens actually exacerbated the trend toward selectivity because many of the newly-funded students aspired to attend the most prestigious institutions. The enlarged applicant pool allowed those institutions to further drop their acceptance rates (Kimball, 2011; Kilgore, 2009).

In summary, American colleges started from humble, though ambitious, origins in the colonial period and grew to the point that public demand for higher education surpassed the existing institutions' capacity to supply it by the early 1900s (as evidenced by the 1919 incident at Dartmouth). By 2012, the seventy top-ranked American universities received 1,488,175 applications and accepted only 429,077 students for an average acceptance rate of 29% (Chace,

2013). The average acceptance rate for all of the colleges in the United States is now 65% (Chace, 2013). Since World War II, the need for selective college admissions and professional college admissions offices has been solidified by the massive enrollment increases caused by government intervention in education policy.

Early College Admissions and Recruitment Strategies

By the 1970s, admissions was integral to the operations of colleges and universities (Kimball, 2011). Berland (1995) examined college admissions and recruitment practices in the pre-internet age by studying a survey that was distributed to college admissions offices in 1979, 1985 and 1992. During this period, five practices comprised the vast majority of recruitment practices: visits to high schools to recruit students, direct mail to prospective students, college fairs, phone calls to prospective students and advertising. Trips to high schools to interact with prospective students were the most popular recruitment practice during this period, with 78% of institutions reporting this practice in 1979. This held steady with 81% in the 1985 survey and 80% in the 1992 survey (Berland, 1995). Directly mailing recruitment materials (such as brochures and viewbooks) was also popular and reported as a regular practice at 72% of institutions in both 1985 and 1992. College fairs, in which multiple institutions would gather at a single location to set up displays and speak with prospective students, was the third most popular practice, with 63% of institutions participating in such events by 1992 (Berland, 1995). Phone calls to prospective students were the fourth most popular option and used by 50% of institutions. Advertising during this period took on various forms, including newspaper advertisements, billboards, radio ads and magazine ads. The most popular type of advertising was the placement of ads in local newspapers, with 32% of institutions reporting such activity (Berland, 1995).

The timing of Berland's (1995) study of college admissions procedures forms a convenient dividing line in the evolution of admissions and recruitment practices. It was in 1995 that the Federal Networking Council officially defined the term "internet" and AOL first started attracting large quantities of users to the internet (Leiner, Cerf, Clark, Kahn, Kleinrock, Lynch & Wolff, 2009). In 1992, only 19% of colleges reported "computer searches" as a recruitment tactic (Berland, 1995), but the internet's meteoric rise in popularity quickly turned the world wide web into an indispensable tool on college campuses. In recent years, the evolution of the internet has prompted admissions offices to adopt a new primary tool for the recruitment of students: social media.

The Definition and Evolution of Social Media

Definition and Categories

Social media (also known as Web 2.0) broadly refers to websites that create an interactive experience for users by encouraging user-generated content and facilitating interactions between multiple users (Abedin, 2011; Henderson & Bowley, 2010). Social media enables users to interact with both the website itself (by both personalizing existing content and creating new content) and with other users through the sharing of content, information and opinions (Ferguson, 2010). This is as opposed to pre-social media Web 1.0 websites, which provided non-interactive experiences by strictly presenting static content (Ferguson, 2010). Rather than merely presenting information, Web 2.0 sites are about the creation and sharing of information (Safko, 2010). Common examples of social media sites include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube (Stagno, 2010).

Because social media is a broadly-defined concept, it is useful to divide social media sites into more specific sub-categories. Safko (2010) and Mangold and Faulds (2009) established comprehensive social media classification systems that both include 15 categories, albeit with slight differences. The classification system developed by Safko (2010) includes 15 categories of social media: Social Networking, Publish, Photo-Sharing, Audio, Video, Microblogging, Livecasting, Virtual Worlds, Gaming, Productivity Applications, Aggregators, RSS, Search, Mobile and Interpersonal. The Mangold and Faulds (2009) classification includes the following categories: Social Networking Sites, Creative Works Sharing Sites, User-Sponsored Blogs, Company-Sponsored Websites/Blogs, Company-Sponsored Cause/Help Sites, Invitation-Only Social Networks, Business-Networking Sites, Collaborative Websites, Virtual Worlds, Commerce Communities, Podcasts, News Delivery Sites, Educational Materials Sharing Sites, Open-Source Software Communities and Social Bookmarking Sites.

While comprehensive, the length of both lists demonstrates the challenge of succinctly categorizing social media. The lists are quite dissimilar, with only two types (Social Networking and Virtual Worlds) appearing in both systems. However, it is helpful to define some recurring terms.

Social Networking Sites: Ellison (2007) defined social networking sites as “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). This is currently the most commonly-used type of social media due to the enormous popularity of Facebook.

Photo, Audio and Video-Sharing Sites: These sites allow users to create and share various types of media, including movies, photos, comics, etc. These sites are social in the sense that they typically allow users to comment on the media created/shared by other users. Sites in this category include Instagram, Flickr, YouTube and Memebase.

Blogs: Herring, Scheidt, Wright, and Bonus (as cited in Chiang & Hsieh, 2011, p. 1,246) defined a blog as “a frequently edited webpage whose main use is recording individual articles and displaying them in chronological order.” Blogs allow users to publish their thoughts and function as online diaries. Much like photo-sharing and video-sharing sites, blogs qualify as social media because they are entirely user-generated and allow users to communicate and comment on each other’s contributions. Twitter is an example of a microblog, which is simply a short version of a blog (Twitter limits text entries to 140 characters).

RSS Feeds and Aggregators: An RSS (Real Simple Syndication) is a list that is “published on a web server, and is maintained either manually through editing by hand or, more commonly, generated by server-side software” (Lee, Miller & Newnham, 2008, p. 312). An RSS feed allows the user to pull content from the internet into a single stream of information based on the user’s interests. Google Reader is a commonly used example of an RSS feed. Although RSS feeds do not necessarily encourage interaction between users, they can be considered social media in that they allow users to manipulate internet content for their own purposes (as opposed to the pre-social media era in which content was static and allowed little modification by users).

Virtual Worlds: Virtual worlds are electronic environments that allow users to interact with each other, interact with the environment and often role-play through the use of animated characters (or avatars) (Bainbridge, 2007). Common examples included MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games), such as World of Warcraft, and Second Life, which can

be used for both personal and professional purposes. For instance, IBM regularly holds engineering meetings in Second Life, which allows engineers from around the world to gather in an online environment to share ideas (Safko, 2010).

Social Bookmarking Sites: “Social bookmarking is the practice of Internet users identifying and labeling web pages for use later and has become a popular way for individuals to organize and share online resources” (Redden, 2010, para. 3). Social bookmarking sites, such as Digg and Delicious, allow users to not only collect a bookmark list of their favorite websites but also look at the lists compiled by other users. These sites allow users to manipulate internet content for their own purposes and encourage interaction between users through the use of a voting mechanism. On many social bookmarking sites, a voting mechanism allows users to express their approval/disapproval of the sites included on another user’s list. Links with the most favorable votes typically become more visible on the site than those with lower approval ratings.

With those definitions in mind, I will turn to the social media classification system proposed by Dooney and Kim (In Press) that emphasized the primary function of a website for the purpose of simplistic categorization. By taking this approach, Dooney and Kim (In Press) fit all social media sites into two categories as defined by their primary function: networking sites and knowledge-sharing sites. “The basic function of networking sites is to allow users to keep in touch with various people (friends on Facebook, professional acquaintances on LinkedIn, etc.). Information-sharing sites allow users to share user-generated content that may or may not be targeted directly at people the user actually knows. Examples include YouTube (videos), Flickr (photos) and Wikipedia (general knowledge)” (Dooney & Kim, In Press). This system allows various categories offered by Safko (2010) and Mangold and Faulds (2009) to be combined into

only two broad, overarching categories. In this classification system, social networking sites, invitation-only networking sites, business-networking sites, virtual worlds and online gaming sites are combined into the “networking site” category. Publishing, photo-sharing, audio-sharing, video-sharing, blog, microblogs and RSS feeds are combined into the “knowledge-sharing” category.

As Dooney and Kim (In Press) pointed out, these categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive because websites can provide both networking and knowledge-sharing functionality. However, most websites do emphasize one function more strongly than the other. For example, a Facebook user could use the site as a mechanism for sharing information. However, Facebook is primarily used as a way to maintain social connections and therefore would be defined as a networking site.

Evolution of Social Networking Sites

As this research focuses on networking social media (specifically Facebook), this section concentrates on the historical development of networking social media rather than the evolution of social media as a whole. The first social networking site was SixDegrees.com, which was launched in 1997 (Kent, 2008). Although largely forgotten today, Six Degrees offered many features familiar to modern Facebook users, including the ability to create personal profiles and make connections with the profiles of friends (Ellison, 2008). Despite having millions of members, Six Degrees never became profitable and shut down in 2000. Ellison (2008) suggested that Six Degrees was simply an idea ahead of its time, as not enough people were yet consistently using the internet to make the experience entertaining enough for the early adopters who had joined the site.

Although Six Degrees was arguably the first social networking site, several similar websites also started appearing between 1997 and 2001. These sites included AsianAvenue, BlackPlanet, MiGente, LiveJournal, Cyworld and LunarStorm. These sites all incorporated key elements from Six Degrees, such as profiles and friend lists, with little innovation. Interestingly, several of these sites (including BlackPlanet and AsianAvenue) allowed users to add people as personal connections without making such a request to the people to whom they were connecting (Ellison, 2008). For whatever reason, none of these sites garnered as big a following as Six Degrees and they all quietly disappeared in the early 2000s.

With the demise of Six Degrees in 2001, several other websites appeared to replace it and were met with varying degrees of success. Ryze.com and Tribe.net had similar features to Six Degrees, but neither became very popular (Ellison, 2008). LinkedIn also appeared and still remains quite popular to this day, but its focus on professional networking has prevented it from becoming as massive as Facebook in terms of membership. Despite its somewhat limited focus, LinkedIn is notable for being the oldest social networking site that is still operational and relevant.

The remaining history of social networking sites is composed of three phases dominated by three websites: Friendster, MySpace and, ultimately, Facebook. In many ways, these were the first social networking sites that achieved popularity outside of a niche audience.

Friendster was launched in 2001 and was intended to challenge Match.com in the realm of online dating (Ellison, 2008; Marwick, 2005). The site was quite popular, but Friendster was unprepared to handle the sudden and drastic increases in membership. With over 300,000 members by 2003, the site wasn't designed to handle the volume of traffic it was receiving. With severe technological strains on the site, Friendster started to fade into obscurity in 2003.

At the same time Friendster was fading, MySpace was just starting. In 2003, MySpace launched to attract people who had abandoned Friendster. MySpace's rapid rise in popularity can be partially attributed to rampant rumors that Friendster was on the verge of introducing membership fees, which caused Friendster members to switch to MySpace suddenly and quickly (Ellison, 2008). The site rose in popularity until it reached its peak in 2005 when News Corporation purchased it for \$580 million (Rosmarin, 2006).

Following its buyout by News Corporation, MySpace experienced a popularity decline similar to that of Friendster. This decline had two primary causes. First, the site's image took a major hit when allegations arose regarding sexual encounters between adult and underage members of the site (Ellison, 2008). Second, Facebook was created in 2004 and quickly started to attract MySpace's members. Just as MySpace was created from the demise of Friendster, the emergence of Facebook signaled the end of MySpace.

Facebook started as an internal networking site for students at Harvard University (Ellison, 2008). The site expanded to include the other Ivy League colleges and then all universities in the United States in 2004 (Rosmarin, 2006). It was then expanded to include high schools in 2005 and then to include corporations in 2006 (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007). In late 2006, Facebook opened its doors completely and no longer required members to have any particular academic or professional affiliation (Lacy, 2006).

Following the decision to open membership to virtually anyone, Facebook's popularity skyrocketed. By 2011, it was the second most popular website in the world behind Google (Fernandes, 2011). When the company became a publicly-traded stock in 2012, it was valued at \$104 billion (Rusli & Eavis, 2012). With over a billion users and counting, Facebook finally brought stability to social networking. While early attempts at social networking either outright

failed (such as MiGente, LunarStorm, CyWorld and others) or fizzled from popularity (such as Friendster and MySpace), Facebook has achieved popularity and financial stability that has vastly eclipsed anything that has come before in the realm of networking social media.

Social Media and College Admissions

College admissions offices have recognized the growing popularity of social media and virtually all admissions offices now use social media to some extent for student recruitment (Barnes & Lescault, 2011). This section discusses the use of social media in college recruitment and identifies the risks and benefits of using social media for this purpose.

Public Networking Social Media and College Admissions

By 2012, virtually all colleges and universities in the United States had a Facebook page (Barnes & Lescault, 2012), and they are using the site in a variety of ways. Syracuse, Brandeis, St. John's and Yale are among a growing list of universities that have hosted virtual campus tours on Facebook (Kessler, 2011a). Professors at some universities, including Stanford, use Facebook as a platform to hold online Q&A sessions with prospective students (Lavrusik, 2009). Most universities have created Facebook profiles to communicate with a wide range of constituencies, including prospective students, alumni and fans of college athletic teams (Johnson, 2011).

A simple search on Facebook confirms that this last option is prominently used and most (if not all) universities have a Facebook page (or several pages) of some kind, including alumni pages, athletics pages and academic department pages. Unofficial, student-run pages promoting various extra-curricular activities and miscellaneous aspects of schools are also common. A unique example is a Facebook page run by students at Seton Hall University called "Seton Hall

University Memes,” in which students post images that humorously convey different aspects of life at the school (a “meme” is a joke that uses an existing image and modified text to make the humor relevant to a specific situation or context).

Recently, a company called Uversity started developing applications specifically for the purpose of helping universities use Facebook for recruiting students and increasing student yield rates. Uversity’s application turns a school’s Facebook page into a closed community of students and presents newly admitted students with a multitude of information streams. One stream serves as the school’s main information feed and as the default option. Additionally, dozens of additional streams are centered on specific topics (transportation, sports, financial aid, etc.) that users can choose to view (Kessler, 2011b). The company’s client list includes 140 universities and its website includes several case studies highlighting client success with the application. For instance, the case study for the University of Denver boasts that applicants who joined the online community in 2012 were 6.3 times more likely to enroll in the university than those that didn’t join the community (Uversity, 2013b.). An important limitation to note is that only admitted students can gain access to a university’s Facebook stream through the Uversity application. While Uversity’s services represent the first attempts to create social media applications explicitly for the purposes of recruitment and improving yield rates, the applications are limited in that a prospective student must be accepted before he/she can use the stream to help determine if they want to enroll in a particular university.

Overall, very little research discusses the use of Facebook pages by universities, so it is difficult to determine how effective these pages are (and, in some cases, it is difficult to determine the purpose of individual pages). Even in the case of universities that use Uversity’s applications, no studies have been conducted to determine the viability of such applications

(except for the data provided by University itself). Additionally, it is difficult to determine how these pages are managed and who is responsible for updating and moderating them. In most cases, student recruitment isn't the clearly intended purpose of university-run pages, though prospective students can view the pages as lurkers and uses the pages as a means to interact with the university. Although most universities are now using Facebook, there is little consistency in how universities are using it and there is a dearth of research on the topic.

There is a complete lack of literature examining the use of public, non-Facebook networking sites as mechanisms for student recruitment. That isn't to say that universities aren't using other sites. LinkedIn is particularly popular among universities and a search of the site retrieves a seemingly endless list of groups affiliated with various universities. However, there is little evidence in the literature that universities are systematically using LinkedIn as a recruitment tool. Similarly, there is no literature that discusses the use of Google+ in college admissions, though the small user base of that service makes it unlikely that it would be useful for recruiting college students. The literature examining MySpace in this context is also lacking, although that site's rapid decline in popularity likely makes it inadequate as a research subject.

Other Types of Social Media and College Admissions

Other than public networking sites (such as Facebook), universities have also used both internal networking sites and knowledge-sharing social media in their recruitment efforts. Regarding internal networking sites, which are networking sites designed for internal use by an institution or corporation and are unavailable to the general public, the only available research study is Christopher Paul Ferguson's doctoral dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania. Ferguson (2010) examined how Albright College and Michigan Technological University (MTU)

used internal networking sites to bolster their recruitment efforts. As this is the only study on the topic, Ferguson's work warrants particular attention.

Albright College created a social network called FACES. The site was managed and moderated by a group of 16 Albright students selected annually to post updates on the site and use the site as a platform for interacting with prospective students. Prospective students can either request to join the site or can be invited to join by the admissions office (Ferguson, 2010). MTU's networking site is called Rendezvous and, unlike Albright's site, is only available to admitted students. While the "admitted only" prerequisite may seem to rule MTU's site out as a recruitment tool, it's important to note that there is a big difference between admitted students and enrolled students. Admitted students may not have decided to attend the institution that accepted them and may need additional convincing that the school is a good fit for them. Rendezvous allows admitted students to interact with each other and the university, with the idea being that such interaction with the university community will help admitted students assimilate into that community and ultimately decide to enroll at the university. FACES and Rendezvous are modeled after Facebook in terms of both layout and functionality (Ferguson, 2010).

The results of Ferguson's (2010) study, however, are inconclusive. Albright's FACES network was created on a separate server from its main student information system (i.e., a system like Banner). As a result, it's extremely difficult to track the progress of a prospective student as he/she goes from FACES into the school's main computer system because there is no mechanism to identify the student as being the same person in both systems (such as a student identification number, which isn't generated until a student enters a university's main system). Tracking a student across both systems to determine the efficiency of the system would be logistically challenging and require an enormous amount of work. Ferguson (2010) attempted to work

around this problem by limiting the focus of his study to a sample of 30 prospective students who joined the FACES network. Of the 30, Ferguson (2010) found that 28 eventually enrolled at the school for a yield rate of 93.3 percent. While this would imply that internal networking sites are effective tools for student recruitment, the results must be considered in the context of the small sample size.

Michigan Technological University's Rendezvous site was connected with its main student information network, making it much easier to generate metrics to determine the success of the system (Ferguson, 2010). Of the 1,131 new freshmen enrolled in Fall 2009, 901 were members of Rendezvous for a yield rate of 79.7 percent. The technological architecture of Rendezvous (as opposed to FACES) makes it easier to conclude that the system is, in fact, effective in recruiting students and increasing yield rates. The only caveat is that Rendezvous, much like the Uiversity application, was only made available to admitted students, so it was only designed to assist with the final stages of the recruitment funnel and was not designed to recruit prospective students who had not yet formally expressed an interest in attending the school. Unfortunately, much like with Facebook, there is a lack of literature on the subject of internal networking sites in the context of student recruitment. Ferguson's (2010) dissertation is seemingly the only study designed for this purpose.

Among knowledge-sharing social media, YouTube is the most popular choice among universities, as more than 400 colleges and universities have set up channels on the site (Wiseman, 2011). However, as with networking sites, there seems to be little consistency in how universities are using YouTube and little evidence in the literature that the site is being used explicitly for the purpose of student recruitment. Some schools (including Boston College, the University of Chicago, Emory University and Skidmore College) have posted YouTube videos

that provide student-hosted virtual campus tours. However, the most viewed video of that kind is from the University of Chicago, with its campus tour video accumulating 61,283 views as of this writing. In contrast, the most viewed college-related video on YouTube shows a paralyzed Berkeley graduate walking at her commencement ceremony. This video has 502,643 views as of this writing (Wiseman, 2011). The numbers illustrate two things. First, there is a potentially large audience for college-related videos on YouTube. Second, YouTube is a financially viable platform for distributing college-related information, as the cost of distributing the content of the video is zero once the video is uploaded. In the case of the University of Chicago, it took much less effort and resources to provide a video tour of the campus to over 60,000 people than it would to actually provide a physical tour to that many people. However, as with the other types of social media, there is very little in the research literature on this subject.

In terms of the adoption of new technology, blogs are an area in which universities have actually outpaced for-profit corporations. The admissions offices of 41% of universities had started blogging by 2008 compared with 13% of Fortune 500 companies (Barnes & Mattson, 2009). Typically, admissions offices have hired current students to maintain blogs that describe and present the university community to prospective students (Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar & Canche, 2012). Xavier University was one of the first schools to use blogs as a strategic recruitment tool in 2005 (Anton, 2006). Utilizing eight student bloggers, each student initially posted once or twice per week about experiences at school. However, feedback from prospective students indicated that the posts were too infrequent and didn't encourage correspondence. In response, the student bloggers changed their approach. Instead of focusing on individual posts about their experiences at the school, the bloggers took a more conversational approach. One blogger would make a post, and then the others would post comments and a conversation would

ensue. This approach provided unique insight into the university community by allowing outsiders to view conversations about everyday life at the school. Additionally, the conversational format welcomed prospective students to contribute and ask questions (Anton, 2006). However, there is no conclusive evidence available that shows how effective this approach has been for recruiting students and this is the only such incident reported in the literature.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The American Anthropological Association (2011) defines ethnography as the “study of human behavior in the natural settings in which people live.” In this traditional sense of the term, “ethnography” conjures up images of researchers travelling to foreign lands to study undocumented cultures. An introduction to ethnography will typically include tales of the American ethnographic researcher Margaret Mead and her trips to study the inhabitants of the Samoa Islands. However, modern technology and the prevalence of the internet have transformed daily life, which now revolves around computer-mediated communication (email, social media, message boards, etc.). In many (if not all) cases, communities and cultures develop around computer-mediated communications and such online communities have gradually drawn attention from the ethnographic research community. Thus, a new kind of ethnography has emerged in the last couple of decades that deals not with activities in natural and physical settings, but instead with online activities. This relatively new frontier in qualitative research is commonly known as “virtual ethnography.”

In this section, I will define virtual ethnography as a methodology, explaining why it developed as a methodology and provide examples of how it has been applied in various settings. Second, I will discuss the ethical issues associated with ethnography and the difficulties that typically arise when such proposed research is submitted to university institutional review boards (IRBs). Third, I will describe my methodology and population, restate my research questions and discuss how my methods address each of my research questions. Finally, I will discuss the ethical precautions that I took when conducting my research.

Virtual Ethnography: Definition and Rationale

Virtual ethnography is the act of conducting ethnographic research by studying computer-mediated communication (Lopez-Rocha, 2010). In other words, it is the act of studying online behavior. The act of studying online behavior has, obviously, only been around as long as the internet has been popular enough to warrant such research. However, such research has already had several labels applied to it. Murthy (2013) divided such research into two categories: digital ethnography (which is “digitally mediated,” although the meaning of that term is unclear and Murthy didn’t elaborate) and cyber-ethnography (which is conducted entirely online). Several other similar labels have been used, including online ethnography (Gatson, 2011), netnography (Lopez-Rocha, 2010), and virtual ethnography (Hine, 2007). Gatson (2011) also proposed the term Ethnography 2.0 to parallel the term Web 2.0, which is another term of the internet in the age of social media. However, all of these labels refer to the same basic concept and the authors (with the noted exception of Murthy, 2013) use these various terms interchangeably. Since the literature has not reached a consensus on the proper term, I will use “virtual ethnography” henceforth as a matter of personal preference.

In the context of virtual ethnography, the concept of a “fieldsite” requires some adjustment. The internet is obviously not a physical location that a researcher can travel to and, therefore, it requires researchers to view fieldsites outside of the constraints of physical boundaries (Eaton, 2011). The popularity of the internet “has undermined the traditional focus on the fieldsite as a bounded physical space” (Jordan, 2009, p.186). Hine (2007) defined her virtual fieldsite in terms of “connection and mobility” rather than on physical location. The reference to mobility (Hine, 2007) is particularly interesting as it emphasizes the fact that research participants never have to actually be in the same place at the same time. That means that virtual

ethnography can also double (or supplement) as multi-site ethnography, such as in Eaton's (2011) doctoral dissertation that studied an outsourced work team in the U.S. and India largely using virtual means. However, all of this may be overcomplicating the simple fact that a fieldsite in the context of a virtual ethnography is simply a website. Travers (2000) even downplayed the notion of virtual ethnography and online fieldsites as being novel concepts, as ethnographers are still observing a site and recording their findings. In his estimation, the only difference in virtual ethnography is that the site is observed via a computer screen.

The rise of virtual ethnography as a popular and viable research methodology has paralleled the rise of the popularity of the internet. Murthy (2011) points toward the fact that the "Google generation" (those born after 1993) is overwhelmingly more likely to use search engines instead of libraries to discover new information as an indication that younger generations are using the internet as their platform for an increasing number of activities.

As the younger generations have become increasingly reliant upon the internet for routine activities, researchers have also turned to the internet (to varying degrees) out of necessity in order to conduct their work and interact with colleagues. Gatson (2011) points out that online fieldsites may offer the only locations wherein the researcher is as familiar with the surroundings as those that they are studying. Perhaps because of this mutual familiarity, "online research can provide either the same level of depth as a one-shot, one-hour interview, or the same level of depth as that produced by the daily participating, embedded offline ethnographer" (Gatson, 2011, p. 250).

Review of Past Research

Virtual ethnography, therefore, is limited in its applicability only by the quantity of social interactions that can be viewed on the internet. The internet is a big place, so to speak, so virtual ethnography can take many forms. I will now review some of the previous research that falls into the category of virtual ethnography and I will divide these studies into three categories: mixed methods, virtual worlds and social media.

Mixed Methods

The study of group interaction on message boards and chat rooms likely represents the oldest form of virtual ethnography, primarily because such sites provided social interactions on the internet years before the appearance of modern social media. Both message boards and chat rooms are sites, usually centered on a specific theme or topic, that allow users to leave messages for others to view and respond to. The main difference between chat rooms and message boards is the degree of immediacy in the conversations that they host. Users in chat rooms interact with each other in real-time and users typically can't view conversations that took place while they weren't present in the chat room. Message boards, on the other hand, have a more casual pace and retain records of posted messages. This allows users to respond to another user's post at any time. While such sites still exist and are quite popular, they lack the functional versatility and mass appeal of modern social networking sites. Facebook, for example, basically combines the functions of both message boards and chat rooms. The ability to comment on a status update is similar to posting on a message board, and the ability to privately message (or PM) a friend on Facebook is similar to the interactivity in a chat room. Message boards and chat rooms typically don't emphasize personal profiles and contact lists, which are common features of social networking sites. Additionally, the specificity of the designated topic of a message board or chat

room (be it astronomy or zoology or anything in between) limits the number of users that would be interested in joining these conversations.

Gatson (2011) claimed that Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community* (originally published in 1993) was the first example of virtual ethnography. Rheingold's book, as indicated by its date of publication, studied the initial emergence of online communication among early adopters of the internet. Although groundbreaking at the time and the forefather of qualitative online research (Gatson, 2011), Rheingold's book examined an internet that bears little resemblance to its modern counterpart due to the technical limitations of computers in the early 1990s and the smaller internet userbase. However, Rheingold's methodological innovation of studying online message-based communities has evolved to encompass a wide range of topics in the current literature.

Hine (2009) used virtual ethnography in her examination of e-science and the ways in which scientists share ideas and network with each other on message boards. In Hine's study (2009), she specifically examined the online community of scientists in the field of biological systematics. Although the study included various methods, including visiting several research institutions and interviews with experts in the field, it largely focused on the proliferation of information on Taxacom, which is an online mailing list for biologists that functions as a message board (University of Kansas, n.d.). By observing the messages exchanged between the members of the list, posting a message requesting member opinions of the list and interviewing several members of the community, Hine (2009) was able to present a holistic presentation of that particular scientific community that represented both the online and offline realities of its members.

Other researchers have incorporated virtual ethnography into a mixed-methods approach similar to the one used by Hine (2009). In Sandra Lopez-Rocha's research on Chilean migrants in England (2010), she combined face-to-face interviews and a questionnaire with a three-year observation of how the Chilean migrants interacted with each other and presented themselves on four kinds of websites: activist sites, socio-cultural sites, blogs and social networking sites. The activist sites allowed the migrants to specifically discuss their negative experiences while they were in Chile and the reasons for their exodus to England. The socio-cultural sites allowed the migrants to express and discuss their Latin American cultural roots. The blogs allowed the migrants to post news and their thoughts on various subjects. The social networking sites, specifically *chilenos.co.uk*, created an online place for the migrants to meet each other and help each other assimilate to their new surroundings. In studying these sites, "the criteria for analysis were based on the characteristics of the website, the changes/updates made, and the type of interaction that elicited or allowed" (Lopez-Rocha, 2010, p. 297). Additionally, in observing the posts and interactions on these sites, Lopez-Rocha focused on the "*what, why and for whom* they posted online" (p. 298, emphasis in original). Unfortunately, Lopez-Rocha provided few details regarding the day-to-day procedures that she used when conducting these observations.

Murthy (2013) also incorporated virtual ethnography into his research on Muslim music subculture. While Murthy used face-to-face interviews and traditional ethnographic observation (by attending concerts and other physical events) in his research, virtual ethnography allowed him to include Muslim women in his research because women rarely attended events and were reluctant to consent to face-to-face interviews with a male researcher. By incorporating Facebook and Twitter observations into his methods, Murthy (2013) was able to "observe their online activities and interactions and create field notes for each of these online-only respondents"

(Murthy, 2013, p. 27). However, much like Lopez-Rocha (2010), Murthy (2013) provided few procedural details regarding these observations.

For her dissertation at Wayne State University, Eaton (2011) studied a team of IT workers in India who provided outsourced labor for an American company. While Eaton did conduct face-to-face interviews and in-person observations with the study's participants, more than 90% of her observations were conducted virtually. The team of workers in India frequently communicated with each other via an instant messaging service and held weekly meetings with their American associates using application-sharing software (primarily netmeeting). Eaton studied these message exchanges and meetings in real time and took field notes, but provided few procedural details outside of reviewing both the exchanged messages and her own notes.

The aforementioned studies all incorporated virtual ethnography into a mixed-methods approach. Others have exclusively used virtual ethnography to examine online communities as separate entities from their offline counterparts. For example, Battles (2010) studied adolescent perceptions of the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine by observing message board discussions on the subject. By observing three separate message board discussions on the subject that included 72 participants, Battles (2010) was able to gain valuable insight into adolescent opinions on an important medical topic and identify several key areas of concern (such as the cost of the vaccine) and important misperceptions (such as the false notion that the vaccine prevented cervical cancer).

Gatson (2011) has conducted virtual ethnography to study the fan community surrounding the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. As a particularly devoted fanbase that developed in the late 1990s, fans of Buffy (or "Bronzers," as Gatson calls them) were one of the first fan communities to develop active message boards to discuss their favorite show. A Buffy

fan and member of the community herself, Gatson (2011) studied the interactions in this community, as a traditional ethnographer would study conversations in a physical setting, to gain a better understanding of this particular cultural phenomenon and learn more about the character of Buffy as a gender-role model for women. More specifically, Gatson (2011) spent six months conducting daily observations of the conversations taking place on the message board and taking notes on the interactions (though, like the aforementioned mixed-methods studies, she didn't provided many details regarding her procedures for analyzing these texts). Gatson (2011) also identified 15 other "aca-fans" (academics that study the object of their fandom) who used virtual ethnography to study the Buffy fan community. Consequently, fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* may well be the most studied group in the virtual ethnography literature.

These examples illustrate the fact that virtual ethnography can be applied to any subject for which a message board exists. The message board functions as a community that has developed around specific topics, and the interactions between members of that community can be studied just as the interactions within a community defined by geography can be studied.

Virtual Worlds

Schroeder (1996) defined a virtual world as "a computer-generated display that allows or compels the user (or users) to have a sense of being present in an environment other than the one they are actually in, and to interact with that environment" (as cited in Warburton, 2009, p. 415). The problem with this definition is that it could just as easily apply to a message board or a social media site, when the phrase "virtual worlds" is really used to indicate more immersive experiences like Second Life or massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). Consequently, I will instead use Bainbridge's (2007) terminology, as he defined a virtual world as "an electronic environment that visually mimics complex physical spaces, where people can

interact with each other and with virtual objects, and where people are represented by animated characters” (p. 472). To state that more simply, virtual worlds offer an opportunity for fantasy role-playing in an online environment.

As virtual worlds offer rich and interactive experiences for users, they have provided prime opportunities for online ethnographic research. Such research is conducted in a similar fashion to message board-based virtual ethnography in the sense that the researcher is observing the activities and interactions of the participants in order to gain a greater understanding of some phenomena. A major ethical and methodological difference arises, though, from the fact that researchers in such environments must be active users in such an environment because virtual worlds typically require users to create active accounts (Buzinkay & Moore, 2009). Such requirements prevent researchers from carrying out their research as non-participant observers (or “lurkers,” in popular internet terminology).

Despite that limitation, researchers have created their own virtual-world accounts to observe virtual activity in a variety of contexts. Taylor (2002) studied users of a virtual game called *The Dreamscape* to determine how their chosen avatars (their manifestations in the virtual world) affected their interactions with other users in the game. In his study, Taylor (2002) observed the interactions between avatars in the game, paying particular attention to how the interactions between avatars emulated real-world interactions. For example, confrontations between avatars were evident when one avatar got very close to another and modified its face to indicate annoyance (thus emulating common real-world behaviors between people who are engaging in a confrontation). Bardzell and Odom (2008) conducted similar avatar-based research by spending six months observing a Gorean Community in Second Life (a “Gorean community” attempts to recreate the fictional universe found in the novels of John Norman). In observing this

community, Bardzell and Odom (2008) sought “to understand how participant-created environments enable the cultivation of a sophisticated subculture...” (p. 240). The research was conducted between February and July of 2007 and had two principal components. First, the researchers observed events (or interactions between community members) in the virtual world. During these observations, the researchers “paid close attention to emerging themes in both textual and physical interactions among participants...” (p. 242). Second, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with participants in the virtual events using instant messaging services.

Yee, Bailenson, Urbanek, Chang and Merget (2007) conducted similar research in examining the interactions between avatars in Second Life. Their research focused on gender relationships between users of Second Life, and they discovered that male avatars mimic their real-life counterparts in their interaction with female avatars in terms of personal distance and even eye contact. Taken as a whole, these studies illustrate that virtual ethnography of virtual worlds can be used to study a plethora of academic disciplines (particularly sociology and psychology) in terms of online interaction (Buzinkay & Moore, 2009).

Social Networking

Despite the ever-increasing presence of social networking sites in everyday life, there is a dearth of literature on virtual ethnography in social networking sites. Much of the research in this area discusses the ethical implications of conducting such research, particularly the definition of social media as a public space and the need to protect the anonymity of those being observed in such a space (for an example, see Murthy, 2013). However, there is an increasing interest within the literature in expanding this field of study.

For example, Postill and Pink (2012) studied the interactions of cultural activists in Barcelona on Facebook in the months leading up to a government vote on a law pertaining to digital piracy. Unlike some of the other researchers discussed, Postill and Pink (2012) defined a structured approach to conducting virtual ethnography. Their system included five steps: catching up, sharing, exploring, interacting and archiving. The “catching up” stage involves reading all of the interactions and posts that have taken place in the virtual fieldsite since the researcher last observed the site. The “sharing” stage involves responding to all of the interactions that accumulated during the catching-up stage. For example, if someone is studying Facebook, and a user created a post directly addressing them, the sharing stage would include posting a response to that post. The third stage is “exploring,” which involves following chains of internet links that can lead to further valuable information. For example, if somebody posts a link that is related to your research, you would follow that link, which could lead to another link, and so forth. The next stage is “interacting,” which involves initiating interactions with users on the social media site. For example, on Facebook this could involve something as simple as liking another user’s post. The final stage is “archiving,” which involves collecting relevant materials for future reference. This can include bookmarking pages, printing out copies of posts and interactions, and using a social-bookmarking site (such as Delicious) to collect links. While Postill and Pink’s (2012) five-stage approach is a notable attempt to articulate the daily procedures for conducting virtual ethnography, it is worth noting that this process assumes that the researcher will be interacting with those under observation. Therefore, their system would require modification for studies that are purely observational.

Bosch (2009) studied the communication between professors and students on Facebook to determine the pedagogical value of such activities (with fairly inconclusive results). For this

study, Bosch (2009) studied the Facebook profiles of 150 students “with particular emphasis being placed on downloaded applications, friend lists, groups and networks, wall posts and other asynchronous communication” (p. 187). Basically, Bosch (2009) examined the student profiles (and the content on their “walls”) to see if there was evidence that the students were using Facebook to interact with their professors or conduct any other pedagogically valuable activities. However, unlike Postill and Pink (2012), Bosch (2009) didn’t provide details regarding his daily procedures for conducting this research.

Gajaria, Yeung, Goodale and Charach (2010) studied adolescents with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) by observing Facebook groups devoted to those with ADHD. This process started by searching Facebook for groups with “ADHD” included in their name, and then narrowing the results by only including groups that had (1) an affiliation with a high school or university and (2) at least 100 members. After identifying the Facebook groups for the study, the researchers printed transcripts of all posts made within those groups between September 2006 and April 2007. Each of the researchers then read the transcripts independently, took notes and developed codes for emerging themes. The researches met regularly to compare their notes and codes and reach a consensus on the most useful and applicable codes. Once a consensus was reached on the codes, the research team created a coding manual and then indexed the data using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. This research concluded that such groups provide positive emotional support for those with the disorder.

As with message boards and virtual worlds, these examples show the disciplinary versatility of virtual ethnography as a methodology. A broader discussion of social media specifically in the context of higher education can be found in the literature review chapter of this dissertation.

The Ethics of Virtual Ethnography

As is often the case with emerging research methodologies, particularly those that are dependent on new technology, virtual ethnography has faced a large amount of ethical scrutiny (Battles, 2010; Hakken, 2000; Gatson, 2011). These issues have arisen among researchers, as they have pondered the extent to which they must protect the privacy of their online subjects, and on institutional review boards (IRBs), as they have struggled with how to deal with virtual ethnographies without set guidelines in place for evaluating such research. In fact, Buchanan and Ess (2009) surveyed over 700 IRBs throughout the United States and found that roughly half of them identified internet research as an area of concern. In that vein, Librett and Perrone (2010) claimed that “there is a fundamental disconnect between what the typical Institutional (or Ethical) Review Board will perceive as essential to safeguard the rights of human subjects and critical ethnographers’ interest in maintaining a high degree of trust and partnership with their research participants” (p. 729).

At the heart of these concerns lie some very basic, though troublesome, questions: Is the internet a public place? Does someone have a reasonable expectation of privacy when posting something on the internet? Is virtual ethnography an intrusive form of research? In addressing these questions, I will first discuss some of the institutional attempts to provide guidelines for online ethnographic research. Then I will present the study conducted by Gajaria et al. (2010) as a model and precedent for conducting and writing online ethnographic research in an ethical and publishable manner.

Existing Guidelines for Virtual Ethnography

Currently, the most extensive ethical statement regarding the conduct of online researchers comes from the American Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) (Gatson,

2011). The AoIR's ethics statement, titled *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research* and composed by Markham and Buchanan (2012), does provide an extensive discussion of the subject. However, the document is essentially a list of ethical considerations that must be made when conducting online research rather than a code of conduct for actually performing online research. In fact, the authors of the document openly acknowledged this weakness and claimed that:

the uniqueness and almost endless range of specific situations defy attempts to universalize experience or define in advance what might constitute harmful research practice. We take the position that internet research involves a number of dialectical tensions that are best addressed and resolved at the stages they arise in the course of a research study. In saying so, we reiterate the value of a casuistic or case-based approach (Markham and Buchanan, 2012, p. 7)

While useful as a conversational starting point, the AoIR document is not particularly useful in establishing specific guidelines for conducting ethical online research. However, the IRBs of some universities have also attempted to establish guidelines for online research. I will now address some of those guidelines.

Arizona State University does not refer to virtual ethnography in its IRB's statement on internet research, but instead uses the term "data mining" to encompass all methods of using websites as sources of research. The statement includes only three guidelines (presented here verbatim):

- Do not collect data that includes identifiers when possible.
- Do not present/publish data in a form that makes sources of data (individuals) readily identifiable (an absolute guarantee is not likely possible).
- PI must describe the "terms of service" of internet sites to be targeted.
 - o Those open to anyone are fair game for most purposes.

o Those that require membership in some meaningful way may require the PI to obtain permission from a site manager and/or to disclose his/her “presence” to other users and acknowledge their role as data gatherer.

□ “Acknowledging their role as researchers” would be similar to a recruitment script and any statement used for this purpose would need to be reviewed by the IRB (ASU IRB Guidance Document, n.d.)

The University of California, Berkeley does specifically refer to observational research. Its IRB statement on the matter states that “when online research procedures are employed, the investigator must be sensitive to the definition of public behavior...an investigator wishes to collect data from discussions posted in an online community ...the online community is technically public, in that anyone can view the discussions and join the group, but some group participants are there to provide personal experiences...and may believe that all discussions and personally identifiable information will remain private” (Internet-Based Research, 2012). Similar to the guidelines posted by the AoIR, Berkeley’s statement brings up ethical considerations, but doesn’t provide specific protocols.

The University of California, Los Angeles makes only one specific reference to observational online research in its IRB statement, noting that “researchers should inform participants that observation is taking place, and that any information exchanged may be used for research purposes when observing a chat room that is not open to the public” (Guidance and Procedure: Research Involving the Internet, 2007). While this qualifies as a specific guideline, it is the only one provided by the institution.

Specific references to virtual ethnography (or, more generally speaking, online observational research) in university IRB statements seem to be rare (for a list of relevant IRB statements, see <http://www.uwstout.edu/ethicscenter/upload/IRB-Human-Research-11092012.pdf>). Many universities do not have any statement pertaining specifically to online research, while some have statements that are only applicable to surveys and interviews

conducted using the internet (see the IRB statements of Columbia University and Cornell University for examples). The most useful university guidelines that I have found are those provided by Arizona State University because they provide specific procedural guidelines. But with a paucity of institutional guidelines, I will turn to the research literature for further ethical considerations.

The literature contains two main streams of thought when discussing the ethical principles of virtual ethnography and the presentation of such research to review boards. The first stream maintains that virtual ethnography is, by definition, exempt from formal ethical scrutiny. The second stream provides specific mechanisms for ensuring that online ethnographies adhere to the basic tenets of ethical research. The research conducted by Gajariaet et al. (2010) provides an ideal example because it incorporates both streams and represents a published piece of literature that used virtual ethnography to examine a sensitive issue (ADHD) with a protected population (adolescents). I will now discuss both streams of thought using Gajariaet et al. (2010) as a specific model.

Exemption from Formal Ethics Boards

Among researchers, there is increasing skepticism regarding whether or not virtual ethnography is exempt from the formal ethical considerations of review boards (for examples of such discussions, see Buchanan & Ess, 2009; Librett & Perrone, 2010). This exemption stems from the definition of “research” provided by the federal government that serves as the basis for the IRB review process. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, Subpart A of the Code of Federal Regulations 45§46.101, research is “a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge” and “this policy applies to all research involving human subjects” (Code of Federal

Regulations, revised 2009). Researchers have taken issue with several aspects of this definition as it pertains to virtual ethnography.

First, the definition itself and the resulting use of IRBs to review research stems from the need for strict ethical standards in biomedical research and resulted from the atrocities committed by Germany and Japan during World War II (Librett & Perrone, 2010). In drafting the AoIR guidelines, Markham and Buchanan (2012) questioned whether principles intended for biomedical research could reasonably be applied to something as innocuous as observing online behavior. Librett and Perrone (2010) referred to this mismatch as “mission creep,” meaning that the intention of preventing physical harm inflicted by dangerous biomedical research has now extended into research areas in which it is not applicable.

Second, the phrase “research involving human subjects” has been scrutinized for a couple of reasons. Virtual ethnography that is purely observational (meaning that the researchers do not interact with those that they are studying) is a kind of naturalistic research (Bakardjieva, 2008; Jerry, n.d.). In naturalistic observation, the researcher seeks to have the smallest possible impact on those being studied (Bakardjieva, 2008). In terms of the ethics of conducting naturalistic observation, “the only issues that pertain are the potential identification of individuals involved in the observation, and whether or not the phenomenon observed was staged to solicit specific reactions” (Jerry, n.d.). It is questionable whether such research would qualify as interacting with human subjects.

Along those same lines, some researchers claim that virtual ethnography is really a form of document analysis and doesn’t involve human subjects at all. Jerry (n.d.) argued that online discussions are really a form of secondary data and, therefore, can be analyzed without the approval of most review boards. A researcher conducting online research is, in one semantic

interpretation, studying texts and not the human subjects that produced them (Gatson, 2011).

This is somewhat echoed by Arizona State's IRB guidelines that refer to such research as data mining instead of ethnography (ASU IRB Guidance Document, n.d.).

In conducting their virtual ethnography of adolescents with ADHD on Facebook, Gajariaet et al. (2010) agreed with this stream of thought and declared that their research was exempt from an ethics review because "such data can be considered as being gathered from a public space from which the individuals who had posted the messages do not have a reasonable expectation of privacy" (p.16). The Research Ethics Board of the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto agreed with their assessment and granted an ethics waiver to their research. However, despite being granted this exemption, Gajariaet et al. (2010) still took precautionary measures to protect the identities of those studied. I will now discuss methods for maintaining the anonymity of research participants in virtual ethnographies.

Protection of Participant Anonymity

Despite the argument that virtual ethnography could be considered exempt from traditional ethical reviews, most researchers agree that such research should be conducted so as to protect the identities of participants both as an ethical courtesy and precautionary measure. Such considerations are also made explicit in Arizona State's statement on the matter (ASU IRB Guidance Document, n.d.).

The work of Battles (2010) and Gajariaet et al. (2010) is valuable in providing procedural guidelines for protecting anonymity when conducting virtual ethnography. Battles (2010) did not use the names or user names of any of the people she observed, nor did she use verbatim quotes. The lack of verbatim material is a protective measure to prevent participants from being identified by putting their quotations into a search engine. Gajariaet et al. (2010) used the same

protective measures, although they did use verbatim quotes when they found that search engines were unable to find the source of the quotes. With a complete lack of names, identifiable characteristics and traceable quotes, the anonymity of those being studied was assured.

In summation, the work of Gajariaet et al. (2010) is likely the most useful single study in determining the ethical viability of online ethnographic research. Although they made a strong case that their work was technically exempt from review board procedures, they still took necessary measures to protect the identities of those studied. As their work was approved for an exemption from a medical review board and still contained ethical safeguards that were not even officially required by the review board, their approach to conducting virtual ethnography has guided my own work in the field.

Virtual Ethnography and Higher Education

Despite its emergence as an increasingly viable research methodology, virtual ethnography is not without its limitations and stigmas. For starters, the majority of ethnographic researchers still prefer to study physical environments and have been slow to move toward online-based ethnography (Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, & Cui, 2011). Additionally, online research has long been associated with the market research industry and (perhaps consequently) looked down upon by the academic community as a less rigorous methodology than its traditional counterpart (O'Connor & Madge, 2003). In the early days of the internet, this connection with corporations and marketing was so strong that Kozinets (1998) defined virtual ethnography as “a new qualitative method devised specifically to investigate the consumer behavior of cultures and communities present on the Internet.”

Perhaps because of those reasons, virtual ethnography has not yet become a prominent methodology in the higher education research literature. Despite the overwhelming popularity of social media among college students (ECAR, 2008) and the increasing use of social media in the college-choice process (Uversity, 2013), there is little research on how social media has been used in the admissions process. Considering that virtually all universities in the United States are now incorporating social media into their marketing and recruitment efforts, with the most common mechanism being Facebook (Barnes & Lescault, 2011), the lack of research on the viability of such efforts is a clear gap in the literature that warrants a further study.

My study brings virtual ethnography to higher education research by examining the interaction between admissions offices and prospective students. More specifically, it is an ethnographic examination of the interaction between a university's admissions office and newly admitted (but not committed) students on Facebook. In a sense, the study does not stray from virtual ethnography's roots as a method of studying consumer behavior (Kozinets, 1998). The relationship between prospective students and universities is based around consumerism in the sense that students pay for a product (or a service, depending on one's semantic preference) from the university in the form of an education. I am studying how universities use social media as an interactive platform to market their product to prospective students.

In the following sections, I will describe my research design and methods and then explain how the methods will address each of the research questions.

Methods

Field Site Selection

In selecting the field site for this study, I wanted to examine a university that uses social media applications developed by a company called Uversity. Funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Uversity provides a unique Facebook application that enhances a university's ability to interact with admitted (but not committed) students in order to increase student yield rates (Kessler, 2011). The Facebook communities created by Uversity's applications are ideal sites for this research because they are closed communities developed and operated for one, explicitly-stated reason: to increase student yield rates. The company's client list includes 140 universities and its website includes several case studies highlighting client success with the application. For instance, the case study for the University of Denver boasts that applicants that joined the online community in 2012 were 6.3 times more likely to enroll in the university than those who did not join the community (Uversity, 2013b).

Uversity's application turns a school's Facebook page into a closed community of students and presents newly admitted students with a multitude of information streams. Once a student is admitted to the university and granted access to the group, they receive an email containing a link to the group. Once they have followed the link, they will be prompted to join the group and will then have a link to the group page on their regular Facebook page.

Once in the group, users view a newsfeed that is similar to the newsfeed function in a personal Facebook account. A blank text box at the top of the newsfeed invites users to post something (a status update) that can be seen by other members of the group. The newsfeed is composed of such posts made by other members of the community and is arranged in chronological order with the most recent post being at the top of the newsfeed. It should be noted

that these posts are isolated to within the group. In other words, a post that is visible in the group is not also visible on a user's personal Facebook newsfeed and vice versa.

In addition to the main newsfeed, the group page also has several features that can be accessed through links appearing vertically down the left sidebar. These features include links to more focused newsfeeds within the group that allow users to find posts from users that have been assigned to a specific residence hall or are from a particular geographic area. Other features include Student Finder (which allows users to search for other users by their academic major, personal interests, hometown or residence hall), a list of recently discussed topics (with links to those discussions) and a list of recently asked questions (with links to the questions and resulting conversations).

I first contacted Uversity representatives in September, 2013 and informed them that I was interested in incorporating their application into my research. The company immediately expressed an interest in my research during our initial phone conversation, and I exchanged numerous emails and held phone conferences with several company employees in the subsequent weeks. After sharing further details about my work, Uversity agreed to begin holding conversations with their clients in an effort to secure an institution to serve as my online field site. One of those clients agreed to participate in the study in November, 2013.

Field Site

The field site of this research is the Facebook admissions page operated by a private, catholic university in the United States. In order to ensure privacy, I will hereafter refer to the school by the pseudonym Quint University. Quint is a medium-sized university that serves approximately 8,000 students, two-thirds of whom are undergraduates. The university claims an acceptance rate of 67% on the 6,991 applications received for the fall, 2013 semester. If the

following year's data remains comparable, then approximately 4,500 – 5,000 accepted students will receive invitations to the Facebook community during the timeframe of my research. I have omitted the source of the university's admissions data in order to preserve anonymity.

Data Collection

The research was conducted in March-April, 2014. This timeframe was selected at the advisement of Uversity representatives on the grounds that it represents the height of the undergraduate admissions cycle and, therefore, activity on the site is maximized during this time. The population was composed of prospective students that have been accepted into Quint University for the Fall, 2014 semester. Although all newly accepted students are invited to join the Facebook community, students are not obligated to join the group and, therefore, it was difficult to pinpoint the exact number of people in the community.

Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is an approach to conducting qualitative research and encoding qualitative data that encompasses three primary stages: (1) identifying a sample, (2) developing a coding process and (3) using the code (Boyatzis, 1998). In this section, I will focus on the second step.

Boyatzis (1998) identified three possible approaches to the development of a coding process in thematic analysis. This process can be driven by either (a) theory, (b) prior research or (c) data. My coding process has developed through a combination of these approaches. Based upon prior research, I identified two overarching codes prior to the start of data collection. In Facebook groups dedicated to the facilitation of the college admissions process, prior research suggests that content can be divided into two overarching categories: *Institutional Fit* and *Social Fit* (Uversity, 2013a). Content in the *Institutional Fit* category pertains to information that will

enable prospective students to better navigate and integrate into the formal and bureaucratic structure of the institution (this could include subjects such as how to select a major or how to obtain financial aid). Content in the *Social Fit* category pertains to information that will enable prospective students to socially assimilate into the university community (this could include information about extracurricular activities, parties or other events that would help foster personal relationships with other members of the community). The idea is that the combination of these two categories of information enables prospective students to decide if they are a good “fit” for that particular university’s community. Therefore, I entered my research with the following codes based upon prior research:

Institutional Fit: Information, requests and conversations that are related to increasing a student’s ability to successfully navigate the academic, logistical and bureaucratic aspects and structures of the university.

Social Fit: Information, requests and conversations that potentially facilitate a student’s ability to socially integrate into the university community, form personal relationships with other students and/or fulfill personal needs not directly related to the university.

Although these two major codes guided my research, I was also looking to discover any other overarching themes that could constitute additional major codes. I also developed sub-codes based upon recurring themes that emerged within the *Institutional Fit* and *Social Fit* categories. Using this approach, my codes were developed based upon both prior research and data.

Pilot Study (November – December, 2013)

In order to gain familiarity with the University application and further define my methodological approach, I conducted a pilot study with Quint University’s Facebook group in

Fall, 2013. For the purposes of this pilot study, I was granted access to Quint's group for a period of two weeks between Monday, November 18th and Monday, December 2nd.

The purpose of this pilot study was to provide a methodological test-run for my dissertation research. Due to the timing of the admissions cycle, there was little activity in the Facebook group during the time that the pilot study was conducted, and, therefore, few insights could be gathered from the available data. At the suggestion of Uiversity representatives in anticipation of this lack of activity, I decided to include content posted outside of my access timeframe in my data analysis. Consequently, the group activity examined for this pilot study was posted between September 1st and December 2nd, 2013.

On my first day accessing the group (November 18th), I first read through all of the posts going back to September 1st. I then printed all of these posts (and resulting conversations) and reread them. I then classified each post as being associated with one of the two major codes (*Institutional Fit* and *Social Fit*) and made a note next to each post identifying its major code classification. Then I created a file folder for each of the major codes and began placing the printed transcripts in the files according to my notes. I then revisited the group every other day in search of new content. When new content was found, I repeated the classification process. After the completion of each week (on Sunday night), I reread the transcripts in each file folder and attempted to identify recurring topics and themes. Such recurring themes and topics were assigned codes and then assigned as either new major codes or as sub-codes beneath one of the major codes.

As expected, there was minimal activity in the group at this time. The activity in the group totaled 50 posts, 64 comments and 55 likes. Although this research yielded little analytical value, the process did allow me to gain familiarity with the structure of the application.

Observation and Interviews (March – April, 2014)

Following the pilot study, the observational research for this dissertation was conducted March 1st – April 30th, 2014. Initially, I planned to conduct this research using the same methods and approach that I used for the pilot study. However, I quickly realized that this approach was unrealistic for three reasons. First, the amount of content in the group was far greater during this timeframe than it was during the period of the pilot study. The management of two separate files for classifying this content quickly became cumbersome due to the sheer volume of material. Second, the increased activity during this period led to an unanticipated complication: In order to keep up with the content, I not only had to read the new content frequently, but also monitor the older posts in case any new comments had been added since I last viewed them. Consequently, I had to constantly update my transcripts both to include new posts and make sure that the transcripts included up-to-date versions of the conversations surrounding older posts. Using the two-file system that I had developed for the pilot study proved to be excessively time-consuming and made it difficult to ensure that both files contained equally-updated versions of the transcripts. Third, the emergence of new codes weakened the logic behind a procedural system that placed such a strong emphasis on my initial codes (*Institutional Fit* and *Social Fit*). While those codes were prevalent in the transcript of the group's activity, other codes emerged that were of equal or greater importance.

In order to better analyze the large volume of content and place proper importance on the newly emerging codes, I developed a single-transcript system. I logged into the group on a daily basis and used the copy-and-paste function to place the content of the Facebook group's newsfeed into a Word document. I would then type any codes that applied to a particular post (and the resulting interactions) next to the post in red. I would also record the number of

comments and number of likes that a post generated next to the codes. So, for example, if a post generated five comments and eight likes, I would put the following designation following the applicable codes: 5C, 8L (for a sample of the resulting transcript, see Appendix A).

In addition to the daily process of recording the group's activity in the form of a transcript, every Sunday I reviewed the transcript in its entirety in order to develop, revise and consolidate codes as new themes emerged in the group's posts and interactions. I also used this time to compose memos to track my developing interpretations of the group's activities and reflect on the difficulties of conducting the research.

In order to preserve anonymity, I assigned a pseudonym to every active member of the group. The pseudonyms were chosen using a website that provides a random name generator. When assigning the pseudonyms, gender is the only characteristic that was kept consistent between an individual's real name and false name. Once individuals were assigned pseudonyms, their real names were replaced with that pseudonym every time that they appeared in the transcript. Similarly, the name of the university was replaced with its pseudonym (Quint University) every time that it appeared. Any information or reference that could identify the school was either altered (as in the case of university-sponsored events) or deleted (as in the case of the school's mascot).

A total of 289 individuals participated in the Facebook group, including 284 prospective students and five administrators. Not a single participant opted out of the study or contacted me with questions. In the two months of the observation period, a total of 262 posts were made in the group (not including comments made in response to those posts). The observational research was conducted from March 1st – April 30th, 2014. The interviews were conducted in April, 2014.

In addition to the observational research, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with four Quint University administrators. The interview subjects hold the following titles: Dean of Admissions, Director of Undergraduate Admissions, Director of Marketing and Social Media Intern. All of these interviews were conducted using my cell phone, recorded using a digital recording device and then transcribed into Word documents. The Director of Marketing and the Social Media Intern were interviewed together on April 15th. They were interviewed together due to their limited availability. The Dean and Director of Undergraduate Admissions were interviewed separately on April 8th and April 15th, respectively. The Director of Undergraduate Admissions also participated in the Facebook group and was assigned the pseudonym “Gwen Palmer.” The other three interview subjects did not participate in the Facebook group, and I will only refer to them by their job titles.

Additionally, I interviewed one other administrator, the Associate Director of Admissions, via email. This interview was conducted via email because the interview subject was out on maternity leave, and this was her preferred forum for answering questions during that period. As will be discussed in the following chapter, this administrator plays a particularly important role with Quint’s social media platforms, and, therefore, I didn’t want to omit her input despite the suboptimal interview format. This administrator did participate in the Facebook group, and I will hereafter refer to her either by her job title or by her assigned pseudonym, Emma Gilbert.

Research Questions & Methods

I will now discuss my research questions in the context of my methodology.

Research Question 1: How does a university use Facebook to communicate with prospective students?

In my research, I was looking for two specific protocols and procedural patterns in the university's usage of Facebook: content type and group management. In terms of content type, I looked for recurring themes and messages in the university's posts, student posts and in the university's interactions with prospective students. In addition to the type of content being posted, I also wanted to understand the thought process behind the selection of that content. Regarding group management, I wanted to know who is managing the Facebook, why they were chosen to manage the group and what training they received (if any).

The questions regarding content type were answered by the observational research. The interviews were used to determine the processes for selecting the content and for managing the content.

Research Question 2: Why does a university decide to use Facebook in its admissions and recruitment processes?

This question has two main components. First, I wanted to know what the university's internal goals for the Facebook group were, particularly in how it presents itself and what kinds of messages it wants to put forth. This information was gathered from the interviews. Second, I determined if the university's stated motivation is aligned with what actually transpires within the Facebook group. In other words, are the messages actually being put forth in the Facebook group consistent with the messages that the university intended? If the messages and the activity are not consistent, how does the university explain the discrepancy? This was done by comparing the content of the interviews with the observational data.

Research Question 3: How do universities determine if their social media strategy is successful for the recruitment of prospective students?

This question also has two main components. The university's mechanism for determining the success of the Facebook group in recruiting prospective students was identified in the interviews. This was compared with the apparent level of success present in the observational data. The "apparent level of success" was determined by analyzing the posts made by prospective students within the group. For example, if the university is using quantitative admissions data as the basis for claiming that the Facebook group is an efficient mechanism for recruiting students, while the majority of responses in the Facebook group are negative or apathetic, then there is a disconnect between the university's assessment and the apparent reality of the Facebook group.

Ethical Safeguards

In accordance with the example set forth by the research of Gajaria et al. (2010) and in adherence to the IRB regulations for internet research published by Arizona State University, the University of California, Berkeley and the University of California, Los Angeles, I took the following steps to ensure that my research meets established ethical standards:

- I notified the host university when my observational research took place.
- I asked the host university to post a statement notifying the community that observational research was taking place for the purpose of a doctoral dissertation.
- I did not identify the host university.
- I did not interact with any of the community members.
- I did not identify any community members by either their real names or their user names.

- I did create pseudonyms and only refer to the users by those pseudonyms. The key that linked the pseudonyms to the real/user names was kept in a locked cabinet in my home office.
- I did not identify any demographic information of any of the users.
- I kept the printed texts of the online communications in a locked cabinet in my home office.
- I used Google to determine if any quotes could be traced to their source. If a quote could be traced, I used a paraphrased version of the quote to ensure that it could not be traced. I found that none of the quoted material in the group could be traced by search engines.

Role of Researcher and Reflexivity

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Watt, 2007). In conducting the observational portion of this research, my role was entirely observational, and I did not interact with any of the research participants. In both the observational research and interviews, the collection and interpretation of the data was conducted through my personal lens. In conducting research that hinges largely upon personal interpretation of data, reflexivity is crucial to prevent a researcher's own opinions and behaviors from impacting the study (Watt, 2007).

The writing of memos is a common method for ensuring the inclusion of reflexivity in a qualitative study (Watt, 2007) and for keeping track of developing ideas and patterns emergent from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Memos are personal notes written by a researcher during the research process that allow the researcher to record his or her thoughts and emerging ideas about the research. By regularly writing and reading memos, the researcher is able to reflect upon his or her work to monitor his or her own thought processes (Watt, 2007).

As suggested by Corbin and Strauss (1990), I regularly wrote memos during the data coding process. This allowed me to both maintain a sense of reflexivity and foster a greater sense of conceptual detail through comprehensive note keeping (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). I wrote one memo every Sunday evening following the review of the previous week's transcripts and composed additional memos as needed during the process. The exact format and content of these memos was developed alongside the research project. The memos were kept in a file and stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home office.

Trustworthiness and Quality Assurance

Morrow (2005) proposed four parallel criteria for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These criteria roughly equate with similar criteria for quantitative research: internal validity, external validity (or generalizability), reliability and objectivity. I will now address the steps that I took to achieve these criteria.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the maintenance of internal consistency in a study. It “can be achieved by prolonged engagement with participants; persistent observation in the field; the use of peer debriefers or peer researchers; negative case analysis; researcher reflexivity; and participant checks” (Morrow, 2005, p.252). In addition to the discussed measures to ensure reflexivity, I persistently observed the participants on a daily basis for two months, and I frequently consulted with my dissertation mentor regarding the progress of the study. Regarding participant checks, I was unable to personally verify the identity of each participant due to both the nature of social media and the privacy requirements of the study. However, the participants have been verified by both Uversity and Quint University and, therefore, reasonable steps have

been taken to make participant checks. Therefore, reflexivity, persistent observation, research consultation and participant screening have all been used to ensure credibility.

Transferability

Transferability occurs when a researcher addresses the extent to which a study can be generalized to other populations (Morrow, 2005). This can be achieved by providing sufficient information about the participants of a study and the context in which a study is conducted (Morrow, 2005). I addressed transferability in two ways. First, it is not my intent to claim that the results of my study can be generalized to other similar situations. Second, although I did not describe the study's participants in order to protect their privacy, I provided basic descriptive information about the university being studied (without disclosing the identity of the university). Therefore, the study is clear about the type of institution in terms of basic descriptors (i.e., a private, medium-sized university in the United States). This information is time and context specific. However, despite the uniqueness of the context, the conclusions and insights that can be drawn from my study can be reflected in other institutions and contexts.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency of the analytic process conducted for the study. "This is accomplished through carefully tracking the emerging research design and through keeping an audit trail, that is, a detailed chronology of research activities and processes...and analytic memos" (Marrow, 2005, p.252). The audit trail can then be examined by peers or an adviser. I ensured dependability by maintaining an audit trail by following a strict research schedule and regularly composing memos and conducting these processes under the supervision of my dissertation mentor and committee members.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the acknowledgement that research is never truly objective. The measures needed to ensure credibility are similar to those needed to ensure dependability (specifically the creation of an audit trail). Therefore, I also ensured credibility through the creation of an audit trail (through the use of a regimented schedule and memos) under the supervision of my committee.

Limitations

Sampling Limitations

This study was limited to a single cohort and a single institution, and both of those characteristics impose limitations on the generalizability of the study. The single cohort means that the results will be the product of a unique group of individuals and the exact content being studied can never be replicated by another group. Therefore, the results must be considered unique to this group and are not necessarily applicable to any other group of prospective students.

The university featured in this study is a private, medium-sized university. The results could be quite different if similar research were conducted at, for example, a large, public university. In such an institution, the cohort of prospective students would be much larger and, consequently, the environment in the online group would likely be different because the quantity of members and amount of content would likely be greater. Conversely, similar research at a smaller institution would involve a smaller cohort and less content. These variables would alter not only the amount of available data but would likely also alter the social dynamics of the group being studied.

Methodological Limitations

The use of virtual ethnography as a methodology also imposes some limitations. First, the members of the Facebook group must self-select into the group. This particular cohort of prospective students also includes students who opted not to participate in the Facebook group, and this raises several concerns. There is no way to know how the content of the group could have been different if the non-members had chosen to participate, and it's impossible to know why some students chose not to participate. The insights and perspectives of those students are lost and could have impacted the study. Additionally, the demographic composition of the member and non-member groups is unknown and, therefore, it is unclear if demographic patterns among both groups would have emerged that might have impacted my analysis.

Second, the timing of the study prevents augmenting the qualitative data with valuable quantitative data. Specifically, the yield rate for this cohort was not known at the time of this research. Consequently, while this study analyzed the admissions process in the context of social media, the outcomes of that process are not known. It is impossible to know how successful the group was in recruiting students without also knowing the final yield rate for the group.

Third, the limited timeframe of the study prevented a more comprehensive presentation of the interactions in the Facebook group. The timeframe (March-April, 2014) was selected because the university's deposit deadline was May 1st and, consequently, the months just prior to that date proved the most active period of recruitment activity. However, the study did not include any interactions that took place outside of that timeframe and, consequently, it is unknown as to how such interactions could have impacted my analysis.

Third, the research methods did not include interviews with students and, therefore, did not explore their perspectives on the use of social media in the college enrollment decision

process. The observational research provided insight into the students' behavior during this process, but their opinions about the process are unexamined in this study.

Fourth, the study only includes students during the admission process, and the college experience obviously goes far beyond the point of admission. This study does not examine the academic careers of students beyond the point of admission and, therefore, isn't designed to determine if the student cohort is actually successful once they have entered college and if their social media experience contributed to that success.

Fifth, the precautions to protect participant anonymity prevented the inclusion of detailed demographic information in the study. The omission of participant demographic information thwarts any potential analysis connecting demographic characteristics with behavioral characteristics in the online group,

Finally, online ethnographies must be conducted with a certain level of blind trust. Quite simply, there is no way to be positive about the identities of those being studied. Due to the vetting processes conducted by both Uversity and the university, it is highly unlikely that an imposter could infiltrate the group. However, this can never be completely verified without any face-to-face interaction.

Chapter IV

Findings

This study sought to understand how and why universities used Facebook as an admissions tool and if such Facebook usage is aligned with the expectations and needs of prospective students. This chapter summarizes the study's findings and discusses how Quint University used Facebook as an admissions tool, why it used Facebook as an admissions tool and how it determined the success of Facebook as an admissions tool.

In response to the research questions, this chapter presents the findings based on the analysis of both the observational data and administrator interviews. For each research question, I first address the main question and then discuss the sub-questions. All of the referenced names are pseudonyms.

Research Question 1: How does a university use Facebook to communicate with prospective students?

In answering this research question, I will first describe the university's overall approach and philosophy in using Facebook as an admissions tool. I will then discuss the major themes that emerged in the administrative posts in the Facebook group, followed by a discussion of the major themes in the student posts and interactions in the group. Finally, I will analyze the similarities and disparities between the administrative posts and the student posts.

Administrative Responses

General Approach: Administrative Non-Engagement

In general, Quint administrators intentionally limited their direct interaction with prospective students in the Facebook group and instead allowed students to use the group as a forum to interact with each other. This approach is evident from the content of the group

transcript, as only 22 posts were made by administrators, accounting for 8.4% of the total posts made during the observation period. I will discuss the content of those posts in a later section.

In the interviews, administrators confirmed that this lack of direct engagement is intentional. One administrator noted that they “leave the space for them (students) to engage as peers” and that administrators only “insert ourselves if a question needs to be answered.” The Dean of Admissions echoed that intention, saying that the “purpose is to let them converse....with each other” and get to know each other prior to coming to campus. Another administrator noted that this approach is aligned with the unwritten rule of social media that conversations must be allowed to develop organically and that students should be allowed to interact without feeling like their interactions are being constrained and guided by the presence of administrators. Stated rather succinctly by the Director of Marketing, “they [students] don’t want to have it feel like there is an administrator there pushing an agenda for the students.”

The university’s overall approach is, therefore, one of administrative non-engagement. The belief held by administrators is that Facebook is best used as a forum for prospective students to interact with each other with minimal intrusions from administrators. This approach was evident in the content of the Facebook group and articulated by the administrators in interviews.

Administrative Key Messages: Logistical Information and Branding

Although the university’s administrators intended to directly engage the group as little as possible, the interviews revealed that they do have several key messages that they hope to convey through their social media. The messages can be grouped into the following categories:

University Policies and Procedures, Academics and Scholarships, University Community, University Events, and Religious Identity. Two of these categories (*University Policies and Procedures* and *Academics and Scholarships*) provide what the administrators perceived to be

vital logistical information for the students. The remaining three categories (*University Community*, *University Events*, and *Religious Identity*) represent administrative attempts to brand the university in a particular way, specifically as a close-knit and religious community. All of the administrator respondents identified at least four of those five categories as being key messages on the university's social media platforms. I will address each of these key messages as they manifested in the Facebook group.

University policies and procedures: Clarifying vital information. Administrators were primarily concerned with the dissemination of information on the university policies and procedures. Despite the general policy of non-engagement, Quint's administrators did interject whenever a question was asked or the group members seemed to be confused about a university policy or procedure. In both cases, the administrative response was posted quickly, indicating that the administrators closely monitored the group even if their posts were infrequent. In most instances, these interactions centered on confusion regarding housing policies, deadlines or student email accounts. For example, a post and resulting conversation about housing applications indicated that the students did not fully understand the format of a student's email address. Although an administrator was not directly questioned in this conversation, a housing administrator interjected a comment describing the correct way to format a student email address. Questions or confusion about housing or email policies were the only reasons why an administrator ever responded to a student's post other than to make a general, congratulatory remark when students announced their acceptance or commitment to the university.

On other occasions, administrators would post (rather than just comment) in the group to address an issue that group members were clearly struggling with. For example, a number of

students posted comments expressing confusion over the process of selecting a roommate.

Noticing this trend, an administrator posted the following:

Hi from the Housing & Residence Life office! Hope you are getting excited about living on-campus next year! You are more than welcome to select your own roommate (you would need to name them in your housing application on (School Mascot)web, and they would need to name you). However, the majority of our first-year students have random roommates. We match you with someone based on your building preference as well as your survey you filled out about things such as noise level, interests, sleep time, etc. We do a pretty good job of matching people, so if you don't find a roommate on here, don't worry!

This post triggered three comments from students requesting clarifications on the policy, to which the administrator responded with a comment in about six hours. The post I quoted above illustrates what a common administrative post looks like, but it should be noted that such posts were fairly rare, accounting for only 8.4% of the posts (or only 22 posts out of 262). Of those administrative posts, five were related to housing and email policies (the other administrative posts pertained to the other administrative key messages).

The *University Policies and Procedures* category is one administrative key message that is primarily concerned with the dissemination of information. Additionally, administrators also identified information about academics and scholarships to be a key message.

Academics and scholarships. All of the administrators stated that academic opportunities are among the primary focal points for the school's social media platforms. When asked about key messages, one administrator stated that "if I had to put it in some broad category, we try to make sure that we put an emphasis on academics, the type of programs we offer or the success of students in those programs."

Administrators wrote six posts that fit within this theme and emphasized academic opportunities in the form of either programs or scholarships. As an example of a post highlighting specific academic programs, one administrator posted the following:

Have you all looked at some of our distinctive academic programs. For those interested in leadership, take a look at our Comprehensive Leadership Program. For those of you interested in Entrepreneurship, watch the Hogan video. If anybody is interested in multicultural education, take a look at our UMEC video.

Similar posts emphasized the school's music and business programs. Regarding scholarships, several administrative posts described scholarships with approaching deadlines and supplied links to the related applications. For instance, one post directed students to apply for scholarships sponsored by the National Catholic College Admission Association.

University community and school spirit. All of the administrators emphasized that the university prides itself on having a friendly, close-knit community, and they want to convey that identity on the school's social media platforms. One administrator summarized this theme by stating that "it's such a gift that we have at Quint in general is this very happy, spirited student body and it's infectious." Similarly, six of the administrative posts can generally be described as supporting university community and school spirit. For example, an administrator posted a video profile of an alumnus who continued to support the university community by offering scholarships to current students. In a separate post during a sports event, another administrator posted that she could "hear students hootin' and hollerin' on campus from my office!" Posts such as these did not direct students toward any event nor give them any particular guidance on university policies, but they helped to create a general sense of enthusiasm, *School Spirit*, for the university community.

In addition to posts that promoted general enthusiasm, the friendly nature of the university community was also conveyed in another, more specific way. Administrators would often acknowledge whenever a prospective student announced his or her commitment to attend the university. There was only one instance where an administrator overtly expressed this enthusiasm in an initial post by stating that "it is so exciting to see all of you post your

commitment messages!” Although this was the only administrative post expressing this sentiment toward the whole group, every student post announcing a commitment was liked by at least one administrator. Notably, despite the frequent acknowledgements of these commitments, no administrator ever directly tried to comment on an individual student’s decision to commit to the university.

University events. Several administrators noted that one of the primary benefits of the Facebook group is its ability to promote the university’s events, also known as yield events, for prospective students. The Dean of Admissions stated that the Facebook group “has increased the number of students that have come to events that we’re holding” and described the Facebook group as being partially a “tool for yield events.” Administrative posts promoted a number of yield events during the observed period, including Preview Days that “are designed to introduce you to the campus” and reception dinners for accepted students throughout the country.

One event in particular seems to be of critical importance to Quint’s enrollment tactics, and that is the Quint Live Experience (QLE) weekend. QLE is a weekend-long event for admitted students during which students get to meet each other, engage in social activities, speak with university executives and faculty, and get a general sense of what the campus and university community has to offer. Additionally, this is the first time that many of the students meet each other, so it is an opportunity for them to see the type of students they would be spending their time with if they decided to attend the university the following fall. It is an opportunity for the students to bond with the university and each other, with the logic being that the formation of these bonds will increase the likelihood that a student will enroll at the school. According to all of the administrators, the event has been a resounding success. The Dean of Admissions anecdotally noted that attendance at the event has increased since the university started offering

the Facebook group for admitted students, although the Dean could not quantify the increase. From a student yield viewpoint, this event is critical because, as one administrator put it, “generally if we can get students here for that weekend, they will...commit.”

Interestingly, despite the proclaimed importance of this event from administrators, administrators did not post anything promoting the event during the observation period (the event took place several weeks after the start of the observation period). This anomaly could be explained by the Social Media Intern’s note that the students are more likely to discuss the event on Twitter than Facebook. Two administrative posts mentioned the event after it had taken place. One of those posts directed students to view photos from the event, and the other directed students to a compilation of Tweets (Twitter posts) posted by those that attended the event.

Religious identity. Quint is a Catholic university and two administrators emphasized that the school’s Catholic tradition is a key message on its social media platforms. The Director of Marketing said that “our Catholic...heritage is a big part of who we are as a university” and noted “that’s something that we’ll put emphasis on.” The Dean of Admissions also echoed the similar sentiment that the university administrators “really try to center around Catholic education.”

Although two high-level administrators identified religious identity as one of the key messages, this is the only key message that was absent in the administrative posts. The only time that religion was mentioned in the Facebook group by an administrator was in a comment to a student post that directed students toward several local churches. The administrators also mentioned that mass services are offered as part of the QLE event.

In sum, in terms of the branding key messages, administrators wanted to convey the school as a close-knit, exciting and religious community. However, only the *University*

Community and *University Events* themes were evident in the administrators' posts. The concept of *Religious Identity*, while emphasized by administrators in interviews, was marginalized in the actual content of the group.

Having summarized the group's communications from the administrative perspective, I will now discuss the student posts and interactions within the Facebook group.

Student Interactions

Approximately 91.6% of all the posts and comments in the Facebook group were made by admitted students. Just as with the administrative posts, several dominant themes emerged among the student posts: *School Choice Decisions*, *Housing and Roommates*, *Social Activities* and *University Events*.

School choice decisions. The decision to attend or not attend Quint (and the thought processes involved in that decision) was the most prevalent theme running through the posts of the admitted students. Of the 240 posts made by admitted students in the group, 81 of them (or 33.75%) were related to this topic. Within this topic, there were three distinct sub-categories: commitment announcements, commitment hesitation and commitment influence.

An announcement that a student decided to attend Quint was the most common type of post in this category. The following two examples illustrate such typical posts:

"It's official.. Quint University Class of 2018!"

"Officially committed to Quint last night! Couldn't be more excited"

Dozens of other similar proclamations were made in the group over the course of the two months. These posts typically inspired little conversation but were greeted enthusiastically by other students in terms of likes. Those posts received 12 and 13 likes, respectively, which are typical numbers for commitment announcements. For some individuals, the announcement to

commit is the first time that they post within the group. For others, their decision-making process could be traced through their posts before ultimately arriving at the commitment announcement. The following two examples represent both categories of individuals.

The first commitment announcement (“It's official.. Quint University Class of 2018!”) was posted by a student (Grant Tran, pseudonym). This was Grant’s first post in the group and it came near the end of the observation period, but he had been present in the group and reading the posts of other students for the entirety of the observation period. He frequently liked the comments of others (he liked a total of 11 posts before posting his commitment announcement). While Grant was relatively quiet about his decision-making process for making his commitment, he observed the interactions between the other members of the Class of 2018 (as he put it) before he decided to join them.

The second of the aforementioned commitment announcements (“Officially committed to Quint last night! Couldn't be more excited”) was posted by a student (Pamela Willis, pseudonym). Unlike Grant, Pamela had posted several times and made a few comments before ultimately announcing her commitment. She is a particularly notable example because she had previously made a post that falls into the category of commitment hesitation. About a month prior to posting her announcement to commit, Pamela posted the following:

“I'm from San Diego and am still deciding between Quint and Marquette. I'm majoring In Nursing and I love to do anything and everything! I especially like getting involved!”

This post and following conversation illustrate how a post expressing commitment hesitation resulted in a conversation that involved commitment influence. Another student (Yvonne Moody, pseudonym) responded to this post the following conversation transpired:

Yvonne Moody: I was deciding between those two schools, too, (and picked Quint)! Good luck with your decision!! :)

Pamela Willis: What made you choose Quint?

Yvonne Moody: It came down to the fact that the people at QU are just so amazing. From the two times I've visited QU, everyone is incredibly friendly and fun, but still cares about their grades. Plus Marquette is freezing haha (way colder than even (state name deleted) gets) and the campus doesn't have as much of a college-campus-feel!

Yvonne Moody: And Quint's study abroad program!

Pamela Willis: Okay thanks! It's going to be a hard decision because I like both the small setting and the city... I definitely am scared of the freezing weather though haha

Michelle Sparks is another student whose posts transformed from commitment hesitation to commitment announcement during the course of the observation period. In the first week of observations, Michelle posted the following:

I am still deciding between Boulder and Quint but I am looking forward to meeting and talking to people if I do choose Quint and I am looking for a roommate to so if you wanna talk just message me (:

Michelle specifically requested that people respond to her with private messages, so there was no resulting conversation to display. But Michelle then became very active in the group with a total of 29 comments and likes on other posts. Eleven days after her post expressing commitment hesitation, she then posted her commitment announcement:

Hey everyone I decided on Quint! I am super excited and can't wait to meet all of you (: my top dorm is cm! Message me if you want to talk or anything! I would love to get to know people ahead of time because I don't know anyone from my area coming to QU but I'm ready for all new faces (:

Pamela and Michelle are noteworthy examples of how commitment hesitation turning into commitment announcements. In another interesting case, a student named Tracy Figueroa expressed commitment hesitation and the resulting conversation exhibited commitment influence. Here is Tracy's initial post expressing commitment hesitation: Tracy initially expressed commitment hesitation when she posted the following: "Hey guys I'm from (Town Name

Deleted), deciding between (School Initials Deleted) and QU! I'm definitely (sic) leaning towards QU though, love tennis, the outdoors, I'm beyond excited!!!!”

A couple of other admitted students posted responses in an attempt to convince Tracy to commit to Quint (note that I replaced the name of the school's mascot with the generic “School Mascot” label):

Billy Andrews: QU for sure! go (School Mascot)s!

Grace Watson: Go to Quint!

Deanna Morales: Hey you should go to Quint! I had the same thought and I'm from (Town Name Deleted) too btw:) Three of the people I met at QLE has the same choice and are leaning, or already have chosen Quint:) and a plus is that the community and spirit is amazing there. :)

About two weeks after that exchange, Tracy announced her commitment to Quint in the following post: “Just committed! I'm so excited!! :)”

After making a decision on attending Quint, Tracy started influencing the decisions of others to commit to the school. A student named Jack Gray posted the following expressing commitment hesitation:

Hi guys! I'm from (Town Name Deleted). I really enjoy music (playing, dabbling in writing, and listening) as well as learning about computers, running and video games. It was really nice meeting some of you potential future (School Mascot)s yesterday :), while I'm not 100% committed to Quint yet it's definitely at the top of my list. Even if I didn't get to meet you, feel free to add me so we can get to know each other!

This prompted a long chain of responses (23 comments in total). A couple of students from the same general area as Jack started trying to convince him to commit to Quint, including Tracy:

Grace Watson: Yup I'm already committed!

Jack Gray: Nice! I'm starting to feel the pressure about making a decision haha. I really liked Quint when I visited Thursday though! What made you all choose Quint over other schools out of curiosity?

Grace Watson: I love the community, the people r super nice, beautiful campus, I like having lots of stuff around to do so (Town Name Deleted) is a great place to go into town and do stuff, everyone I know that goes/went there absolutely loves it

Jack Gray: That's reassuring to know people loved it then. My sister went there and she loved it too. I have spent a little time in (Town Name Deleted) but not enough to know what there is to do there haha. I know a lot of concerts I would love to go to happen there though so that's a plus! Campus was definitely beautiful even if it was raining the whole time :) have you decided on a dorm you want?

Tracy Figueroa: The people are sooo welcoming, your professors actually get to know you, and the campus is beautiful!

Jack remained active in the group for the duration of the observation period, but had not yet announced his decision by the end of my research. On the very last day that I observed the group, Jack expressed (in a comment responding to another post) that he was still unsure about what school to attend.

Tracy made another appearance wherein she attempted to influence the commitment decision of another student. As one last example of commitment hesitation leading to commitment influence, a student named Tyler Alvarado expressed such hesitation and openly requested that others explain their choice to commit to Quint. Here is Tyler's initial post:

“What's up guys! Still unsure if I wanna attend QU. From (Town Name Deleted), so I'm used to the city type vibe. Never visited QU so I'm unsure about it. Can anyone tell me why they've chosen QU?”

The other students (including Tracy) were quick to fulfill his request with the following comments:

Melanie Marsh: Campus is beautiful. The people are kind and down to earth. Best (Deleted) team ever. Great education programs (my major). The community is so supportive and always there for you. Hope you choose QU :)

Brad Horton: They really care about you. It's not like some giant school where you're just a name on paper, but everyone I talked to said they knew their professors very well by the end of the semester. You won't find that at Arizona state

Meredith Reeves: The community!

Tracy Figueroa: Honestly the people are very welcoming, (Town Name Deleted) has a big city in a small town kind of feeling, your professors actually get to know you!

Ann George: Come to QU with us! Everyone I've talked to on here is super nice! 😊👍

Grace Watson: You should visit it I'm sure you'd love it!

Much like Jack, Tyler remained active in the group but didn't announce his decision before the end of my research period. His last post came on the last day of observations (this is actually the same post that Jack commented on during the last day):

“Still unsure where to commit. AAAHHHHHH!!!”

Jack and Tyler are two students whose final decision remains unclear. On the other hand, Tracy is an example of a student who I was able to track through the entire decision-making process: She expressed hesitation, experienced influence from her peers, announced her commitment and then became an agent of influence herself.

In summary, the student interactions regarding school choice decisions validate the administration's lack of direct attempts to influence those decisions. Quite simply, there was no need for administrative interference because the other students became advocates for the university whenever one expressed any hesitation toward committing to the school. The group became a mechanism for marketing the university while allowing the administrators to remain relatively latent in the process. This also allowed the students to reach their own decisions organically without making the students feel as though their decisions were being guided by administrative messaging.

Housing and roommates. The second most popular topic among students was housing and roommates, as this theme appeared in 81 student posts (representing about 33.75%, or the same approximate percentage as school choice decisions). This topic includes three sub-categories: dorm selection, roommate selection and procedural confusion.

Regarding dorm selections, the students often made posts and engaged each other in conversations to help them decide which dorm they wanted to live in. This often resulted in the

students weighing in on the pros and cons of different dorms. For example, a student named Clifton Meyer posted the following:

“Hi! I am really excited to attend Quint next year! I have no idea what housing to choose. I know that I want it to be co-ed but other than that, I am clueless... anyone have any advice that might help? :)”

Other students quickly offered advice to Clifton in the following exchange:

Sarah Chambers: I've heard CM and Lauper are good!

Rose Pena: CM is loud and social, not good if you are big on sleep and quiet. Lauper is quiet and has sinks in the rooms. Parcels is the newest and cleanest, and I personally think it's the perfect mix between social and quiet. Also Parcels has LLCs. Good luck deciding!

Ed Mack: Like Rose said CM is supposed to be the most social and is where you would be able to meet the most people.

Grace Watson: Lauper has sinks which is good for like brushing your teeth in the mornings, cm is loud and roudy (sic) and good to meet a lot of people, Parcels is the nicest and people call it "hotel Parcels"

Student conversations about dorm selection tended to become more repetitive (and placed a surprisingly large emphasis on the value of sinks). For example, a student named Oscar Mendoza wrote the following post requesting advice about dorm selection:

“Enrolled this weekend and cant wait for next year. Thinking forward to residence Im probably gonna go Lauper, anybody else doing the same? anything good/bad about Lauper?”

The other students responded with the following comments and advice for Oscar:

Elias Terry: The windows are big for lots of natural light

Deanna Morales: Sinks!

Ryan Hall: Best dorm!

Oscar Mendoza: why do you say that?

Ryan Hall: A lot of space, one of the only dorms with sinks, and a huge window to the outside. It also has a great location. Close to food, fitness center and the field. I just like the feel of the dorm. My sister stayed in the dorm her sophomore year and loved it! Hopefully I will be there next year when I go to Quint!

Oscar Mendoza: thanks man. Thats where im planning on being as well

All of the other conversations about dorm selection are fairly similar, but such conversations are abundant. In addition to selecting dorms, students also used the forum as a way to select their roommates. This would often come in the form of a post wherein a student briefly described themselves in search of a similar person to act as their roommate. For example, a student named Miranda Houston posted the following:

“Hi there! I am from (Town Name Deleted) and am ready to be a (School Mascot)! I'm interested in civil engineering, basketball games, and being social! I am excited to meet tons of new people and experience life! I am hopefully going to be in CM so if you're interested in a roommate let me know. Oh and a social life is a must!”

This post did not receive any comments, although it did receive eight likes. It was fairly common for such posts to receive few, if any, comments. I speculate that the lack of comments is because the students preferred to respond to roommate requests with private messages instead of public comments. That is largely conjecture for this particular post, but some roommate seeking posts did explicitly ask for responses to come in the form of private messages instead of public comments. Here are some examples of such posts:

“Oh and I'm interested in finding a roommate! Check my profile and message me if you want to talk!”

“Hey I'm from (Town Name Deleted) and I just committed to Quint! I'm looking to find a roommate. I'm neat and quiet. I am really into music (the Rolling Stones, arctic monkeys, nick waterhouse) and I am a film fanatic (Quentin Tarantino, Wes Anderson, Scorsese). I'm easy to talk to and a very understanding person. Message me if you're interested!”

“Hi! I'm from (Town Name Deleted) and Quint seems great! I think I might live in Madonna or Parcels. It would be nice to choose a roommate rather than a random one I think. Message me if you're interested, and check or my bio! “

In all of those cases, the other students respected the poster's request for private messages and the posts received no comments. In another example, an initial post didn't mention a desire

for a roommate, but the resulting conversation veered toward that topic until it went private.

Here is that initial post from Diana Elliott:

“Hi, my names Diana and I'm from (Town Name Deleted. I don't know very many people going to Quint and would love to get to know people. I play soccer and lacrosse and like watching football.”

Diana’s post did not explicitly state that she was looking for a roommate, although one could argue that it’s implied. The resulting conversation went explicitly into that topic:

Meredith Jefferson: Are you looking for a room mate?

Diana Elliott: Yeah I am!

Meredith Jefferson: I think we might be a good match! What hall were you planning on living in?

Diana Elliott: I haven't decided yet, my first choice I think would be CM

Meredith Jefferson: Ok my first choice is the leadership LLC in Parcels :) send me a fb message if you're interested

There were a few cases when a student didn’t specify that he or she wanted to talk to potential roommates via private messages. For example, a student named Bryan Russell posted the following:

“Anyone looking for a roommate?, also i'm bringing a flat screen to college with possibly a Ps4 or xbox one not sure which any ideas?”

Since Bryan didn’t request private responses, students responded with public comments, resulting in the following conversation:

Dexter Kelly: Hey man I'm down to be your roommate! I haven't played a playstation in years but I play Xbox pretty often. I'd say the Xbox. Up to you though! If you want a roommate, I'm down!

Brad Horton: What style dorm are you hoping for?

Bryan Russell: c/m or lauper

Brad Horton: I'm still looking for a room mate too, and I really don't care where I'm staying, so let me know if you are interested.

Dexter Kelly: Do you guys know what the good dorms are?

Brad Horton: No bad dorms. I just want one close to the athletic center and the cafeteria.

In summary, the students used the Facebook group as a mechanism for identifying potential roommates. In most cases, the roommate screening process took place in private messages but with an initial announcement coming in the form of a public post. In those rare instances when this was not handled privately, other students were quick to respond and communicate on the subject.

Another way that students used the group to discuss housing and roommates was to use it as a forum for seeking clarification involving policies and deadlines. As discussed in the previous section, these are among the only types of posts that prompted the administrators to interact directly with the students. For example, Billy Andrews posted the following question:

“When do we find out about housing? and roommate situations for next year?”

Jacob Douglas, a housing administrator, was quick to respond and the following exchange ensued:

Jacob Douglas: The residence hall assignments and roommate pairings will not be completed and sent out for quite awhile (not until the summer) because Quint waits until all students have made their housing deposit before we begin pairing students with rooms or roommates. The priority for placing students in residence halls is still based upon when the housing deposit comes in, but we do not start filling residence halls until we know all of the students who will be coming and living on campus (so that we can be intentional about all roommate pairs and residence hall communities we are developing on campus, rather than only providing the best option for the first students who pay the deposit). So, don't worry you have plenty of time before the housing process gets rolling, for now just kick back and root on the (School Mascot)s...(Phrase Deleted)...!

Billy Andrews: Thanks!

In a similar case, a student named Brandi Ramsey posted the following question:

“When is the supplemental application for Parcels due? And if you have a roommate, will you both be accepted together?”

Another housing administrator was quick to respond with the following:

Dan McDonald: Hi Brandi! Good question - the supplemental application is due on Friday, May 16th at 5pm. You can find the form here: (Link Deleted). You will need to use your (School Mascot)mail username and password to log on. You and your prospective roommate would both need to individually apply and name each other as roommates in the space provided. Hope that helps!

Sometimes administrative interference wasn't necessary even in these situations because the students were also quick to respond and clarify things for other students before the administrators had a chance to do so. For example, Karla Stewart posted the following expressing confusion about the housing application process:

I want to fill out a supplemental housing app for one of the Living Learning Communities. However, when I tried to log in using my (School Mascot)mail information it said my username or password was incorrect. I copied and pasted exactly what I use to log in to (School Mascot)mail, so why isn't it working? Also, when I first tried to set up (School Mascot)mail using the information that I received by snail mail, it said my Student ID or verification was incorrect even though I typed in everything correctly, and I had to call the IT Help Desk in order to get everything to work in the first place. Am I the only one having issues related to (School Mascot)mail?

A student named Jeanette Williams responded to help her with the process, resulting in the following exchange:

Jeanette Williams: I also had some problems when I tried to reset my password. Your username is not the (School Mascot)mail address itself; it is everything before the @ symbol and then your password should be the same. Hopefully that should work :)

Karla Stewart: Thank you! That worked.

Jeanette Williams: I'm so glad :)

Dexter Pierce: Thank god. I had the same issue

Although the administrators did not participate in this conversation, two administrators liked Jeanette's first comment, indicating that administrators were monitoring the conversation and approved of the solution that was offered. The Facebook group not only functioned as a way for students to gather information about possible living spaces and roommates, but it also

provided a forum for them to ask questions and gain clarifications about the housing and roommate selection processes from both administrators and each other.

Social activities & meetings. The students also tended to discuss and plan social activities for the coming semester and planned group meetings for prior to the start of the semester. This theme emerged in 37 posts, representing about 15.4% of all student posts. For social activities, specific topics included baseball, ultimate Frisbee, intramural sports, playing musical instruments and skiing. For example, Dean Ray posted the following to express his interest in skiing:

“I'm super excited to be at Quint next year. I'm hoping that there will be some good skiing.”

This prompted responses from other students interested in the activity:

Nelson Larson: (Town Name Deleted) is an hour and a half away in (State Name Deleted) and it's awesome! I skied there last spring break when I visited.

Katrina Duncan: We also have Mt. (Town Name Deleted) and 49 degrees north within like an hour tops!!

Nelson Larson: I'm big into skiing so I'm pumped that you guys are too!

Margie Wallace: Yay!! Good ski hills, I'm glad.

This exchange is typical for interactions in this category, as the students used an initial post to express an interest in an activity to draw the attention of others interested in that activity. They would then discuss it and start making plans to engage in the activity together after they arrived on campus. In other cases, students set up social gatherings and meetings before the start of the semester. The students typically set up these meetings so that they could meet other Quint students from the same geographic area as them. For example, Ann George posted the following:

“Anyone near (Town Name Deleted) want to meet up sometime?:)”

That post prompted the following responses:

Brandi Ramsey: Yeah we definitely should!

Ann George: Yes!!

Sarah Chambers: Yeah for sure!

Katrina Wilkins: Someone should create a meetup! :)

Sarah Chambers: Created the meetup!

Jean Burns: I'm near (Town Name Deleted) too! It would be really fun to meet all of you! :)

Clinton Cain: Also in the (Town Name Deleted) area! 😊

The “meetup” that they referred to is an event scheduled through Facebook that other group members could informally sign-up to attend. As she indicated in her comment, Sarah created the meetup for this particular sub-group of students and announced it via a post:

“Just created the meetup Get together for coffee / hanging out”

When viewed in Facebook, the words “Get together for coffee / hanging out” in that post served as a hyperlink to the meetup’s event page. The use of these meetups was quite common. Here is a pair of posts announcing the creation of similar events:

“Just created the meetup Get together for coffee/Beach day!”

“If any of you guys are from the (Town Name Deleted) area, you should join the meet up page!! We're meeting on May 3!”

Through these meetups and planned social activities, the Facebook group facilitated student bonding in two distinct ways. First, it enabled them to organize informal social gatherings prior to their arrival on campus. Second, it allowed them to identify other students to participate in various social activities once the semester had started. Together, these elements of the student communications enabled them to form friendships based upon mutual interests earlier than they otherwise would have been able to do so.

University events. In addition to informal social gatherings, the Facebook group provided the students with a forum to discuss official university events. This theme was only present in 14 student posts (about 5.8% of posts). While there were relatively few posts in this

category, such posts received a particularly strong response. For example, Irvin Reeves posted the following about a university-sponsored social event for accepted students:

“Is anyone trying to go to the (State Name Deleted) QOOB? “

That post received eight likes and prompted the following nine comments:

Marshall Franklin: Yep!!

Becky Strickland: I do too is there multiple qoob s?

Clara Burton: Yeah! It sounds really fun

Marshall Franklin: Yeah there is two QOOBs actually! One in (Town Name Deleted) and one in Montana!

Nelson Larson: I'm trying to go too! It looks awesome!

Tara Moreno: Can someone enlighten me as to what this means? Please:)

Nelson Larson: QOOB stands for Quint Out of Bounds (I think). It's a rafting and mountain biking trip that freshman can go on the week before orientation! I've heard it's a great way to bond with your incoming class.

Tara Moreno: That's awesome! Thanks for the explanation! (State Name Deleted)'s a pretty amazing place. :)

Marshall Franklin: There's also one in (Town Name Deleted) that's in July!

This conversation is a particularly noteworthy example for a few reasons. First, an administrator liked Nelson’s second comment (explaining the nature of the event), again indicating that the administrators were monitoring the conversations but were allowing the students to resolve questions amongst themselves. Second, it illustrates that the Facebook group not only allowed students to interact with other students who were planning to attend these events, but also, in Tara Moreno’s case, to find out about events that they might have not otherwise attended.

Of all of the university events, QLE received the strongest response in the Facebook group. In the days leading up to the event, the group was filled with posts expressing anticipation for the event. For instance, Johnnie Glover posted the following:

“anyone going to QLE?!”

That short and simple post received 16 likes and 28 comments, making it the most commented-on post during the two months that I observed the group. The following comments are only a portion of the conversation that resulted from that post:

Erika Hamilton: Of course!! Can't wait!

Esther Swanson: Yessss

Johnnie Glover: woooo!! so pumped haha can't wait to see y'all!

Donna Rogers: I'm so excited! It'll be my first time visiting campus :)

Michele Sparks: Me!! (:

The conversation continued in that vein for 23 more comments as more students enthusiastically confirmed their intention to attend the event. In addition to posts about QLE prior to the event, students also referenced the event several times after it had taken place. Perhaps most notably, a student named Ed Mack stated that he decided to attend Quint because of the event:

Hey all, I'm from (Town Name Deleted) and after having the best weekend ever at QEL and being introduced to many awesome people, I truly felt like I was welcomed in as family, I've made up my mind and am officially committing to Quint! I am so excited to be a (School Mascot) next year!!!

Although this is the only post that explicitly linked the event with a student's decision to attend the university, other posts similarly expressed satisfaction with the event. In short, the Facebook group provided the students with the opportunity to both discuss and learn about university-sponsored social events.

Comparison of Administrative Key Messages & Student Interactions

In discussing how the university used Facebook to communicate with prospective students, I first identified the administrators' key messages and organized them into four categories: *University Policies and Procedures*, *University Community*, *University Events* and *Religious Identity*. I then discussed the major themes present in the actual student interactions that took place in the group. Now, I will discuss the extent to which each of the administrative key messages was present in the student interactions.

Presence of administrative key messages in student interactions. The discussion of *University Policies and Procedures* was both an administrative key message and the only topic which administrators and students frequently discussed together. Although this topic was certainly present in the group, it occurred relatively infrequently compared with other topics that generated more interest from students (such as *School Choice Decisions* and *University Events*) and revolved almost entirely around two topics (housing applications and the format of student usernames). However, when any questions were raised by students regarding policies or procedures, they were promptly answered by either administrators or other students (and given an administrative seal of approval in the form of an administrator liking the student's answer). A lack of inquiries about policies and procedures might be due to the fact that the students were simply given enough information on this topic prior to entering the Facebook group.

Similar to *University Policies and Procedures*, the *Academics and Scholarships* category was a fairly unpopular topic among students, even though it was identified as an administrative key message. While administrators created six posts that highlighted specific programs and scholarships, these posts did not garner much enthusiasm among students. For example, an administrative post about an internship program offered through the university's business school

only received two likes and zero comments. A similar post about the university's music program only received five likes and one comment. Of course, this information could have been useful to more students than those numbers would indicate. But the number of likes and comments generated by posts on this topic were very low compared with other posts.

The topic of programs and scholarships was also fairly uncommon among student interactions. Students would commonly declare their intended program of study (I denoted these posts/comments with the label "Major" on the transcript), but it was not usually the focal point of student conversations. In other words, students often told each other their intended major, but they rarely discussed the topic in detail or weighed the pros and cons of particular programs and majors. As a typical example, Sandra Wright mentioned her intended major in the following post:

Hi I'm Sandra and I'm from (Town Name Deleted) which is about 10 minutes away from Portland. I hope to live in either Madonna or Welch, not sure which one yet, and major in Business Administration with a minor in Environmental studies. I love country music, playing softball, and being outdoors. Go (School Mascot)s!

However, the comments that this post received focused on her athletic interests, not her academic major:

Jean Burns: Did you play volleyball for (Town Name Deleted) a few years ago?

Sandra Wright: Yeah I did in like 7th grade!

Jean Burns: I think we were on the same team! With Meagan as our coach right?

Sandra Wright: Yes! Oh my gosh that was forever ago! How have you been?

The students continued discussing this for several more comments, but without any further mention of their intended academic programs. As one more example, Thelma Davis mentioned her intended major with the following post:

"Hi guys! My name Thelma and I'm so excited to attend Quint! I'm majoring in nursing and I like to stay active and be social(: I love to meet new people and I can't wait for the school year to start!"

That post prompted the following comments, which again did not touch upon the intended academic major:

Monica Marshall: Where are you from Thelma? (:

Thelma Davis: I'm from (Town Name Deleted)! It's a little town on the coast of (State Name Deleted)!

Monica Marshall: Oh awesome! Im from (State Name Deleted). Do you know what dorm your thinking about staying in?

Thelma Davis: Oh cool! I'm hoping to be in Lauper

This conversation also continued for several more comments, but the conversation never turned toward academics. Almost all other posts that mentioned an academic program resulted in a similar conversation, as the students focused on just about every aspect of the post except the academic program that was mentioned.

Interestingly, engineering was the only academic major that seemed to be an exception to this rule. For example, Wilbur Collier posted the following:

“Hey guys, I just committed to Quint and couldn't be happier! I'm from (State Name Deleted) and I'm planning on studying mechanical engineering! I'm also big into skiing, both downhill and nordic, and the outdoors in general! I can't wait to meet you all this fall!”

Although the first comment focused on skiing, the conversation then turned to the engineering program, albeit briefly:

Irvin Reeves: Congratulations on Quint. I cannot wait to meet another mechanical engineering student. Have you thought about the (Name Deleted) Engineering Community?

Wilbur Collier: Irvin I defiantly have thought about doing the engineering community and I am going to apply once I get all the information I need to fill out their application! Congrats on your admission as well! And Irvin, we'll definitely have to ski together

Two other posts mentioned the engineering major and received responses from other students majoring in the subject. Although three posts might not be a significant portion of the group's interactions, it is worth noting that engineering was the only academic program that

consistently prompted any acknowledgement from other students. In almost all other cases, students ignored the subject of academics and instead focused on more social aspects of posts.

University Community is an administrative key message that was, in a sense, quite prevalent in the student interactions. From the administrative perspective, this message was communicated through posts showing that the existing university community is friendly and close-knit. The students responded well to this, frequently stating that the welcoming environment was a significant factor in their decisions to commit to the university (as indicated by the comments that I quoted in the discussion of *School Choice Decisions*).

While the administrators emphasized the values of the existing university community, the students extended those values to the creation of the university's newest community: the incoming freshmen class. Taken as a whole, the transcript of the Facebook group is the story of the creation of a community through social media interactions. This story is evident in developing friendships among sub-groups of students, the supportive likes and welcoming comments whenever a student announce their commitment to Quint, the establishment of meetup events and several posts that just generally expressed a student's eagerness to be a part of this community. Such posts include the following examples:

"Pretty excited to join this (School Mascot) community next year!!"

"Proud to call myself a (School Mascot)! So stoked for next year and to meet all of you#(School Mascot)Nation"

"Hey guys!!!! Whose excited to go to QU in the fall?!?!"

"It looks like a ton of pretty people are going to Quint next year. We are one fine freshman class."

Those posts (and several other similar ones) indicate an affinity for both the existing university community and the emerging sub-community of the incoming freshman class. The student interactions indicate that the administrative key message of *University Community* did

permeate through the Facebook group in terms of both facilitating the students' entrance into the existing university community and enabling the students to form their own sub-community prior to their arrival on campus.

The topic of school events, identified by administrators as a key message, was also fairly popular among the students. As discussed in the previous section, student discussions of university events were not particularly frequent. However, such posts were popular when they did appear. Interestingly, administrators only made a few attempts to directly promote such events through posts of their own and instead largely left the students to generate enthusiasm for these events themselves. Although attendance figures for these events are unknown, the student discussions of these events (particularly QLE) indicates that the Facebook group did help build awareness for them, an observation that is in line with the Dean's description of the group as a "tool for yield events."

Of all the administrative key messages, *Religious Identity* was the least present and popular within the group. This key message was not expressed in any administrative posts and was only mentioned in one student post:

Hi everyone! I am officially committed to attend QU next year and I am so pumped! I am looking to live in CM and I am looking for a roommate. Just to tell you guys a little about me... I am from (Town Name Deleted) , I love sports and school spirit (I will be that person to paint my face, scream my head off at basketball games, and be decked out in (School Mascot) gear), I am a Christian and my faith is super important to me (will be looking for a church when I get to campus), I am a fairly neat person, I don't like to wake up early, but i don't go to bed super late either, and I am just a super laid back guy who is really excited to explore and soak up all that QU has to offer. I am also a business major. Feel free to add me or contact me if you are interested!

That post, from a student named Mitchell Mullins, resulted in the following conversation:

Lisa Lindsey: So exciting! I'm committed to QU and I know of some really great churches in the area - it was actually a good part of my decision to go to QU over other schools. I'm looking forward to meeting you next fall! :)

Mitchell Mullins: Looking forward to meeting you too, Lisa! Can you message me any of the info you found on the churches?

Carrie Morton: I'm in the same boat as you guys! I'd love to know the churches around the area too. I know that there is one church called New Community that is walking distance from campus that a lot of Quint and (School Name Deleted) students go to!

Katrina Duncan: Hey guys! I'm from (Town Name Deleted) and I know quite a few churches too!! Message me if you want any specific info :)

Marshall Franklin: Is anyone thinking of going to saint Al's?

Christian Russell: Keep in mind that University Ministry is here to help you connect with faith communities both on and off campus. Reach out to them for help in finding the right church for you.

Margie Wallace: I am glad faith is so important to other students as well! It's a very important part of my life too.

It should be noted that Christian Russell is an administrator, so the administration did interject with a supportive and informative comment when the subject of religion did arise. However, that post and conversation represent the entirety of the religious discussion in the group.

In summary, *University Community* was the most prominent administrative key message in the student interactions. *University Policies and Procedures* and *University Events* were also fairly popular topics among students while the topic of *Academic and Scholarships* was rarely discussed. *Religious Identity* was barely present in the student interactions. Considering the variations in the presence of administrative key messages in the student discussions, there appears to be an inconsistency between what the administration deemed important and what the students considered to be worthy of discussion. Two broad categories, *Institutional Fit* and *Social Fit*, emerged to explain that inconsistency by further combining the administrative messages and student interactions.

Institutional fit vs. social fit. As discussed, research has shown that the information transferred in a Facebook group dedicated to the college admissions process can be divided into

two broad categories: *Institutional Fit* and *Social Fit* (University, 2013a). Information in the *Institutional Fit* category facilitates a student's entrance into the formal structure of a school while information in the *Social Fit* category facilitates a student's entrance into the informal, social structure of a school. The content of this particular Facebook group indicates that information in the *Social Fit* category resonates more strongly with potential students.

Of the four thematic categories that comprise the vast majority of student posts and interactions, three categories (*Housing and Roommates*, *Social Activities and Meetings* and *University Events*) distinctly fall into the broader category of *Social Fit*. The discussions about housing and roommates almost always had a social and informal tone, as students frequently weighed the pros and cons of particular dormitories and identified potential roommates based on mutual interests. The majority of discussions about dorms did not focus on the formal processes involved in securing housing in a particular dorm but instead on the social environment of particular dorms (which dorms are more conducive to partying or studying, for example). While there were instances in which students asked questions about the formal processes involved with housing (questions that would fall into the *Institutional Fit* category), those posts were significantly outnumbered by those that took a more social tone. In short, the students were more interested in identifying an appropriate social environment (in terms of both their dorm and roommate) than they were in the formal procedures for entering that environment.

The *Social Activities and Meetings* and *University Events* categories of student interactions can also be classified within the realm of *Social Fit*. Interactions in the *Social Activities and Meetings* category can be characterized as *Social Fit* because those interactions focused entirely on social bonding via informal group gatherings and shared activities. Interactions in the *University Events* category are also classified as *Social Fit* because they

almost exclusively focused on the social benefits of attending the events rather than any procedural information that was obtained at the events or the formal processes involved in attending the events. The students treated both university-sanctioned events and student-organized events as social gatherings first and information-gathering events second.

School Choice Decisions, the final category of student interactions, could be interpreted as either *Institutional Fit* or *Social Fit*. Although students did converse on the institutional (formal) benefits of Quint as compared with those of other universities, those conversations tended to revolve around the social bonds being formed between the students and the university community. When asking other students why they chose Quint over other universities, responses typically focused on the friendly nature of the school's community rather than on the academic benefits of the school. Even when students were trying to decide what institution to attend, their focus tended to stay on the school's social environment rather than the formal aspects of the university. The community-focused nature of the group was also evident whenever a student announced their commitment to the university, as such posts were typically greeted with dozens of likes and, less regularly, congratulatory remarks. This was the group's informal way of welcoming an official new member to the incoming class.

The administrative key messages and posts involved elements of both *Institutional Fit* and *Social Fit*. However, posts in the categories of *University Policies and Procedures* and *Academics and Scholarships* (both of which clearly fall within *Institutional Fit*) were generally met with a subdued response from students. Students only acknowledged information regarding policies and procedures when it was absolutely necessary for them to resolve a problem with paperwork or their student account, while posts about academic programs were generally ignored. The administrative key messages that were embraced by students (specifically *University*

Community and *University Events*) are closely aligned with *Social Fit*. *Religious Identity*, the administrative key message that was practically non-existent in the group, could have taken either an institutional or social tone. However, the lack of discussion on the subject makes it difficult to place into one category.

Taken together, it seems that the Facebook group primarily served as a mechanism for the exchange of information in the *Social Fit* category, while administrators provided *Institutional Fit* information as needed. Of course, students do need information about formal policies and procedures. For instance, they need to fill out various applications, choose an academic major and attain academic advisement. However, the interactions in this group pointed out that students get that information from other sources and prefer the Facebook group to be a more social, informal environment that allows them to socially assimilate into an incoming class. The administration's hands-off approach to the management of the group facilitated this, as the students were largely left to talk among themselves and administrators made few attempts to steer the conversations in the direction of their key messages. The administration even stuck to that approach when it seemingly meant allowing their key messages to be marginalized. Briefly stated, the Facebook group functioned as a social and informal environment where formal (institutional) information was available by request.

Research Question 1a: How does a university decide what content to post on Facebook?

The university has two distinct types of social media. The first type is the private Facebook group that I observed. The second type includes all of the school's public social media pages that can be viewed by anyone. The two types are designed for different audiences and,

therefore, feature different content. I will first discuss the process for selecting content for the private group and then discuss the content selection process for the public social media.

Private Facebook Group: Student-Driven Content

For the private Facebook group, Quint's administrators chose content based upon their key messages and student questions. As I discussed, administrative posts were fairly rare in the Facebook group and administrators typically only posted content out of perceived necessity. As Emma Gilbert, Associate Director of Admissions and the primary administrator for the group, put it, the administrators only post content "if a question needs to be answered. The only other times we post within the app is to announce a deadline or an event or share pertinent information." In other words, the university chose content based upon the needs of the students. Those needs could be stated overtly in the form of a direct question, or they could be anticipated by administrators (for example, administrators could post that a deadline was approaching even if a student didn't inquire about it). While this student-driven approach to selecting content is in sync with the university's overall approach with Facebook communication, it did have a pair of consequences.

First, the student-driven approach meant that the administrators lacked a systematic methodology for selecting content. While the group was regularly monitored, the administrators didn't seem to have a set plan or timetable for posting specific content. The content selection was either reactive to student questions, or individual administrators decided to post content that they deemed necessary for their particular area (for example, a housing administrator would post about an approaching deadline for housing applications). While this approach did seem conducive to encouraging student participation in the group, the administrators largely acted as individuals and lacked a cohesive plan as a group.

Second, the student-driven approach allowed the students to dictate the presence of the administrators' key messages. While the administrators were generally in agreement about the university's key messages, the presence of those messages in the group was determined by student interest rather than administrative effort. The key messages that were well-received by students (primarily regarding events and the community) were present in the group, while key messages that the students didn't openly embrace (particularly academic programs and the school's religious identity) were not prominent themes in the group's interactions. For example, this explains why *Religious Identity*, though identified by administrators as a key message, was almost non-existent as a theme in the group. Only one student discussion mentioned it and, therefore, the student-driven approach to content selection was prevalent in that the administrators left the message to remain unexpressed rather than forcing the message to be present in the group.

Public Social Media: University-Driven Content

Quint's public social media pages on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are managed differently from the private group. These pages are accessible to a broader range of constituencies (alumni, parents, friends, students, prospective students, fans, etc.) and, consequently, must feature more varied content than the Facebook group that exists exclusively for accepted prospective students. In the words of the intern, the public content must "cover everything important on campus as well as important things with alumni and sporting events." This broader range of content required administrators to take a more systematic and university-driven approach to content selection.

The public social media pages are overseen by the Director of Marketing and (more directly) the Social Media Intern. They (the marketing department) decide what content to post

that best reflects the administrative key messages. However, not all content comes from the marketing department. Both academic departments and administrative departments (alumni relations, admissions, athletics, etc.) can submit content for posting on the school's main social media pages. Such content can be submitted in one of two ways. First, the departments can email the content to the intern. The intern would then evaluate the content, identify where it should be posted and post it. Second, the marketing department hosts a monthly meeting and invites all employees that generate social media content and/or oversee unofficial university social media pages (the unofficial, or "rogue," social media pages are those not created or managed by the school's marketing department and, therefore, do not necessarily comply with the university's social media strategy). At these meetings, content is submitted for posting, and the overall direction of the school's social media content is discussed.

Overall, the content selection process for the public social media pages differs from the private Facebook group in three ways. First, the content is intended for a much broader range of constituencies than the private group and is, consequently, more varied than the content in the private group. Conversely, the content in the private group is much more targeted because only one group (accepted prospective students) is present. Second, the content selection process for the public pages is more systematic (I will discuss the management of these processes in the following section). Third, the content selection in the public pages is more university-driven while the process in the private group is primarily student-driven.

For both the public and private social media, administrators stated that they needed to strike a balance between an active approach (meaning administrators posting content) and a reactive approach (allowing users to post content and responding as necessary). However, administrators also acknowledged that the public social media pages feature a more active

approach while the opposite is true of the private Facebook group. In other words, the majority of the content in the public pages is posted by the administrators (a university-driven approach) while the majority of the content in the private group is generated by users (a student-driven approach).

Research Question 1b: Who manages the Facebook group for the university?

In addition to differences in content and the content-selection process, the private and public social media pages are also managed differently by the university. In discussing the differences, I will first describe the management of the private group and then describe the management of the public social media.

Private Facebook Group

The private Facebook group is managed entirely by the admissions department. During the two months that I observed the group, five administrators posted in the group. Additionally, student workers in the admissions department also monitored the group and answered questions. During my observations, I did not find any evidence that these students (also known as the Student Communication Team or StudCom team) were present in the group. However, one administrator explained their absence by saying that they were busy making phone calls to prospective students during my observation period.

As with content selection, there is little evidence of a systematic approach for selecting or training administrators (or student workers) to work with the Facebook group. The administrative group is self-selected from the admissions department personnel, as any admissions administrator who wants to participate is encouraged to participate. Training is minimal for three reasons. First, most administrators are already familiar with Facebook, and,

therefore, there is little need for technical training. Second, the admissions team is already familiar with the university's key messages because those messages remain the same across all of the department's initiatives (the messages aren't unique to the social media platform, in other words). Third, the student-driven philosophy utilized for the private group dictates a reactive approach to dealing with the group. For the most part, administrators just need to monitor the student interactions and intervene when the students have a question pertaining to an administrator's specific area of expertise. In the context of the overall approach, all that an administrator needs in order to participate in the group is knowledge of the school's key messages and an understanding of how to use Facebook.

The Associate Director of Admissions, identified here as Emma Gilbert, is usually the primary administrator who oversees the group. When asked about the oversight of the group, both the Dean and Director of Admissions immediately described Emma as the key administrator. In addition to participating in the group, Emma worked with Uiversity on contract agreements, incorporating new features, inviting students into the group and tracking results. During the time of my observational research, Emma was out on maternity leave and, therefore, I observed the group under abnormal administrative circumstances. Due to those circumstances, Emma only posted once during my observation period. According to the other administrators, Emma would normally be a more active participant in the group.

In sum, the Facebook group is logistically managed by a single administrator within the admissions department. The rest of the admissions administrators are invited to participate. Those that do participate then monitor the group regularly, but post sporadically and only as necessary as dictated by the reactive student-driven approach. Although several administrators

(including the Dean) acknowledged that this management approach is not systematic, all of the administrators seemed confident in its efficiency and none expressed a desire to change it.

Public Social Media

Like the private Facebook group, administrative control of Quint's official public social media pages is centralized within a single department. In this case, the marketing department manages and monitors the content of the public Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages. The Social Media Intern has oversight over these pages and is directly responsible for posting content and monitoring questions and activity on the pages. The Director of Marketing and the Associate Vice President of Marketing set the overall strategic plan for the pages in terms of content, but it is the intern who carries out the plan and handles the day-to-day maintenance of the pages. Both the marketing and admissions departments identified the same key messages for this content, although it is unclear if the similarity of the two departments' messaging strategies is the result of collaboration.

Unlike the private Facebook group, a wide variety of departments submit content to be posted on the public pages. However, this content still has to be filtered through the marketing department with the intern serving as an informational gatekeeper. All of the university's departments submit content to the intern for posting on the school's various social media pages. The intern then evaluates it and schedules it for posting. The only instance when a department posts directly onto the pages without the intern is to document university events that the intern is unable to attend. However, even in the case of such events, the intern must be notified of such posts and must coordinate access for the employees who want to post. Under normal circumstances, the marketing department's graphic designer is the only other person who has direct access to the pages.

It should be noted that this process only applies to the university's officially sanctioned social media pages. The university only considers the pages operated by the marketing department to be official despite a number of other unsanctioned pages that exist across the major social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram). According to the intern, various academic departments and social clubs operate such pages and openly present themselves as being affiliated with the university. The marketing director noted that they are planning a social media audit to identify all such rouge pages, but do not currently know how many exist nor have a plan for monitoring or incorporating their content into the official pages.

Summary

The primary distinction between the private Facebook group and the public social media can, therefore, be summarized by its specific purpose. The private group is used entirely as an admissions tool with the intent to increase the university's student yield rate. The public pages have a less distinct purpose because they cater to a broader range of constituencies, although these pages could generally be summarized as branding tools. This difference in purpose (admissions tool vs. branding tool) is manifested in both differences in the overall approach (student-driven vs. university-driven) and management structure (the private group is managed entirely by the admissions department, while the public pages are managed by the marketing department with input from various other departments). This distinction raises the question as to why the university specifically chose a private Facebook group as an admissions tool.

Research Question 2: Why does a university decide to use Facebook in its admissions and recruitment processes?

In responding to this research question, I will first provide the background on how Quint University started using Facebook, and, more specifically, the Facebook application developed

by Uversity, for admissions and recruitment. I will then provide the reasons identified by administrators for using Facebook and the Uversity application for those purposes.

Background

The private Facebook group run through the Uversity application is not Quint's first attempt at creating such a community for recruitment purposes. Initially, the university attempted to use an internal networking site run through Target X, a company that provides internal social media and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems for higher education. The problem, though, was that this required admitted students to create new personal social media pages just for this purpose in order to participate. This created a significant barrier to student participation and the project was quickly abandoned.

With the failure of the internal networking site, the university started examining ways to use an established social media site for admissions, as an established platform would increase the likelihood that students already have pages on the site and eliminate the participation barrier posed by the internal site. At this point, the Dean of Admissions read an article about the Gates Foundation providing funding to Uversity, which was called Integral at the time. Intrigued by the potential in Uversity's applications, Emma Gilbert, the Associate Director of Admissions, was tasked with contacting the company and exploring a potential partnership. Emma started speaking with Uversity representatives in January, 2011 and became an "innovation partner" with Uversity in June, 2011. According to Emma, this arrangement allowed Quint to get a close look at Uversity's products, participate in focus groups and provide feedback on the applications. Sufficiently pleased with what they saw, Quint's administrators decided to become full partners and started using the application for the following admissions cycle.

Reasons for Using Facebook

Quint's administrators identified three main reasons why they chose to start using Facebook and the Uiversity application for admissions and recruitment. First, it allowed them a significant level of control over the site's content. Second, it enabled them to create a single site for communicating with prospective students, students and alumni (although, as I will discuss, this idea didn't pan out). Third, it enabled them to reach prospective students on a platform with which the students are already familiar.

Administrative control. Several administrators claimed that a major benefit of utilizing a private Facebook group for admissions was that it created a more manageable forum in a couple of ways. First, a public Facebook page is, as the Dean of Admissions put it, "too open." Such a public page would allow any Facebook user to post content and would, consequently, make it more difficult for administrators to monitor the content and ensure that the page served its purpose as an admissions tool. Stated differently, allowing all Facebook users (including those who are not prospective Quint students) to access the page would likely result in content that is not conducive to the recruitment of students. Second, the privacy of the group allowed administrators to tailor their messages toward a specific group, as opposed to the public social media pages that must represent the interests of multiple constituencies (alumni, sports fans, parents, etc.). Since only admitted prospective students are allowed into the group and each person must be invited by the administrators, the university knows exactly who is in the group. Such control over the group membership makes it easier to tailor messages and create a constructive environment for a specific audience.

While the private Facebook group allows administrators to manage both content and membership more easily than a public page, the administrators also identified a downfall to using

Facebook for communicating with prospective students. The Director of Undergraduate Admissions lamented a functional shortcoming of Facebook that prevents the administrators from highlighting particular messages. Specifically, Facebook does not allow the administrators to keep a particular post at the top of the group's newsfeed (in internet terminology, such a post is known as a "sticky"). When content is posted in the group, it is only at the top of the page until another post is made, which would then go above the previous post. As more posts are made, previous posts become buried underneath the more recent posts. For example, if the administrators wanted to post about a particularly important upcoming deadline, that information would only be featured prominently at the top of the group's page until the next post knocked it downward in the newsfeed. This functional deficiency prevents administrators from controlling the placement of posts and is not effective in emphasizing specific messages, especially for a prolonged period of time.

Student life cycle management. Although the university's original plan was far more ambitious, the Facebook group was used solely as an admissions tool and managed entirely by the admissions department. The University application allows a particular class of students (the incoming freshmen class of 2014 being the current example) to remain together in a group after the admissions cycle has ended. Then the next incoming class would get its own group the following year. The admissions department originally intended to use the group initially as an admissions tool, but then have other administrative departments continue to maintain the group for other reasons. Once the students were deposited and enrolled, the intention was for the group to remain intact but be managed by the Student Life department. At that point, the Student Life department would use the group as a mechanism to keep a particular class of students together in a single place for distributing messages relevant to active students (as opposed to prospective

students). Once the students graduated, the group's management would then be passed on the Alumni Relations Office, which would then distribute messages relevant to that particular class of alumni. Therefore, the Facebook group could serve as a forum for communicating with specific classes of students for their entire student life cycle, from prospective students to current students to alumni.

However, Quint's Student Life and Alumni Relations departments chose not to adopt the application for reasons that aren't clear. This has been a disappointment for the admissions department, as the admissions director stated the following:

I really wish our Student Life...area would use the tool because it could be a great tool that carries them through the time they are on Facebook....so I could see this tool being utilized in other ways, but right now it's definitely serving a good purpose for admissions.

While this functionality has gone unused, two things are worth noting. First, as indicated by the previous quote, the admissions department is still satisfied with the application, even though they have not benefited from it in all the ways that they intended. Second, this is an organizational issue within the university and is not indicative of a fault within Facebook or the application itself.

Going “where the students are”. The most common phrase among administrators when explaining the choice to use Facebook as an admissions platform is that the administrators wanted to “go where the students are.” The administrators continually read papers and attended conferences that emphasized the fact that most college-age people have Facebook accounts and that social media is, as the Director of Admissions put it, “the next frontier in marketing and outreach.” Unlike the attempted internal networking site, most people in the university's targeted demographic already have Facebook accounts, and the university wanted to communicate with them on an environment where they are already active. Although private networking sites (such

as those studied by Ferguson, 2010) allow universities to design websites specifically tailored for their unique goals and purposes, such sites create barriers to students because they are unfamiliar and require students to create new profiles just for those sites. Facebook, on the other hand, is familiar to students and students likely already have profiles on the site.

The Rise of Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat

My discussion of the school's motivation for using Facebook as an admissions tool has, thus far, focused entirely on the school's private Facebook group. The omission of the school's public Facebook page from this discussion arose from administrative concerns about the dwindling viability of Facebook for admissions purposes and the fact that prospective students rarely interact with the public page.

The school's public Facebook pages, managed by the Director of Marketing and the Social Media Intern, are used to interact with multiple constituencies, including alumni, parents, students and prospective students. However, the marketing director and the intern agreed that alumni are the group that visits and interacts with the public Facebook page the most. When asked about prospective students, the intern said that they "generally don't see a lot of incoming questions or comments on our Facebook." In terms of the university's public social media platforms, the majority of interactions with prospective students take place on Instagram and Twitter and not Facebook. Even the QLE event, which was a popular topic in the private Facebook group, was not discussed by prospective students on the public Facebook page. As the intern put it, the event "was big on Twitter and Instagram and not really Facebook at all."

This sentiment was echoed by Gwen Palmer, the Director of Undergraduate Admissions. For prospective college students, she said that "Facebook is done. It's dead." Gwen went on to

say that college-age students have shifted away from Facebook and now “everyone is on Instagram and Snapchat.”

Snapchat is a fairly new social media site that was first launched in 2011. It is essentially a media-sharing site that allows users to send pictures and videos to a selected group of recipients. The uniqueness of the site lies in the fact that the sent videos and pictures are only visible to the recipient for about ten seconds before they are automatically deleted (hence, they are called “snaps”).

Therefore, the university makes a distinction between how it communicates with prospective students in public social media versus how it handles such communications in the private group. Although the key messages remain the same, these messages are communicated publicly via Instagram and Twitter while Facebook is still used to communicate privately. As noted by one administrator, the university is aware that Snapchat is increasingly popular among prospective students, but administrators haven’t yet figured out how to utilize it. It could be speculated that the difference in preferred social media sites is associated with the age of the users. Alumni, who are obviously older than prospective college students, prefer to communicate via Facebook, while the younger prospective students have moved toward Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat. This shift was identified by admissions administrators as a major concern and a challenge to their plan to be “where the students are.”

Summary

The university had specific reasons for incorporating a private Facebook group into its admissions strategy: the need for administrative control over social media, the goal of enhancing student lifecycle management and the desire to “go where the students are.” Additionally, the distinction between interactions with prospective students in the private group and the public

social media has been magnified by the decreasing popularity of Facebook among college students. With these in mind, I will discuss how these motivations and developments are reflected in the university's actual use of Facebook.

Research Question 2a: Is the university's motivation for using Facebook aligned with its actual use of Facebook?

Research Question 2b: If there are discrepancies between the actual activity and the motivation, how do university administrators explain them?

These two questions are closely linked and, therefore, I will answer them in tandem. As discussed, the university had three main motivations for adopting Facebook as an admissions tool: the ease of administrative control, the potential for student life cycle management and the desire to communicate with students on a platform that is already popular with them. These motivations have aligned with actual outcomes with varying levels of success.

Motivation vs. Outcome: Administrative Control

The private Facebook group has seemingly fulfilled the administrative need for an admissions social media platform that is easily monitored and managed. As promised by University when Quint served as an "innovation partner," the admissions department has had complete control over the membership of the group, allowing administrators to confidently assume that only admitted prospective students can view the content of the group. This has had several benefits. First, administrators do not have to worry about strangers interacting with students in the group. This notion arose when I questioned one administrator about the students' tendency to post open requests for rides to school events. Noting that such posts could lead to dangerous situations if the group were open to anyone, the administrator said that they "kind of let those go" because they "know no one is on there that is outside of our network and that

creates a feeling of safety.” If the group wasn’t established with such strict privacy settings and narrow definition of who is eligible to join, the administrators would have had to be much more vigilant in monitoring the interactions between students and outsiders.

Second, the level of administrative control allowed administrators to solely post content aimed at the interests of prospective students. While administrators posted infrequently, their posts always pertained to topics of interest to this specific audience, such as decision deadlines, housing policies, etc. If the administrators didn’t have such control over their audience, they would post content that appealed to a broader range of audiences, as the marketing department does with the public social media pages.

Finally, the control allowed by the private group enabled the administrators to implement their reactive, student-driven approach to managing the group. Since the group members were all prospective students, they were all interested in similar topics and faced similar problems. Sharing such similar circumstances, the students found common ground and communicated with each other easily on topics and issues that affected all of them. Consequently, the group was largely self-sufficient and needed little interference from administrators in order to keep the information and conversation flowing.

In short, the Facebook group did suit the university’s need for an admissions social media platform that was easily managed. The university’s overall reactive approach to managing the group would likely have not been feasible on a non-private, less-controlled platform.

Motivation vs. Outcome: Student Life Cycle Management

This motivating factor did not come to fruition. According to one admissions administrator, the Facebook group was conceived as “starting with accepted students into student life into alumni, that there was kind of a system throughout the life phase.” However, the

admissions administrators all seemed disappointed by the fact that this grander vision was not realized. Although the group and the Uiversity application were embraced by the admissions department, the school's Student Life and Alumni Relations offices were not keen on continuing the use of the group beyond the point of admissions. None of the admissions administrators appeared to know why those other departments were uninterested in this concept. This expanded functionality has been unused thus far.

Motivation vs. Outcome: *Going “Where the Students are”*

This motivation has seemingly worked out in the context of the Facebook group, but the administrators seem concerned about the future of Facebook as a viable online environment for interacting with prospective students. On one hand, administrators acknowledged that the majority of people in their target age demographic do have Facebook accounts. The amount of activity in the group seemingly supports that claim, as 284 prospective students participated in the group during the observation period. According to the admissions data on the school's website, that figure would represent about 25% of a typical freshmen class. The administrators attributed the high-level of participation to the fact that most people already have Facebook accounts and, therefore, the use of Facebook eliminates such participation barriers as forcing members to create new accounts and familiarize themselves with an unfamiliar site format.

However, this enthusiasm was tempered with growing apprehensions about the future viability of Facebook in this context. Although most college-age people may still have Facebook accounts, administrators fear that they are increasingly uninterested in the platform and have shifted toward Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat as their preferred social media sites. This suspicion was confirmed by the Social Media Intern, who remarked that she rarely interacted with prospective students on Facebook because such individuals prefer to interact using Twitter

and Instagram. The increasing popularity of Snapchat is particularly troubling. As one administrator bluntly stated, “I don’t know how Snapchat is ever going to help us.”

For the time being, it seems that the Facebook group has fulfilled the administration’s goal of going where the students are. However, this may not be the case for long. The university plans to continue using Facebook for admissions but will have to constantly reevaluate it. “We’re going to have to reevaluate next year and the year after as those numbers start to dwindle and we need to figure out where they are,” noted one administrator. The goal of “going where the students are” may have been met for now, but the best place to find a particular audience will likely be a challenge going forward in the constantly changing landscape of social media.

Summary

The university’s motivations for using the private Facebook group are reflected in the actual use of the group to varying degrees. The group did meet the university’s need for administrative control. Although Facebook’s popularity is waning with the school’s target demographic, the need to interact with students on a popular platform was met. However, the goal of enhancing student lifecycle management was largely unattainable (although this was a shortcoming of the university, not the group itself).

Research Question 3: How do universities determine if their social media strategy is successful for the recruitment of prospective students?

Regardless of the university’s motivations for using social media, the primary goal of the Facebook group was to increase admissions and yield rates. It is, therefore, critical to address the success of the Facebook group in the context of that goal.

The evidence of the social media strategy’s success has been largely anecdotal. When asked about the level of success achieved by the Facebook group, the Dean of Admissions

seemed unsure of the answer. “So....that’s a great question, so now that you talk about it, I should probably be asking for reports and I’m not sure that I’ve seen any,” she said. Despite the Dean’s regrets over the lack of formal reporting, some data does exist to support the use of the Facebook group. The Associate Director of Admissions pointed out that 85% of enrolled students in 2013 downloaded the Facebook application. In 2012, 78% of enrolled students had downloaded the application. The Dean also acknowledged that attendance at yield events (such as QLE) had increased since the school started using the Facebook group, although she couldn’t attach a figure to the increase. These claims are inconclusive; the university has no way of knowing if the students who downloaded the application actually enrolled because of the application or if the Facebook group actually increased attendance at yield events. The administrators only know the use of social media is positively related to such increases.

The difficulty of establishing causation between the use of Facebook and any such quantifiable increases is at the heart of the university’s core challenge when it comes to measuring success of this initiative. Simply stated, it is difficult to quantify the value of engagement. The Associate Director of Admissions also noted that “the main way the university evaluates success of our social media strategy is engagement. On Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, etc. we look to see how the public interacts with us.” With such a philosophy, a high level of activity on a social media page would regard the social media strategy as being successful. The administrators did acknowledge that such value can be difficult to explain without any direct ways to quantify it. The intern noted that “it can be hard to explain that maybe there isn’t a direct connection between interactions and likes with real-life things that we can track, but if you get a lot of interaction, it’s valuable.”

Despite this difficulty, the administrators seemed satisfied with anecdotal evidence and a positive relationship as evidence of the success of the Facebook group (and social media in general) for admissions and the general promotion of the university. The university's use of social media to foster engagement with its constituents and raise brand awareness has, according to administrators, had immeasurable benefits. The Director of Marketing noted that "it's hard to quantify and measure an ROI (Return on Investment) on it, but from how I've seen our presence grow on social media over the last few years, I think it's been a net very positive for us."

Considering such comments, the university's overall approach to determining the success of its social media strategy appears to be qualitative and anecdotal. In the next section, I will address how these measures of success are aligned with the university's management of the Facebook group.

Research Question 3a: Does the university's determination of success align with the actual activity in the Facebook group?

Research Question 3b: If there are discrepancies between the university's determination of success and the actual activity, how do university administrators explain them?

The university primarily determines its success based on the level of engagement on its social media platforms. The university's strategy with the Facebook group has been to promote engagement by allowing the group to function as a place where students can engage with each other with limited administrative interference and engage administrators if needed. This engagement strategy has seemingly been successful based upon both the volume of activity in the group and the anecdotal data supplied by administrators.

In order for the university to take a more quantifiable approach to measuring success in an attempt to establish direct connection, they would likely have to take measures that would

compromise their attempts to minimize administrative interference in the Facebook group. For example, the evaluation of the effect of the Facebook group on increasing yield rates would likely require a survey to determine if the Facebook group was a deciding factor in each student's decision to enroll (or not enroll) at the university. However, the use of such an instrument would go against the administration's desire to be as unobtrusive as possible and allow the students to interact without feeling that their interactions are being closely monitored or directed by administrators.

Measuring success is, then, an extension of the university's overall philosophy in the management of the Facebook group. The administrators have taken a student-driven approach to both the management of the group and the determination of the group's success. In sticking to that approach, the administrators sacrificed direct measurements of success in favor of maintaining the group's status as a student-centered online environment. In that sense, the management and the evaluation of the group are aligned.

Chapter V

Conclusion

On the surface, this dissertation research was a marketing study. It was about the measures taken by a single institution to sell itself to a group of potential customers (or prospective students, in academic terminology). However, the act of conducting and relating this research became something else. It became the story of the formation of a group, specifically the formation of the Quint University freshman class of 2014. For two months, I observed the forging of friendships, the development of a group and the emerging kinship between not only the group's members, but also between the group and the university that facilitated the sense of group membership.

In the end, the outcome is that of any other marketing study. The potential customers (students) either decided to purchase or not purchase a product (enrollment in Quint University to get an education). It was the journey to that conclusion that was unusual, even more unusual than I expected when I started working on this project. In traditional marketing, a company puts out messages in order to entice customers. In this case, the university administrators did little to promote or emphasize their own messages. Instead, they allowed the messages to be largely constructed and communicated by the customers themselves. The company (university) mainly provided a forum for those customers to meet each other and form the bonds that led to their emergence as a unified group of customers (students). In that sense, this has been a study of reverse marketing: a form of marketing where customers sold the product to each other by communicating over social media.

In this chapter, I will discuss the implications of that process, and my reflection on studying it, as it relates to practice, theory and methodology (specifically the act of conducting virtual ethnography). I will then conclude with some suggestions for future research.

Implications for Practice

In the opening chapter of this dissertation, I noted that 100% of all colleges in the United States now report using some form of social media in their admissions and recruitment strategies, and Facebook is the most popular site for this purpose (Barnes & Lescault, 2011). While conducting this research, I have noticed several implications (both encouraging and cautionary) about the incorporation of social media into the college admissions and recruitment process.

Choosing the Correct Social Media Platform

A recurring theme in my interviews with administrators is the need to choose the social media platform that best suits both the university's purposes and its audiences. This particular issue can be further divided into discussions of two distinct topics: (1) the benefits of public networking sites versus the benefits of internal networking sites and (2) the selection of appropriate public social media sites.

Public networking vs. internal networking. In choosing to use Facebook to host an admissions group, a university must deal with the technological confines and limitations of Facebook. Although generally satisfied with the site, Quint's administrators did express frustration with their inability to highlight important messages for any length of time, as Facebook messages are quickly buried by subsequent messages. The alternative to dealing with such pre-existing limitations is the creation of an internal networking site, such as the FACES and Rendezvous sites studied by Ferguson (2010). The creation of internal sites allows the user interface, functionality and content to be tailored to the needs of a specific institution. However,

this uniqueness is also the inherent problem for internal sites because it creates barriers for new users. For the billion people that already have a Facebook account, joining a Facebook group is a simple task that only requires a few clicks. However, joining a unique, internal site requires users to create new profiles and passwords specifically for that site. A university must choose between optimizing functionality for itself and minimizing barriers for users.

Public vs. private groups. If a university decides to use a public networking site (like Facebook) to create an admissions group as Quint University did, it must then decide if the group is going to be public or private. By using Uiversity's application, Quint chose to create a private group that is only available via invitation to admitted students. This allowed administrators to tailor the site specifically for a single audience to a single purpose without any concerns about who else might be observing the group or interacting with the group's members. This also allowed the group members to communicate openly with each other over shared interests and concerns, as they could be assured that everyone in the group was in a similar situation (considering becoming a student at Quint) and in a similar age demographic. This allowed group members to socialize easily with minimal administrative interference. The downside of a private group is that it does create barriers (albeit minor ones), as site users would have to join the group and agree to the terms-of-use policy. However, the level of socialization and engagement that I observed in Quint's private admissions group indicates that that is a negligible problem compared with the benefits of utilizing a private group.

Selecting appropriate sites for specific audiences. If a university decides to engage its constituents on public social media sites, it is critical that it choose the sites that are appropriate for specific audiences. In my conversations with Quint's administrators, it became clear that they perceived Instagram and Twitter as being more viable platforms for communicating with

prospective students, while Facebook was perceived as being more popular among alumni. These perceptions were based on actual interactions, as prospective students rarely used the school's public Facebook page to interact with the university and instead commonly communicated via Twitter and Instagram. However, prospective students were open to the idea of using Facebook when a private Facebook group was created explicitly for that purpose.

In a similar vein, universities must keep up with the rapidly changing social media landscape. While the data suggests that Facebook is still the most popular social media site for college admissions (Barnes & Lescault, 2011), universities can't assume that Facebook will remain the most viable social media site. Indeed, Quint's experiences suggest that Facebook's popularity is already declining among college-age people and that it is being supplanted by Instagram and Twitter within that demographic. Snapchat has also risen rapidly in popularity and, to the frustration of Quint's administrators, does not seem conducive to student recruitment and admissions.

These changes in social media are particularly troublesome for college administrators because most social media sites (such as those discussed by Ferguson, 2010) and applications (such as the one developed by Uversity) are either built within Facebook or are structurally modeled on Facebook. If the Facebook format is falling out of favor with college students, administrators will have to rethink their approach to social media or risk losing touch with their audience. It should be noted that I do not imply that Facebook has ceased to be a useful admissions platform. Quint's Facebook group was quite active and engaged and, despite their concerns over Facebook's future, Quint's administrators frequently pointed out that the majority of students do have Facebook accounts. However, despite having accounts on the site, they have grown increasingly unlikely to use the site. Universities (and application developers like

University) will have to monitor this trend closely and refocus their efforts away from Facebook and toward developing ways to use emerging social media platforms to recruit students. For example, a university that figures out how to use Snapchat to recruit students might have a competitive advantage over its peers, at least until Snapchat's popularity is usurped by something else.

Choosing the Correct Messages and Communication Style.

Once a university has chosen a proper social media platform to communicate with prospective students, it must then decide how it wants to communicate in terms of both communication style and message selection.

Matching communication style with purpose. The administrators at Quint University tailored their communication style on social media to their specific purpose in communicating with particular audiences. This resulted in two distinct communication styles: (1) university-driven and (2) student-driven.

The university-driven style was used by the Marketing Director and the Intern on the school's public social media sites, such as Instagram, Twitter and the public Facebook page. As discussed, the primary audiences for those sites are alumni and fans of the university. These audiences are looking to stay connected with the university by learning about what's happening on campus or, as the Social Media Intern put it, they can "see a day in the life of Quint." Since these messages are primarily about the university (hence why I call it the university-driven approach), it requires that the majority of posts come from within the university. Therefore, the majority of content on these sites comes from administrators and is aimed at keeping external audiences informed of updates and activities within the university community.

The student-driven style was used by the admissions administrators in the private Facebook group. In this context, the purpose was not to distribute information, but to allow the group members to assimilate into the university community in hopes that they would then enroll at the school. The administrators' approach was to allow the prospective students to post the majority of content and interact with each other with minimal administrative interference. By interacting and forming friendships with each other, the students essentially recruited each other to join the university community as enrolled students. With that approach, the majority of content in the private Facebook group was generated by the students.

Another way to describe the different styles is that the administrators are active in the public sites (by posting the majority of content and directing the conversation themselves) and reactive in the private group (by allowing the prospective students to post most of the content and direct the conversation). However, the two communication styles do not have to be mutually exclusive. In Quint's public social media, administrators allow other Facebook users to post content and questions and then respond accordingly. Likewise, administrators did post content and answer questions in the private group when necessary. However, one distinct communication style was always dominant and dictated by the purpose and audience of a specific form of social media. In both cases, administrators allowed their communication style to be determined by the needs of specific audiences rather than by university policy.

Message selection. All of the administrators identified similar key messages for the university's social media. However, the actual content posted in the private Facebook group was not necessarily reflective of those messages (I did not examine the content of the school's public social media pages, so I can't comment on that content). Of the five primary categories of administrative key messages, two (*University Community* and *University Events*) were well-

received by students, while the other three (*University Policies and Procedures*, *Academics and Scholarships* and *Religious Identity*) were largely ignored by students. Overall, students tended to be more interested in topics and conversations that allowed them to determine their social fit in the institution and were less interested in learning about how the institution (e.g., the official policies, procedures, programs) fit them.

Instead of trying to force the unpopular key messages into the group's conversations, Quint's administrators allowed those messages to be obscured by more popular subjects. This seems to be an unintentional consequence of the administrators' student-driven approach that called for them to, as one administrator put it, "follow the rules of social media and that is allow conversations to develop organically." In other words, administrators only emphasized their key messages when the student conversations allowed them to do so. The only exception to this occurred whenever administrators felt that they had to mention important pieces of information, such as an approaching deadline, without prompting from a student. This approach seemed to work, based on the volume and apparent enthusiasm of the student interactions in the group.

This could be a difficult lesson for university administrators, as it indicates that messages in such an environment should be dictated by the students. With this approach, a university may learn that its marketing messages, which are often closely tied to the identity and brand that a university hopes to project, are largely useless in efforts to attract students. If a university is going to engage prospective students on social media, it must allow conversations to develop naturally without unnecessary attempts to direct the conversation toward a predetermined message or theme. In a sense, this means that effective use of social media requires that universities relinquish some control over their own messaging and recognize that the interests

and needs of the audience are more important than the university's branding strategy. In the light of student recruitment, a key message only remains a key message if it attracts students.

Blending Quantitative and Qualitative Evaluation

Quint's administrators used a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to evaluate the usefulness of the Facebook group in student recruitment. The need for quantitative measures is clear in recruitment initiatives because, in the words of one administrator, "in admissions, it always comes down to numbers." Either a university is able to recruit enough students to remain financially viable or it doesn't, and that question is logically assessed by analyzing enrollment figures. Consequently, administrators pointed to several statistics, suggesting that the Facebook group has been a successful recruitment tool (specifically that 85% of the enrolled students in 2013 downloaded the Facebook application and that the school's yield rate increased by 2.5% in the last two years since it started using the application).

However, administrators also acknowledged that these numbers do not tell the entire story. The administrator who noted that admissions "always comes down to numbers" also stated that "the main way that the university evaluates the success of our social media strategy is engagement...we look to see how the public interacts with us through social media." The Dean of Admissions seemed slightly embarrassed when she admitted that she doesn't request formal reports evaluating the group's activity, but quickly noted that the main benefit of the group occurs "once that admitted group is solidified....they start talking to each other." This recognition of non-quantifiable benefits extended to the school's public social media, as the marketing director noted the value of general brand awareness even when that awareness is difficult to measure.

Both quantitative and qualitative measures of social media efforts present unique challenges for administrators. In the case of statistics, it is very difficult to establish causation between the use of social media and any quantifiable enrollment changes. While Quint's administrators did point toward statistical evidence of the recruitment prowess of Facebook, they also stressed that social media is only one of many factors that go into student recruitment. One administrator summarized this by saying that "the reasons why a student enrolls in a school can be fivefold...there are so many things, it's usually not one thing." The Dean of Admissions, while recognizing the value of the Facebook group, noted that financial aid is likely the single largest factor in the school choice process for many students. While some quantitative measures may indicate the success (or lack thereof) of integrating social media into recruitment efforts, administrators must be cautious about claiming any causal relationship between social media usage and enrollment data.

While the quantitative evaluations may be plagued with potentially misleading data, qualitative evaluations come with challenges as well. As noted by all of the administrators that I interviewed, it is difficult to quantify and explain the value of engagement and interaction. If a person likes a school's post or comments on a school's page, it could be impossible to place a measurable value on that interaction. The successful incorporation of social media into a school's admissions and recruitment strategies may be expensive, and such expenses may be difficult to justify without a quantifiable return on investment for the university.

The overall implication for university administrators is that while the benefits of social media may be difficult to measure, that doesn't mean that social media isn't worthwhile. Like those at Quint, administrators will likely have to embrace the engagement of audiences on social media without relying too heavily on metrics to determine the success of their efforts (unless

such reliable metrics are developed). The establishment of open communication and good will with one's constituencies must be considered valuable, even if it is difficult to measure that value.

The Uniqueness Caveat

This dissertation is a case study and, as such, it must be considered a unique situation. All universities are different and all incoming freshmen classes are different. Consequently, it can't be assumed that the results and interactions described in this study could be replicated elsewhere. For administrators, the uniqueness caveat has two further important implications. First, colleges must represent themselves honestly on social media. Second, such an honest representation must be positive in order for social media to be a valuable recruitment tool.

By all administrator and student accounts that I encountered while conducting this research, Quint University is a particularly cheerful and efficient institution. The administrators constantly described the campus as a friendly, close-knit community. The students frequently commented on the welcoming and responsive nature of the school. Both administrators and prospective students raved about the school's recruitment events. During the course of my research, I did not see or hear a single negative comment about the university. The apparent success of the private Facebook group hinged largely on this positive perception, as the students shared positive stories and views about the school.

Not all universities will benefit from such honest discussions. In choosing to host such a private admissions group in social media, universities must be prepared to deal with the open and candid conversations that are going to take place in the group. If a university is not positive or responsive in its interactions, or if it does not offer a welcoming environment, such efforts on social media will potentially backfire as prospective students share negative stories and views about the school. Before using a Facebook group for admissions, a university must make an

honest appraisal of itself and determine if the conversations in the group are likely to have a beneficial or detrimental effect on enrollment.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the implications for practice, this research suggests several specific recommendations for admissions practitioners using social media for student recruitment. These recommendations pertain to the type of social media used and the management structure surrounding it.

Regarding the type of social media, a private group hosted on a public networking site is likely the best type of social media for the recruitment of college students. The use of a private group has benefits for both administrators and students. It allows administrators to control the membership of the group and, consequently, create and manage an online environment that is tailored specifically for members of that group. For students, a private group creates an intimate setting wherein they can get to know each other and interact with confidence that the other group members share similar characteristics (e.g., they are all prospective students for the same university). The use of a public networking site (such as Facebook) to host the group removes membership barriers because it greatly increases the likelihood that prospective students are already familiar with the site and have active accounts. These conditions allow the development of friendships and a group dynamic that is essential for the social formulation of an incoming freshman class.

For the moment, Facebook is still the ideal site for hosting such an admissions group. Although the site's popularity has fallen behind Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat among college-age students, the structure of Facebook is conducive to large group interactions. Additionally, although many college students may not actively use Facebook as much as other sites, they do

still typically have active Facebook accounts. Therefore, despite the waning popularity of Facebook, a private Facebook group is likely the best type of social media for increasing student yield rates.

Regarding the management of the group, the admissions department should be in charge of overseeing the group. The admissions administrators do not necessarily need to follow a rigid schedule in observing the group or creating posts, but they should check on the group regularly and communicate with each other about developing trends or problems in the group's content. Due to the constantly-evolving content of the group, this communication should be continuous (via e-mail or other means) rather than confined to formal department meetings. The administrators should also be aware of each other's area of expertise so that the correct person can be quickly notified of inquiries on specific topics (a housing expert should be quickly notified when a housing question is raised, for example). In selecting content and messages, administrators should have a mutual understanding of the university's desired branding messages, but they should take a reactive approach and allow the prospective students to drive the conversations in a direction that is useful to them.

In addition to managing the group, the admissions department should monitor social media trends by reading both academic literature and surveying incoming students about their preferred social media sites. The social media landscape is constantly evolving and administrators must be cognizant of these changes and be willing to adjust their strategies accordingly. The admissions department should survey the freshmen class every fall about their social media usage and hold a meeting to discuss the results as they pertain to the university's social media strategy. Additionally, social media trends should be a regular topic in department meetings throughout the year.

In evaluating the group as a recruitment tool, administrators must keep in mind that it is difficult to accurately link interaction metrics (that measure social media activity) with outcome metrics (such as enrollment numbers or yield rate). Given that caveat, administrators should look for a positive relationship between the use of the group and growth in the student yield rate. Since such a group is composed of people who have already been accepted to a university, the number of applications and the overall enrollment figures are not necessarily reflective of the group's success as a recruitment tool. The group is only a means of recruiting the prospective students who have already been accepted and, therefore, the yield rate is the most realistic measurement of the group's success because it measures the conversion rate of those who have already been accepted. However, administrators must also remember that social media is only one factor in fluctuations in the yield rate. Other factors (financial aid, marketing, economic trends) can impact yield rates and enrollment and act as confounding variables in measuring the impact of administrative initiatives. The admissions department should clearly explain these measurement difficulties to upper administration before implementing a social media strategy.

Implications for Theory

According to Stinchcombe (1990), distinct social situations provide information to individuals about an uncertain future, and individuals in those situations will take steps to gather the information needed to resolve that uncertainty. In the context of college admissions from the student perspective, this uncertainty revolves around whether or not a particular university is a good fit for a particular student. I speculated that social media could provide such a distinct social situation to transfer information to remove student uncertainty, and this particular Facebook group supported that notion with two caveats.

First, the information that students desired and utilized to remove uncertainty was largely informal information about both their fellow (potential) classmates and the social environment of the university. In other words, it is *Social Fit* information that removes this uncertainty. Second, students preferred to gather this information from fellow students with minimal interference from university administrators. That is not to say that the university does not play any role in the transfer of information. Students still need institutional information (about deadlines, procedures, programs, etc.), and the university must transfer that information accurately and responsively. However, the interactions in the Facebook group indicate that this information is of secondary importance in the removal of the students' uncertainty. The uncertainty in the school-choice process is primarily removed by *Social Fit* information that is transferred by other students.

Therefore, while administrators can use social media to create such a distinct social situation for the transfer of information, they must do so in accordance with three general guidelines. First, administrators should not be the primary transmitters of the information if it is to remove uncertainty. The information needs to be transmitted by other students in order for the process to work. Second, although the administrators should not be the primary information transmitters, they must facilitate the transfer of information between students. This means creating an environment that allows students to communicate freely and honestly with each other with minimal administrative interference. Finally, administrators must provide institutional information as needed and provide timely and helpful responses when prompted by a student. If those guidelines are followed, my research indicates that administrators can use social media (particularly private Facebook groups) to create the kind of distinct social situation described by Stinchcombe (1990).

Implications for Methodology

Virtual ethnography is still in its infancy as a research methodology and, therefore, this study is fairly distinct at this point in time. Ethnographic methods have not been widely used online. Consequently, my experience has generated some methodological insights that I hope will be valuable for future researchers in the virtual field.

Postill and Pink (2012) defined an approach to conducting virtual ethnography that contains five stages: catching up, sharing, exploring, interacting and archiving. I described these steps in detail in the third chapter of this dissertation. In conducting my research, I adopted a modified version of this approach. Because my research is mainly observational, I eliminated the “sharing” and “interacting” steps entirely, as I did not interact with any of the people who I observed (excluding the administrators who participated in both interviews and the Facebook group). My approach included only the three remaining stages of catching up, exploring and archiving.

The catching-up stage, which involves updating the transcript of the group’s activities, proved to be the most challenging because a transcript of a social media page is a living document and must be treated as such. This is an important distinction from accounts of offline interactions and conversations. Unlike a transcript of an in-person conversation or field notes describing an observed event, a social media transcript requires constant maintenance because it can never be assumed that a conversation has ended. My initial frustration in conducting the observational research stemmed from the fact that conversations that I had thought were over would frequently restart days later. For example, a post would appear one day and generate three comments and, after a day of inactivity, I would assume that the conversation associated with that post had concluded. Then I would look at that post again a week later and discover that the conversation had actually continued after a prolonged period of dormancy. This required that I

constantly compare my existing transcript with the most up-to-date content of the group and make updates to include additional comments and likes. Transcript maintenance is, therefore, a significant and time-consuming challenge for virtual ethnographers studying social media. However, it is essential that virtual ethnographers constantly review their transcripts to ensure that they are accurate representations of the actual online interactions.

The exploring stage was only occasionally necessary. This occurred whenever a member of the group referenced something (such as an event or activity) with which I was not familiar. I would then have to “explore” the internet (or do a Google search, in other words) to figure out what they were talking about.

The archiving stage was closely tied with the catching-up stage, to the point where they sometimes blurred into a single activity. I considered “archiving” to be the act of finalizing a section of the transcript. This occurred when I was satisfied that a particular conversation had ended and involved evaluating that transcript section for emerging or recurring themes that I could code (such as the key messages identified by the administrators). However, archiving was complicated by two factors. First, the catching-up stage often revealed that a finished (or “archived”) section of the transcript was not actually finished. I would then have to update and recode that section, essentially redoing both the catching-up and archiving stages. Second, because the transcript was a living document and meanings of conversations could change via the addition of new comments, the themes (and related codes) associated with a portion of the transcript could change over time.

In summary, my approach was primarily a process of transcript maintenance (a combination of the catching-up and archiving stages proposed by Postill and Pink (2012)) with an occasional need for internet exploring to confirm the meanings of interactions. The act of transcript

maintenance was the greatest logistical challenge in conducting this research and is a process that will require further examination and refinements by other researchers in the realm of virtual ethnography.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study is limited in that it examined a single group at a single institution. Furthermore, although different types of social media were touched upon in my interviews with administrators, the bulk of my research focused on a single type of social media (private Facebook groups). Given that each of those limiting factors (group, institution and social media type) could be addressed in a number of ways, several recommendations for future research are as follows:

A multi-year study at a single institution could address concerns that the uniqueness of a single group prevents generalizations about the use of social media at that institution (*internal generalizability*) (Maxwell, 2012). Conducting research over the course of several years and observing multiple classes of incoming freshmen would allow a researcher to draw more meaningful conclusions that are not solely dependent upon the characteristics of a single group of people.

Such a study would only be viable for a specific institution or, at best, a specific type of institution (in Quint's case, a medium-sized, private university). A study including multiple institutions of varying sizes and missions would be necessary to generalize the results beyond a single type of institution (so called *external generalizability*) (Maxwell, 2012). University's long list of clients is quite varied, so such a study comparing the results of private admissions Facebook groups is possible across varied institutions using the same application. Such a study could be done on several scales, depending on the number of institutions included. Two or more institutions could be observed during the same time period to identify differences in how

Facebook is used at, for example, a liberal arts college versus a state university or across institutions within the same category. On a broader scale, a multi-year study could be conducted across multiple institutions. That would likely be the ideal study in this realm because it would help eliminate unique attributes of both single groups and single institutions as confounding variables. However, it would also be a highly complex and time-consuming endeavor.

On a smaller scale, future research could also look at different types of social media being used at a single institution. While I discussed public social media to a limited extent based upon my interviews with administrators, my primary focus was on the private Facebook group. A holistic examination of a university's entire social media strategy (including both private and public platforms and all social media sites used by the school) would provide a more comprehensive picture of how social media factors into the entirety of a university's operations and would not be limited to only the admissions function. A multi-year study of this type would also provide insight into how a university adjusts (or fails to adjust) to evolutions in social media (such as the rising popularity of Snapchat).

Additionally, my research methodology has two limitations that could be eliminated in future studies. First, my research is entirely qualitative. While I observed the development of the group and gained a sense of how their interactions functioned as an admissions tool, I did not confirm the outcomes of the group by examining the university's quantitative enrollment data for the following fall semester. A further study would be enhanced by the inclusion of such data, as it would confirm if the school's enrollment goals were met with a particular group. However, even if such a study were conducted, it would be difficult to establish causation between the interactions in the Facebook group and the enrollment data.

Finally, I did not interview any of the student participants in this study. Such interviews would have enhanced my understanding of how students perceived the group and if the group actually impacted their decision to enroll (or not enroll) at the university. I did not conduct such interviews due to ethical concerns for the privacy of the students, as I wanted my work to be as unintrusive as possible. However, future research in this area would benefit from such an inclusion if researchers could find ways to ensure that it would not either compromise privacy or interfere in the admissions process.

One final note that is worth mentioning is that neither University or Quint University administrators made a clear link between the financial value (cost) of using social media as a recruitment tool and its measurable outcomes (e.g., yield rate, enrollment number). Though it is evident that there is no systematic way to measure the return of investment in social media in relation to educational outcomes in place, why some institutions have opted to participate in the Facebook private group? What's their rationale for investing in using social media? What would be additional recruitment cost per student when using social media? Do institutions view investment in social media as a financially viable option? Can institutions have the ability to collect data for cost-benefit analysis to evaluate the value and utility of social media? All of these questions remain to be investigated by future research.

Concluding Remarks

Social media's rise in popularity has been meteoric and trends suggest that its social relevance will not decline in the foreseeable future, particularly among those in the college-age demographic. This dissertation research was, as far as I know, one of the first attempts to study the incorporation of social media into a university's admissions and recruitment strategies. This

research suggests that a private Facebook group managed by the admissions department is likely the best scenario for incorporating social media into such strategies. However, those results must be tempered with a cautionary note: Any study discussing technological trends is immediately in danger of becoming antiquated. As the speed of technological development increases, technological discussions become relevant for increasingly small windows of time. Just as articles about the internet written in the 1990s seem almost humorous when read in a modern context, current discussions of social media will likely seem archaic in 20 years.

However, the danger of becoming obsolete should not deter researchers from studying this subject. Rather, it is all the more reason for researchers to address this topic so that their successors will have something to build upon. As the data discussed in this dissertation suggests, social media's role in student recruitment is only increasing and the integration of social media into recruitment practices will likely become increasingly pivotal as universities compete to enroll the students needed to remain financially viable. This dissertation is a snapshot of those efforts in 2014 and, as technology and education continue to evolve, future research will be needed to build upon this research to ensure that universities have the up-to-date information needed to make sound strategic decisions in the arena of student recruitment.

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APPENDIX A

SAMPLE SECTION OF CODED FACEBOOK TRANSCRIPT

Ruby West IF/SF, Commit, 13L

Officially committed to Quint last night! Couldn't be more excited ☐ ☐ ☐

[Like](#) · [Comment](#) ·

[More](#)

· Apr 28th via Schools App for iPhone

13 people like this. **Brandi Ramsey, Sandy Thompson, Charlotte Evans, Lewis Holloway, Ellen Edwards, Whitney Bolibol, Meredith Jefferson, Becky Strickland, Ellen Chapman, Grant Tran, Marco Willis, Marshall Roberts, Dennis Parks**

Elena Rice IF/SF, Commit, 11L

Hey there, I'm Elena from Olympia Washington and I just committed today! I'm excited and nervous to meet some new faces next year. I'm pretty outdoorsy and am fairly active. My passions are leadership, golf, and working as a camp counselor. I think that's about it! See you guys in the fall :)

[Like](#) · [Comment](#) ·

[More](#)

· Apr 27th via Schools App for iPhone

11 people like this. **Sandy Thompson, Chelsea Singleton, Charlotte Evans, Lynette Wilkerson, Michele Sparks, Katrina Duncan, Meredith Jefferson, Rose Pena, Susie Parker, Freddie White, Marco Willis**

Wilbur Collier IF/SF, Commit, Major, 4C, 7L

Hey guys, I just committed to Quint and couldn't be happier! I'm from Colorado and I'm planning on studying mechanical engineering! I'm also big into skiing, both downhill and nordic, and the outdoors in general! I can't wait to meet you all this fall!

[Like](#) · [Comment](#) ·

[More](#)

· Apr 27th

7 people like this. **Lorene Guerrero, Sandy Thompson, Ellen Chapman, Grant Tran, Charlotte Evans, Marco Willis, Holly Mathis**

Lorene QUerrero I do nordic and downhill skiing as well!

[Like](#) ·

[More](#) **Wilbur Collier**

· 1 · Apr 28th

Irvin Reeves Congratulations on Quint. I cannot wait to meet another mechanical engineering student. Have you thought about the KEEN Engineering Community?

[Like](#) ·

[More](#)

· Apr 28th

Wilbur Collier Wilbur I defiantly have thought about doing the engineering community and I am going to apply once I get all the information I need to fill out their application! Congrats on your admission as well! And Irvin, we'll definitely have to ski together sometime!

[Like](#) ·

[More](#) **Lorene Guerrero, Irvin Reeves**

· 2 · 2 days ago

Holly Mathis Where in Colorado? That's where I'm from as well!

[Like](#) ·

[More](#)

· about 3 hours ago

Felix Grant **SF, Activity, 4C, 12L**

Who likes to play pick up BBall? If so you can expect to see me alot next year! I'm already getting pumped for intramurals!!

[Like](#) · [Comment](#) ·

[More](#)

· Apr 27th

12 people like this. **Heidi Schneider, Yvonne Moody, Linda Simmons, Betsy Sherman, Lynette Wilkerson, Alfred Dawson, Simon Doyle, Janice Haynes, Nelson Larson, Grant Tran, Marco Willis, Corey Fowler**

Lewis Holloway Dudeeeee sameeeee

[Like](#) ·

[More](#) **Felix Grant**

· 1 · Apr 27th

Simon Doyle Yessir! You a Mavs fan? Looks like my Blazers might be playing them in the playoffs next round..

[Like](#) ·

[More](#)

· Apr 27th

Lewis Holloway GOLDEN STATE ALL THE WAYY

[Like](#) ·

[More](#)

· Apr 28th

Felix Grant Ya I'm a huge mavs fan! Dirk vs. Aldridge would be fun to watch.

[Like](#) ·

[More](#)

· Apr 28th

Ellen Nash **SF, Activity, 1C, 2L**

Hey, so does anyone know anything about auditioning for The Big Bing Theory??

[Like](#) · [Comment](#) ·

[More](#)

· Apr 27th

2 people like this. **Julie Meyer, Karla Stewart**

Karla Stewart I don't know about auditions, but I bet they'll have a table out with all the other clubs during orientation, and you can probably get more information then. :)

[Like](#) ·

[More](#)

· 1 day ago

Erma Hudson SF, Meetup, 3L

If any of you guys are from the Seattle area, you should join the meet up page!! We're meeting on May 3!

[Like](#) · [Comment](#) ·

[More](#)

· Apr 27th via Schools App for iPhone

3 people like this. **Wilma Ballard, Carrie Morton, Meredith Jefferson**

Julie Meyer IF, Activity, 2C, 1L

Does anyone have any information on musical theatre opportunities at Quint?

[Like](#) · [Comment](#) ·

[More](#)

· 39 minutes ago

Dennis Parks likes this.

Ellen Nash I know that they do a musical every other year if that helps

[Like](#) ·

[More](#)

· Apr 27th

ADMIN

Jacob Douglas

Catherine, We do have opportunities to get involved in both our music and theatre programs for majors, minors, and students who are not pursuing either discipline academically. The Theatre & Dance department at Quint puts on two "main stage" productions, a Second Stage reader's theatre series, and a dance concert each year, and every other year one of those shows is a musical. You can check out more information on the Theatre & Dance department at [\(Link Deleted\)](#)

[Like](#) ·

[More](#)

· Apr 28th

Dennis Parks IF/SF, Commit, 2L

I am now officially a (School Mascot)! Go (School Mascot)s! ♥□□□

[Like](#) · [Comment](#) ·

[More](#)

· about 2 hours ago via Schools App for iPhone

2 people like this. **Brad Horton, Vincent Cobb**

Darnell Hill SF, Commit, 7L

Hello everyone, I'm Darnell from Portland, OR. I finally decided on going to Quint and just finished my housing application! I'm really excited to go to Quint and start a new chapter in my life. I love music (I'm band president at my school), saxophone, reading, helping others, and doing community service. Planing on traveling to Japan and major in Business. I'll be the only one from my school to go to Quint so I'm hoping to make a lot of new friends!

[Like](#) · [Comment](#) ·

[More](#)

· about 7 hours ago

7 people like this. **Donna Rodriguez, Dana Smith, Vincent Cobb, Ed Mack, Bessie Perez, Wilma Ballard, Clara Burton**

Sandra Wright **SF, Dorm, Major, 6C, 10L**

Hi I'm Sandra and I'm from Beaverton, OR which is about 10 minutes away from Portland. I hope to live in either Madonna or Welch, not sure which one yet, and major in Business Administration with a minor in Environmental studies. I love country music, playing softball, and being outdoors. Go (School Mascot)s!

[Like](#) · [Comment](#) ·

[More](#)

· about 20 hours ago via Schools App for Android

8 people like this. **Donna Rodriguez, Dana Smith, Katrina Duncan, Lynette Wilkerson, Ed Mack, Brandi Ramsey, Dennis Parks, Colin Nichols, Clara Burton, Abel West**

Jean Burns Did you play volleyball for west valley a few years ago?

[Like](#) ·

[More](#)

· about 19 hours ago

Sandra Wright Yeah I did in like 7th grade!

[Like](#) ·

[More](#)

· about 10 hours ago

Jean Burns I think we were on the same team! With Meagan as our coach right?

[Like](#) ·

[More](#)

· about 9 hours ago

Sandra Wright Yes! Oh my gosh that was forever ago! How have you been?

[Like](#) ·

[More](#)

· about 8 hours ago

Jean Burns Good!! Haha I'm ready for senior year to be over, but I'm also gonna miss it! I'm really excited for next year though! Hbu?

[Like](#) ·

[More](#)

· about 6 hours ago

Sandra Wright I'm doing well! So excited for next year! It's going to be a blast!

[Like](#) ·

[More](#)

· about 2 hours ago

Dan Mcdonald **IF, Dorm, ADMIN, 5C, 4L**

Hi from the Housing & Residence Life office!

Hope you are getting excited about living on-campus next year! You are more than welcome to select your own roommate (you would need to name them in your housing application on (School Mascot)web, and they would need to name you). However, the majority of our first-year students have random roommates. We match you with

someone based on your building preference as well as your survey you filled out about things such as noise level, interests, sleep time, etc. We do a pretty good job of matching people, so if you don't find a roommate on here, don't worry!

If you have any housing-related questions, I am happy to answer them!

Dan Mcdonald

Area Coordinator, Housing & Residence Life

[Like](#) · [Comment](#) ·

[More](#) **Wilma Ballard, Clara Burton, Vincent Cobb, Dennis Parks**

· 3 minutes ago

Devin Austin I still haven't gotten my (School Mascot)mail information and I paid my tuition and housing on Monday. Do I have to ask them for the information or do they email me? I need the (School Mascot)mail information in order to complete my LLC application.

[Like](#) ·

[More](#)

· less than a minute ago

Jacob Garcia When do you find out which housing you were assigned and who you are housing with?

[Like](#) ·

[More](#) **Ann George**

· 1 · about 21 hours ago

Ann George Hi there! When will I find out if I've been accepted to one of the Living Learning communities?

[Like](#) ·

[More](#)

· about 7 hours ago

Dan Mcdonald Good questions! Devin - your (School Mascot)mail username and password will be sent to your home via snail mail. Should hopefully get there soon!

Jacob - tentative building assignments will come out in July and roommate information and room number will come out in early AuQUst.

Ann - you will find out about acceptance into a Living-Learning Community in late May (we place people in LLCs before we do the rest of the residence halls).

Hope all that info helps!

[Like](#) ·

[More](#)

· about 6 hours ago

Bessie Perez My housing application says it is incomplete, but I have filled out everything except my supplemental application for a living learning community. Is that normal? Also how do I fill out the supplemental application? I tried to log onto (School Mascot)tivities but I don't know what my username and password would be.

[Like](#) ·

[More](#)

· about 2 hours ago

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The interview(s) with administrators from Quint University will be semi-structured and recorded with Skype Auto Recorder. Sample questions that will be asked of each participant include:

- Why did the university decide to start using Facebook groups for admissions?
- How is the Facebook group managed by the university?
- Who manages the Facebook group for the university? Why and how were those people chosen?
- What are the university's goals when using Facebook to communicate with prospective students?
- How would you define the university's overall approach or strategy when using Facebook to communicate with prospective students?
- How does the university determine if its social media strategy has been successful?
- What has been beneficial about using Facebook as an admissions tool?

APPENDIX C

LETTER OF SOLICITATION FOR INTERVIEWS

March 1, 2014

Dear Mr./Ms./Dr.....,

My name is Michael Dooney and I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education Leadership, Management and Policy program at Seton Hall University. I would like to invite you to participate in a study of how college admissions groups on Facebook can impact the college admissions process.

The purpose of my study is to understand how and why universities are using Facebook as an admissions tool and if such Facebook usage is aligned with the expectations and needs of prospective students.

If you participate in the study, you will be asked to participate in a one-hour Skype interview at a time that is convenient for you during the months of March and April, 2014. Interview questions will focus on your experience and strategy with using Facebook as an admissions and student recruitment tool. The interview will be recorded using Skype Auto Recorder. I will transcribe the interview only by assigned pseudonym. All conversations will remain confidential; your name and other identifying characteristics will not be used in reports or presentation. Information from this research will be used only for the purpose of this study and any publications that may result from this study. All information will be securely stored on a USB flash drive and will not be found on any laptops or personal computers. After the research is completed, the audio files and all materials will be destroyed. All steps necessary to protect you in this study will be taken.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I sincerely hope that you will agree to participate in this study. If you have any questions about my research, please contact me at Michael.dooney@shu.edu.

Sincerely,

Michael Dooney

Doctoral Candidate in Higher Education Leadership, Management and Policy
College of Education and Human Services, Seton Hall University

Author's Biography

Michael Dooney is the Assistant Director of Graduate Admissions for Seton Hall University's College of Arts & Sciences. In that role, he oversees all admissions processes, student recruitment and marketing for the College's 12 master's programs and two doctoral programs. Prior to that position, Michael worked as a graduate assistant in the school's communication department. He holds a BA in Communication with a focus in Public Relations, a MA in Strategic Communication and a professional certificate in Organizational Communication. All of his credentials were earned at Seton Hall University.