

College Search and Selection: A Study of the Influence of Social Media on College
Choice

Submitted by
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Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
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by

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Approved

March 31, 2019


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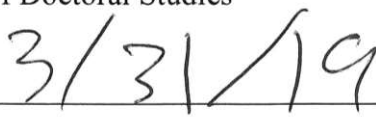
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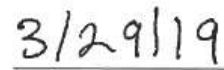
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Allison Mason


Date

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative, case study was to explore interactive use of social media influenced first-year college students' decision to attend a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern, United States. This study used college choice theory, and relationship marketing for the theoretical foundation. Three research questions guided data collection and focused on how college students use social media during their college decision making process, how college students describe their parents and university-employed marketing staff's use of social media influenced college choice decisions, and how university-employed marketing staff use social media to influence first year students' college choice decisions? Sixty-five students completed the questionnaire. Twelve students participated in semistructured interviews and, seven university-employed marketing staff participated in a focus group. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis through the use of initial and axial codes. Five themes emerged from data: Students interacted and observed information on social media to learn about academic and social activities related to campus life; Prospective students used social media to gather information and interact with others during the initial college search process, Peers, parents and university-employed marketing staff used social media to share information about the university; University-employed marketing staff used social media as one source of their overall marketing strategy and created social media to influence student college choice decisions.

Keywords: Social media, interactive, college, university, higher education, college choice, college search, relationship marketing.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Determining which college or university to apply to and attend can be a difficult process and involves a multifaceted approach. The college search process includes not only evaluating university ranking/reputation, cost, financial aid availability, accreditation, and academic programs (Bock, Poole, & Joseph, 2014; Klein & Washburn, 2012; Nadelson et al., 2013), but also the resources that are used to seek information. The most commonly used resources consist of counselors, the social environment such as peers, and media (Areces, Rodríguez Muñiz, Suárez Álvarez, De la Roca, & Cueli, 2016).

Social media has become a commonly-used tool for universities to share information with the public. In a recent quantitative study on the use of Twitter accounts of 2,411 university and colleges, Kimmons, Veletsianos, and Woodward (2017) found that universities primarily use social media for one-way communication to provide information to the public and to paint a positive picture of the university. Results of this study suggested that there is a need to continue research on the use of social media to engage with other stakeholders, as well as study other social media sites, such as Facebook or Instagram (Kimmons et al., 2017).

Due to advances in technology, Web 2.0 tools such as social media, websites, and online advertisements are an essential step in the student recruitment process (Jan & Ammari, 2016). Jan and Ammari (2016) administered a questionnaire to 350 students in Malaysian universities and found that social media and websites positively affected student decision-making and college choice. Results from the study suggested that universities establish a marketing strategy using online tools and develop social media

sites to interact and engage with students (Jan & Ammari, 2016). The researchers also suggested a need to conduct more qualitative studies on the subject to determine other factors that affect college decision-making.

As technology has improved over the years, consumers have begun to look to social networks, blogs, and media devices, to connect with and gather information from others (Powers, Advincula, Austin, Graiko, & Snyder, 2012). Given this evolution, higher education institutions are changing the way they attract, recruit, and retain students. Increasingly, colleges are utilizing media resources such as Facebook, university websites, and blogs to increase enrollment (Sandlin & Peña, 2014).

Prior literature indicated a need to continue researching the college choice topic due to changes in technology, marketing, social networking, and societal norms, as all these areas have the potential to affect prospective student expectations and decision-making (Klein & Washburn, 2012). More specifically, there is a gap in research regarding the ways social media sites are used as an informational and interactive tool by university stakeholders, prospective students, family, and friends to influence college choice decisions (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012; Linvill, et al., 2015; Thornton, 2017). Jan and Ammari (2016) recommended that Malaysian universities establish social media campaign using online tools and develop social media sites to interact and engage with prospective students. Researchers also suggested there is a need to conduct more qualitative studies on the subject to determine other variables that affect college decision-making. Other recent research has been done to identify which social media platforms prospective students use, social media platforms universities use as an informational tool to recruit students, and the factors that influence college choice decisions (Areces et al.,

2016; Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012; Linvill, Rowlett, & Kolind, 2015; Sandlin & Peña, 2014; Thornton, 2017).

Research continues to need to be conducted on the use of social media as a tool for college-choice decisions. Kimmons, et al. (2017) found that universities are primarily using social media for one-way communication to provide information to the public, and to paint a positive picture of the university. Therefore, this study explored social media was used to influence first-year college students' decision to attend a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern, United States. Additionally, this study is a valuable resource for universities due to the increased and frequent use of social media and social networks by college-age students, as well as the fact that it is known that social networking sites are prime platforms for word-of-mouth and viral marketing (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012). Once colleges are able to identify how social media is used as an interactive tool and to share information, enrollment and marketing teams will be able to strengthen their communication and marketing strategies to increase enrollment using social media. Another potential benefit is that understanding how to best implement social media strategies provides institutions with the ability to reallocate marketing dollars toward other items that drive student decision-making.

Background of the Study

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there are over 7,000 institutions of higher education in the United States (College Navigator, 2016). To put this into perspective, the National Center for Education divided the United States into eight regions for data collection, and there are over 500, two or four-year institutions solely in the Southwestern United States (College Navigator, 2016). With thousands of

colleges and universities to choose from, students need reliable information to determine which college will best fit their needs. Social media provides an avenue for users to gain information which they feel is reliable through authentic communication from students, who can shape expectations of campus life and potential experiences (Sandlin & Peña, 2014).

Little research exists regarding how prospective college students use social media when selecting the college, they will attend (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012). The research that does exist on the college selection process has consistently shown that counselors, parents, peers, and university websites are the most commonly used resources during the college search and selection phase (Kutty, 2014; Obermeit, 2012). Research has been conducted on the specific social networking sites that prospective students use when making college decisions (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012; Linvill, et al., 2015; Thornton, 2017). Linvill, et al. (2015) found that social media platforms such as Twitter and Pinterest are not being optimized by colleges and universities to attract potential new students, as they have focused more on the relationships with alumni and friends. Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2012) found that the informational aspects of social media sites ranked low as influencing college choice. Results from Constantinides and Zinck Stagno's study indicated that prospective students used social media sites not only to *seek information*, but also visited sites for social interaction, looking for blogs, discussion forums and links to social media venues, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, to help inform college decisions. Lack of stimulating and innovative applications, along with these interactive forms of social media make it difficult for future students to connect with others (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012). Thornton (2017) noted that

universities were missing out on opportunities to interact with students on social media sites, as most just offer information on these sites. Thornton found that the most popular searches on university social media sites were student, campus, and athletic events. These areas were where students left the most comments. Therefore, a gap in research indicated more study is needed on how social media is used to influence college decisions. Leaders may be able to leverage this information to reduce marketing dollars in total or reallocating it from traditional forms of marketing materials. Making adjustments like this may be impactful for institutions due to the financial crisis in 2008, which impacted enrollment for higher education institutions in the United States, increasing the need for schools to adapt to survive (Stowe & Komasara, 2016). For example, Hanover Research results identified 63% of the institutions in the survey spend \$100,000 and 31% of the institutions in the survey spend \$200,000 on marketing initiatives (Hanover Research, 2015). Results from this study may be used to inform enrollment and marketing strategies of the future, which could result in potential savings for the university.

Students in the Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2012) study also indicated that information from family and friends also played a major role in college decisions. Given the extensive use and importance of social networks for young people, the authors found it reasonable to assume that input on college decisions from family and friends is provided through social media. Therefore, the researchers also recommended future study on how these individuals (family and friends) use social media as a tool to influence college choice decisions (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012).

Although not part of their original study on the exploration factors that high school seniors felt were important to their college selection, Klein and Washburn (2012)

made a case for future research on the use of technology, marketing, and social networks as influencing college choice, since society is changing and embracing these tools increasingly. Thus, based on Kimmons, et al. (2017), Jan and Ammari (2016), and Thornton (2017), more research is needed on how students and universities use information and interactive tools on social media sites to inform college decisions along with how parents and peers use social media to influence college decisions and, and Klein and Washburn's (2012) mention of the growing popularity of social media as a college choice tool, more research is warranted. This study filled the need to explore how social media is used to influence college choice decisions.

Problem Statement

It was not known how social media was used to influence first-year college students' decision to attend a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern, United States. First year students enrolled in one on ground business course participated in the study, along with university-employed marketing staff, which included individuals who create social media for the university, maintain the website, and work on ad campaigns. Enrollment staff included university admissions counselors (UACs) and program specialists. UACs work directly with students and parents. They take students through the entire enrollment process, including tuition, schedules, and housing. Program specialists are referred into high schools to present on specific programs within this non-profit, private Christian university, and also come in direct contact with new students. The UAC and program specialists are able to use social media to connect with the students with whom they work.

Prospective college students consider college reputation, cost, financial aid availability, accreditation, academic and social programs when considering which college, they will attend (Bock, et al., 2014; Klein & Washburn, 2012; Nadelson et al., 2013) and use a variety of resources to collect this information. Bock, et al. (2014), found that prospective students utilize informational resources differently based on categories such as word-of-mouth, family and friends, advertisements, and college counselors. Furthermore, Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2012) found that despite the high popularity of social media use among future college students, students ranked the informational use of social media as less instrumental in their college choice decisions than interactive use. The authors speculated that this is due to lack of interactive focus on these sites. Prospective students expect to see “links to corporate blogs, discussion forums or social networking applications like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Delicious, Flickr, Digg on the web pages they visit” (p. 20). Therefore, the interactive focus of social media often lacks an engagement factor which future students want. Furthermore, Constantinides and Zinck Stagno found that information on how family and friends use social media to influence a student’s college choice is lacking. The results of this study provide information to fill that gap. Consumers use technology such as social media more than ever to learn, socialize, and interact with companies quicker (Powers, et al., 2012). Colleges and universities need to have an understanding of how prospective students use social media during the college search and selection phases so they can effectively use it as a tool to communicate and interact with current and prospective students (Ghosh, Chawla, & Mallott, 2012).

Social networking sites have created many opportunities for marketers to reach consumers. However, these sites are relatively new areas for research considering they have been in existence for approximately 10 years (Girona & Korgaonkar, 2014). Prior researchers recommended and made a case for future research on how social media is used to influence prospective student college choice decisions (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012; Thornton, 2017). This study will add to the body of research on the use of social networking sites by researching how social media is used to influence college choice decisions.

The general population was all potential first year college students and university-employed marketing staff in non-profit or private colleges in the USA. The target population was all potential first year college students and university-employed marketing staff in non-profit or private colleges in the southwest USA. The sample was first year business students and university-employed marketing staff of one four-year non-profit, private college located in the Southwestern USA. The unit of analysis was students and university-employed marketing staff.

The phenomenon under study specifically related to social media was used to influence first-year college students' decision to attend a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern, United States. Results may provide universities and marketers with evidence to improve strategies to attract, recruit, and retain students. Additionally, this study is beneficial to colleges and universities struggling to attract and retain students by providing additional ways to provide information to and interact with those individuals via social media. The research identified how use of social media influenced first-year college students in their decision-making process, thus developing a

business case to justify possible reallocation of budgets to increase social media marketing activities.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this descriptive, qualitative study was to explore how social media was used to influence first-year college students' decision to attend a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern, United States. The target population included prospective students and university-employed marketing staff of non-profit, private four-year Christian colleges located in the southwestern, United States. The sample included first-year college students enrolled in a business course and university-employed marketing staff at the university, who consented to participate in the study.

From an enrollment perspective, it is useful for universities to have an understanding of how influential social media is during the college search and selection phase. This information will allow colleges and universities to develop more effective marketing strategies using resources such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and university blogs, to attract future students. Based on the identified gap, information from this study shows how these sites are used to engage stakeholders. Further, the study showed how parents, peers and families are engaged in this process, since this is an area for recommended research. Additionally, colleges and universities may find this information valuable due to the potential cost savings associated with using social media to attract students, versus more traditional methods of student recruitment. Social media is quickly becoming a highly-used marketing tool because it is a relatively easy and inexpensive form of brand communication (Baxi, Panda, & Karani, 2016; Zailskaite-Jakste, & Kuvykaite, 2013).

Social media can not only benefit both customers and organizations, but it also has the ability for the two groups to maintain an ongoing relationship, thus it may be used as a relationship marketing tool (Linvill, et al., 2015). Additionally, social media has potential to build brand equity for an organization by taking advantage of word-of-mouth communication or viral marketing (Zailskaite-Jakste, & Kuvykaite, 2013). This study contributes to the literature on college choice, and relationship marketing, and provides colleges and universities with information which may improve marketing and communication strategies, to attract and recruit future students.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative, case study was to describe how social media was used to influence first-year college students' decision to attend a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern, United States. The phenomenon under study specifically related to social media was used to influence first-year college students' decision to attend a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern, United States. The target population of this study consisted of first-year college students and university-employed marketing staff at one four-year college in the southwestern, United States. The sample consisted of individuals (first-year college students and university-employed marketing staff) from the target population who consented to participate in the study.

The following research questions guide this study:

- RQ1: How do college students use social media during their college decision making process?
- RQ2: How do college students describe their parents and university-employed marketing staff's use of social media influenced college choice decisions?

RQ3: How do university-employed marketing staff use social media to influence first year students' college choice decisions?

The first research question was directed towards how students describe they used social media to support their college application and admission procedures. The second research question focused on how first year students perceive their parents, and university-employed marketing staff's use of social media helped influence college decisions. The final research question focused on how the university-employed marketing staff used social media in an interactive and informational manner to influence decisions. The answers to these questions fill the existing gap in literature regarding how students, parents, peers and universities can utilize social media to engage and influence prospective students' college choice decisions (Linvill, et al., 2015). The results from the research may provide evidence for university marketing departments to form a business case to justify reallocating or adding funds to their budget to enhance, or include social media activities to attract, recruit, and retain students. Additionally, this research provides guidance to university marketing departments with information to better understand how social media is used to influence decision-making, specifically relating to college choice.

Advancing Scientific Knowledge and Significance of the Study

Significance of the study. Social networking has been around for over 40 years; however, the introduction of social media sites in the early 2000's combined with technology advancements, has made it easier for users to socialize, gather information and for organizations to reach consumers (Waddington, 2011). While colleges and universities continue to recruit using traditional marketing strategies, such as campus visits and face-to-face meetings, social media sites are becoming a more commonly used

tool to communicate to prospective students, peers, and parents (Sandlin & Peña, 2014). Social media is also a medium which may be used to employ marketing strategies via communication to build brand equity, resulting in an increased awareness of a product or service (Zailskaite-Jakste, & Kuvykaite, 2013).

There is a large amount of research on the topic of college choice, which has determined that prospective students most commonly gain information from peers, parents, and university websites (Areces et al., 2016; Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012). Additionally, Constantinides and Zinck Stagno noted that interest among institutions of higher education institutions is increasing in terms of the potential of using social media to attract potential students. However, little is known about the role of social media as influencers of future students in the choice of study and university. Therefore, there is a need to continue research on this topic due to the increased ease of using social media over the past decade (Klein & Washburn, 2012). Colleges and universities are increasing their presence on social media by promoting events and activities and are finding the sites as a more effective way to communicate to both current and prospective students, while saving money by reducing expenses on traditional forms of advertising (Kuzma & Wright, 2013). However, Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2012) found that the interactive focus of social media, such as blogs and videos is lacking. Specifically, Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2012) found universities do not routinely use interactive tools such as blogs, discussion forums or social networking applications like Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube to interact with prospective students or to allow students to interact with one another. The authors also noted that information is lacking regarding how students report their family and friends' use of social media influenced the student's

college choice decision. Thus, there is a gap in research due to advances in technology and the ways that information is shared on social media, and used as an interactive tool by university stakeholders, prospective students, family, and friends to make college choice decisions (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012; Thornton, 2017; Linvill, et al., 2015).

Prior studies on college choice have focused on the who, what, and where categories of what is influential during college search and selection stages (Areces et al., 2016; Bock, et al., 2014; Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012; Klein & Washburn, 2012; Nadelson et al., 2013;). Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2012) found that social media is popular among young people such as potential college students, however, results of their study also indicated that informational use of social media was ranked last in regard to resources which influence college choice. There are several possible reasons for why informational aspects of social media were ranked as a less likely influence on college choice, such as a lack of relevant content posted on social media, and low engagement of social media by colleges and universities (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012). Prospective students indicated they wanted to use social media sites as an interactive, not just an informational tool to seek information when making college decisions. Thus, future research should be conducted to explore how future students use social media as an information-seeking tool, but also as a tool to interact with the university and other students, along with usage of faculty and friends to influence those decisions (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012; Kimmons et al., 2017).

In tandem with these findings, Thornton (2017) focused research on how social media impacted college choice by analyzing how social media sites such as Facebook

and Twitter are used by universities to attract new students. However, other popular social media sites were found to be used by students and not universities, resulting in a missed opportunity to interact and engage with prospective students. Jan and Ammari (2016) found that social media and websites positively affected student decision-making and college choice. Similarly, Linvill, et al. (2015) found that colleges and universities are not utilizing social media platforms to the fullest, with results indicating that Twitter and Pinterest are popular social media sites used by students and not optimized by universities. Results from Jan and Ammari (2016) and Linvill et al. (2015) suggested that universities establish a market strategy using online tools and develop social media sites to interact and engage with students. Additionally, Kimmons, et al. (2017) found that universities are primarily using social media for one-way communication to provide information to the public, and to paint a positive picture of the university. Results of this study suggest that there is a need to continue research on the use of social media to engage with other stakeholders, as well as study other social media sites, such as Facebook or Instagram (Kimmons et al., 2017).

Additional research on college choice will contribute to the current body of literature by exploring how interaction with university-sponsored social media sites influenced first year college students' decision to attend a four-year private college in the southwestern United States. Thus, based on Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2012), Kimmons, et al. (2017), Thornton's (2017) practical implications and Klein and Washburn's (2012) mention of the growing popularity of social media as a college choice tool, more research is warranted. More specifically, qualitative research is needed as suggested by Jan and Ammari (2016) to determine other factors that influence college

decision-making. This study added to the current research by engaging directly with first-year college students in a business college to identify how use of social media influenced their decision to attend a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern, United States.

Advancing scientific knowledge. College choice theory and relationship marketing comprise the conceptual framework for this study. College choice theory has been widely researched; however, due to changes in technology and how prospective students use it to inform the college choice, research needs to continue (Klein & Washburn, 2012). Lastly, this study advanced relationship marketing research by exploring how universities and customers (prospective students) use social media to engage and interact with each other.

College choice theory. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) were one of the early researchers to study the college choice model, which has been refined over the years. College choice theory consists of three phases in which future college students follow throughout the college selection process. The stages consist of predisposition, search, and choice (Bergerson, 2009). Predisposition is initiated with the desire to attend college, and elements of this stage are active before students even reach adolescence (Bergerson, 2009). The search phase comes next and is consumed by initial college search activities where initial interaction begins, between institutions and prospective students. The final phase is choice, where the prospective student selects a college to attend. This study focused on the search and choice phase of the college choice theory and contributes to the body of literature which focuses on the use of the social media to search and select a college or university. The research identified social media sites that are used during the

college search and choice phase as an information sharing and interactive tool by prospective students, peers, and family.

The search phase consists of the point in time when prospective students begin to explore colleges they might want to attend. This phase also includes an interactive stage where not only are students searching for a university, but universities are searching for students (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Search activities are established, such as setting college values, interacting with university enrollment counselors, reviewing university websites, and social networking sites. Once information is collected, the prospective student identifies universities to place in the choice set and moves into the college choice phase (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Although the use of social media is not a requirement of the search phase, social media now plays a prominent role, with 69% of adults and 88% of 18-29-year olds using at least one social media site (Pew Research Center, 2017). Using social media as an interactive tool allows prospective students to utilize technology to not only gather information but interact with college students and university employees. Social media provides a platform for both students and universities to interact.

The choice phase consists of the student's ability to narrow down the choice set and select the institution that fits their needs, both academically and socially. In this stage Hossler and Gallagher (1987) suggested that personal interactions between the student and university officials are equally as impactful on the final decision as financial aid and cost. The final college choice decision is typically based on interactions between the student and the institution, quality of education, cost of tuition and fees, and academic program offerings (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Personal interactions can also include

interactions on social media. For example, the dean or enrollment counselor of a university may post a message on Twitter regarding an upcoming event. Prospective students or their parents now have the ability to engage with that person via Twitter, and further establish a relationship to make a final college choice. The results of this research will guide universities towards how students use social media during college search and choice, to improve social media marketing strategies, and interact with prospective students to increase enrollment.

Relationship marketing. Social media and social networking are becoming increasingly important in terms of marketing and advertising, and are cost-effective marketing activities (Kuzma & Wright, 2013). Additionally, social media provides consumers the opportunity to seek and distribute information within a social network, which may affect decision-making (Kuzma & Wright, 2013). Regarding how social media effects college choice, prospective college students are becoming more integrated into social media. In 2012, Constantinides and Zinck Stagno indicated that “95.1% of future students maintain a profile on a social media website” (p. 20), resulting in a change in potential college search activities such as following university Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, blogs and other social media sites. This change has resulted in the need for colleges and universities to identify new strategies using social media to reach potential students (Linville, et al., 2015).

A marketing strategy which is important for this study is relationship marketing, which was introduced in 1983 by Berry, and is centered around relationships with customers (Gronroos, 2004). Relationship marketing is recommended for college and university marketing departments because it is centered on establishing, maintaining, and

potentially terminating relationships (Linvill, et al., 2015). Social media provides customers and organizations with the ability to maintain two-way communication strategies at a potentially low cost. Research suggested that social media also has the potential to influence decision-making due to the ability to utilize peer-to-peer comments to share information (Bélanger, Bali, & Longden, 2014). Bélanger, et al. (2014) focused research on institutional branding on Facebook and Twitter by collecting data that was posted on these social media sites by students, faculty, and staff about events or general information related to the university. The results of the study elicited useful information however, researchers recommend additional research which would include questionnaires with students to collect more detailed information to learn more about the universities institutional branding and social media marketing (Bélanger, et al., 2014).

Rationale for Methodology

A qualitative methodology, which consists of a perspective or assumption that can be used for open analysis (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013), was used for this study. Qualitative research focuses largely on the “why” question of a study, which provides an in depth focus into the research topic (Barnham, 2015). A qualitative approach allows the researcher to ask open-ended questions to understand the perspective of participants by looking at first-hand experiences to develop an initial understanding of the phenomenon (Park & Park, 2016). Specifically, for this study, the researcher gathered data in the natural setting to determine, from the perspective of participants how social media was during the college search and choice process to influence the decision to attend a private, four-year university.

Qualitative methodology also allows the researcher to gather data that will focus on meaning and explanation provided by the participants (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). In-depth interviews provide researchers with the ability to engage with the participants and ask follow-up questions to gain an understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). For this study, the researcher used interviews, and a questionnaire with first-year students to explore how they used social media to gather information and interact with others during their college search and decision-making process. Additionally, seven university-employed marketing staff participated in a focus group to discuss how they used social media to influence decisions.

Nature of the Research Design for the Study

A single case study design was selected to explore the problem under study: It was not known how social media was used to influence first-year college students' decision to attend a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern, United States. According to Yin (2014), a case study is appropriate for studies which explain how a phenomenon works and answer the how and why questions. A case study is appropriate as the researcher wants to explain how the use of social media works in facilitating college choice decisions for students. Additionally, the research questions are framed in a "how" format to explore use of social media as an information and interactive tool.

When using a case study, the researcher must determine whether they will be using a single-case design or multiple-case design (Yin, 2014). For this study, the researcher explored how social media is used as to support college search and selection. A single case study was used (Yin, 2014). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a case is "a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries" (p. 27). A case

can be a person, program, group, event or policy, which is in a bounded context. The researcher needs to be able to articulate the phenomenon and describe its boundaries or “fence.” According to Yin (2014), in a case study, the unit of analysis being studied, and the context of the study must be identified. The specific individual or group must be considered in light of the phenomenon (Yin, 2014). The specific group being studied, the “case” for this study, included the four-year university located in a Southwestern state. Using multiple forms of evidence is considered a strength of a case study because it will increase the trustworthiness of conclusions from the data (Yin, 2014). By utilizing multiple source of data: interviews, questionnaires, and a focus group, the researcher collected in-depth information regarding participant perspectives on the phenomenon. First-year students at the university were first asked to complete a questionnaire. From that group, a subset was recruited to participate in semistructured interviews to determine how they described use of social media influenced their decision to attend a four-year private college in the southwestern, United States. Additionally, students were asked to describe how parents and university enrollment counselors used social media to influence college choice.

University-employed marketing staff consisting of program specialists, digital marketing specialists, and a manager of digital marketing were also recruited to participate in the study. UACs work with the marketing department to attract potential students to the university. They frequently work directly in the field with prospective students and parents. Program specialists work in enrollment and focus on specific programs within each college at the university. Employees in the digital marketing department focus on marketing activities related to the university website, blogs, and

social media content. The researcher conducted a focus group of seven university-employed marketing staff to identify how they used social media as an informational and interactive tool to share information about the university. The focus group was also used to validate the results from the questionnaire and interviews and identify which social media activities are seen as key factors for enrollment.

Case studies have commonly been used in business research. Yin (2014) provided specific examples in accounting, business and international business, education, and marketing. In addition to explaining how social media influences college selection, the research for this study is intended to provide a stronger business case for university marketing departments to add social media budgetary support to attract potential students.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions and concepts are applicable to this study.

Assistant director of digital marketing. Supervisor for all activities related to the university website, blogs, video, and social media content.

Brand equity. Brand equity is the added value of a brand, held by consumers based on what has been learned about a brand over time (Kerin, Hartley, & Rudelius, 2013).

College choice theory. The college choice model consists of three phases in which future college students follow throughout the college selection process; 1) predisposition, 2) search, and 3) choice (Bergerson, 2009).

First-year student. Student experiencing their first year at a university (Nadelson et al., 2013).

Interactive use of social media. Using social media to interact with users to gather information for college choice (Thornton, 2017), and to actively seek out content related to college experience.

Program specialist. Employees working in enrollment who are knowledgeable on all programs within a designated college at the university. Program specialists are referred into high schools by a UAC to inform prospective students about a program they are interested in.

Relationship marketing. Relationship marketing focuses on communication of the ongoing relationship between the customer and the provider (Gronroos, 2004).

Segment. Identification of a group of buyers with different needs and preferences (Bock, et al., 2014).

Social media. Online media used to communicate with users by posting comments, photos, or videos (Kerin, et al., 2013). The most popular social media sites used in the United States are Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, and LinkedIn (Pew Research Center, 2017). Other examples of forms of social media include blogs, and communication forums which allow for users to share information such as YouTube, or forums on a university website (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012).

Social media marketing manager. Facilitates creation of digital media content.

University admissions counselor (UAC). Enrollment counselor for ground undergraduate programs. Each UAC is given a territory to assist any interested students through the admissions process.

User-generated content. Media that is produced by consumers rather than by paid professionals (Poch & Martin, 2015).

Web 2.0. Online spaces that allow users to interact with others using comments, blogs, and social networking sites (Morrison, Cheong, & McMillan, 2013).

Word-of-mouth communication. Communication that is generated around a phenomenon (Susarla, Oh, & Tan, 2016).

Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations

Research studies include assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. These components support the credibility of the study and should be identified in a proposal (Ellis & Levy, 2009). The following sections will describe assumptions, limitations, and delimitations that were considered for this study.

Assumptions. Assumptions can be defined as something that the researcher believes to be true and does not consider that it would be different from someone else's point of view (Ellis & Levy, 2009). The following assumptions were present in this study:

1. It was assumed that all participants in this study would answer questions honestly and to the best of their ability. This assumption was supported by the fact that the questionnaire and interviews were completed in a comfortable environment where participants felt safe, and responses will remain confidential.
2. It was assumed that student participants were aware of social media processes parents and peers used to influence college choice decisions. Given that parents and peers interact with students regarding college choice decisions, the students should be able to accurately report social media usage by these individuals.
3. It was assumed that the students who completed the questionnaire were business students. This is supported by the fact that the course they are taking is only required in business programs at the selected university.
4. It was assumed the faith-based nature of the university may have influenced the college choice decision for some students.

Limitations. Limitations include what the researcher cannot control, such as whether the views of the participants represent the entire population (Ellis & Levy, 2009). The following limitations are associated in this study:

1. The questionnaire and interview participants included students attending one faith-based, non-profit, private university in the southwestern, United States, rather than using participants from multiple universities. It is possible that the students attending this institution have differing opinions than students attending a non-faith-based institution.
2. The student participants were attending ground business course at the university; therefore, the sample was primarily business majors rather than majors throughout the university.
3. Students were asked their perspective regarding how parents and friends used social media to influence the student's college choice decision. Therefore, the perspectives of students may not accurately represent the perspectives of peers, parents and university-employed marketing staff.
4. Researcher bias may have been present due to personal values and assumptions, which can influence data collection and analysis (Baškarada, 2014). The researcher exercised bracketing in an effort to minimize bias.
5. The researcher is the assistant dean in the College of Business and therefore, the instructor and students may have potentially felt coerced to participate in the study. However, the dean had no prior relationship with any of the students. potential limitation is researcher bias in the analysis.
6. Interview times were relatively short, possibility limiting the quality of data collected.

Delimitations. Delimitations consist of what the researcher does not include in the study, and is intentionally left out (Ellis & Levy, 2009). The following delimitations are associated in this study:

1. The student sample was delimited to first-year students enrolled in one on ground business course. The justification for not opening the sample to second, third, or fourth year students is because the researcher is looking for more recent experiences due to how quickly social media technology is changing, and the increase in social media users from 2013 to 2017 (Pew Research Center, 2017).
2. The researcher used university admissions counselors, program specialists, and digital marketing employees to describe how university employees used social media to influence college choice. These individuals had the ability to use interactive social media tools to connect with prospective students.
3. The researcher selected to use a private, not-for profit, Christian university versus public, non-faith-based institutions due to the convenience of conducting qualitative research in one location. Regardless of the type of

institution the participants selected, the results in terms of how social media influenced their choice should not be affected. Future research should be done at public and/or non-faith-based institutions to provide a broader perspective.

Summary and Organization of the Remainder of the Study

The research study adds to the body of knowledge on the search and selection phases of college choice. The purpose of this qualitative, case study was to explore how social media was used to influence first-year college students' decision to attend a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern, United States. The research questions guiding the study addressed the problem and gap in literature. The study was guided by two theoretical foundations: the college choice model of Hossler and Gallagher, early researchers of college choice in 1987 (Bergerson, 2009), and relationship marketing, which links customers to an organization before, during, and after a purchase (Gronroos, 2004).

Each of these models can relate back to the use of social media to communicate with others to influence college choice, both consciously and subconsciously. Parents, peers, and university-employed marketing staff play a pivotal role in the lives of future college students. Colleges and universities have the ability to create and share content using social media, which may depict the experiences that a student may have in college. These experiences have the potential to be shared on social media, resulting in potential enrollment for colleges and universities. However, additional research needed to be conducted due to advances in technology and the ways social media sites are used by university stakeholders, prospective students, family, and friends to influence college choice decisions (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012; Linvill, et al., 2015; Thornton, 2017).

This study includes five chapters. Chapter 1 provides the background of the study, the problem statement, and the purpose of the study, a rationale of the study, methodology, and nature of the research design, research questions, advancing scientific knowledge, and definition of terms, assumptions, limitations and delimitations. Chapter 2 presents a review of current research on the college choice model, and relationship marketing, as well as an overview of the literature on the topic. Chapter 3 describes the methodology, research design, and procedures used for the research study. Chapter 4 provides results and analysis of the data collected for the study. Chapter 5 discusses results and conclusions based on the findings of the research, as well as discuss recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction to the Chapter and Background to the Problem

The research for this study focused on how students use social media as a tool to actively engage with peers, parents, and university-employed marketing staff for college search and selection. The purpose of this qualitative, case study was to explore how social media was used to influence first-year college students' decision to attend a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern, United States. Interviews, a questionnaire and focus group were used as data collection sources.

According to Pew Research Center (2017), 70% of Americans use social media and 86% of 18-29-year olds use at least one social media account. Social media is being used by prospective students, and many universities utilize social media accounts to connect with current and prospective students. Additionally, prospective students are influenced by a variety of resources. The most commonly used resources consist of counselors, the social environment, and media (Areces et al., 2016). However, it was not known how use of social media influenced students' college choices decision. Therefore, this literature examined various aspects of social media and how they may influence college choice.

Research for this study was done by reviewing journal articles and empirical research located within the library databases provided by the researcher's educational institution such as EBSCO, Academic Search Complete, and Business Source Complete. Search terms relating to college choice, college selectivity, college planning, higher education enrollment, social media and marketing, brand equity and social media, user-generated content, social network analysis, higher education and marketing strategy, were

used to identify topics for the review of literature. This chapter is designed to review existing literature related to social media, social influences, and college choice.

The first section of the chapter includes the background of the problem, followed by the theoretical foundations used to explore the phenomenon being studied. The next section is the review of literature, which is focused on the following topics related to social media and college choice; college enrollment, use of the internet for college choice, use of social media for college choice, use of social networking sites for college choice, trust in social networking sites, use of blogs, social network theory, resources used during college search and selection, social environment as a college choice resource, parental involvement in college choice, rankings and reputation as a college choice resource, brand equity, word-of-mouth communication and user-generated content. The chapter also includes a section on methods and instruments used in other studies and concludes with a summary.

Background. College tuition has seen a rise in cost over the years, making it seemingly unaffordable for many potential students. Tuition for public four-year institutions increased an average of 2.8 percent per year for the last ten years, while wages have remained stagnant (Wogan, 2017). Thelin (2015) argued that although cost of a college education has changed, the quality of education has increased significantly, as well. With numerous program offerings available and a variety of student life activities to choose from, prospective students have an array of information to gather when determining which college to attend.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and Chapman (1986) developed seminal work in college choice, which focuses on three stages related to college selection. Chapman

(1986) focused solely on college search and college choice, while Hossler and Gallagher (1987) included predisposition as well as search and choice for college selection. Socioeconomic status, financial aid opportunities, institutional cost, and peer and parental influences are the attributes that Hossler and Gallagher found to play key roles during college search. These influences are consistent in today's practices of college choice, as highlighted in recent literature. Prospective students evaluate university ranking/reputation, cost, financial aid availability, accreditation, and academic programs when determining college choice (Bock, et al., 2014; Klein & Washburn, 2012; Nadelson et al., 2013). Additionally, high school teachers, high school classmates, siblings, extended family, and college representatives have been found to be influential in college choice research (González Canché, D'Amico, Rios-Aguilar, & Salas, 2014). Although the process of college search and choice has not changed, the ways in which students gather information to inform the final college selection has evolved through advances in technology, and the ability to easily communicate and connect with one another.

Technology has changed in recent years, with social media and social networking sites becoming available within the last decade (Girona & Korgaonkar, 2014). While several researchers such as Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2012) and González Canché, et al. (2014) conducted empirical research on the use of technology for college choice, there is still more information to uncover. There has been minimal research identified which links the use of social media by peers, parents, and counselors to influence college choice. Additionally, social media has become an aspect of daily routine for people (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Klein and Washburn (2012) conducted a qualitative study to explore factors that high school seniors felt were important to their college selection. Eleven high school seniors participated in interviews. Results showed six factors were important to the students in this sample: interest in a specific major, college reputation, distance from home, family's interaction with the college, cost, and campus climate. Although not part of their original study, Klein and Washburn made a case for future research on the use of technology, marketing and social networks as influencing college choice since society is changing and embracing these tools increasingly.

Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2012) conducted a quantitative survey study in the Netherlands to explore how use of social media influenced future student's choice of major and university as compared to traditional communication strategies. A final sample of 126 individuals completed surveys. With regard to college choice factors, results indicated the most important factors influencing choice were the college's and cities social activities and the different majors offered. Friends and family were the most influential factor on college choice. One result showed that overall, social media was not influential in college decisions. The researchers projected that this could be due to lack of applicable, relevant or exciting content on the sites. A surprising finding of this study was that social media was ranked last as a resource for information on college choice (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012). The researchers recommended additional research on this topic due to the fact that social media brings individuals together and is a likely resource used during the college search and selection phases, and the true impact of social media on college choice may be more significant than what the outcomes showed (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012). Thornton's (2017) implications for practice in

this study showed, like prior research, that universities were missing out on opportunities to interact with students rather than just offering information. Thornton found that the most popular searches were student, campus and athletic events. These areas were where students left the most comments.

Other research has found that social media platforms such as Twitter and Pinterest are not being optimized by colleges and universities to attract potential new students and have focused more on the relationships with alumni and friends (Linvill, et al., 2015). Thornton (2017) conducted a content analysis study to understand how universities used social media as a tool to influence college choice decisions. Out of 16 universities studied, all were active on Facebook and Twitter, but the students used other platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube on a more frequent basis. The results also showed, that the universities, were thus not connecting with students on the right social media platforms, thus missing opportunities that could impact their enrollment. Implications for practice in this study showed, like prior research, the universities were missing out on opportunities to interact with students rather than just offering information. Thornton found that the most popular searches were student, campus and athletic events. These areas were where students left the most comments. Little is known how social media tools are utilized to engage stakeholders online (Linvill, et al., 2015), and attract potential students. However, Bélanger, et al. (2014) suggested that comments made on social media play an important role in the decision-making process. Little research has been published to determine the influence that social media has on consumer outcomes (Stephen, 2016). However, Bélanger, et al. (2014) suggested that comments made on social media play an important role in the decision-making process. This study

builds on existing research by going a step further to explore how social media is used as an information sharing and interactive tool by universities, prospective students, friends, and family to influence college choice decision-making.

The internet and social media have made it relatively easy to collect information, as well as provide a low-cost form of marketing for the institutions (O'Hallarn, Morehead, & Pribesh, 2016; Chen, 2016). The result of this low-cost marketing tool is the ability to save money in other areas of the university, with the potential to create more scholarships, maintain or lower tuition, and increase staff and faculty pay. This literature examines various aspects of social media and college choice, including how peers, parents, and counselors may use social media to influence college choice. There is a lack of peer-reviewed empirical articles relating to social media marketing in education (O'Hallarn, et al., 2016), resulting in the need to study this topic further so that university leaders can use the results of this research study to develop social media marketing strategies.

Identification of the Gap

College choice is a topic that has been researched for more than 30 years, starting with early researchers such as Hossler and Gallagher (Bergerson, 2009). The societal challenge being explored at that time was to determine the phases that students go through when determining where to attend college (Bergerson, 2009). The search phase and selection phase have begun to blend together and typically include a strong level of parent-child communication (Myers & Myers, 2012). Communication between a parent and a child may include not only face-to-face conversations, but interactions using social media as well. While parents have the ability to interact face-to-face with their child, the

parent can also use social media to share information and initiate interactions, which have the potential to influence the final college choice.

Existing research has found that prospective college students factor in reputation, cost, financial aid availability, accreditation, and academic programs into the college selection process and use a variety of resources to collect this information (Bock, et al., 2014; Klein & Washburn, 2012; Nadelson et al., 2013). The most common influencers of college choice have been found to be peers, parents, and university websites (Areces et al., 2016; Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012). What remains to be discovered within the topic of college search, is how interactive use of social media has influenced college search and selection. Specifically, there is a gap in research due to the need for interactive and informational use of social media to influence college choice decisions.

(Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012; Ghosh, et al., 2012). Although more higher education institutions are using social media as part of their marketing strategy, little is known about the potential of these channels in higher education marketing strategies, and less research has focused on the role of social media to influence college choice (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012).

While exploring original literature on the topic of college choice, research has been conducted related to the three phases of college search, 1) predisposition, 2) search, and 3) choice. Research has been broken down by focusing on areas such as private versus public universities (Kargic & Poturak, 2014), rankings (Luca & Smith, 2013), and levels high school counselor involvement (Donnelly, 2015). General results of the studies have found that students use a variety of resources when conducting college search, including parents, peers, counselors, websites, teachers, and family members (Areces et

al., 2016; Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012). In 2013, technology became a more common theme of college choice, due to the need for universities to use social media as a marketing tool to attract students who are going through the college choice process (Kuzma & Wright, 2013). Findings which have emerged from more recent studies include the recommendation of additional studies on how students engage through online social networks to better understand how decisions are made (González Canché, et al., 2014), as well as the importance that universities place on employing strategies to deliver authentic communication through the use of social media, such as blogs, to attract students (Sandlin & Peña, 2014).

Recently, college choice research has moved more towards the use of technology and online resources during the college choice phases (Popa, 2015). Studies have focused on using social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Pinterest to identify how students and universities use social media to post and share information. Linvill, et al. (2015) used Pinterest to identify the types of pins which are being employed by colleges and universities, and what types of pins employed by colleges and universities are the most effective. The results found that the types of content and area where the posts are being employed by colleges and universities was not as effective as it could be (Linvill, et al., 2015). Colleges and universities need to have an understanding of the type of content that is 'liked' and 'shared' by users so that the image and brand can reach a wider group of users. Additional research suggested by Linvill, et al. (2015) is to focus on how information is posted, and on the user experience to determine the effectiveness of social media platforms.

Social networks are another area of focus from recent researchers. González Canché, et al. (2014) stressed the importance of building and leveraging social networks to connect with others and gain information. Social media tools have made it very easy for prospective students to both connect and gain information from others. It is recommended that future research should focus on how individuals do, or do not use social networks to influence college choice decision making (González Canché, et al., (2014). Additionally, Bélanger, et al. (2014) focused research on the types of information that universities are posting on social media and how it may be used to attract students. The research found that active institutions are able to reach a broader audience, with the potential to increase enrollment. However, further research using current or former students is recommended, as it will provide more detailed information connecting social media use for branding and social media marketing (Bélanger, et al., 2014).

In addition to understanding the effectiveness of social media and the use of social networks, relationship quality has also been found to be an important aspect of higher education marketing (Clark, Fine, & Scheuer, 2017). Relationship quality can be tied into relationship marketing, which focuses on two-way communication between an organization and the consumer. Clark, et al. (2017) focused research on whether social media can be used to enhance the quality of relationships between a university and the students. The benefit to improving the relationship quality between a university and the students is the ability to improve trust, which may lead to current students, alumni, and other stakeholders to posting or sharing information or experiences related to the university. Clark, et al. (2017) found that following university social media did enhance their perceived quality of relationship, thus led them to be more engaged with the

university on social media. This research supported the idea that social media is becoming a more commonly used tool to access information and interact with students and university employees, thus the study will build on this study by identifying how information is shared on social media by users such as students, parents, and university employees, and influence college choice decisions.

College choice research has evolved over the years and continues to grow, due to the increased use of technology during the college choice phases. Researchers suggested that due to the evolution of social media and the ability to utilize it as a marketing tool, there is a significant gap in social media research (O'Hallarn, et al., 2016; Yuki, 2015). Yuki (2015) suggested future research on the impact of what drives content, measure the return that is achieved depending on what is posted and when it is posted. O'Hallarn, et al. (2016) stated that future research should include benefits of long-term innovative social media strategies, as well as to focus on gaining information about what customers want from an organization via social media. Linvill, et al. (2015) suggested that future research should explore issues that may impact how social media tools are being utilized, and information gathered can be used to improve social media marketing strategies and build an understanding of how to engage stakeholders online (Linvill, et al., 2015).

Additional studies related to social media research will increase the body of literature due to the relatively recent impact that social media has had on marketing strategies (Yuki, 2015). O'Hallarn, et al. (2016) addressed similar concerns in that while there are many individuals currently claiming themselves as social media experts, academic literature has not kept pace, resulting in a need for additional studies related to the discipline. The results of this study will extend the college choice literature as well as

add to literature related to social media, by exploring how social media is used to influence college choice.

Theoretical Foundations

College choice theory. The topic of college choice has been studied for over 30 years and involves decision-making for college education aimed at students from as early as the primary years, through the final college selection (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Early research on college choice has separated the stages and focuses largely on college selection (Chapman, 1986; Punj & Staelin, 1978). Chapman (1986) focused research on the search and choice stages. Prior studies on college choice led to the well-known model of college choice by Hossler and Gallagher (1987), which focuses on all three stages of college choice; pre-disposition, search, and choice, which incorporate attributes beyond the student, such as socioeconomic status, financial aid opportunities, institutional cost, and peer and parental influences. This research explores the search and choice phases of the college choice theory, with the focus on how social media is used throughout the college search process, but also when making the final determination of which college to attend.

Relationship marketing. Christian Gronroos (1994) was one of the early researchers of relationship marketing, who defined the concepts as “marketing is to establish, maintain, and enhance relationships with customers and other partners, at a profit, so that the objectives of the parties involved are met” (p. 9). Early research on the topic of relationship marketing focused on the importance of attracting the customer and building the relationship in order to maintain them as a customer (Gronroos, 1994). Relationship marketing research has largely focused on the relationship from the business

perspective, rather than from the perspective of the customer (Rasul, 2017). Rasul (2017) created a questionnaire to better define relationship marketing by utilizing questions which focus on trust within the organization and found that the level of trust impacts how customers feel, either positive or negative about a business. In regard to the research proposed in this study, content posted on social media by universities, peers, parents, or counselors, has the ability to impact trust as well as influence college choice. The results of this study will also contribute to relationship marketing research and the phenomenon of the key aspects of college search and selection phases, specifically relating to how social media is used as a tool for two-way interactive communication, with the potential to influence where an individual will attend college.

Review of the Literature

College enrollment. Enrollment in postsecondary degree-granting institutions increased 23% from 1995 to 2005, and 5% from 2005 to 2015 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). However, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2017) reported an overall decrease in college enrollment over the past three years. Fein (2014) projected this significant change, due to the high cost of tuition, and lower graduation rates, (Fein, 2014). In order to combat these challenges, Fein (2014) referred to the idea that colleges should be run more like a business, with a focus on students as the customer and creating efficiencies to serve their needs. Suggestions made by Fein are similar to the idea of creating a sustainable university. Successful universities of the future need to create processes, efficiencies, and be willing to create innovative strategies that create value to the university (Denneen & Dretler, 2012).

Although applying common business practices towards higher education may seem controversial to some, colleges which adopt a more innovative approach towards recruitment strategies are able to build a brand by creating transparency through student experiences and sharing the institutions mission and vision (Wardley, Bélanger, & Leonard, 2013), which is now being done using the internet and social media.

The Internet provides opportunity for innovation within higher education to improve learning and lower costs (Fein, 2014). With the introduction of the Web 2.0, recruitment strategies for colleges and universities are being modified to incorporate social media, which gives universities the opportunity to provide transparency to prospective college students. Prospective students not only use traditional research methods to seek information about a college or university such as speaking to counselors and attending campus tours, but they also use the internet to gather information (Crawford, 2013). Due to this change in behavior, colleges and universities are contributing additional resources towards social media offerings.

Using social media to increase visibility can be beneficial for a variety of reasons. Primarily, prospective students are able to gain the college perspective from someone who can share their daily experiences through social media such as blogs, which are perceived as authentic real-life experiences (Sandlin & Peña, 2014). Bélanger, et al. (2014) recommended colleges and universities use current and former students as brand ambassadors so they can provide a more personal perspective of their experience. This strategy can be used by university marketing departments to recruit students using authentic experiences and improve recruitment and retention.

Marketing for higher education. Universities are beginning to implement marketing strategies that include social media activities, which have recently become a popular way to advertise, to potential customers (Bélanger, et al., 2014; Logica, Victoria-Mihaela, & Magdalena., 2015). According to Hanover Research (2014) most universities now have social media accounts however, many are struggling to manage the institutions social media initiatives. Due to the struggles, institutions are hiring marketing professionals outside of the university to create strong brands (Hanover Research, 2015), resulting in 63 percent of the institutions surveyed spending \$100,000 and 31 percent spending \$200,000 on marketing initiatives (Hanover Research, 2015). Alhakimi and Qasem (2014) found that private universities tend to advertise on social media sites, use social networking sites, and positive word-of-mouth communication in addition to traditional marketing strategies used by public institutions. Social media is a cost-effective marketing tool, and commonly used form of brand communication, resulting in saving an organization such as a college or university money in the marketing budget (Baxi, et al., 2016; Bélanger, et al., 2014; Logica, et al., 2015; O'Hallarn, et al., 2016; Zailskaite-Jakste, & Kuvykaite, 2013). The savings can potentially be reinvested into the community, help to maintain tuition rates, and increase wages for faculty and staff.

Chen (2016) supported the research on using word-of-mouth communication to increase brand image to create low-cost, effective marketing strategies. Statistical evidence found brand image significantly and positively influenced loyalty, which suggests that students who feel loyal to their university will share their experience with others, resulting in potential low-cost marketing strategies (Chen, 2016). Existing research has found that students are using the internet as a resource to gain information

about college, financial aid, and scholarship information (Crawford, 2013; Daun-Barnett & Das, 2013).

Using the Internet for college choice. As technology has become more easily accessible, high school students are more reliant on using the internet as an informative source for the college search process. Crawford (2013) stated that high school students are relying on additional sources more than traditional college information sources. Because of this, there is a need to better understand which aspects of the internet are used for college search and selection.

Daun-Barnett and Das (2013) confirmed that there are a variety of internet sites which relay information related to college choice. A recent case study was conducted to review college-access web portals to determine usefulness of the web tools, and the internet in determining the college of choice (Daun-Barnett, & Das, 2013). The researchers used the college choice model to assess the web portal's level of importance, and found that although the volume of web-based tools is substantial and useful, the level and ease of access to the tools is not equal across all income levels, making it potentially more challenging for low-income, first-generation, and under-represented minorities to access the same resources (Daun-Barnett, & Das, 2013). These challenges confirm the need to use the internet to determine college choice but also identify the gap which confirms that while there may be a significant amount of college choice web-tools on the internet, they are difficult to sort through, especially for students with less financial resources and support.

According to Crawford (2013), recent high school graduates use the internet because they prefer less interaction with people and can get answers more quickly by

looking up questions online. Crawford (2013) conducted a study to understand how students use the internet to research colleges during the college search and selection phase and found that college students generally use the internet to network with friends via social media (56.2%), complete school work (20.5%), and search for news and information (14%) (Crawford, 2013). Additionally, 93.5% of the students questioned visited the school's website before applying to the university, however only 27.5% of the sample indicated that they researched the department/major's website before applying (Crawford, 2013). These results confirmed existing research findings, in that the internet is a significant resource for students to use when they are searching for information on which school to attend, and that students rely on the internet to gain information via social media and websites.

Similar to the study mentioned above, Popa (2015) conducted research to identify the extent to which students use the internet to gather information during the college search phase, identify the main online sources used in the college selection phase, analyze the extent to which the quality of information found raised expectations and contributed to college choice, and analyze the way information sources were used during college search and selection. The results indicated that college websites and Google search engines were used as a resource during the college search phase, while social media was not considered an important resource used to enroll in a college or university (Popa, 2015). Although social media may not be considered an important resource for college choice, technology is advancing and changing how people connect, interact, and communicate in the 21st century.

Using social media for college choice. Social media is a form of communication which utilizes user-based content to interact and connect with others (Matikainen, 2015). Social media related to colleges and universities can come in multiple forms such as university websites, blogs, and social networking sites, and is a relatively new communication method used by marketers to attract potential consumers. Marketers can use social media to establish more intimate relationships with customers by creating goals behind social media use (Campbell, Anitsal, & Anitsal, 2013). For example, if a university is looking to increase enrollment, they may use social media to increase brand awareness, accelerate opinion of a new program, or retain students. Wardley, et al. (2013) found a connection between students who have strong relationships with the institution, and retention, and suggest that positive word-of-mouth, and increasing customer loyalty can be used to develop brand strategies to increase enrollment. Social media has made it easy to increase word-of-mouth by utilizing social networking sites to promote a product or service. Brand strategies such as using social media are used to share experiences and express loyalty may result in prospective students feeling more connected to a university.

Campbell, et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative study with 15 participants to gain the consumers perspective of social media and their experiences and use of social media. The results suggested that people feel more connected to businesses when using social media and appreciate seeing updates on social media once or twice per week, so they are informed but not overwhelmed (Campbell et al., 2013). This finding is consistent with Sandlin and Peña (2014), who found that users want to see and hear about authentic experiences from the consumer.

An alternate point to consider is that social media research thus far has not been found to be a significant resource during college search and selection. Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2012) found that social media was ranked last as a resource for gaining information on college choice. The findings were consistent with Popa (2015), in that social media was not a top ranked resource for college choice, which was surprising by researchers in both studies. While social media was not a top resource used during college search and selection, participants indicated that visiting Facebook pages of potential institutions would have been useful (Popa, 2015). This statement suggested that social media is still a factor during college search and selection however, colleges and universities may need to review marketing and communication strategies to show the value that social media may bring to prospective students during the search and selection phase of college choice.

Using social networking sites for college choice. Social networking is a relatively new way to communicate with current and prospective students and is becoming a key aspect of marketing for many organizations, and is a tool used frequently by university students (Palmer, 2013; Shittu, Madarsha, AbduRahman, & Ahmad, 2013). Social networking using social media is a common practice in today's world, with seven-in-ten Americans using social media to connect, engage, and share information (Pew Research Center, 2017). This topic is relevant to this study due to the impact that it can have on how information is spread and used for college search and selection.

A study of six Australian universities was conducted to determine how social media is used within the selected university, specifically Twitter, to communicate with students. The study focuses on the number of tweets, retweets, and followers for each

university, and results indicate that Twitter is used in several ways; teaching and learning, marketing, student recruitment, alumni communication, and student services (Palmer, 2013). The research also found a correlation between retweets and followers and suggested that retweets may lead to gaining additional followers, which leads to increased word-of-mouth communication (Palmer, 2013). Social networking sites provide opportunities for people to share experiences and opinions with others and can be used as a specific marketing strategy to create awareness and attract others.

One strategy recommended by Sashittal and Jassawalla (2015) was that social media and other Web 2.0 tools should be developed based on segments of population, rather than assuming all users regardless of the segment, believe the same thing. Pinterest, Twitter, and Facebook are the top three popular forms of social networking sites, which can be used to build brand equity in addition to connecting friends, express feelings, and sell products or services (Sashittal & Jassawalla, 2015). Sashittal and Jassawalla (2015) conducted research to determine why college students use Pinterest, motivation behind using it and continuing to use it, and benefits of using the form of social media. Additionally, a questionnaire was developed based on the hypotheses that the higher the level of groundedness of the Pinterest user, the greater the experience of authenticity as a result of Pinterest usage, and greater the experience of authenticity, the higher level of reported enrichment (Sashittal & Jassawalla, 2015). Results from the study indicated that Pinterest was used mostly by women, who express themselves using pictures to tell a story about choices made in life, to describe oneself and future expectations (Sashittal & Jassawalla, 2015). Pinterest, along with other forms of social

networking sites can be used by marketers to learn about a segment, and appeal to future consumers who are looking for positive experiences to learn from.

González Canché, et al. (2014) studied the influences of social networks on college-going students. Key areas of the study focused on the sources used to gain information when preparing to apply to and attend a community college. Results were consistent with other studies, in that the top five influences were high school teachers, high school classmates, siblings, extended family, and college representatives (González Canché, et al., 2014). An interesting finding was that college web pages ranked in the lowest five resources used to gain information. This is consistent with Areces et al. (2016), and Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2012), in that social media was one of the least used resources in the college search phase.

In terms of social media use in colleges and universities at the global perspective, Kuzma and Wright (2013) studied how universities use social media as a marketing tool and evaluated which social media sites were most widely used for marketing and recruiting. Ten universities between three countries; Asia, Europe, and Africa in addition to four social media sites; Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and MySpace were studied, resulting 50% of the countries universities or less use social media (Kuzma & Wright, 2013). These findings suggested that there are universities which are not taking advantage of social media marketing opportunities to attract potential students. Additionally, considerations need to be made for users in developing countries. Duffett and Wakeham (2016) conducted a study using 18-30-year olds in South Africa to provide insight on the influence that social media marketing via Facebook has on Millennials in South Africa. The results suggested that South African Millennials who had used social

media for at least five years were the most aware of social network advertising (Duffett & Wakeham, 2016). As technology increases, universities worldwide will be able to use social networking sites to market to prospective students.

Trust in social networking sites. Social media can be considered as a conduit to form a trustworthy network, resulting in providing institutions with the ability to easily influence families and friends (Bélanger, et al., 2014). However, social media can also impact trust both positively and negatively. One reason for social media falling lower on a list of resources used during college search and selection may be due to the lack of trust. Hajli (2014) studied the impact that social media has on attracting new consumers, and the importance that the role of trust plays in building communities and attracting customers. A questionnaire was used to measure trust using social interaction on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, and measured perceived usefulness using social media sites. The results of the study suggested that customers who trust peers and vendors are more likely to buy (Hajli, 2014). Additionally, consumers are more likely to buy when the website is easy to use and includes quality information (Hajli, 2014). Social media sites can be used to develop trust and build communities between the user, peers, and an organization. Mirela-Cristina (2016) confirmed the importance of trust when building a brand for a product or service, and social media is a tool that can be used to earn consumers trust. Colleges and universities may be able to gain trust and acceptance via social media however, it requires consumer involvement in addition to the creation of credible messages that can be shared by social networks. College and universities are moving towards the use of blogs in addition to traditional forms of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

In order to measure trust, Chang, Diaz, and Hung (2015) developed an estimated trust value model to measure trust between individuals within a social network. The estimated trust value model measures social distances between users, giving less weight to users that have a further social distance (Chang, et al., 2015). This model would allow marketers to learn more about consumers and identify heavy users which could have a higher level of influence, resulting in a potential competitive advantage for an organization (Chang, et al., 2015). This model could also benefit marketing departments from a variety of industries for consumers who are using social network sites to gain information or ratings of a product or service (Chang, et al., 2015).

Use of blogs. Technology has made it easy for users to share personal experiences. One form of social media used to share information is a blog. A blog is a website that allows users to share personal experiences (Shiau & Luo, 2013). Chang and Yang (2013) studied the use and acceptance of blogs based on the perspective of technology acceptance model. The results indicate that the level of blog acceptance is significantly affected by technology acceptance and media choice (Chang & Yang, 2013), meaning that if users are comfortable with blog technology, they will be more inclined to accept the information found in the blog. Frequent blog users are interested in rich, diverse, and updated information, which may provide more certainty for users and may increase interactions with an organization (Chang & Yang, 2013).

Huang (2015) conducted a study to research the influence that consumer blogs have on consumers in the restaurant industry. Findings of the study indicated an integrated framework consisting of self-disclosed information, popularity, product attitudes, and feedback intentions affect blog reader responses (Huang, 2015). It is

suggested that bloggers will improve reader relationships by increasing reader's affective trust via self-disclosure, which enables the reader to create a stronger connection with the blogger (Huang, 2015). In the case of college students connecting with a blog writer for a college or university, a potential student may get a better feel for what the college experience will be, based on the experience of other college students.

Sandlin and Peña (2014) conducted a phenomenological study to explore college-bound high school student's perceptions of how authentic college or university blogs were. Information in a blog for a college or university can range from student experiences, college events, to guidance from a university professor. Interviews from the study suggested that the content included topics ranging from enrollment experience to interactions in class with actual professors, and the blogs were perceived to be authentic and provide students with stories about real experiences (Sandlin & Peña, 2014). Results from the study suggested that colleges and universities should invest in hiring actual students to participate in social media so that prospective students can internalize the experiences of the bloggers and make a more intimate connection with the university (Sandlin & Peña, 2014).

Colleges and universities that use blogs to attract and retain students need to take into account the required daily up-keep needed to maintain users. Shiau and Luo (2013) studied the impact of perceived enjoyment, habit, user involvement and blogging, and found that user involvement and satisfaction are strong predictors of a user's intention to continue reading a blog to gain information. Additionally, users who gain enjoyment and feel that they gain value from the blogs are likely to continue using blogs (Shiau & Luo, 2013).

Social network analysis. The abundance of social networking sites, which are used by businesses to promote products and services has made social networking analysis more applicable than ever, while at the same time challenging to track due to the need for analytical knowledge to interpret results. Social network analysis focuses on the quantitative study of social networks (Eisenberg, Johnson, & Pieteron, 2015), and has been applied to theory and practice of management. Logica, et al. (2015) referred to the importance of using social networks, along with traditional data sources such as questionnaires to generate big data, which enables businesses to analyze and predict consumer behaviors. This is an important area of focus for organizations because as Logica, et al. (2015) found that social network analysis software provides information which relates to customer opinions, customer satisfaction, and an additional understanding of what influences consumer behavior and decision-making. As college enrollment continues to increase, universities can use social network analysis and big data to remain competitive in an industry which has recently been under pressure for potential reform (Fein, 2014).

Resources used during college search and selection. Students use a variety of resources to collect information throughout the college search and selection phases. Existing literature has found parents, peers, and counselors to be significant influences during these stages (Areces et al., 2016; Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012; Kutty, 2014; Lubbe & Petzer, 2013;). This has been found to be a major theme throughout the review of literature for this study, and plays a pivotal role in the research, which explains why they are specified in the questionnaire and interviews for this study.

College choice literature has focused on influential resources such as families, media, university students and staff, university reputation, and peers (Areces et al., 2016; Kutty, 2014; Lubbe & Petzer, 2013;). Depending on the type of student, the key influence of the student decision making process may vary. Areces, et al. (2016) found that parents and university web sites are the most used and useful resource when selecting a college major. This finding is consistent with other research such as Constantinides and Zinck Stagno, (2012), who found that campus visits, university websites, and brochures are the top three useful resources. It is also possible that resources are used differently depending on demographic.

According to Bock, et al. (2014), there has not been a large amount of research focus on branding in higher education. Bock et al. explored the college selection process of students attending a private university in the northwestern USA, to gain an understanding of why students select a specific university. The results of the study separated the participant responses into three clusters of students; Satisfactory Seekers, Financially Focused, and Deliberators, and found that the clusters in the Financially Focused and Deliberators group gained knowledge from family and friends, and through a university representative more than the Satisfactory Seekers (Bock, et al., 2014). Additionally, all three types of students obtained information through advertisements, guidance counselors, and campus visits. A more recent study on college choice and the influence of brand, utilized the consumer decision-making framework, which resulted in consistent findings to other college choice research in that friends and family are often involved in the college selection process, and the influential factors used to make a

decision consist of program availability, price, perception, size, location, and the environment of the campus (Stephenson, Heckert, & Yerger, 2016).

While college choice research continues to produce consistent results in terms of key influences of college selection, there exists a gap in literature which explains how information is shared during the decision-making process. Stephenson, et al. (2016) suggest additional research is needed to identify how an institutions brand may be used to inform college choice, specifically relating to how a college moves from being simply considered to the final choice. Prior research identified social media as a potential resource which can be used to communicate with others to generate word-of-mouth influences on a product or service (Zailskaite-Jakste & Kuvykaite, 2013). As social media evolves, there is potential for it to have a significant impact on consumer behavior. This study may provide the opportunity to better understand how social media can be used through the social environment to impact college decision-making, as well as to reassure college choice during the time the potential student commits to attending a university, and actually attending on the first day of class. Stephenson, et al. (2016) notes that the campus visit played a significant role in college selection, but to this researcher's knowledge, there has not been research to identify which resources reinforce final college selection.

Social environment as a college search resource. The social environment consists of influences such as family, friends, and peers (Areces et al., 2016). Lubbe and Petzer (2013) studied the influences on prospective students' university choice in South Africa and hypothesized that various key sources influence the college choice and decision-making process when selecting a university and suggested that demographic

characteristics influence their decision-making process. The results of the study identified brochures and parent guidance as the top influences for college decision making, and different demographics of students utilize resources differently in the decision-making process (Lubbe & Petzer, 2013). Lower performing students are more likely influenced by media, peers, and counselors, whereas higher performing prospective students use resources such as students at a university, parents, teachers, or university rankings (Lubbe & Petzer, 2013). This finding is similar to Areces et al. (2016); however, their study also found that friends, family, peers, and media such as radio, television, and the internet were key resources during the search and selection phase.

Parental involvement in college choice. Parent involvement has also been a contributor towards the college choice process. The influence of parents has consistently been cited as one of several key influences of college choice (Areces et al., 2016; Lubbe & Petzer, 2013; Watson, Vernon, Seddon, Andrews, & Wang, 2016; Workman, 2015). Research has also found that the level of parent involvement varies depending on socioeconomic (SES) status, but regardless of the SES, parental discussions are equally as important (Watson, et al., 2016). Workman (2015) and Myers and Myers (2012) conducted studies which focus on parental involvement, and found that students connect deeply with parents, and parents who have two-way communication with their child are influential in the major, and career paths. Millennial college students deeply connect with parents, indicating further research is needed to gain a better understanding of how to serve the current college demographic in the college choice process (Myers, S., & Myers, C., 2012; Workman, 2015).

Rankings/reputation as a college choice resource. University rankings reflect reputation and are widely used, although research identifies methodological weaknesses and validity of various ranking systems (O'Connell, 2013). University rankings tend to be listed in news magazines which target potential students however, Bastedo and Bowman (2011) identified the multi-uses of the rankings from an organizational perspective as a way to increase tuition by placing an importance on reputation of being listed in the top 25 of the rankings. One major concern in regard to university rankings is that there are a large number of university ranking systems, but they do not consistently include all indicators needed to determine the effectiveness of a higher education institution. Essack and Naidoo (2013) found four main challenges with university ranking systems; 1) incorporating teaching related profiles, missions, and goals, 2) identifying appropriate quantitative and qualitative indicators for teaching quality, 3) finding the right balance between teaching indicators, and 4) ensuring that the indicators address teaching impact and learning.

An additional point of consideration is that students may view rankings differently than college administrators. Luca and Smith (2013) researched the topic of university rankings and the salience of the information and how it affects the college choice. Luca and Smith (2013) defined salience as the "simplicity of determining a given college's ranking" (p.59), meaning that if consumers are provided with a simple ranking versus the methodology of ranking, the ranking is more salient. The findings of the Luca and Smith (2013) indicated that when rankings are in their most simplistic form, there is a causal impact on applications to a college of university. While these results indicated that university rankings are used to apply to college or university, the research did not

indicate whether students actually selected a college or university based on the university ranking. These findings are similar to a study by Soo (2013), in that rankings do not appear to be a final determination factor for college choice.

Soo (2013) studied university rankings to research the effect of rankings on the perceptions of the quality of universities by teachers and academics and the effects of rankings on student applications. The results of the study indicated that university rankings affect the perceptions of a college or university; however, rankings have less of an impact on student college applications (Soo, 2013). There are similarities and differences between student use of ranking and academic use of rankings. While both demographics place an importance on reputation of a university, the difference between the results of the student's use of ranking and academic use of ranking is that the ranking used in this study did not influence which university students applied to (Soo, 2013). The overall result of these findings indicated that although students may review university rankings, the ranking itself does not appear to be a final factor in the decision-making process.

Munisamy, Mohd Jaafar, and Nagaraj (2014) studied the topic of college choice and the factors that influence college decision-making. The study was conducted in the country of Malaysia, and reasons for students to pursue higher education and the key factors that influence the final choice of institution (Munisamy, et al., 2014). Students were asked to rate the importance level for making the decision to further their education, as well as, the importance level for selecting a specific university to attend. Reputation was used as the dependent variable, with relative costs, personal development, career prospect, and significant others as independent variables. A significant focus from the

data was on reputation; 39.3% of the participants rated reputation as important. Based on the results of the study, it was recommended that universities focus on building relationships with alumni, feeder schools, and employers, to build the brand image of a university, which also has the potential to improve the reputation of a university (Munisamy, et al., 2014).

Counselors as a college choice resource. Existing research has identified high school and college counselors as common resources used during college search and selection (Bock, et al., 2014). The consistent finding recognized in the research is that all high schools are not created equal and do not have the same resources needed to provide college and career counseling support (Donnelly, 2015; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). Donnelly (2015) conducted a case study of two schools in Wales to learn about the college choice decision-making process, using students in their final year of school prior to entering a higher education institution. Participants were interviewed twice throughout the year, as the researcher learned about experiences at school and plans for the future. High school guidance counselors strongly influenced student decision-making, and potentially altered the direction a student may want to take (Donnelly, 2015). For example, there was a clear differentiation between the two schools in regard to the amount of time given to the discussion about college or university options and college preparation (Donnelly, 2015). The potential impact of differing counseling initiatives is that the school which provided a larger focus on higher education may have been overly involved in guiding students, resulting in changing the future path (Donnelly, 2015).

Similarly, Engberg and Gilbert (2014) conducted a study to examine the relationship between high school guidance counselor structures and college-going rates.

Engberg and Gilbert (2014) stated that most high schools do not have systems in place to distribute college information to students. A significant finding of the study by Engberg and Gilbert (2014) was the correlation between the percentage of hours spent on college counseling and the average caseload of a high school guidance counselor. High schools with counselors dedicated towards college advising have a higher college-going rate than high schools without dedicated college guidance (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014).

Watson, et al. (2016) suggested that a way to combat the lack of college search resources is for universities to provide information sessions, specifically targeted to parents of high school students. Lower SES families would benefit from informational sessions hosted by universities because they may not have the means or experience properly educate their child. Although research stated that there are a variety of college choice counseling activities being held (Donnelly, 2015; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014), there is a lack of research which focuses on how social media may or may not have been used by counseling departments to inform college decision-making. This study will make an attempt to close this gap by researching how high school students connect with counselors using social media to inform college search and selection.

The importance of brand. Brand and image play an important role in establishing and maintaining a strong university and need to be factored into marketing strategies (Casidy, 2013). For example, if a college or university creates a new program offering such as a BS in Supply Chain Management, the universities brand may be what attracts the student and although there may be other nearby institutions which offer the same program, the student may choose to attend the university with the new program due to the positive image and brand, which was built on other aspects of the organization.

This section will review the importance of brand and brand equity, which can be built using social media tools. It is important that universities have an understanding of how social media influences college search and selection so that marketing strategies include a variety of methods to attract and retain students. Additionally, a strong brand orientation may be perceived as a high-quality (Casidy, 2014) university in the education industry.

Casidy (2013) confirmed the importance of perceived brand orientation, and found links between perceived brand orientation, loyalty, and student satisfaction. This study supported prior research findings, suggesting that positive perception and student satisfaction can increase brand image. When students are satisfied with the experience, they also tend to become more loyal to the product or service. Existing students and alumni are able to use social media to share their satisfaction and loyalties using word-of-mouth communication tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs, to inform others about their experiences.

Brand equity. Brand equity plays a key role for organizations which are offering new products or services. The most well-known model of brand equity was constructed by Aaker (1991) and provides value to both the customer and the business, and incorporates five categories of assets; brand loyalty, name awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and other proprietary brand assets (Aaker, 1991; Liu, Hu, Kao, & Ching, 2016). Zailskaite-Jakste and Kuvykaite (2013) incorporated social media with brand equity to show the potential that communication in social media may be used to build brand equity. For the customer, the assets of brand equity provide information, build confidence in the purchase decision, and have the potential to create perceived satisfaction between the customer and the product (Aaker, 1991). From a business

perspective, brand equity may be used to generate cash flow by attracting new customers, and build loyalty through perceived quality (Aaker, 1991).

Social media provides a platform for word-of-mouth communication to build brand equity in a scalable and inexpensive form of marketing for organizations (Zailskaite-Jakste, & Kuvykaite, 2013). The concept of social media in brand equity is a relatively new concept. Zailskaite-Jakste and Kuvykaite (2013) developed a theoretical model of building brand equity by using social media communication. The model consists of eight stages: Environmental and competitor's analysis, brand equity research before the beginning of communication in social media, communication strategy, proper selection of channels, process of communication, monitoring of actions, reaction to negative comments, and assessment and comparison of results (Zailskaite-Jakste & Kuvykaite, 2013). The researchers implemented a mixed-method study consisting of structural interviews, and content analysis and questionnaire interviews to conduct the study on a brand of coffee. Results of the study suggested that social media changes how the brand is communicated based on consumer reactions (Zailskaite-Jakste & Kuvykaite, 2013). Consumers may help to build brand awareness and brand equity via social media however, the size of the impact is based on the level of involvement that consumers have on social media (Zailskaite-Jakste & Kuvykaite, 2013). Organizations must consider how consumer opinion and communication affect the message and the ability to build a brand to attract new consumers (Zailskaite-Jakste & Kuvykaite, 2013). When universities are looking to attract, and enroll new students, social media can be used to create awareness using viral marketing or word-of-mouth communication, which is shared between social networks.

Word-of mouth-communication. This section will focus on word-of-mouth communication, as it is relevant and necessary when evaluating social media and how information is relayed to students, parents, and counselors during college search and selection. Existing literature has cited the use of social media to share information using social networks to increase followers (Palmer, 2013) and visibility of an organization. The advancement of technology has made it easier to utilize word-of-mouth communication via users posting and sharing content (Palmer, 2013). Susarla, et al. (2016) studied the topic word-of-mouth communication in social networks, specifically the factors that trigger word-of-mouth communication, and the impact that early word-of-mouth communication has on the continuation of the shared message. Data for the study included tracking information from YouTube channels such as the number of responses to videos, length of a video, number of links to a video, number of views of a video, and tags posted by the channel (Susarla, et al., 2016). Results of the study suggested that videos that were posted and had comments within 15 days of original posting, were shared more than videos that do not receive comments (Susarla, et al., 2016). These results indicated that network ties significantly impact word-of-mouth communication and support user-generated content.

When users share content on social media, they are able to extend the reach of social media to people who have not already shown an interest in the brand, and the brand is able to increase awareness while maintaining relative control of the content (Yuki, 2015). Yuki (2015) studied the psychological factors that affect brand content on Facebook; social currency, emotion, usefulness, and content that tells a story. Yuki (2015) found that 52% of the respondents shared to “look good” and 36% of the

respondents shared to “look intelligent.” These results are similar to results found by Araujo, Neijens, and Vliegenthart (2015) which found that informational cues were predictors of higher levels of sharing content on Twitter. By gaining a better understanding of why people share content and what content is more likely to be shared, marketers can post content that will generate more interest and potentially increase word-of-mouth communication.

While many colleges and universities are developing recruitment strategies towards electronic content, there are still universities which believe that face-to-face communication is key. Jackson, Davis, and Damron-Martinez (2014) wrote a case study about a business school in the Midwest which is utilizing student panels, student organizations, campus and classroom visits, and personal communication via faculty and students, to recruit business students. The outcome of using a more personalized touch to college recruiting has proven to be beneficial, as enrollment has increased while marketing budgets have decreased (Jackson, et al., 2014).

User-generated content. User-generated content is a major contributor to social media marketing. A benefit to increasing user-generated content is that the content is created by actual consumers rather than by paid advertisements (Poch & Martin, 2015). While there are benefits of user-generated content such as increased awareness of a product or service at minimal cost to the business, there is also potential for negative content from unsatisfied consumers (Poch & Martin, 2015). Poch and Martin (2015) studied consumer motivation to understand why people create user-generated video content, specifically, the role of altruism, social benefits, and economic incentives. An online questionnaire was delivered to 101 students at a university in Australia, resulting

in a sample size of 28 students who were asked to answer questions relating to positive and negative word-of-mouth behavior, positive and negative user-generated video branded content behavior, and altruism. Poch and Martin (2015) found that economic incentives and high altruism consumers are more likely to create positive user-generated content.

Organizations can benefit from positive user-generated content due to the increase in trust they may bring. Morrison, et al. (2013) studied the behaviors of social media users to better understand patterns of lurking and posting to user-generated content sites, and the demographics of the lurkers and posters. The social media sites consisted of news outlets, sites for consumer reviews, and social networking sites. The results of the study suggest that there are more people who read reviews on social media than people who post on social media, however, people who do post, post to social networking sites (Morrison, et al., 2013). In regard to relating this study to the influence that social media has on college choice, prospective students may find it easier to trust user-generated comments, than to trust advertising.

Wang and Li (2014) studied how people are motivated and influenced to create user-generated content on social media. The authors focus on three main areas; content attractiveness, trust toward the social media site, and individual characteristics that influence the motivation to produce user-generated content (Wang & Li, 2014). The researchers found that when individuals perceive that others enjoy what they posted on social media as well as trust the social media site, the individual who posted content may have an increase in competence, which may increase their motivation to post on social media (Wang & Li, 2014). Additionally, Matikainen (2015) suggested that people are

motivated to generate social media content because they want to be involved in the development of the internet, learn things, share information about their lives, and feel a sense of community using the online platform. Motivation to post on social media is connected to social identity (Matikainen, 2015). If a university understands what motivates people to use social media to share experiences related to college or university life, prospective students may gain a better understanding of what to expect prior to attending a higher education institution. Additionally, universities may be able to leverage social media to retain students between the time of enrollment and the actual start date.

Methodology. There are three methodologies that can be used for research: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method. Studies relating to this research include both quantitative and qualitative methodology. Thornton (2017) and Linvill, et al. (2015) utilized a qualitative methodology to perform a content analysis for their selected studies. Thornton's research focused on social media sites of 16 universities. Linvill et al. used Pinterest to identify the types of information that colleges and universities were posting their Pinterest accounts. Klein and Washburn (2012) also used qualitative methodology to research the search phase of the college choice process, using a case study research design to identify why high school students elected to attend a specified university in the Midwest. Kimmons, et al. (2017) used data mining and other quantitative tools to study the types of information posted on Twitter accounts of 2,411 colleges and universities. Jan and Ammari (2016) also used a quantitative methodology to identify causal relationships of institutional social media, websites, and advertisements to college choice.

Similar to Klein and Washburn, the researcher selected a qualitative methodology with a case study design so that the specified university could be studied, and students attending the institution were able to share their perspective on how social media was used as an interactive tool, and why they used it during the college search and choice phases. Yin (2014), suggested the use of a case study when a researcher is looking to explore, explain, predict, or describe a phenomenon. The benefit of a case study is that it requires at least three sources of data, which are used to triangulate the results. Consistent themes can then be found within the three sources of data, and further justify the results of the study.

Instrumentation. After reviewing previous studies on college choice and relationship marketing, there appears to be a mix of both quantitative and qualitative research. However, there have been more studies using quantitative research and instrumentation than qualitative. Because of this, it is believing that qualitative research was needed to gain additional information to further explain how college choices are made, who influences the decision, and how information is relayed to them. Qualitative studies referenced in this research (Donnelly, 2015; Klein & Washburn, 2012; Sandlin & Peña, 2014) utilize interviews as well as personal observations to gather data. As Sandlin and Peña (2014) mention, a qualitative approach such as this, place a value on student perception. Thornton (2017) and Linvill, et al. (2015) used archival data from social media sites to perform content analysis on the types of information universities post on social media. Daun-Barnett, and Das (2013) completed a case study using archival data from college-access web portals to collect information related to how web portals are used during college search. Kutty (2014) used semistructured interviews with 16 college

students to collect college choice data related to the college decision-making process. Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2012) selected a quantitative methodology, using surveys to collect data relating to the use of social media and the choice of study and university, and to study the factors that influence college choice. This study focused on the student perception of how information was shared on social media, and how university-employed marketing staff interact on social media to influence college choice.

This study used questionnaires, interviews and a focus group to gain an increased understanding of student's perspective of how social media resources affected their decision to attend an identified university. The questionnaire collected demographic information as well as information related to general social media usage. Semistructured interviews provided a more in-depth exploration of how student's perceived use of social media influenced their decision to attend a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern, United States. Additionally, a focus group revealed how university-employed staff used social media to influence college choice. The data were collected, coded, and analyzed to identify themes to support the research and add to the body of literature.

Summary

There have been numerous studies conducted throughout the United States and across the globe with a focus on college choice. The studies have largely been quantitative and based on college choice theory by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and have concluded with consistent findings in that the key influences of college search are parents, peers, and counselors. Physical campus tours, and information found on the internet are overall the key resources used to gain information related to college choice.

However, as technology improves, social media is becoming a stronger influence and resource for consumers, resulting in the need to continue research on college choice (Klein & Washburn, 2012). Additionally, social media has been found to be a cost-effective marketing tool and a new form of brand communication (Baxi, et al., 2016; Logica, et al., 2015; Zailskaite-Jakste, & Kuvykaite, 2013).

Prospective students are continuing to use traditional methods of to learn about colleges and universities, but they have also moved towards using the internet to collect additional information. The internet not only provides prospective students with information regarding program offerings, but also may be used as a tool to host web portals, which collects various pieces of data such as cost of tuition, housing, financial aid availability, and submit college applications (Daun-Barnett & Das, 2013). In addition to general internet use, students now have the access to review blogs, social networking sites, and watch videos related to college activities. There have been very few empirical articles which specifically identify how social media is used throughout college search and selection; however, findings have suggested that social media has not been a top-ranking resource used in college search (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012; Popa, 2015). Existing research has not been extensive and has not focused on how social media influences college choice, specifically in relation to how peers, parents, and counselors use social media to provide information to students.

Several themes found throughout social media research consist of the use of blogs to create authentic messages and build trust with the consumer (Sandlin & Peña, 2014; Chang & Yang, 2013; Huang, 2015). These are two important areas for any organization to consider when creating content for social media. When users are able to relate the

content of what they see online with real experiences, they feel more connected to the organization (Sandlin & Peña, 2014). This suggests that students who are in the college search and selection phases may feel more comfortable with the college or university choice if they are able to get a true sense of what to expect based on what they see on social media. On the contrary, prospective students also have the opportunity to utilize university rankings to determine where to attend college. Existing research on university rankings and reputation suggest that although rankings are reviewed, they do not have a significant impact on final college selection (Luca & Smith, 2013; Soo, 2013). Similarly, research indicates that counselors offer varied support depending on where a student attends high school (Donnelly, 2015; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). Unfortunately, not all high schools receive the same amount of financial support to provide college choice resources to students. Watson, et al. (2016) suggested universities host information sessions to parents to provide a detailed perspective of what to expect in college, regardless of the socioeconomic level.

Word-of-mouth communication and user-generated content have consistently appeared in empirical studies as a relatively easy way to spread information (Palmer, 2013). As mentioned earlier, information has been found to be shared through peers, parents, and counselors (Areces et al., 2016). Knowing that the common influences are peers, parents, and counselors, this research study used relationship marketing as a theoretical foundation.

College choice theory and relationship marketing were used to guide this study, and explain the phenomena of how social media influences first-year college students' college decision process.

The following research questions guide this study:

- RQ1: How do college students use social media during their college decision making process?
- RQ2: How do college students describe their parents' and university-employed marketing staffs' use of social media influenced their college choice decision?
- RQ3: How do university-employed marketing staff use social media to influence college choice decisions?

This research provided data that may be used by university marketing departments to identify specific social media strategies to attract, retain, and enroll new students. Branding is a key strategy needed to build an organization (Casidy, 2013). This research will also give universities suggestions to increase relationship marketing strategies using social media to build a brand and promote enrollment growth.

To summarize, Chapter 2 provided a review of existing literature concerning college choice, and explores several topics related to this study. Chapter 3 explains how the data was obtained to identify how social media influences college choice. Chapter 3 also explains the method of data collection and analysis.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, case study was to explore how social media was used to influence first-year college students' decision to attend a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern, United States. The target population included first-year college students and university-employed marketing staff associated with a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern, United States. The sample included 62 students enrolled in one on ground business course and seven university-employed marketing staff, including the manager of social media marketing, four social media marketing employees who manage the university accounts, one student worker for social media marketing, and a program specialist from enrollment.

This chapter outlines the methodology chosen for the research and provides a summary of the problem in addition to the three research questions used to address the problem. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology and why the methodology and design are appropriate to answer the research questions. Additionally, it outlines the population, sample selection procedures, data collection procedures, instrumentation, and how the instruments are designed to answer the research questions. Lastly, this chapter describes how the validity and reliability of the research was ensured given the research methodology. Chapter 3 also identifies ethical issues to be considered and addresses the limitations of the study. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Statement of the Problem

It was not known how social media was used to influence first-year college students' decision to attend a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern,

United States. Prospective college students consider college reputation, cost, financial aid availability, accreditation, academic and social programs into the college selection process (Bock, et al., 2014; Klein & Washburn, 2012; Nadelson et al., 2013), and use a variety of resources to collect this information. Bock, et al. (2014) found that prospective students utilize informational resources differently based on categories such as word-of-mouth, family and friends, advertisements, and college counselors.

Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2012) found that despite the high popularity of social media use among future college students, students ranked the informational use of social media relatively low in their college choice decisions. The authors speculated that this is due to lack of interactive focus on these sites. Future students expect to see “links to corporate blogs, discussion forums or social networking applications like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Delicious, Flickr, Digg on the web pages they visit” (p. 20).

Additionally, Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2012) found that information on how family and friends use social media to influence a student’s college choice was lacking in the Netherlands. The results of this study provide information to fill in that gap. At the moment, many universities are using social media in a unidirectional manner where they provide information to prospective students. However, much research has indicated prospective students appreciate both the informational and interactive features of social media. Therefore, there exists a certain disjuncture between what universities are doing in terms of social media usage and what prospective students expect when they access social media.

Consumers use technology such as social media more than ever to learn, socialize, and interact with companies quicker (Powers, et al., 2012). Colleges and universities need to have an understanding of how prospective students use social media during the college search and selection phases so they can effectively use it as a tool to communicate and interact with current and prospective students (Ghosh, et al., 2012; Jan & Ammari, 2016; Kimmons, et al., 2017; Thornton, 2017).

Social networking sites have created many opportunities for marketers to reach consumers. However, these sites are relatively new areas for research considering they have been in existence for approximately 10 years (Girona & Korgaonkar, 2014). Prior researchers recommended and made a case for future research on how social media is used as a tool to influence prospective student college choice decisions (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012; Thornton, 2017). This study will add to the body of research on the use of social networking sites by researching how social media was used to during prospective students' college search and decision-making process. The general population was all potential first year college students and university-employed marketing staff in non-profit or private colleges in the United States. The target population was all potential first year college students and university-employed marketing staff in non-profit or private colleges in the southwest United States. The sample was first-year business students and university marketing staff of one four-year non-profit private college located in the southwestern, United States. The sample included 62 students enrolled in one on ground business course who completed a questionnaire, and 12 students enrolled in one on-ground business course participated in semistructured interview. Seven university-employed marketing staff participated in a

focus group, including the manager of social media marketing, four social media marketing employees who manage the university accounts, one student worker for social media marketing, and a program specialist from enrollment.

The phenomenon under study specifically relates to how use of social media sites influenced first year college students' decision to attend a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern, United States. Results may provide universities and marketers with evidence to improve strategies to attract, recruit, and retain students. Additionally, this study may be beneficial to colleges and universities struggling to attract and retain students. The researcher identified social media sites that are used as an information sharing and interactive tool by prospective students, peers, and family, thus developing a business case to justify possible reallocation of budgets to increase social media marketing activities. Understanding these influences may help university leaders and marketers to better understand how social media may be used for marketing higher education, as social media is still in the infancy stage (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012).

Research Questions

Three research questions were used to guide this study and were developed in response to the literature that suggests the need to explore the phenomenon of how technology and social media could influence student recruitment and decisions to attend specific colleges in education (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012; Crawford, 2013; González Canché, et al., 2014; Klein & Washburn, 2012; Kuzma & Wright, 2013;).

The following research questions guide this study:

RQ1: How do college students use social media during their college decision making process?

RQ2: How do college students describe their parents and university-employed marketing staff's use of social media influenced college choice decisions?

RQ3: How do university-employed marketing staff use social media to influence first year students' college choice decisions?

Due to the nature of the research questions, a qualitative research approach was an appropriate method to explore the phenomena related to how social media was used to influence first-year college students' college search and choice decisions. Sources of data collection were questionnaires and face-to-face interviews with first-year university students enrolled in an on-ground business class. The questionnaires provided the researcher with initial demographic data and were used to select the participants for the study. The questionnaires were also used to validate the data from the interviews with the students. Additionally, the interviews gave participants the opportunity to explain and clarify the level of influence that social media had on college search and selection process to address the first two research questions. University-employed marketing staff participated in a focus group to describe how the university used social media as a strategy to attract potential students, which was used to address the third research question.

Research Methodology

A qualitative method was deemed appropriate for this study because it allowed the researcher to conduct an in-depth evaluation to answer the "how" question related to use the influence of social media on first-year college students' decision to attend a four-

year private college in the southwestern, United States. A qualitative methodology consists of a perspective or assumption that can be used for open analysis (Vaismoradi, et al., 2013), and focuses largely on the “how” and “why” question of a study, which provides a deeper evaluation of the research (Barnham, 2015). These attributes fit the current study because the researcher asked students to explain how they used social media throughout their college search, and why they selected the resources they did to make their final choice. Additionally, the students were asked how their parents and university-employed marketing staff used social media is used to help students make a college choice decision. Finally, university-employed marketing staff discussed how they used social media to influence college choice decisions. Furthermore, qualitative research focuses on how people make sense out of their experiences and yields primarily narrative data.

Quantitative methodology is appropriate for studies that examine the relationship among variables, and are looking to find trends, participant opinion, or studies that evaluate treatment options through inferential statistics (Yates & Leggett, 2016). In contrast to qualitative research, quantitative research has a stronger focus on the “what” question of a study, with results displayed more towards pure factual information (Barnham, 2015). The purpose of this study was not to establish a relationship through hypothesis testing; therefore, a quantitative method was not appropriate.

Empirical studies on the topic have ranged in both quantitative and qualitative research. Quantitative studies have focused research on identifying the resources and influences of college search and selection (Areces et al., 2016; Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012; Crawford, 2013; Jung, 2013; Lubbe & Petzer, 2013; Myers & Myers,

2012; Popa, 2015). Several of these studies were done in countries other than the United States. Therefore, the results may not be applicable to other settings or geographic locations. Qualitative studies focused research on understanding the decision-making process (Campbell, et al., M., 2013) the factors that influenced the college selection process (Daun-Barnett, & Das, 2013; Kutty, 2014; Workman, 2015).

Two examples of empirical research with a qualitative method were conducted by Donnelly (2015) and Klein and Washburn (2012). Donnelly (2015) focused on the influence of Britain high school resources on college choice. The sources for the study compared two schools, and include interviews with students, interviews with teachers and counselors, and observations of career preparation activities (Donnelly, 2015). Klein and Washburn (2012) used a qualitative approach utilizing responses from a questionnaire and interviews of students from a campus visit to understand reasons for selecting a college or university. Both of these studies were qualitative because the researcher wanted to gain a better understanding of how students determine where they will attend college. These studies also influenced how the researcher developed the interview and focus group questions.

A qualitative approach helps to uncover additional resources and influences that may not be included in a quantitative research design (Obermeit, 2012), which is commonly known to be used as an explanatory phase of research (Yin, 2014). A quantitative approach was not appropriate for this study, because it would not allow the participants to explain why or how they used social media as a tool to make college choice decisions. Although quantitative methodology may be useful for this study, it would not provide the researcher with the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of

the topic by asking open-ended questions to the participants about how parents, peers, and counselors use social media to influence college search and selection. Furthermore, the researcher is using an inductive, not deductive approach, which is suited to quantitative methods. The researcher does not want to establish a relationship between two or more variables based on hypothesis testing; therefore, a quantitative method was not selected.

Research Design

A qualitative case study was the most appropriate design for this research. Dresch, Lacerda, and Miguel (2015) suggested that a case study is appropriate for studies which explore, describe, explain, or predict an objective or phenomenon, and answer how and why questions. Additionally, case studies are a justifiable design when the researcher has little or no control of the real-life experiences of the participants (Yin, 2014), and the researcher can investigate the details of the case, resulting in a deeper knowledge of the subject. This design provided detailed information on the topic by allowing the participants to share their perspective via interviews and focus groups to explain how social media influences students' decision to attend a four-year private college in the southwestern, United States.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a case is “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (p. 27). A case can be a person, program, group, event or policy, which is in a bounded context. The researcher needs to be able to articulate the phenomenon and describe its boundaries or “fence.” According to Yin (2014), in a case study, the unit of analysis being studied, and the context of the study must be identified. The specific individual or group must be considered in light of the

phenomenon (Yin, 2014). The unit of analysis was first-year business students, their parents, and the university-employed marketing staff at a four-year private Christian university in the southwest, United States.

Data for this case study were collected using multiple forms of evidence including interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups. According to Yin (2014), a strength of using a case study is that it uses multiple forms of evidence because it will increase the trustworthiness of conclusions yielded from the data. For example, if a questionnaire were the only source used in this study, the researcher would not be able to interact with the participants to further understand the participant's behavior to explain the central phenomena of how social media have been used by the participants to share information and influence their college choice decisions.

Additional research designs which may be suggested for qualitative research are phenomenology, narrative inquiry, phenomenology, or grounded theory. Phenomenology and narrative inquiry share some commonalities in that participants share their experiences through interviews. However, the narrative inquiry design is not appropriate because it is based on using first-hand experiences shared and reported through stories, which are organized chronologically based on the meaning of the experiences shared in the story (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). This research study did include life stories solicited from the participants discussing the role of social media played during their college search process. The researcher was not interested in organizing results based on stories reported by first-year students; therefore, narrative inquiry design would not support this portion of the study.

Phenomenological studies are appropriate for describing, gaining an understanding of, and/or interpreting a lived experience, and utilizes in-depth interviews to collect the data (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). This design may have been appropriate for a portion of this research; however, this study attempted to uncover how social media influences college choice decisions, and the researcher was not looking at the psychological, cognitive meaning behind college choice decision-making.

Another research design that could have been used is a qualitative descriptive design. A qualitative descriptive design was not used for this study because it focuses on reporting the who, what, and where to simply describe a phenomenon (Maul, 2015). Additionally, this design is used more to describe the phenomenon versus taking the interpretive approach. Whereas a case study will use ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions to explain the interactions among the factors involved a phenomenon.

Grounded theory is another research design used for qualitative studies and uses an analytic approach to review data. Grounded theory requires multiple rounds of interviews to collect data and develop a core or central theory (Yates & Leggett, 2016). Grounded theory was not chosen because the project, and research questions, were not designed to develop theory from everyday practice.

Population and Sample Selection

The general population was all potential first year college students and university-employed marketing staff in non-profit or private colleges in the United States. The target population was all potential first year college and university-employed marketing staff in non-profit or private colleges in the southwest United States. The sample was first-year

business students and university-employed marketing staff of one four-year non-profit private college located in the southwestern, United States.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants. According to Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016), a purposive sampling strategy is used when the researcher wants to identify individuals who are able to provide information related to the phenomenon. In particular, they are knowledgeable of the phenomenon. The first target group for this qualitative study included 90 first-year students, enrolled in one on ground business class, who were selected to complete a questionnaire. The criteria used to invite participants to the interview were: (1) they were taking classes within their first year at the university, (2) maintained at least one social media account (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, LinkedIn, YouTube, blogs), (3) used social media to connect with parents, peers, or counselors, and (3) reviewed university social media accounts during the college search and selection stage. The researcher requested 30 volunteers from one section of a business ground course. If there were not enough volunteers for participants from one section, the researcher would have identified additional sections to solicit volunteers from. However, 62 students completed the questionnaire, 33 qualified to participate in the semistructured interviews, and 12 participated in interviews, so this did not occur. Criteria for participation for the university-employed marketing staff included (1) participants were over the age of 18, and (2) worked in marketing or enrollment at the university. The researcher recruited participants by contacting the assistant director of digital media and executive vice president of ground operations to request employee volunteers to participate in the study.

Sample size is also an important aspect of research. There are no specific guidelines to follow when determining how many participants to interview or observe, however, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that in purposeful sampling the researcher should continue collecting data until there is no new information to learn, thus reaching a point of saturation. Mason (2010) suggested that the point of saturation is difficult to determine and can vary between different types of qualitative studies. Mason (2010) found the most common qualitative study sample sizes to be 20 and 30, with the lowest number being 10 and highest up to 42. In regard to this study, the researcher found a range of participants in qualitative studies. Sandlin and Peña (2014) and Kutty (2014) interviewed 16 participants, and Klein and Washburn (2012) interviewed 11 participants. Thus, this researcher believed an appropriate sample size would be 15 first-year students and 10-15 university-employed marketing staff.

Prior to conducting the study, the researcher obtained site authorization approval at the university, and requested approval to attend a business course taken by students in their first-year at the university. The researcher also got IRB approval from Grand Canyon University prior to collecting data. The researcher assigned all participants an identifier to maintain anonymity between interview participants. The researcher transcribed the data from the interviews, and the data will be stored on an external hard-drive to keep it safe and secure for a period of 3 years.

Sources of Data

Researchers use multiple sources of evidence when conducting a case study. Six commonly used sources of evidence for qualitative studies are: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts

(Yin, 2014). The sources that were used in this study were questionnaires, semistructured interviews, and a focus group with university-employed marketing staff.

Questionnaire. The first source was a questionnaire (Appendix D), designed by the researcher, which was answered by students enrolled in a first-year business course and attending their first year at the university. Questionnaire items 1-6 were designed to identify general information about the sample, such as the participant age range, gender, and the length of time to make the college selection. Questionnaire items 7-12 were designed to identify the interviewees and address RQ1, which relates to students using social media as an information sharing and interactive tool. This section covered questions such as how many social networking accounts the student had, whether the connections on social media include parents, peers, or counselors, whether social media was used as a resource during college search, whether they read blogs, and whether the student browsed university websites during college search.

Questionnaire items 13-31 were designed to address RQ2, which related to how prospective students described peers', parents' and university counselors' use of social media as an information sharing and interactive tool. This section of the questionnaire covered items such as if or how friends, parents, or university counselors share information on social media, and whether students generally listen to their friends, parents, or counselors. To ensure that the questionnaire items would support Research Questions 1 and 2, the researcher conducted a field test with a current student at the university. The results of the field test indicated that the questionnaire would address the research questions 1 and 2. The student recommended no changes.

Semistructured interviews. The second instrument was semistructured interviews with first-year students enrolled in a ground course at the university. The questions in the interviews provided a more in-depth exploration of the phenomenon. The interview questions (Appendix E) focus on the students' perspective of their experience using social media in supporting the college application and admission process, and communicating with peers, parents, and university counselors throughout the college search process. The semistructured interviews included five foundational questions and additional probing questions to elicit different responses. The questions were related to how the participants used social media during the college search phase, the forms of social media that were used, and how they describe peers,' parents', and university counselors' use of social media related to college search. The interview questions provided participants with the opportunity to expand their responses and explain why they used social media and how it could be used as an interactive tool for information sharing and information seeking tool to influence college choice. To ensure that the interview questions would support Research Questions 1 and 2, the researcher conducted a field test with a current student at the university. The results of the field test indicated the interview questions would address the research questions 1 and 2.

Focus group. The third instrument is through focus groups with university-employed marketing staff. Five questions were designed for the focus group with university-employed marketing staff (Appendix G). The questions were designed to address RQ 3. The focus group questions relate to how the university-employed marketing staff use social media to attract students. These questions were designed based

on research similar to the student questions, but provide a perspective aligned with the university's marketing strategy.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is an important aspect of qualitative research. Trustworthiness is comprised of four elements: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study. Potential threats to the credibility or dependability of the study inherent in may include areas within the study design, sampling strategy, data collection method/instruments, and data analysis. This section describes the strategies used to establish trustworthiness in this study.

Credibility. Credibility refers to the accuracy of data collected. In essence, it refers to strategies used by a researcher to ensure they have recorded the phenomena under study (Shenton, 2004). In order to ensure the research design was credible, the researcher adopted three strategies. First, a detailed data collection plan was outlined and implemented. Member checking was used to verify accuracy of interview transcripts. Finally, data triangulation across multiple sources of data ensured patterns of findings were verified. These three strategies supported the credibility of the study.

Transferability. Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of the study are applicable to other situations. In order to ensure transferability, the researcher provided details of comments provided by the participants (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003), in the form of a thick, rich description. By providing observations or comments, readers are able to give meaning to the study and determine whether the results are applicable to other situations.

Dependability. Dependability refers to the stability of data over time, thus the level of quality of the data collection process, and analysis of the study (Elo et al., 2014). Dependability may also be supported through providing details of the study such as the criteria used to select the participants of the study. Dependability allows for readers to identify how and follow how conclusions were made for the study (Elo et al., 2014). The data analysis process documents how codes and themes were established based on the questionnaires, interview, and focus group transcripts. Additionally, the researcher ensured that there was clear alignment of the research gap, problem statement, research questions, methodology, and research design. The researcher established an audit trail and evidence of data collection in terms of transcripts, along with a codebook to show how data were analyzed.

Confirmability. Confirmability refers to the ability for other researchers to be able to replicate the study (Cope, 2014). The researcher ensured confirmability through; 1) Evidence, 2) Interview protocols, 3) Recording the data analysis process, and 4) Clear alignment of the research. Evidence was collected using multiple forms of documentation, such as audio recording, transcribing, and note-taking. Analysis of multiple forms of data allows for triangulation, which corroborates findings across the sources: questionnaire, interviews, and focus group data. The use of an interview and focus group protocol (see Appendices F and H) was used to guide the data collection process, resulting in a higher likelihood that the internal elements of the study would recur if another researcher were conducting the same study.

Data Collection and Management

The first step in the data collection process was to request site approval at the university. Next, the researcher requested approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to pursue the research. After IRB approval was obtained, the researcher identified the sample participants for the study.

Questionnaire. The researcher identified a ground business course typically taken by students in their first year at the university, to solicit student volunteers to participate in the study. Next, the researcher requested permission from the instructor to visit the ground class to request volunteers. Consent forms were provided in-person and returned to the researcher during a class session. The instructor gave permission for this process. Students were informed that in no way would their course grade be impacted if they chose not to participate in the study. Participation was completely voluntary. The informed consent process requires participants to sign a statement indicating their willingness to participate and confirm that they are 18 years older or over (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The consent form (Appendix C) and questionnaire (Appendix D) were provided to students in the course. A total of 62 questionnaires were collected, which were used to identify the participants for the next phase, consisting of semistructured interviews.

Semistructured interviews. After reviewing the questionnaire results, the researcher sent emails to qualified students who met participation criteria to invite them to participate in an interview. The criteria used to invite participants to the interview were based on the results of the questionnaire (see Appendix E), and the following criteria: (1) they were taking classes within their first year at the university, (2)

maintained at least one social media account (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, LinkedIn, YouTube, blogs), (3) used social media to connect with parents, peers, or counselors, and (3) reviewed university social media accounts during the college search and selection stage. If the researcher did not solicit enough volunteers to participate in the study, another ground class at the university would have been selected to request additional volunteers. However, 12 students consented to and participated in interviews, so the researcher did not need to employ further recruitment. Interviews were conducted in a conference room located on campus, at a time convenient for the students. The researcher used a scheduling application called Doodle, to provide available times for participants to schedule the interviews. The researcher recorded the interviews using an iPhone voice memos application. Interviews took approximately 30 minutes each. Longer interviews may have resulted in a more robust data set for analysis to address the research questions.

Focus group. University-employed marketing staff were recruited to participate in a focus group. The researcher recruited these participants by contacting the assistant director of digital media and executive vice president of ground operations for names at the university to request volunteers to participate in the study. The executive vice president provided names of three regional directors of operations, who work with enrollment. Two of the three regional directors responded with recommendations of employees to reach out to. Additionally, the assistant director of digital media suggested the researcher contact the director of digital media, who provided recommendations of employees who work in digital marketing at the university. The researcher sent an email to the recommended names to request volunteers to participate. The participants of the

focus group were asked to sign a consent form, and the focus group was held in a conference room at the university. The focus group was audio recorded and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Although the researcher was the assistant dean at the university, there was no prior relationship with the participants.

All of the data collected during the study were saved either in a file cabinet (potential hard-copy notes) or on an external hard-drive, locked in the researcher's office. Data will be stored for 3 years after the study is completed to allow for potential questions of the data. The data, including notes will be deleted or shredded using an electronic shredder, and destroyed after 3 years to ensure the information cannot be reconstructed.

Data Analysis Procedures

This study explored how social media was used to influence first-year college students' decision to attend a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern, United States. Qualitative research provides an in-depth perspective to the study in ways that quantitative research cannot (Yates & Leggett, 2016). The following research questions guide this study:

RQ1: How do college students use social media during their college decision making process?

RQ2: How do college students describe their parents and university-employed marketing staff's use of social media influenced college choice decisions?

RQ3: How do university-employed marketing staff use social media to influence first year students' college choice decisions?

Data analysis begins with reviewing the data to identify themes and categories (Yates & Leggett, 2016). The questionnaire data were imported into SPSS, a statistical software system to create descriptive statistics from the data. For example, the researcher found the mean of the number of social networking accounts reported by the participants. Other useful data points were the distribution of how many months prior to starting college the participants made their final college choice, and age range of student participants. This data was useful as it provided the researcher with additional information regarding college choice decision-making.

Next, the researcher transcribed the data from the interviews. The transcripts were segmented based on the information expressed in the interviews. Data were reduced by removing any information that did not relate to the research questions. Next, the researcher coded the data through reviewing the transcript and making notes, comments, and observations in the margins (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Johnson and Christensen (2014) suggested the use of a master list of codes for ease of use. The researcher used a coding and theming strategy as discussed by Saldana (2011). First cycle codes can be used to identify codes for single words, sentences or full pages of information. The first cycle codes were created using initial coding. Once the first cycle codes were created, the researcher moved to axial coding, for second cycle coding. During the second cycle of coding the researcher grouped, linked, and consolidated information to identify patterns within the data to create categories (Saldana, 2011). The third step of data analysis was to conduct a data comparison by reviewing the categories to identify themes. During this process, themes were developed based on second cycle axial categories, which included consistent messages from the participants related to that theme. For example, theme 1 was

identified through participants referring to using social media to gain information related to what their experience would be while attending the university. The information relayed from the participants was through a combination of information gathering using social media and interacting with others on social media. Lastly, the data were summarized into a narrative report to interpret the data and describe the results. Tables were used for organization and codes were compared and combined into categories and finally key themes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are a crucial aspect of conducting research. The researcher holds the responsibility of the following; gaining informed consent formally soliciting volunteers to participate, protecting the participants from harm and avoiding deception, protecting privacy and confidentiality, taking special precautions for vulnerable groups, and selecting participants equitably (Yin, 2014). The researcher required each participant to sign a consent form. Participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study to avoid deception or harm. All participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question and could withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty. All data remained confidential and were saved on an external hard-drive. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through secure holding of data and use of a coding system such as P-1, instead of use of actual participant names. Participants were age 18 or older, and any participant was allowed to participate in the study as long as they were within their first year of college, regardless of race or gender.

The researcher for this study is the assistant dean for the college of business at the university. However, she holds no position of authority over any of the university-

employed marketing staff who participated in the study and held no prior relationship with students who participated. The researcher exercised bracketing in an attempt to minimize bias towards opinions and observations regarding other universities and during the interview process. Additionally, since the participants of the study were students, rather than peers, parents, and university-employed marketing staff, the results of this study only provide the student perspective of how social media was used by peers, parents, and university-employed marketing staff to share information and influence college choice. The researcher study did not include data from the actual parents or peers of student participants. The interviews were held in a private setting, and the interview questions solely focused on experience prior to entering the university.

All of the data collected during the study were saved on an external hard drive and locked in the researcher's office. Data will be stored for 3 years after the study is completed to allow for potential questions of the data. The data, including notes will be deleted and destroyed after 3 years to ensure the information cannot be reconstructed.

Limitations and Delimitations

Several limitations were present in this study. The sample included students attending and university-employed marketing staff working at one non-profit, private, faith-based university in the southwestern, United States, rather than using participants from multiple universities. It is possible that the students attending this institution have differing opinions than students attending a non-faith-based institution.

Researcher bias may have been present due to personal values and assumptions, which can influence data collection and analysis (Baškarada, 2014). The researcher exercised bracketing in an effort to minimize bias. Additionally, the researcher was the

assistant dean in the College of Business and therefore, the instructor and students may have potentially felt coerced to participate in the study. However, the dean had no prior relationship with any of the students. Another potential limitation is researcher bias in the analysis. Researcher bias may result from personal values and assumptions, which can influence data collection and analysis (Baškarada, 2014). As recommended by Yin (2014), the data were triangulated using data sources to examine each question, to increase the trustworthiness of the study.

Participation was completely voluntary, and the students were assured that a decision to not participate would in no way affect their course grade or standing in the program. Additionally, the student participants were attending ground business course at the university; therefore, the sample was business majors rather than majors throughout the university.

Students were asked their perspective regarding how parents and friends used social media to influence the student's college choice decision. Therefore, the perspectives of students may not accurately represent the perspectives of peers and parents. Some of the research used to inform the need for this was conducted in countries other than the United States. Therefore, the results of this study must be interpreted with caution and may not be applicable to other settings or geographic locations. The interview times were short. Therefore, longer interviews may have yielded a more thorough summary of the participants' perspectives. More research is recommended.

Delimitations of a study consist of specific choices of the study that are controlled by the researcher (Simon & Goes, 2013). A delimitation in this study is in regard to the participant sample. The participants came from one, not-for profit, private, Christian

university in the southwestern, United States. As a result, data collected may not depict the population of students attending all universities.

Another delimitation of this study is that the sample is limited to only entering first-year students, rather than opening the sample to second, third, or fourth year students. Although students that are not in their first year of college may have used social media to search for their college, technology has changed significantly over the past few years and they may not provide data that would reflect current college choice practices.

A third delimitation of the study is the researcher selected to use a private, Christian university. The reason for selecting a private, Christian university is because the researcher has access to the data, and although many of the students who attend the university have the intent to attend a faith-based institution, they still would have gone through the college search process to make their final selection.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative, case study was to explore how social media was used to influence first-year college students' decision to attend a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern, United States. Existing research in this area did not thoroughly address how social media may influence college choice for prospective students. Using social media is a relatively new way to communicate with current and prospective students and is becoming a key aspect of marketing for many organizations, and is a tool frequently used by university students (Palmer, 2013; Shittu, et al., 2013). Therefore, it is important for colleges and universities to understand how social media influences college choice, how information is delivered using social media, and who it comes from, in order to recruit and retain students.

This study was guided by three research questions to explore how social media was used to influence first-year college students' decision to attend a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern, United States. The study was limited to first-year students enrolled in one on ground business class, instead of all students because they have most recently completed college choice research. Additionally, the study was delimited to university-employed marketing staff working for this one university.

The data collection began with the use of a questionnaire to collect demographic information as well as information relating to social media usage. The results from the questionnaire was used to identify participants to interview to gather more in-depth information based in the participant's experiences during the search and selection phase of college choice. Chapter 4 describes the research findings from the participant's experiences using social media, which was provided by questionnaires, interviews and a focus group. Themes were identified and summarized so that institutions may use the results of the research to identify effective social media marketing strategies to potentially increase enrollment.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

Introduction

College choice and social media research conducted prior to this study had not sufficiently focused on how social media is used to influence the college selection and decision-making process of prospective students. There was a gap in research regarding the ways social media sites are used in an interactive and informational format to influence college choice decisions (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012; Thornton, 2017; Linvill, et al., 2015). The most commonly used college choice resources consist of college counselors, the social environment such as peers, and media (Areces, et al., 2016). Universities use social media as a tool for student recruitment; however, Jan and Ammari (2016) found that universities use social media as a one-way informational tool and suggested the need for additional qualitative research. The purpose of this qualitative, case study was to explore social media was used to influence first-year college students' decision to attend a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern, United States. Data collection included a questionnaire, semistructured interviews, and a focus group.

The general population was all potential first year college students and university-employed marketing staff in non-profit or private colleges in the United States. The target population was all potential first year college students and university-employed marketing staff in non-profit or private colleges in the southwest United States. The sample was first-year business students and university-employed marketing staff of one four-year, non-profit, private college located in the southwestern, United States. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do college students use social media during their college decision making process?

RQ2: How do college students describe their parents and university-employed marketing staff's use of social media influenced college choice decisions?

RQ3: How do university-employed marketing staff use social media to influence first year students' college choice decisions?

This qualitative case study provided the researcher with the opportunity to better understand the central phenomena studied in this research, which was how social media was used to influence first-year college students' decision to attend a four-year private Christian college in the southwestern, United States. The remainder of this chapter provides an overview of the descriptive data collected, the data analysis procedures, the results of the data analysis, and a summary of the study findings.

Descriptive Findings

Students' demographic data were acquired from the questionnaire. Sixty-two students completed the questionnaire, which took approximately 10 minutes to complete. Of the 62 students who completed the questionnaire, 33 qualified to participate in the semistructured interviews. Qualification criteria for students included: (1) they were taking classes within their first year at the university, (2) maintained at least one social media account (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, LinkedIn, YouTube, blogs), (3) used social media to connect with parents, peers, or counselors, (4) reviewed university social media accounts during the college search and selection stage. The researcher sent an email to all 33 qualified student participants. Twelve student participants responded to

the request interview and scheduled time for a semistructured interview. Table 1 provides a descriptive demographic summary of students who participated in the study.

The researcher contacted the executive vice president of operations and the assistant director of digital marketing for recommendations for university-employed marketing staff to participate in a focus group. The qualification criteria for the university-employed marketing staff included (1) Participants were over the age of 18, and (2) worked in marketing or enrollment at the university. The researcher was provided with names and email addresses of four individuals who work in enrollment and 11 employees from the marketing department who work in social media. The researcher sent emails to four employees from enrollment, of which two agreed to participate and the first six employees recommended from marketing, and all six agreed to participate in the focus group. On the day of the focus group, one employee from enrollment was not able to participate, resulting in seven total focus group participants. The focus group participants consisted of the manager of social media marketing, four social media marketing employees who manage the university accounts, one student worker for social media marketing, and a program specialist from enrollment. The four marketing employees had attended the university prior to becoming full-time employees. Table 1 and 2 provides a descriptive demographic summary of students and university-employed marketing staff who participated in the study.

Table 1.

Student Demographics

Variable	n	%
Gender, n = 62		
Male	36	58
Female	26	42
Qualified interview participants, n = 33		
Male	19	42.4
Female	14	57.6
Interview participants, n = 12		
Male	7	58.3
Female	5	41.7

Table 2.

University-Employed Marketing Staff Demographics

Variable	n	%
Gender, n = 7		
Male	4	57.1
Female	3	42.9
Social media marketing employee	6	85.7
University program specialist (enrollment)	1	14.3

Table 3 provides a descriptive summary of questionnaire descriptive data for student interview participants and includes age range, months taken to select college, and number of social media accounts. The distribution of age range indicates that most of the student participants were between the ages of 18-20, and one-fourth of the participants spent 0-3 months or 6-9 months to make their college choice, while nearly 40% of the participants spent 3-6 months to make their college choice. Additionally, there was a nearly even split of student participants who indicated that they actively used 3-4 social

media accounts and 5 or more social media accounts. For example, student participants may have been active on Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter.

Table 3.

Student Age Range, Months to College Choice and Number of Reported Social Media Accounts

Variable	n	%
Age range, n = 33		
18-20	31	93.9
21-24	2	6.1
Months taken to choose college, n = 32		
0-3	8	24.2
3-6	13	39.4
6-9	9	27.3
9-12	1	3
Over 12	1	3
Number of social media accounts		
3-4	17	51.5
5 or more	16	48.5

The student questionnaire also included eight questions which used a 5-point Likert scale, with a score of 1 indicating strongly disagree and a score of 5 indicating strongly agree. This scale was used to gain an understanding of whether friends, classmates, parents, or enrollment counselors shared information on social media, and whether they value the opinions of those individuals. The data displayed are important to this research topic because they indicate how participants perceive friends, classmates, parents, or enrollment counselors use social media to share information. Students differentiate between ‘friends’ and ‘classmates/peers.’ The mean indicates that student participants perceive friends and classmates shared information more than parents or enrollment counselors. However, participants value the opinions of their friends and

parents more than classmates and enrollment counselors, and parents' opinions are valued higher than anyone else.

Table 4.

Student Questionnaire Descriptive Data: Information Sharing on Social Media

Question	Mean	Std. Deviation
10. Friends share information on social media	4.09	.914
11. Value friends' opinion	4.45	.564
12. Classmates share information on social media	4.06	.747
14. Value classmates' opinion	2.88	1.139
15. Parents share information on social media	3.06	1.478
16. Value parents' opinion	4.61	.788
18. Enrollment counselors share information on social media	3.45	1.063
19. Value enrollment counselors' opinion	3.79	1.053

Interview and focus group data. Of the 33 students who were contacted to participate in interviews, 12 students consented to and participated in individual, semistructured interviews. Seven university-employed marketing staff participated in a focus group. Table 5 provides a summary of the interviews, and length of recorded student interviews. Table 6 provides a summary of the length of focus group, and length of transcripts and coded data from the focus group.

Table 5.

Student Interview Data

Participant Code	Length of Interview in Minutes	Number of Pages of Transcript (Single spaced)
PA	16	9
PB	24	13
PC	27	15
PD	19	11
PE	34	17
PF	31	15
PG	27	14
PH	31	13
PI	31	14
PJ	33	11
PK	19	11
PL	30	15
	Average length of interview=27	Total pages of transcripts=158

Note: A-L indicate students who completed interviews.

Table 6.

Focus Group Data

Data Source	Pages of Transcripts Single Spaced	Pages of Data Coded	Length of Interviews (minutes)
Focus group participants ($n=7$)	18	18	52

Data Analysis Procedures

The researcher followed the data preparation and analysis process as described in Chapter 3. This process included several steps: data preparation, descriptive statistics, and thematic analysis, and triangulation. The data sources included a questionnaire, semistructured interviews, and a focus group.

Preparation of the data. The initial data collection came from questionnaire responses from students in a business course at the university. The researcher administered the questionnaires in person, and individuals completed in hard copy. Upon

completion of data collection from the questionnaires, the researcher entered the data into an Excel spreadsheet to compile the data for analysis, which were loaded into SPSS for analysis. The researcher used an online transcription service called rev.com to transcribe the recordings. Next, the researcher read the transcripts and listened to the tapes to ensure accuracy. Member checking was done after all transcripts were reviewed. Interview transcripts were sent to participants to confirm the accuracy of the data. Upon the completion of the files being transcribed, the researcher downloaded the files to a Word document and imported them to NVivo 12, for analysis.

Questionnaire analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze demographic data and Likert-scale questionnaire items. The researcher used SPSS to generate descriptive statistics tables (Tables 1 and 2) to provide an overall demographic profile of the student participants and university employees. These questions represented how students used social media and how they perceived peers, parents, and university-employed marketing staff use and share information on social media.

Thematic analysis. The researcher used thematic analysis to synthesize the qualitative data from the open-ended questionnaire responses, interviews, and focus group transcripts. Saldana (2011) referred to a variety of coding strategies, which utilize first and second cycle codes to be used for thematic analysis. For this study, the researcher used initial coding for first cycle codes and axial coding for second cycle codes. Initial coding is an open coding process, which is used to break down the data into parts (Saldana, 2011). Saldana (2011) referred to initial coding as appropriate for all qualitative studies, particularly studies which use a variety of data forms. Axial coding is

a form of second-cycle coding used to create categories and/or subcategories from the initial codes (Saldana, 2011).

The researcher listened to the audio recordings, while reading the transcript to become familiar with the data and read open-ended responses from the questionnaires. Initially, the researcher utilized automated coding functions from NVivo 12 to auto-code the data; however, the results did not appear to provide useful information. Thus, the researcher elected to hand code interview transcripts, focus group transcripts and open-ended questionnaire items (Saldana, 2011).

Initial coding. The researcher created initial codes while reviewing each transcript. As each sentence was reviewed, chunks of words were highlighted and labeled with initial codes. The researcher followed the same process to code the open-ended questionnaire responses, and focus group transcripts, and created a table of axial codes and associated initial codes. Table J7 displays the codes used for each data source and the number of occurrences for participants. In total, 12 of the same initial codes occurred throughout all three data sources: open-ended questions in the questionnaire and focus group and interview transcripts.

During axial coding, initial codes were grouped to create categories, based on like codes. For example, a category of campus life was formed from codes of academics, athletics, authentic, campus, clubs, spiritual life, and student life are all a part of campus life. Table 8 displays how categories emerged from the axial coding process.

Themes. The third step of data analysis was to conduct a data comparison by reviewing the categories to identify themes. During this process, themes were developed based on second cycle axial categories, which included consistent messages from the

participants related to that theme. For example, theme 1 was identified through participants referring to using social media to gain information related to what their experience would be while attending the university. The information relayed from the participants was through a combination of information gathering using social media and interacting with others on social media. Lastly, the data were summarized into a narrative report to interpret the data and describe the results. Table 8 shows the final themes.

Table 8.

<i>Themes</i>			
Research Question	Aligned Themes	Theme Meaning	Categories Aligned to Theme
RQ 1: How do college students perceive the interactive role of social media as influencing their college decision process?	Theme 1: Students interacted and observed information on social media to learn about academic and social activities related to campus life.	Participants refer to the importance of gaining an accurate depiction of life while attending the university.	Campus life, types of social media used by students
RQ 1: How do college students perceive the interactive role of social media as influencing their college decision process?	Theme 2. Prospective students used social media to gather information and interact with others during the initial college search process.	Participants refer to using social media as a source to gather information about colleges and universities they were interested in.	Initial college search process, peer interaction
RQ2: How do college students describe their parents and university-employed marketing staff's use of social media influenced college choice decisions?	Theme 3: Peers, parents and university-employed marketing staff used social media to share information about the university	Participants perceive, peers, use social media to share information, but not as a sole influencing factor.	Information sharing with peers (friends and classmates); Information sharing with parents, information sharing with university-employed marketing staff.
RQ3: How do university-employed marketing staff use social media to influence college choice decisions of first-year students?	Theme 4. University-employed marketing staff used social media as one source of their overall marketing strategy to influence student college choice.	Participants refer to a strong focus and importance of displaying an accurate depiction of life while attending the university.	Social media accounts
RQ3: How do university-employed marketing staff use social media to influence college choice decisions of first-year students?	Theme 5. University-employed staff created social media content to influence college choice decisions.	Participants refer to posting content that allows users to actively engage and interact with others on social media	College search

Triangulation. As suggested by Yin (2014), the data analysis process for single-case study designs include triangulation of data, which supports the validity of the study.

Data triangulation was completed by comparing data with the data sources. Table 9 displays an alignment table of the sources used for data triangulation. For example, data from the student questionnaire was consistent with data in the student interviews in regard to the use of testimonials or reviews on social media. Participants in both data sources indicated that these were helpful because they depicted what campus life would be like.

Table 9.

Data Triangulation

Research Question	Questionnaire	Interview	Focus Group
How do college students perceive the interactive role of social media as influencing their college decision process?	X	X	
How do college students perceive their parents,' peers' and university-employed marketing staff's use of social media influenced college choice decisions?	X	X	X
How do university-employed marketing staff use social media as an interactive tool to influence college choice decisions of first year students?		X	X

Results

Research Question 1. The first research question was: How do college students use social media during their college decision making process? The researcher used the questionnaire and interviews to answer this question. This section discusses these findings.

Two themes emerged to answer Research Question 1. Theme 1 was Students interacted and observed information on social media to learn about academic and social activities related to campus life. Categories that aligned to Theme 1 were campus life and

observations on social media. These categories related to how social media was used both interactively and through observations to learn about the campus and culture. Theme 2 was prospective students used social media to gather information and interact with others during the initial college search process. Categories aligned with this theme were initial college search process and types of social media used by students.

Theme 1. Students used different types of social media to learn about campus life and culture. The first theme referred to students mentioning that they used social media to learn about academic and social activities or events on campus. Throughout the interviews, students continuously relayed that they used social media to see what the campus was like. They also used social media to gain an understanding of the experience they would get while attending the university.

Participants frequently referred to using or looking at information on social media to learn about events on campus to get a feel for the student life and campus culture.

Interview participant E stated:

So, I mainly looked at student life and academic life....student life because I want to see how everybody acts here. If they are stressed out, you can definitely see it. But people are just having a good time in college. And then I toured it, and I was like, "Yep. That's it. So, I think seeing the community involvement through [university's] social media, you can see all their volunteer stuff through Kids, and then also the school spirit at basketball games, and not even just basketball games, but literally every sport across the board.

Similarly, Participant K referred to social media as a tool to confirm the college choice, stating he used it "to see the atmosphere, and to grow his faith." He "watched an

interview of a first-year student talking about their experiences.” Questionnaire participant 3 stated, “I browsed several colleges’ Instagram pages to understand student life on campus.” Similar statements occurred throughout the interviews and questionnaire responses, reiterating the ease of using social media to get a feel for the campus.

Additionally, the researcher asked all of the interview participants if they felt that the information that was shared on social media was authentic and true to what they were experiencing. The results of that question were that most participants responded positively and felt that what they saw on social media was what they were getting at the university. Table 10 displays additional quotations from the campus life category.

Table 10.

Campus Life

Data Source	Quotation Examples
Questionnaire	P20: I looked at [university's] Instagram and twitter account to try and see the kind of atmosphere this school had.
Questionnaire	P30: I watched a lot of YouTube videos on student life and what the dorms looked like.
Interview	PH: So, I would first look up the college....and I would see, oh, what kind of clubs do they have? Or how do people interact with the college? So, I was like, are they having fun there, is it okay to socially be there, is everyone okay. But I used Instagram. I would just look at the pictures. And then I would look up some people who actually go to the school and kind of investigate, I guess. Do they like it there?
Interview	PB: Yeah. A lot of those videos, I feel like I've really experienced what they were showing. Especially during welcome week, how everyone was excited. People were just so hyped up that it made it really fun. It made it a lot less stressful.
Interview	PC: Yeah. I would honestly say that it's even downplayed a little more on social media.
Interview	PF: Yeah, it's pretty close, because you always saw the environment on Instagram, everybody being excited all the time and everybody always being like, woohoo, college. I thought, I'm going to go to college and nobody's going to be like that because it's college. Who's excited about college? But everybody is definitely hyped about what they're doing here.
Interview	PG: Definitely, yeah. Because it like matched exactly what campus is like every day.
Interview	PH: Yes, I see people actually enjoying their lives, walking out smiling out of class. Or walking in smiling to class. And I was like, wow. People are actually having fun here, and I like it.
Interview	PK: Yeah, definitely. It was definitely a good representation of what campus life is actually like.

Types of social media used by students. Participants referred to using different types of social media to seek out information. Participants referred to watching videos and using Instagram accounts to learn about the university. Questionnaire participants 2, 3, 5, 19, 20, 24, 25, 26, 30, and 32 all referred to the use of videos and pictures, and frequently mentioned YouTube or Instagram. For example, questionnaire participant 24 said, "I used Instagram and Facebook to find tags related to the university." Similarly, questionnaire participant 2 said,

I ... followed the school's main account on Instagram, along with their athletics account since I was interested in playing a sport. I used Facebook to communicate with other future students about the school, and I used YouTube to search videos.

Interview participants A, B, C, E, F, G, H, J, K, and L all shared how they used social media sites such as Instagram and Facebook. For example, interview participant K said, "Instagram is where I looked up the different tags and stuff, to find out like the atmosphere at [university]," and interview participant B stated, "I did follow some people who go here on Snapchat. But I mostly got my information from Instagram and Facebook."

Thus, most students indicated they used Instagram, Facebook and YouTube to learn about the university. One mentioned use of Snap Chat. Table 11 displays a sample of quotation examples from the questionnaires and interviews to support the types of media used by students.

Table 11.

Types of Social Media Used by Students

Data Source	Quotation Examples
Questionnaire	P14: [University's] main Instagram. This was to keep myself updated of events.
Questionnaire	P19: I looked up and followed my top choice universities on Instagram to learn more about what they had to offer and what campus life was like.
Questionnaire	P24: I used Instagram and Facebook to find tags related to the university.
Questionnaire	P32: I looked through Instagram and Facebook
Interview	PB: I looked at Instagram a lot because [university] has a lot of Instagram pages. So, it was cool to see how many things are always going on. I saw a lot of Welcome Week on YouTube too.

The Pew Research Center (2017) conducted research and created a fact sheet to share data about social media patterns and trends from the past decade. Researchers found that 88% of 18-29-year olds use at least one social media site (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Results of this research were consistent with this statistic. Questionnaire results showed 100% of the participants used three or more social media accounts. Table 12 displays the age range from the study and number of social media accounts.

Table 12.

Social Media Accounts

Variable	n	%
Age range, n = 33		
18-20	31	93.9
21-24	2	6.1
Number of social media accounts		
3-4	17	51.5
5 or more	16	48.5

Theme 2. Prospective students used social media to gather information and interact with others during the initial college search process. Participants referred to using social media as a source to actively search social media accounts to gather information about colleges and universities they were interested in. The category that aligned with this theme was: initial college search process and peer interactions.

Initial college search process. Participants frequently mentioned following many different social media accounts during their initial college search process. These included university pages as well as other user accounts. Interview participant F would find something or someone interesting on social media and stated he would then, “look through all the stuff. If it didn’t seem interesting, I would not follow them. But if it seemed pretty good, then I would probably follow them if they didn’t post too much.” Participant 29 referred to being added on social media through staff from the university and then chose to look through their social media account.

Testimonials or reviews were also mentioned frequently. Participants from both the questionnaire and interviews referred to learning about the university through social media and from reviews posted by friends on social media, as well as they sought out reviews or testimonials on social media. Questionnaire participant 17 responded to question 24, stating that “YouTube videos, researched online, and looked at reviews” were examples of how social media was used during the initial college search process. Additionally, interview participant L thought that information shared on social media, particularly videos, pictures, and reviews were helpful, and another participant mentioned the impact of real-life information that was included in pictures with captions related to what freshman and seniors were doing at the university. Interview participant G stated,

I’m not one to read long comments or captions on people’s posts, but whenever I saw one of those, I sat there and read all of it even though it looked like an entire paragraph on my phone. So, I wanted to know what [university] could supply to people while they were in college.

Two interview participants who did not visit the university prior to attending. They used a variety of resources, including social media, to learn about what the schools had to offer, and to make their college choice. For example, interview participant A stated, “Instagram was a big one, probably the number one. I used YouTube to look up videos and stuff. I did the online virtual tour.” Table 12 displays additional quotations from the questionnaires and interviews.

Table 13.

Social Media Use in the Initial College Search Process

Data Source	Quotation Examples
Questionnaire	P2: I looked at both of [university's] twitter and Instagram pages before my decision to see all the school had to offer.
Questionnaire	P31: I followed [university] on Instagram. I went on the university website and read more about the school. I watched YouTube videos on [university].
Interview	PK: I think there was one, they were interviewing first year students. I think, for their experiences.
Interview	PL: There were comments that were saying that [university] is like amazing, that they really are involved with their students, they love helping their students, and getting the students involved and stuff like that. Then there's the other side of the spectrum where they were like, [university] is like, I just don't like it here. No one really helps. The teachers suck, and all that kind of stuff. But I researched other schools and they said the same thing about those schools. There's always going to be two sides of the spectrum.
Questionnaire	P22: Followed @[university] and looked at pictures tagged at the university.
Questionnaire	P33: The [university] YouTube channel affected my college choice tremendously.
Interview	PI: I wanted to get from a perspective of someone that where I would be like because a lot of websites and stuff are from a point of view of someone that works there, which I would be a student. So, I kind of wanted to get it from a perspective from a student rather than a faculty member.
Interview	I found a lot of [university]-based accounts, like the two basketball teams, the GCBC accounts, and like, I came to visit here a lot, so I saw the GCBC, if you follow them, you might win something or something like that. So, I think that was a big portion of me just following the [university] account, specifically on Instagram. Then, I followed NAU accounts and ASU accounts when I went to go visit those campuses, but they weren't as active, so it seemed like they didn't really care about getting the message out to people.

Peer interaction. Peer interaction and peers sharing about schools was also a common thread between the questionnaire and interviews. Interview participants spoke about friends and peers posting information on social media about the colleges they were going to attend or were currently attending. Interview participant B referred to “friends taking a lot of pictures and using Instagram and Snapchat to show her how amazing the campus was.” Interview participant D referred to looking at peers’ or friends’ social media accounts, stating she would look at the post and ‘like’ some, but would maybe contact them and “be like oh, this seemed really cool. Tell me more about it.” Similarly,

questionnaire participant 11 noted that friends were already in college, “so I looked at their accounts to see what school and how they thought of it.”

In addition to communicating and following peers, participants also occasionally used hashtags to gather information. While hashtags were not as popular as videos or pictures, a few participants found them helpful. Participant K referred to using hashtags to connect with future students, stating she “looked at [university], [university] 2018, or [university] 2022.” This was found to be a good way to identify people of similar age that would be attending the university.

Similarly, participant C initially learned of the university through someone he met on a vacation. When that person shared information about the university on social media, participant C started to follow the university and came across the university’s YouTube channel. Participant C stated that he, “watched a few hours’ worth of videos, specifically footage of candid students who were enjoying campus and having fun.”

Table 13 shows a sample of participants who indicated this in the questionnaire or interview and used social media during their college search.

Summary. The first research question was: How do college students use social media during their college decision making process? Theme 1 indicated that students used different types of social media to learn about campus life and culture. They felt it was important to gain an understanding of what it would be like to attend the university, and to get a feel for the campus life and culture would be. During this process, students indicated they primarily used Instagram, Facebook and YouTube to learn about the university. One student indicated use of Snapchat.

Theme 2 revealed that prospective students used social media to gather information and to interact with others, mainly peers, during their *initial* college search process. They looked at testimonials, reviews and also watched videos to gather information about the university. Students also interacted with peers in a variety of ways during the initial search process.

Students perceived social media as an influencing source, but as an introduction to the university and not as the sole influencer of their college choice. After reviewing all of the questionnaires and transcripts, it was apparent that social media was influential as both an informational and interactive resource during the initial college search process. Using the frequently mentioned sites such as Snap Chat or Instagram and hashtags, students would discuss their search process with others.

Research Question 2. The second research question was: How do college students describe their parents and university-employed marketing staff's use of social media influenced college choice decisions? This question was answered through the use of student questionnaires and interviews. There was one consistent theme between the resources, which was Theme 3: Peers, parents and university-employed marketing staff used social media to share information about the university. However, most participants were very clear that they made their own choice and that they were not solely influenced by peers, parents, or university-employed marketing staff. This theme has three categories: a) information sharing by peers, b) information sharing by parents, and b) information sharing by counselors/university-employed marketing staff.

Category. Information sharing by peers. During the interviews, student participants were asked how they viewed their peers or friends used social media to

influence their (the student's) college choice decision. Additionally, Q10 and Q12 from the questionnaire, used a 5-point Likert scale to ask whether friends or classmates shared or posted information related to colleges or universities on social media. The mean responses to these questions indicated that participants agreed or strongly agreed that friends and classmates shared information related to colleges or universities on social media. Subsequently, Q11 and Q13 asked whether the participants valued those opinions. Participants valued their friends' opinions regarding information shared on social media to influence college choice, as indicated by a mean score of 4.45 on Q11. However, the mean score of Q13 was 2.88, indicated that the participants did not place a high value at all on the information their classmates shared on social media to influence college choice. Information shared by friends on social media regarding colleges or universities is taken at different value than information shared by classmates on social media regarding colleges or universities. Table 14 displays the results of these questions.

Table 14.

Descriptive Analysis-Friends and Classmates Sharing on Social Media

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
10. Friends share information on social media	4.09	.914
11. Value friends' opinion	4.45	.564
12. Classmates share information on social media	4.06	.747
13. Value classmates' opinion	2.88	1.139

Open-ended items on the questionnaire also gave participants the opportunity to expand upon these Likert questions, with Q27 asking participants to describe *how* peers'

use of social media influenced their decision. Questionnaire participants 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 13, 16, 21, 22, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32, and 33 referred to peers (friends and classmates) using Instagram to post information about universities they were visiting, decision day, and peers who had already begun attending college and shared their experience on social media. For example, participant 9 stated, “My friends’ posts on Instagram about college encouraged me to attend a university” and participant 11 stated, “some of my friends would post reviews of schools after they visited them, and it would go into the detail of what vibe the campus and students gave off.” However, there were participants who indicated that other people’s posts had no effect on their decision. For example, questionnaire participant 7 stated that, “the use of social media did not influence the decision because the decision was up to me.” Participant 18 stated with regard to classmates, “not many people from my public high school chose to attend the selected university, so their opinions didn’t really matter.”

The student interviews relayed similar information based on the response to the question of how peers used social media to influence college choice. Participants A, B, C, D, E, G, H, I, K, and L referred to seeing posts on social media about their friends, or peer’s college experiences or final college choice. For example, in response to the question of how peers used social media to influence college selection, interview participant B stated,

They took a lot of pictures, showed me a lot of stuff. Especially on Instagram and Snapchat. They were just showing me how amazing this campus was. They were the ones that told me about [university] because they were just happy that they got all these scholarships. I really wanted to be a part of that.

Interview participant C also confirmed that peers shared information about their college choice on social media stating, “I definitely used that as a means to, you know, kind of get a feel for what it was like.”

Interview participants also frequently referred to themselves as well as their friends using Instagram and Snapchat and sharing information about their college choice on these social media sites. When asked in the interviews about trusting their peers, the participants said they did trust their peers, but that it depended on the topic they were posting about. For example, participant A did trust peers, but stated that,

it depends on the person who was posting because some people exaggerate and make it look like it’s the time of their life when on the inside It’s really not that fun or something like that. It definitely depends on the person, and how well I know them to trust their information.

Table 15 displays direct quotations from the questionnaire and interviews.

Table 15.

Information Sharing by Peers

Data Source	Quotation Examples
Questionnaire	P11: Some of my friends would post reviews of schools after they visited them, and it would go into detail of what vibe did the campus/students give off.
Questionnaire	P13: I saw cool and fun videos my friends were doing in college.
Questionnaire	P28: Peers who attended this college would post photos on Instagram and Twitter. These posts helped me get an idea of the school and people who attend it.
Questionnaire	P33: My friends used Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram to show off the colleges that they were visiting and ultimately were accepted to.
Interview	PC: 100% of high school seniors posted about their college trips and stuff, and what their final decision is. And it's always like, a huge deal.
Interview	PD: Definitely just looked at it and maybe would like it. But I would contact them and be like, oh this seemed really cool. Tell me more about it. But not really looking at other people I don't know posts.
Interview	PE: My friends were posting about colleges they were touring, and I was like, "that's cool," and then everyone's deciding and posting, and I still had no idea where I'm going. One of my really good friends, she goes here too. She was like, "apply to [university]." And I was like, "okay."
Interview	PG: A lot of my friends were seniors when I was a junior. So, they went to college a year before me, so I used their social media a lot to look at their college life. Like, one of my friends is at NAU right now, one is at ASU, one is here, and then one is at U of A. So, I got to see what they're posting about, about their college on their social medias.

Information sharing by parents. During the in-person interviews, student participants were asked how their parents used social media to influence their (the student's) college choice. Additionally, Q18 from asked participants to rate whether parents shared or posted information related to colleges or universities on social media. The mean score of 3.06 indicated that participants did not indicate their parents really shared information related to colleges or universities on social media. Q19 asked whether the participants value their parents' opinions. The mean score of Q19 was 4.61. This was the highest score of all the Likert questions, which suggested that while many participants did not have parents who shared information on social media, they do value the opinions

of their parents, when those were shared on social media. Table 16 displays the results of these questions.

Table 16.

Questionnaire Descriptive Data: Parents Share on Social Media

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
18. Parents share information on social media	3.06	1.478
19. Value parents' opinion	4.61	.788

Question 25 from the questionnaire gave participants the option to share more information related to how parents share information on social media and the sites that they used. Participants 13, 19, 31, and 32 indicated that parents did their research using sources such as school websites. However, they also indicated that information was shared through social media sites, most frequently via Facebook to share links or tag the participant on posts. For example, participant 22 shared that the parents used “Facebook, schools pages, shared a post with a statement.” Participants 11, 22, 25, 26, 28, 29, and 33 also indicated that parents would share information on social media that related to campus life. For example, questionnaire participant 11 stated, “My parents just continually tagged me in stuff on Facebook about college information.” Questionnaire participant 28 stated, “My parents would share videos found on Facebook or Twitter with me. The school atmosphere looked fun and helped me make my decision.” Similar results were found in the student interviews, with participants B, C, E, H, and J stating that their parents would actively share information on social media about schools they were interested in. However, participants also shared that communication regarding college search was also done in-person. For example, participant D said his “I know my mom

read a lot of blogs. That was her thing, she was reading up and she did research and I'd come home, and she'd be like, 'I read this today about this place'." Participants A, D, and E indicated that their parents used social media to share information about their student's life and updates about college. For example, participant A said, "She posts my life on Facebook." Participant D said, I know when we moved in, she posted pictures of like oh, participant D is moved in at [university]. Stuff like that." Interestingly, the mother was consistently mentioned as being active on social media, versus the father. Table 17 displays direct quotations related to how participants perceived their parents use of social media during college search.

Table 17.

Information Sharing by Parents

Data Source	Quotation Examples
Questionnaire	P29: My mother used links to influence my opinion.
Questionnaire	P33: My mom used Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook to show me colleges and tag me in their photos.
Interview	PB: Once I got my parents on board, my mom started following them on Facebook. Started looking at YouTube videos. My dad doesn't really use a lot of social media, so he looked at their homepage. She shared a lot. She would be at work one day texting me about all these videos she found. Then she would tag my name under it and she would just that all the time.
Interview	PC: Yeah, my mom she would always send me stuff on Facebook and Instagram and stuff. And like call and say, "oh, look at this. This looks nice." And like, "oh, your great uncle's third cousin went there." Stuff like that.
Interview	PH: They would post it on their social media and then tag me. They would do it twice. They are kind of old. And they even spoiled that I didn't tell anyone I was going to [university], and three months before, I was gonna tell everyone.

Trust between the participant and the student also appeared frequently. When asked if the participant trusted their parents' opinion more than others', the participants responded positively. This was consistent between the questionnaire and in-person interview. However, the interview participants also noted that their parents' opinion was valued depending on the topic of discussion. For example, participant A stated that,

“Some subjects my parents know more about than my friends, and my friends know more about the younger world, I guess in a way.” In reference to the same question, when participant C was asked about valuing his mom’s opinion, he said definitively, “yeah, definitely. I mean, it’s my mom.” Thus, parents continue to play a role during college search, but may not be as influential on social media as peers or friends.

Information sharing by university-employed marketing staff. During the in-person interviews, the student participants were asked how university-employed marketing staff (enrollment counselors) used social media to influence college choice. The consistent response to this question was that the counselors would send links such as YouTube videos or to Instagram pages, but that was as far as counselors would go via social media. For example, questionnaire participant 32 said, “My counselor used Instagram to show cool videos.” Interview participant L stated,

They send you videos and articles about [university], and obviously it’s just like good things, so it excites the students. Yeah, she would constantly email me and tell me like what to do to get into [university]. I think just because so was so persistent and she would show me videos and stuff. Yeah, it influenced me.

However, the university-employed marketing staff (enrollment counselors) did clearly play an influential role in providing social media links to students with information and resources during the college search process. Table 18 displays direct quotations about how university counselors interacted with prospective students.

Table 18.

Information Sharing by University-Employed Marketing Staff (Enrollment Counselors)

Data Source	Quotation Examples
Questionnaire	P5: My college recruiter sent me many links to Instagram accounts the school offers with all the different clubs. These accounts made [university] look like so much fun.
Questionnaire	P28: My counselor showed my YouTube videos.
Interview	PC: I guess, it's that they were really there for me. Not many colleges would meet up with me at Starbucks and talk about how it's gonna go down. My counselor, he actually talked to me, and I have his number still. And he would just explain what [university] is and how they're there to help. I guess they're really onboard with students' futures more than other colleges.
Interview	PI: When I started looking more into it, I met with my counselor. The admissions counselor, and she would show me like YouTube videos and stuff that was produced by the [university]TV and stuff like that. About the campus and the things, you can get interactive with.

Interaction with university-employed marketing staff. In addition to the in-person interviews, the questionnaire asked participants how they interacted with university-employed marketing staff to influence their choice. Many participants referred to the employees who run the university social media accounts and referenced using social media to show the student connection, and perspective. For example, questionnaire participant 3 stated, "Only the use of the university's specific Instagram page played any role in recruiting me. Personally, by showing the schools from the student's eyes." Table 19 displays additional quotations from the questionnaire about university-employed marketing staff and their interactions.

Table 19.

Information Sharing by University-employed Marketing Staff

Data Source	Quotation Examples
Questionnaire	P17: They had a lively feel, loved doing what they do.
Questionnaire	P18: I noticed that their involvement in social media really broadcasted their vision and matched up with what the counselors were telling me.
Questionnaire	P28: Staff employed at the university used social media as an outlet to shine a light on any questions or cool information a student may be looking for.

Summary. The main theme of information gaining answered RQ 2: How do college students perceive their parents,' peers' and university-employed marketing staff's use of social media influenced college choice decisions? After reviewing all of the themes from research question 2, the consistent message between all three resources was that social media was seen as a tool for communicating and sharing information. Participants also indicated that they were using social media as a tool to learn more about the student experience. The most frequently mentioned YouTube videos were welcome week (depicted the experience of moving into the dorms and activities that would occur during the first week of school), and the havocs (students who provide school spirit at athletic events). Another very consistent term the participants used was Discover trips. This is an in-person visit to the university, which includes a two- or three-day experience of what it would be like to attend the university.

Research Question 3. The third research question, was: How do university-employed marketing staff use social media to influence college choice decisions of first-year students? A focus group was used to answer this question. Two themes aligned with the question. Theme 4 was university-employed marketing staff used social media as one source of their overall marketing strategy to influence student college choice. Theme 5 was university-employed staff created social media content to influence college choice decisions.

Theme 4. University-employed marketing staff used social media as one source of their overall marketing strategy to influence student college choice. University-employed marketing staff provided insightful information regarding how they use social media to share and interact with users. Employee participants indicated that social media

is only one piece of the marketing strategy; however, it is a very influential piece.

Participant 1 from the focus group shared that “while it should not be the sole marketing tool used, social media can be used alongside other strategies as a less aggressive form of marketing.”

When asked about how prospective students use social media to search for a college or university, the university employees shared that the process starts with observation, because the main focus is on the experience. As such, the social media marketing team has been intentional about making the Instagram page very visual, to show the campus life and culture of the university. Participant 1 stated that they want students to see a “realistic view of what campus looks like;” thus, they have a variety of social media accounts. Table 20 displays information regarding three frequently used social media sites: Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The university created a main page for each site, and has additional accounts on each site, such as athletics, alumni, and academic related pages. Within each site, accounts have a variety of pages. For example, there were 12 accounts on Facebook relating to athletics, three relating to academics, and five related to clubs or student life.

These accounts allow users to both observe and interact on the social media site. An interesting observation from these accounts is that although Instagram is most frequently used by students, the main page for both Facebook and Twitter had more followers than on Instagram. This may be due to the fact that older populations use Facebook and Twitter more than Instagram or other up and coming social media sites.

Table 20.

University Social Media Accounts and Followers

Accounts	Facebook	Instagram	Twitter
Main page	1	1	1
Followers	456k	44.6k	120k
Athletics	12	4	17
Academic	3	2	5
Club/Student Life	5	2	5
Other	1	2	2
Total	22	9	27

As indicated in Table 20, there are various accounts on social media. Some of those accounts were formally managed by the social media marketing team, while some accounts are managed by colleges, clubs, or other departments. When asked about the athletics accounts, focus group participant 5 referred to the importance that athletics plays on campus life:

On the athletic standpoint, like we were mentioning with raw content, that's not produced, that's a huge aspect of what we're doing and especially as it relates to kind of what you're saying with campus lifestyle and how at [university] that's such a big part of campus lifestyle is athletics.

Interview participants confirmed this, as many of them mentioned seeing videos of midnight madness, and the havocs. Focus group participant 5 also noted the ease and simplicity of using technology to pull out a phone to take a quick video of pre-game activity and easily share it on social media, stating,

You take your phone out, you show a video of the havocs. It didn't take a ton of effort on our end. We didn't produce it. We didn't have to filter it or do anything with it. You just post it. The havocs themselves drive the content.

Focus group participant 5 also noted that prospective students and parents frequently interact and comment on those videos with posts such as, “can’t wait to be doing this” or “my daughter is there for the first time.” Thus, focus group participant 1 reiterated the importance of using, “genuine content” on social media to provide a look at what life would be like as a student attending the campus. Focus group participant 1 stated, “we want to make sure it feels legitimate and feels genuine to the student experience because social media is really for that.” Participant 1 also referenced knowing the demographics, stating that, “the ground campus student really just wants to see what it really looks like and want a legitimate look at what life is like here.”

Theme 5. University-employed staff created social media content to influence college choice decisions. Creating content that is interactive and used by all users was also important to university-employed marketing staff and is the focus of the final theme for this research study. The university-employed marketing staff confirmed that the most frequently used social media sites were Instagram and Facebook. Instagram was used primarily by students because as focus group participant 1 states, “on a platform like Instagram where everything is very visual, we’ve intentionally made our Instagram something that’s focused on campus lifestyle versus marketing or hard sell.” Facebook was used primarily by parents of traditional students or non-traditional online students. Another focus group participant stated,

We have a brand voice we definitely skew more parents, and online students from a Facebook perspective. But we do have stuff; I mean they’re very engaged on Instagram as well because they want to see what’s happening on campus.

These results are consistent with the student questionnaires and interviews, which also noted that students frequently used sites such as Instagram and Snapchat, and Facebook being used by parents. Within these sites, users have the ability to interact by posting on the page, clicking on hashtags, replying to comments, share links or posts with other users, provide personal experiences, and tag users. Participants of the focus group shared how the university-employed marketing staff interacts with users, and the importance of monitoring the accounts, and benefits of being able to view comments to make real-time adjustments on campus when needed. As referenced in both student interviews and the focus group, reviews or testimonials are frequently used when searching for a college. Focus group participants 1 and 6 commented on the importance that reviews on social media can have on the consumer. Focus group participant 1 stated that, “the value of that social review is so major. We want to make sure we are giving the best customer service that we can, as fast as we can.” Focus group participant 6 pointed out the impact that negative reviews can also have on the university, stating that

another thing that happens is with negative reviews, potential students will go on to the negative reviews and comments saying this makes me not want to go here. And things like that. So, it can work in our benefit and it can also work against us. So that's why it's really important for our team to manage those reviews as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Participants in the student interviews also utilized reviews on social media. As mentioned earlier, interview participants noted that they read both positive and negative reviews and understood that they were just one person’s perspective and did not place as much weight on those reviews as they would on information that was posted on social media by

someone they knew. Another interactive piece of social media is hashtags. Participant 1 from the focus group referred to the basic concept of hashtags as a way to “file information relevant to a topic, which is then used to build brand identity and as a search tool for users.”

When asked about the use of hashtags, the focus group participants noted that they have about four campaigns tied to hashtags, and each hashtag relates to different types of content. For example, one hashtag is utilized for community building, versus another may be used for athletics. Although marketing teams are able to determine hashtags and the content they are tied to, focus group participant 5 mentioned the importance of knowing when to make a shift, which was recently done when the marketing team noticed that users were using the hashtags in their own posts. Focus group participant 5 stated,

We actually just had a recent shift where we kind of analyzed what was happening with our hashtags and the last few years from the official accounts, we weren't using the #[University]Up and we realized with incoming, whether it be incoming students or fans or people that may not be like super in tune with what's going on at university, that their initial kind of reaction is to use #[University]Up.

Focus group participants said that this change resulted in the university adjusting their hashtag to what users were doing “naturally.” Focus group participant 1 also noted that,

we try really hard to be as practical as we can with the hashtags. We do use and invest in that way when students are searching, it's worth their time. It's a feed that has good content, you know, effective content, not just our content but other students.

The student interview participants also commented on the use of hashtags. Many stated that they did not use hashtags when searching for colleges. However, a few did say that they actively used hashtags. As mentioned earlier, participant K used a specific one while searching for college and then transitioned to different ones after making the final selection. While participant L stated that it was helpful to use hashtags when trying to connect with other future students.

Summary. Two themes were identified in response to RQ 3: How do university-employed marketing staff use social media as an interactive tool to influence college choice decisions of first-year students? 1) University-employed marketing staff used social media as one source of their overall marketing strategy to influence student college choice, and 2) University-employed staff created social media content to influence college choice decisions.

University-employed marketing staff utilized a variety of resources to implement social media marketing strategies. The main goal was to create and share content that provides users with a true understanding of the campus experience. Based on results from the student interviews and questionnaires, and focus group, university-employed marketing staff appears to be an influential source for prospective students during college search and selection.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative, single-case study was to explore how interaction with university-sponsored social media sites influenced first-year college students' decision to attend a four-year private college in the southwestern, United States. A deeper understanding of how students use social media as an interactive tool to search for

colleges will add to college choice research and relationship marketing research and provide university marketing departments with information that can be used to increase visibility and enrollment. Additionally, universities may consider new marketing strategies and cut budget costs by increasing social media presence and decrease spending on traditional marketing resources. Using thematic analysis and triangulation, the researcher synthesized data from questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews in order to answer three research questions in this study. The research questions were developed based on the overarching question of how social media influences college selection for first-year college students. The three questions are:

RQ1: How do college students use social media during their college decision making process?

RQ2: How do college students describe their parents and university-employed marketing staff's use of social media influenced their college choice decision?

RQ3: How do university-employed marketing staff use social media as an interactive tool to influence college choice decisions?

Data were collected through the use of open and closed-ended questionnaires, transcribed interviews, and a transcribed focus group. Initial codes and axial codes were created, as suggested by Saldana (2011), which provided the researcher with codes that were analyzed and summarized. The codes resulted in five themes across the three research questions.

Results for RQ1 suggest that social media was found to be an influential as an introductory resource to prospective students. First-year students frequently referred to using social media to learn more about campus life and what they would experience at

the universities they were interested in attending. First-year students also found social media to be an easy way to interact with potential students and seek out information from people who were attending, or who had attended the university, as well as interact with peers, parents, or counselors throughout the college search process.

Results for RQ2 suggested that social media was perceived as a tool for communicating and sharing information from peers, parents, and university-employed marketing staff. Information that was most commonly shared was related to campus life and campus experience, in the form of videos and pictures. Additionally, participants suggested that the information shared on social media was influential however, they made it very clear that the final college choice was not strongly influenced by peers, parents, and university-employed marketing staff. Rather, it was the student participant's choice to attend the selected university.

Results for RQ3 indicated that university-employed marketing staff use social media as a tool to deliver content that provides users with a true understanding of the campus experience. Participants from all three data sources often referred to engaging in social media with the intent to either seek out information or share information related to the campus life and campus experience. Student participants indicated the desire to see an authentic experience, and university-employed marketing staff used social media to share information which showed an authentic experience.

Study limitations. The researcher discussed limitations earlier in the study. The questionnaire and interview participants included students attending one faith-based, non-profit, private university in the southwestern, United States, rather than using participants

from multiple universities. It is possible that the students attending this institution have differing opinions than students attending a non-faith-based institution.

The student participants were attending ground business course at the university; therefore, the sample was primarily business majors rather than majors throughout the university. Students were asked their perspective regarding how parents and friends used social media to influence the student's college choice decision. Therefore, the perspectives of students may not accurately represent the perspectives of peers, parents and university-employed marketing staff. Researcher bias may have been present due to personal values and assumptions, which can influence data collection and analysis (Baškarada, 2014). The researcher exercised bracketing in an effort to minimize bias.

The researcher is the assistant dean in the College of Business and therefore, the instructor and students may have potentially felt coerced to participate in the study. However, the dean had no prior relationship with any of the students. potential limitation is researcher bias in the analysis. Interview times were relatively short, possibility limiting the quality of data collected.

Conclusion. The consistent message that emerged out of the overarching question of how social media influences college selection for first-year college students, was that social media plays an influential role in *introducing* colleges and universities to prospective students. Prospective students are most interested in using social media to gain an understanding of what they will experience while attending college. University-employed marketing staff use social media as a tool to share information about what life it like while attending college. This strategy aligns with how prospective students are

using social media during college search and selection. Chapter 5 will discuss these results in detail, and the possible implications and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction and Summary of Study

This qualitative, single case study explored how first-year college students, their parents, and university-employed marketing staff used social media in an interactive fashion to influence the student's decision to attend a four-year private college in the southwestern, United States. Existing research found that the most common influencers of college choice have been peers, parents, and university websites (Areces et al., 2016; Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012). Although higher education institutions are using social media as part of their marketing strategy, little is known about the potential of these channels in higher education marketing strategies, and less research has focused on the role of social media to influence college choice (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012). Researchers suggested that due to the evolution of social media and the ability to utilize it as a marketing tool, there is a significant gap in social media research, resulting in combining social media research with college choice research to add to the bodies of literature (O'Hallarn, et al., 2016; Yuki, 2015). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative, case study was to explore how interaction with university sponsored social media sites influenced first year college students' decision to attend a four-year private college in the southwestern, United States.

A qualitative, single-case study design was used to fill this gap. Yin (2014) suggested that a case study is appropriate for studies which explain how a phenomenon works and answer the how and why questions. The phenomenon of this study was how interaction with university sponsored social media sites influenced first-year students'

college choice decision. To study this phenomenon, the research used three research questions:

RQ1: How do college students use social media during their college decision making process?

RQ2: How do college students describe their parents and university-employed marketing staff's use of social media influenced college choice decisions?

RQ3: How do university-employed marketing staff use social media to influence first year students' college choice decisions?

The research questions were answered using questionnaires, and interviews from first-year students, and a focus group with university-employed marketing staff from a university in the southwestern, United States. The participants included 33 first-year students, 12 of whom also participated in the in-person interviews. Additionally, seven university-employed marketing staff members participated in a focus group. The questionnaire included demographic questions, open and closed-ended questions, and were used to determine whether the participant met the criteria to qualify to participate in the in-person interviews. An interview protocol was used as a guide for the semistructured interviews (Appendix F) and focus group (Appendix G).

Upon completion of data collection, the researcher used descriptive statistics, and thematic analysis to analyze the data. The researcher used two data sources to examine each question to support triangulation and validity of the study. Table 10 displays the data source used for each research question. Through thematic analysis, the researcher coded the transcripts from the interviews and focus group, which resulted in five themes used to answer the research questions. Table 9 summarizes the themes. The following

sections in this chapter include a summary of findings and conclusions, implications of the findings, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings and Conclusion

Three research questions were used to guide the study of how social media was used to influence first-year college students' decision to attend a four-year private college in the southwestern, United States. Results from the questionnaire, in-person interviews, and focus group were used to explain the phenomenon. The findings and conclusion of the study are organized by research question and theme within each research question.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the first two themes emerged from RQ 1 through the use of questionnaires and interviews with students. Thematic analysis identified two themes. Theme 1 was students interacted and observed information on social media to learn about academic and social activities related to campus life. Theme 2 was prospective students used social media to gather information and interact with others during the initial college search process.

Research Question 1. The first research question was: How do college students use social media during their college decision making process? Little research exists regarding how prospective college students use social media when selecting the college, they will attend (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012). However, results from Constantinides and Zinck Stagno's study indicated that prospective students used social media to both seek information as well as interact with other users regarding their college search and indicated a need for further research on the topic.

Theme 1. Students interacted and observed information on social media to learn about academic and social activities related to campus life. Theme 1 identified a

clear focus on the use of social media to allow students to get a feel for what life would be like while attending college. Two categories aligned with this theme: Categories that aligned to Theme 1 were campus life and observations on social media. Results of this study showed students used social media primarily for one-way communication, with two-way interaction used as well, but less frequently.

Campus life. The results of this study revealed that students used social media to get a “feel” for the campus. The participants often referred to using social media to learn about the atmosphere on campus and were interested in events occurring on campus through clubs and athletics. Participants also used social media for virtual tours, to get an idea of what student life was like and to see the dorms. For example, students referred to looking at academic and student life on social media. Interview participant C said he, “looked at how college life is at the campus. I looked at Instagram a lot because [university] has a lot of Instagram pages. So, it was cool to see how many things are always going on.” In this case, the student was looking at information that was posted by students or social media marketing employees on social media. Thornton (2017) found similar information, in that the most popular searches on university social media sites were related to students, campus, and athletic events. These areas were where students left the most comments.

Participants in this study responded positively when asked about whether they felt that what was posted on social media regarding campus and academic life was consistent with what they actually saw and felt while attending the university. For example, student interview participant G stated that the “experience matched exactly what campus is like every day,” and student interview participant K said, “it was a good representation of

what campus life is actually like.” Prior research relating to college choice identified the importance of the prospective college students being able to see how information posted online compared to real campus experiences (Sandlin & Peña, 2014). Sandlin and Peña conducted a phenomenological study with college-bound students to understand perceptions of authenticity being displayed in college or university blogs. They found that prospective college students thought student-written blogs were genuine when the writers discussed their own personal feelings and experiences with student life. Similarly, Sashittal and Jassawalla (2015) conducted social media research focusing on why college students use Pinterest as a form of social media, and found that the greater the experience of authenticity, the higher level of reported enrichment. Casidy (2013) found links between perceived brand orientation, loyalty, and student satisfaction. In sum, results from Sandlin and Peña (2014), Sashittal and Jassawalla (2015) aligned with results from this research study because results showed the importance of using social media to depict an accurate experience of campus life, which could result in positive brand recognition and student satisfaction (Casidy, 2013),

Observations on social media. An interesting finding from this study was that prospective students primarily used Instagram or Snapchat as their preferred social media site because they can quickly create content or ‘stories,’ which are recorded directly to their account. The most common college search stories shared by participants included reference to friends and classmates sharing about where they were going to attend college. For example, student participant C stated that, “100 percent of high school seniors post about their college trips” and “what their final decision is, and it’s always a big deal.”

In regard to the categories that students use social media for college search, campus experience and events were commonly mentioned. For example, questionnaire participant 15 referred to using Instagram to “keep myself updated of events” and questionnaire participant 20 used social media to follow their “top choice universities on Instagram to learn about what they had to offer and what campus life was like.” Participants also referred to using sites such as Facebook and Twitter, but more as a way to collect information or communicate with family regarding the college search and choice process. For example, student participant A used Facebook to “connect with friends that are very far away. Or family that does not have some other way of communicating.”

Student participants referred to reviewing social media from the universities they were interested in attending however, they used social media less if they were considering in-state schools and relied on social media more for out-of-state schools. For example, student interview participant E was considering in-state schools in Colorado and said,

I grew up around Boulder, so I kind of already knew how everything was. Then I looked at NAU’s pictures through their Instagram page or whatever it was to see how that portrayed their school. And then DU, I grew up around that, so I didn’t really look at their social media.

When student interview participant E discussed the selected universities’ social media, she noted the following:

While I was looking, I looked at this school in New York, and their social media wasn’t really there. And if they’re not excited about their school, no one else is

gonna be excited about their school. So [university's] confidence level on their social media was like, oh wow, if they are this proud of what they are, that's probably a good place to be. Versus just having a social media presence. They're actually involved in their social media.

Results of other studies align with this study and indicated that universities and students are using a variety of social media sites. Universities use social media as a marketing function, although some colleges are more active than others, and students use social media to connect with people and seek out information. Linvill, et al. (2015) found that the categories that colleges and universities posted most frequently were information sharing and group experiences however, promotional pins were shared at a higher rate than the other categories. Linvill, et al. suggested that social media tools are potentially valuable platforms for relationship marketing in higher education because it promotes community and relationship building. The researchers also suggested that universities are not utilizing social media platforms to the fullest and suggested that every social media tools have different audiences and functionality and those need to be considered when universities are using them to build their brand. These results agree with the study because as mentioned earlier, students used a variety of social media accounts during the college search phase to both collect and share information and gauge what the experience will be like when attending the university.

Theme 2. Prospective students used social media to gather information and interact with others during the initial college search process. Two categories aligned with this theme: Initial college search process, and peer interaction.

Initial college search process. Students read testimonials or reviews of universities as a way to gather information. For example, interview participant G followed Instagram the most and said that he generally did not read long comments or captions on people's posts", but when he saw testimonials that were posted by Admissions, he "read all of it, even though it looked like an entire paragraph on my phone. So, I wanted to know what [university] could supply to people while they are in college.

Similarly, student interview participant L looked up reviews and stated that, "there are some people that since it is a for-profit school, they said [university] would be kind of greedy and they kind of try to scam you in certain ways." The same participant said she also saw positive comments, "that were saying [university] is like amazing, that they are really involved with their students, they love helping their students, and getting the students involved and stuff like that," and noted that "there are always two sides of the spectrum."

These examples align with research related to word-of-mouth communication to build brand equity. Studies have found social media to be known as a prime platform for marketing and to build brand equity (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012; Zailskaite-Jakste, & Kuvykaite, 2013). Zailskaite-Jakste and Kuvykaite's (2013) research focused on brand equity of a brand of coffee and found that social media changes how the brand is communicated based on the consumer reactions. This study agrees with these results in that testimonials and reviews on social media may impact how a student perceives the university, especially when it is from the student perspective.

Interactions with peers. Viewing pictures and videos were identified as helpful types of content to gather information. For example, student interview participant C talked about the impact that the university's YouTube channel had on him. He stated that he watched a "few hours' worth of videos" that were created, specifically mentioning footage of "candid students," meaning students actually attending the university and sharing what they were doing, to get a feel for the student experience. He said, "Anyone can say anything in front of a camera, but like when they don't see you and then they're just out like having fun, like it definitely shows you that people are loving it here." Susarla, et al. (2016) studied triggers of word-of-mouth communication in social networks, specifically focusing on the topic of comments and views on YouTube channels, with results suggesting that network ties or connections on social media significantly impact word-of-mouth communication. Results from this study agree with Susarla, et al. (2016), as nearly all participants confirmed that they used social media to watch videos related to colleges they were interested.

Prospective students share and view pictures and videos on social media which portray the life and culture of the campus. These behaviors have the potential to influence student perception and college choice. The results from this study tie into college choice research and provides evidence that college students perceive social media as an influential resource during college search. However, the interactive role, meaning prospective students communicate back and forth with the same people, did not play a primary role in college choice and was more secondary during their search.

Research Question 2. The second research question was: How do college

students describe their parents and university-employed marketing staff's use of social media influenced college choice decisions? One theme aligned with the question. Theme 3 was: Peers, parents and university-employed marketing staff used social media to share information about the university. Three categories align with this question: Information sharing by peers (friends and classmates); Information sharing by parents, and information sharing with university-employed marketing staff.

Students in this study used social media to interact primarily with peers, but also with parents, and university-employed marketing staff to gather information about universities they were interested in attending. Participants referred to seeking out information about the university through friends' social media accounts. Theme 3a through 3c includes examples from each of these resources.

Information sharing by peers (friends and classmates). This category focused on how participants perceived their friends and peers shared information on social media regarding their college experience, both during the search phase as well as friends or peers who were older and had already started college. Participants perceived peers or friends to post and share information that was influential in the sense that participants would view information that was shared by peers or friends who had started attending college prior to the participant. Peers or friends would also share information on social media through pictures or videos at the time they were visiting colleges, or after making their final college selection. This information was often viewed by the participants because it gave an idea of what life was going to be like while attending college in the future. For example, questionnaire participant 11 read college reviews from friends regarding campus visits, stating, "Some of my friends would post reviews of schools after

they visited them, and it would go into the detail of what vibe the campus and students gave off.” Similarly, interview participant C used information posted by peers who were already attending college to “get a feel for what it was like.”

Results from this study are similar to what was recommended by Sandlin and Peña (2014), who conducted research on the use of blogs to create authentic information. The authors suggest that colleges and universities hire students to participate in their social media to provide prospective students with posts that share the actual experience and create a stronger connection with students attending the university.

Additionally, trust is an important factor that comes into play when receiving information from peers about college search. When asked about trusting sources such as peers, parents, or counselors, participants often trust their friends more than peers or individuals they do not know as well. For example, student interview participant F said, “For peers, like people you know or people that are students, actually are going to say what’s true for the most part, unless they just are trying to downgrade the college or whatever.” Student interview participant L had similar thoughts in reference to trusting peer opinions about college, stating, “They’re just going to tell you how it is. I think that was really influential for me.” Thus, confirming that information that is shared by people they know is considered more strongly than information that is shared by others. Conversely, participants from the study also made it very clear that the decision to attend the selected university was very much their decision, and they made their own choice regarding which college to attend. Chang, et al. (2015) studied relationships within social networks, and developed an estimated trust value model to measure trust between individuals within a social network. The estimated trust value model measures social

distances between users, giving less weight to users that have a further social distance (Chang, et al., 2015). This model may be useful for marketing departments when looking at the relationships between prospective students and who they interact with on social media.

Information by sharing-parents. Theme 3c focused on how parents were perceived to share information on social media. Not surprisingly, parents were thought to use Facebook most often; however, they were not perceived to share information on social media as much as friends or peers did. However, the data from the questionnaire did result in a mean score of 4.61 out of 5 when asked whether participants value parents' opinion. For example, several participants mentioned that a parent shared college information on social media, but they also viewed information together in-person. Study participants mentioned that sometimes their parents would share information about a particular college on social media. Questionnaire participant 11 had a parent who would tag him on information related to colleges that was posted on social media, stating, "My parents just continually tagged me in stuff on Facebook about college information." Questionnaire participant 28 had parents who shared videos and pictures, which helped make the college choice decision, stating, "My parents would share videos found on Facebook or Twitter with me. The school atmosphere looked fun and helped me make my decision." Student interview participant C had a strong connection with his mother and when asked about valuing her opinion he said, "Yeah, definitely. I mean, it's my mom." These findings align with research related to the influence that parents have on college decision-making.

Prior research focusing on parent involvement in college search found that Millennial college students connect deeply with parents, and parents who communicate with their child are influential in their college major and career path selection (Myers, S., & Myers, C., 2012; Workman, 2015;). Although the research did not focus on social media as a form of communication, the results suggest that Millennial college students connect deeply with parents (Workman, 2015).

An additional finding to point out is that participants noted that after they made their college choice or when they began attending college, parents would begin to share information on social media about their son or daughter's college experience. For example, in reference to her mother posting information on social media, student interview participant A said, "She posts my life on Facebook." Similarly, student interview participant D said, "When we moved in she posted pictures of like oh, participant D is moved in at [university]. Stuff like that." As mentioned earlier in this chapter, this is another form of word-of-mouth communication which can provide awareness to an organization at a minimal cost (Poch & Martin, 2015).

Information sharing by/University-employed marketing staff. The final information sharing theme relates to students described how university-employed marketing staff used social media to influence college choice. The majority of the participants found the university counselors to be helpful, but not through connections directly on social media. The role of a university counselor is to provide prospective students with information about programs, cost, financial aid, scholarships, and overall student experience.

From the results of this study, it is clear student participants felt that university counselors use various forms of communication to deliver information about colleges and universities. For example, participants mentioned meeting in-person at a high school or coffee shop, where they would pull up information on social media. Participants had an appreciation for information that was shared by enrollment counselor and referred to counselors being influential through persistency and providing links to videos, and articles about the university. For example, student interview participant I referenced videos that showed the campus experience, stating “she would show me like YouTube videos and stuff that was produced by the university TV and stuff like that about the campus and the things you can get interactive with.” Although enrollment counselor’s information is helpful, it is clear that college students perceive information to be shared on social media by enrollment counselors less often and as less valuable than information shared by friends, as indicated in table 21.

Table 21.

Questionnaire descriptive data: Information sharing

Question	Mean	Std. Deviation
10. Friends share information on social media	4.09	.914
11. Value friends’ opinion	4.45	.564
12. Classmates share information on social media	4.06	.747
14. Value classmates’ opinion	2.88	1.139
18. Enrollment counselors share information on social media	3.45	1.063
19. Value enrollment counselors’ opinion	3.79	1.053

Research Question 3. The third question was: How do university-employed marketing staff use social media to influence college choice decisions of first year students? The researcher identified two themes under RQ3. Theme 4 was: University-employed marketing staff used social media as one source of their overall marketing strategy to influence student college choice. Theme 5 was: University-employed staff created social media content to influence college choice decisions.

Theme 4: University employees used social media to illustrate campus life and culture. The focus group participants referred to their overall goal as providing users with visual information to illustrate campus life and culture. For example, focus group participant 1 said, students want to see a “realistic view of what campus looks like,” and also noted the importance of providing an accurate depiction of the experience students will get: “We want to make sure it feels legitimate and feels genuine to the student experience because social media is really for that.” For example, university employees shared a video of a pre-game activity and referred to students or parents making comments on the video.

Social media accounts. There are two additional examples which identify universities to be using social media to influence college choice decision-making. The first example comes directly from the University in this study. The researcher observed the University social media accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and how they interact with users. As mentioned in chapter 4, there are several pages that were created within each of these accounts that are used to interact with prospective students as well as with alumni, current students or anyone interested in what the University has to offer. Table 22 displays this information.

Table 22.

University Social Media Accounts

Category	Facebook	Instagram	Twitter
Main page	1	1	1
Followers	456k	44.6k	120k
Academic	3	1	2
Athletics	12	4	17
Club/student life	5	2	5
Other	1	2	3
Total	22	9	27

Theme 5. University-employed staff created social media content to influence college choice decisions. In addition to identifying the university social media accounts, the researcher also asked interview participants about the social media they viewed for all the colleges they were interested in attending. Participants often referred to the colleges as having social media accounts, with some being similar to the selected university and others that were not as interactive or useful. While this is a small sample of all college and university social media accounts, it is indicative that universities are using social media as a tool to connect with prospective students. Results from this study identified the university as using it as a tool to both share information and interact with users. For example, in theme 4 campus life, videos were mentioned as a way to share and interact with users. Prior research found that universities are primarily using social media for one-way communication to provide information to the public, and to paint a positive picture of the university (Kimmons, et al., 2017).

Another method of interaction mentioned in both the focus group and interviews was through testimonials or reviews. Participants in both the focus group and student interviews mentioned the positive and negative impact that can be shared on social

media. Focus group participant 1 said, “The value of that social review is so major. We want to make sure we are giving the best customer service that we can, as fast as we can.” Also noting that reviews on social media are used to respond to a concern, typically by relaying the information to someone in the university who can assist the user. For example, if there is a complaint on social media about service on campus, the information is relayed, and a solution can be implemented within the week if not sooner. These results suggest the importance that should be placed on using social media as an interactive tool to influence college choice decision-making. Similarly, Thornton (2017) found that students left the most comments regarding student, campus, and athletic events. This finding aligns with results from the student questionnaires, interviews, and focus group, in that those are also the areas that participants focus on while using social media for college search.

An interesting finding in regard to the interactive aspect of social media is the minimal use of hashtags by students. Focus group participant 1 said hashtags can be described as a “filing cabinet or have a file folder where you can file away all relevant information into that folder, and that’s really the base of the use of hashtags, but it goes into brand identify.” Focus group indicated that many users use hashtags improperly however, the university was able to adapt from this and changed their use of a hashtag to what the users were using, which enables them to capture and file the information that users were sharing. Focus group participant 5 said,

We actually just had a recent shift where we kind of analyzed what was happening with our hashtags over the last few years from the official accounts. We weren’t using #[University]Up and we realized with incoming, whether it be

incoming students or fans, or people that may not be like super in tune with what's going on at university, that their initial kind of reaction is to use #[University]Up. So, we decided based on that, why aren't we using #[University]Up if that's what people naturally want to do?

There has been little research conducted on the use of hashtags in higher education; however, Murzintcev and Cheng (2017) studied the use of data collection from hashtags to detect information related to disasters. The authors confirmed that they can be used to collect information related to similar events, but they have limited use because not all posts on social media include hashtags thus, only messages that use hashtags could be included in their data collection model.

As mentioned earlier, little empirical research has been conducted to explore how universities use social media as an interactive tool to influence college choice. However, the results from this study agree with prior research and confirms that students use social media as a way to gather information regarding events and activities occurring on campus and interact with other users when needed. It is clear that the university in this study does use social media as an interactive tool to influence college choice, and support stakeholders such as current and prospective students.

Summary. The purpose of this case study was to explore how social media was used to influence first-year college students' decision to attend a four-year private college in the southwestern, United States. The overarching research question for the study was: How does social media influence college selection for first-year college students? The data resulted in five themes which tie the research together, adds to existing literature,

and fills the gap, which also includes the lack of empirical research on the topic of how social media influences college choice.

The five themes identified were:

- Theme 1: Students interacted and observed information on social media to learn about academic and social activities related to campus life.
- Theme 2. Prospective students used social media to gather information and interact with others during the initial college search process.
- Theme 3: Peers, parents and university-employed marketing staff used social media to share information about the university.
- Theme 4. University-employed marketing staff used social media as one source of their overall marketing strategy to influence student college choice.
- Theme 5. University-employed staff created social media content to influence college choice decisions.

Campus life and culture was a key area of focus for both student interviews and the focus group. Students want to know what life will be like when they attend college, and they looked to social media in addition to visiting the campus in-person to gather this information. Furthermore, students also identified themselves as sharing information, searching for information that was shared by peers or friends, receiving content from parents, and viewing content such as videos or photos shared by university social media teams. These activities resulted in using social media as an interactive resource for college search. The theoretical, practical, and future recommendations are discussed in the following section.

Implications

There were several theoretical, practical, and future implications which emerged through analysis of Chapter 4. The purpose of this qualitative, single-case study was to explore how social media was used to influence college choice of first-year students. The

case study of analysis was first-year business students and university-employed marketing staff at a university in the southwestern, United States. The theoretical, practical, and future implications are discussed further in this section.

Theoretical implications. This study was guided by two theoretical foundations: the college choice model of Hossler and Gallagher, early researchers of college choice in 1987 (Bergerson, 2009), and relationship marketing, which links customers to an organization before, during, and after a purchase (Gronroos, 2004). Prior college choice research has identified peers, parents, counselors, and university websites as the most commonly used resources during the college search and selection phase (Areces et al., 2016; Kutty, 2014; Obermeit, 2012), and additional research had been done to identify which social media platforms prospective students use, social media platforms universities use as an informational tool to recruit students, and the factors that influence college choice decisions (Areces et al., 2016; Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012; Linvill, et al., 2015; Sandlin & Peña, 2014; Thornton, 2017).

Relationship marketing is a theory that has also evolved over the past 30 years, and is centered on relationships with customers (Gronroos, 2004). Social media has created the ability for groups to maintain an ongoing relationship, thus it may be used by universities as a relationship marketing tool (Linvill, et al., 2015). This research has converged college choice theory and relationship marketing to fill the research gap and provide universities with guidance on how to use social media to influence college search.

The first research question focused on how students used social media to influence the college decision-making process. The findings support the college choice

model, confirming that students still use parents, peers, and counselors as resources for college search (Areces et al., 2016; Kutty, 2014; Obermeit, 2012). Through thematic analysis, the researcher was able to add to college choice research by identifying that social media is used somewhat as an interactive resource during the search stage of the college choice model. However, social media was found primarily as an informational resource used to introduce students to universities, particularly in the case where the student was looking at out-of-state school. First-year students were able to use social media as a tool to communicate and gather information, specifically to learn about campus life and the culture of the university, but the interaction portion was more of a secondary tool. Based on these findings, the conclusions for research question one are credible.

The second research question for this study examined how first-year college students perceived their parents', peers', and university-employed marketing staff used social media to influence college decision-making. This research question was based on the college choice model and took it a step further to identify how parents, peers, and university-employed marketing staff used social media to influence college choice. The findings identify these resources as influential in college choice through sharing information on social media. However, peers or friends were clearly identified as having the largest impact because they would often share about their experience visiting, or actually attending college. Information shared by parents and university-employed marketing staff did have an influence on the students however, it fit into the college search phase of the college choice model versus college selection, with participants often

referring to the idea that the decision to attend the selected university was theirs to make. Based on these findings, the conclusions for research two are credible.

The final research question investigated how university-employed marketing staff used social media to influence college-decision making. This research question was based on relationship marketing research, which is centered on establishing, maintaining, and potentially terminating relationships (Linvill, et al., 2015). Through thematic analysis, the findings from the study adds to relationship marketing research in that university-employed marketing staff use social media as an interactive tool to communicate and share information with current and prospective students, and establish and maintain relationships with prospective students. The findings also indicate that social media is used to interact with parents as well, who have found to be a resource for prospective students. Based on these findings, the conclusions for research question three are credible.

Practical implications. There are several practical implications which emerged from this study.

1. Prospective students want to know what life will be like while attending the university in terms of campus life and culture. This includes both the academic perspective as well as the social and living perspective. Social media can be used to provide virtual tours of the campus and dorms.
2. Prospective students used social media to gather information and interact with others during the *initial* college search process. However, they used the sites for information gathering, with minimal use of interactive purposes.
3. Students valued parents' views on school, but again, most was informational rather than interactive in nature.
4. University-employed marketing staff used social media as one source of their overall marketing strategy to influence student college choice.
5. University-employed staff created social media content to influence college choice decisions.

Future implications. In order to increase or maintain enrollment, universities need to ensure that students know what they are getting when they choose a higher education institution. Social media is one tool that can be used to show transparency and an authentic experience. While there have been numerous studies conducted on college choice, little is known about the role of social media as an influencer on college search and choice. This study incorporates how technology has evolved to impact college choice. Based on the practical implications discussed earlier, there is a need for universities to better utilize social media to share and interact with prospective students to increase enrollment and retention.

Strengths and weaknesses of the study. Earlier in this study, the researcher identified several weaknesses. First, the data were collected at one faith-based university in the southwestern, United States. This limits the data to students who desired an education from a faith-based school. The questionnaire and interview participants included students attending one faith-based, non-profit, private university in the southwestern, United States, rather than using participants from multiple universities. It is possible that the students attending this institution have differing opinions than students attending a non-faith-based institution. The student participants were attending ground business course at the university; therefore, the sample was primarily business majors rather than majors throughout the university.

The researcher has worked in higher education for over 10 years, thus there may have been a bias from the researcher in that it was believed that prospective students are heavily influenced by social media from peers, parents, or counselors. Fourth, the students were asked how they perceived parents, peers, and counselors used social media

to influence college choice. Thus, the perception may not accurately represent the opinions of those resources. The counselor portion of the focus group participant included only counselors who were local, which limited the data to opinions of people who do not live outside of the state. Lastly, the student interviews were relatively short because many of the questions in the interview received similar responses to other questions, and examples were often repeated. Interview times were relatively short, possibility limiting the quality of data collected.

In addition to weaknesses, there were several strengths of the study. First, although the research was conducted at one faith-based university, the participants did not indicate that it was the primary reason for selecting the university. Additionally, they often referred to public colleges that were not faith-based. In regard to researcher bias, the researcher used data triangulation as suggested by Yin (2014) to reduce this bias. Although the student participants from the study identified from a ground business course, they were first-year students in their first semester. It is possible that they may not continue as a business major, and a significant benefit is that the students were in their first semester at the university and recently went through the college search and selection phases. Resulting in having stronger recollection of their use of social media for college search than students who had attended the university for a longer period of time. Additionally, the researcher used peer review as suggested by Johnson and Christensen (2014) to support the results of the data.

Recommendations

A review of the literature identified the need for additional research related to how social media is used to during the college decision-making process. Several studies

refer to the need to research how future students use social media as an information seeking tool, as well as a tool to interact with the university and other students, along with usage of faculty and friends to influence those decisions (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012; Kimmons et al., 2017). As a result, this research explored how social media is shared by peers, parents, and university-employed marketing staff to attract potential students, and influence college choice of first-year students at a university in the southwestern, United States. Based on the conclusions of this study, the researcher identified five recommendations for future research.

Recommendations for future research. Based on the results from this study, recommendations for future research include the following:

1. The participants included business students attending a private, faith-based university. It is recommended that similar research be conducted at public universities to determine whether similar results would be found at different institutions.
2. This study identified peers and parents as influencers on social media. Additional research should include the actual parents and peers of the interview participants to confirm whether the student perceptions were accurate.
3. Additional studies should include a content analysis of information that was posted by the peers or parents of the participants to further evaluate the influence the social media content has on college choice.
4. This study focused on ground traditional business students. Future studies should include online non-traditional students to identify whether non-traditional students are influenced by social media in the same way that ground traditional students are influenced.
5. Future studies should identify the state the participant lived in prior to attending, to further confirm whether there is a difference between in-state and out-of-state student use of social media for college search.

Recommendations for future practice. The results of this qualitative single-case study support the interactive use of university-sponsored social media sites to inform

prospective students during college search and choice. Social media may be used as a form of relationship marketing as mentioned by Linvill, et al. (2015), for prospective students to establish and maintain a relationship with individuals at a university.

1. A recommendation for future practice is for universities to analyze the money spent on traditional marketing strategies versus a social media marketing strategy, and find a balance between the two, to maximize the marketing budget and increase or maintain enrollment. Universities would greatly benefit from this exercise because they will identify where they can reduce cost and use social media as an interactive tool to increase enrollment.
2. An additional recommendation for future practice is for universities to hire current students to run social media marketing. As mentioned by Sandlin and Peña (2014), authentic communication from students provides information related to the campus life and potential to share real life experiences. By doing this, prospective students are able to benefit from two-way communication and interactive content, and universities benefit by having the content on their social media.

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Appendix A.**Site Authorization Letter**

Site authorization on file at Grand Canyon University.

Appendix B.

IRB Approval Letter



GRAND CANYON
UNIVERSITY™

3300 West Camelback Road, Phoenix Arizona 85017 602.639.7500 Toll Free 800.800.9776 www.gcu.edu

DATE: September 07, 2018

TO: Allison Mason
FROM: Grand Canyon University Institutional Review Board

STUDY TITLE: College Search and Selection: A Study of the Influence of Social Media on College Choice
IRB REFERENCE #: IRB-2018-445

SUBMISSION TYPE: Submission Response for Initial Review Submission Packet

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: September 07, 2018
EXPIRATION DATE:
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited

REVIEW CATEGORY: Category 7: Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research study. Grand Canyon University Institutional Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document. If applicable, please use the approved informed consent that is included in your published documents.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials or the data collection protocol must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate modification request form.

All SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported to this office. Please use the appropriate adverse event forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

Please report all NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this study to this office.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years.

Based on the risks, this project requires Continuing Review by this office on an annual basis.

Please use the appropriate renewal forms for this procedure.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at irb@gcu.edu or 602-639-7804. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

Appendix C.

Informed Consent



Grand Canyon University
College of Doctoral Studies
3300 W. Camelback Road
Phoenix, AZ 85017
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INFORMED CONSENT FORM
College Search and Selection: A Study of the Influence of Social Media on College Choice
INTRODUCTION
The purposes of this form are to provide you (as a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research and to record the consent of those who agree to be involved in the study.
RESEARCH
Allison Mason, doctoral student, has invited your participation in a research study. I am completing this research as part of my doctoral degree.
STUDY PURPOSE
The purpose of the research is to explore social media tools used by universities. It will also explore how they are used as an interactive tool to influence college choice. This research will improve universities social media marketing strategies.
ELIGIBILITY
You are eligible to participate in this research if you:
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are 18 years or older 2. Are in your first year of classes at Grand Canyon University
You are not eligible to participate in this research if you:
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Under the age of 18 2. Have taken classes at Grand Canyon University for more than 12 months
DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH ACTIVITY
If you decide to participate, then as a study participant you will be asked to:
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Complete a questionnaire. 2. Based on your responses to the questionnaire, you may be asked to complete an interview.
At any point you may choose to skip questions on the questionnaire or interview. There will be no penalty. You may say yes to the questionnaire and decide to opt out of the interview. If you say YES, then your participation will last for approximately 5 minutes completing an in-person questionnaire. Approximately (90) subjects will participate in this portion of the study.
If you also say YES to the interview, then you will be contacted within one week to schedule a 30 minute in-person interview.
Approximately (10-15) subjects will participate in the interview portion of the study.

RISKS
There are no known risks from taking part in this study. However, in any research, it is possible that there may be risks that are not yet known.
BENEFITS
There are no direct benefits to you. However, an indirect benefit is that you may increase your understanding of how social media influences college choice. You will also assist your university with information related to how students used social media for college choice.
CONFIDENTIALITY
All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. The results of this research study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications, but the researchers will not identify you. In order to maintain confidentiality of your records, Allison Mason will keep the names of the subjects confidential. All of the data collected during the study will be saved in a file cabinet or on an external hard-drive. The data will be locked in the researcher's office. All data and notes will be destroyed after three years. This will ensure the information cannot be reconstructed.
The people who will have access to your information are: myself, and my dissertation chair.
Audio recording: I would like to use a voice recorder to record your responses. You can still participate if you do not wish to be recorded. The recordings will be saved on an external hard-drive, locked in the researcher's office. Data will be destroyed after three years.
I will secure your information with these steps: Locking it in an office, and/or, securing the computer file with a password.
I will keep your data for 3 years. Then, I will delete electronic data and destroy paper data.
WITHDRAWAL PRIVILEGE
It is okay for you to decline to participate in this research study. Even if you say yes now, you are free to say no later, and stop participating at any time, there will be no penalty to you.
If you decide to stop participation, you may do so by: Informing the researcher that you no longer wish to participate. If so, I will not use the information I gathered from you.
Your decision will not affect your relationship with Grand Canyon University or otherwise cause a loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled.
I may stop your participation, even if you did not ask me to, if: You appear uncomfortable during the interview.
COSTS AND PAYMENTS
There is no financial cost to you as a study participant, however, as a thank you for your willingness to participate, you will be given a \$5 gift card.
COMPENSATION FOR ILLNESS AND INJURY
If you agree to participate in the study, then your consent does not waive any of your legal rights. However, no funds have been set aside to compensate you in the event of injury.
VOLUNTARY CONSENT

Any questions you have concerning the research study or your participation in the study, before or after your consent, will be answered by (Allison Mason, Allison.mason@gcu.edu, and [REDACTED])

If you have questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the College of Doctoral Studies at IRB@gcu.edu; (602) 639-7804.

This form explains the nature, demands, benefits and any risk of the research study. By signing this form you agree knowingly to assume any risks involved. Remember, your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefit. In signing this consent form, you are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies. A copy of this consent form will be given (offered) to you.

Your signature below indicates that you consent to participate in the above study.

Subject's Signature Printed Name Date

Other Signature Printed Name Date
(if appropriate)

INVESTIGATOR'S STATEMENT

"I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits and possible risks associated with participation in this research study, have answered any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above signature. These elements of Informed Consent conform to the Assurance given by Grand Canyon University to the Office for Human Research Protections to protect the rights of human subjects. I have provided (offered) the subject/participant a copy of this signed consent document."

Signature of Investigator _____ Date _____

Appendix D.

Questionnaire Questions

Note to Participants: Social media is considered any online media used to communicate with users by posting comments, photos, or videos (Kerin, Hartley, & Rudelius, 2013). The most popular social media sites used in the United States are Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, and LinkedIn (Pew Research Center, 2017). Other examples of forms of social media include blogs, and communication forums which allow for users to share information such as YouTube, or forums on a university website (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012).

Name:

Email:

Phone Number:

*All contact information will remain confidential and will only be used to schedule interviews with selected participants.

- 1) What is your current age range?
 - a) 18-20
 - b) 21-24
 - c) Over 24

- 2) Gender:
 - a) Male
 - b) Female

- 3) How many months prior to starting college did you make the final college selection?
 - a) 0-3
 - b) 3-6
 - c) 6-9
 - d) 9-12
 - e) Over 12

- 4) Are you within the first year of attending the university?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No

- 5) How many social networking accounts did you have at the time you were applying to the university? (example: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, LinkedIn)
- 0
 - 1-2
 - 3-4
 - 5 or more
- 6) Did your connections on social media accounts include parents, peers, or university counselors? Please check all that apply:
- Parents
 - Peers
 - University counselors
- 7) Did you use social media as a resource during your college search?
- Yes
 - No
- 8) Did you read any blogs associated with colleges that were considered during your college search?
- Yes
 - No
- 9) Did you browse university websites during your college search?
- Yes
 - No
- 10) My friends shared or posted information related to colleges or universities on social media
1. Strongly disagree
 2. Somewhat disagree
 3. Neutral/no opinion
 4. Somewhat agree
 5. Strongly agree
- 11) I value the opinions of my friends
1. Strongly disagree
 2. Somewhat disagree
 3. Neutral/no opinion
 4. Somewhat agree
 5. Strongly agree

12) My classmates shared or posted information related to colleges or universities on social media.

1. Strongly disagree
2. Somewhat disagree
3. Neutral/no opinion
4. Somewhat agree
5. Strongly agree

13) Did peers use social media to influence your college choice? If yes, please share an example.

- a) Yes
- b) No

14) I valued the opinions of my high school classmates when it came to selecting the college I would attend.

1. Strongly disagree
2. Somewhat disagree
3. Neutral/no opinion
4. Somewhat agree
5. Strongly agree

15) My parents shared or posted information related to colleges or universities on social media.

1. Strongly disagree
2. Somewhat disagree
3. Neutral/no opinion
4. Somewhat agree
5. Strongly agree

16) I valued the opinions of my parents when it came to selecting the college I would attend.

1. Strongly disagree
2. Somewhat disagree
3. Neutral/no opinion
4. Somewhat agree
5. Strongly agree

17). Did university employee(s) use social media to influence your college choice? If yes, please share an example.

- a) Yes
- b) No

18). The university enrollment counselors from the universities that I was interested in shared or posted information related to colleges or universities on social media University

1. Strongly disagree
2. Somewhat disagree
3. Neutral/no opinion
4. Somewhat agree
5. Strongly agree

19) I valued the opinions of university enrollment counselors when it came to selecting the college I would attend.

1. Strongly disagree
2. Somewhat disagree
3. Neutral/no opinion
4. Somewhat agree
5. Strongly agree

20) Did parents use social media to influence your college choice? If yes, please share an example.

- a) Yes
- b) No

Open-ended Questions

21. Please provide some specific examples of how you used social media during the search as well as the specific accounts you used.

22. Please describe how parents' use of social media influenced your decision. What sites did they use? How did they interact on the site? How did this interaction influence your decision, if at all?

If parents' use of social media did not influence your decision, please describe why.

23. Please describe how peers' use of social media influenced your decision. What sites did they use? How did they interact on the site? How did this interaction influence your decision, if at all?

If peers use of social media did not influence your decision, please describe why.

24. Please describe how staff employed at the universities you looked at used social media as an interactive tool to recruit students.

25. Please describe how university employees' use of social media influenced your decision. What sites did they use? How did they interact on the site? How did this interaction influence your decision, if at all?

If university employees' use of social media did not influence your decision, please describe why.

Appendix E.

Student Interview Questions

1. How did social media influence your college selection?
 - a. In what ways did social media influence your final college selection, and did watching/reading posts provide confirmation that you made the right choice? Why?
 - b. How did social media help you confirm your college choice?
 - c. What colleges did you view social media resources from?
2. What social media resources did you use to inform your decision in selecting the college you chose to attend?
 - a. Tell me about the social media resources you used when selecting a college.
 - b. What type of information did you find the most helpful from these social media sites? For example, did you prefer to watch videos/read information posted by peers more than through university posts?
 - (i) If so, what made that social media helpful?
 - (ii) How did you use social media to interact with other prospective students or college staff?
 - (iii) What content presentation, or information sharing techniques did these sites use that helped you make your decision?
3. What information did you find most helpful? Least helpful?
4. What recommendations do you have for social media sites and college marketing staff regarding the type of information you would like to see that would better help you make a decision or help other prospective students make a decision?
5. How did parents use social media to influence your college selection?
 - a. If parents posted or reviewed college information on social media, what type of response did you provide? Did you view what they shared? Did it support your college choice? How did it support your college choice?
 - b. What social media sites did your parents use the most? Why?
6. How did peers use social media influence your college selection?

- a. If peers posted college information on social media, what type of response did you provide? did you view what they shared? Did it support your college choice? How did it influence your college choice?
 - b. Do you trust what peers share more than parents or counselors? Why?
 - c. What social media sites did your peers use the most? Why?
7. How did university-employed marketing staff use social media to influence your college selection process?
- a) What type of content was shared between you and your enrollment counselor? i.e YouTube videos, blogs, etc
 - b) How did the content influence your college choice?
 - c) Do you feel like the information shared was authentic?

Appendix F.

Student Interview Protocol

Step 1	Contact participants to schedule interview based on results from the questionnaire
Step 2	Re-introduce researcher to participant and verify the participant is still willing to participate
Step 3	Inform participant that the interview will be recorded and remain confidential
Step 4	Begin interview

Interview Script-Thank you for volunteering to participate in a brief interview discussing your experience using social media while conducting your college search. This interview is designed to examine how interaction with university-sponsored social media sites influenced first year college students' decision to attend a four-year private college in the southwestern, United States.

❖ **Question 1-** How did social media influence your college selection?

- **Probing question-** In what ways did social media influence your final college selection, and did watching/reading posts provide confirmation that you made the right choice? Why?
- **Probing question-**How did social media help you confirm your college choice, or both, and how?
- **Probing question-**What colleges did you view social media resources from?

❖ **Question 2-** What social media resources did you use to inform your decision in selecting the college of choice?

- **Probing question-**Tell me about the social media resources you used when selecting a college.
- **Probing question-**What type of information did you find the most helpful from these social media sites? For example, did you prefer to watch videos/read information posted by peers more than through university posts?
 - If so, what made that social media helpful?

- How did you use social media to interact with other prospective students or college staff?
 - What content presentation, or information sharing techniques did these sites use that helped you make your decision?
- ❖ **Question 3-** What recommendations do you have for social media sites and college marketing staff regarding the type of information you would like to see that would better help you make a decision or help other prospective students make a decision?
- ❖ **Question 4-** What information did you find most helpful? Least helpful?
- ❖ **Question 5-** How did parents use social media influence your college selection?
- **Probing question-**If parents posted or reviewed college information on social media, what type of response did you provide? Did you view what they shared? Did it support your college choice? How did it support your college choice?
 - **Probing question-**What social media sites did your parents use the most? Why?
- ❖ **Question 6-** How did peers use social media influence your college selection?
- **Probing question-**If peers posted college information on social media, what type of response did you provide? Did you view what they shared? Did it support your college choice? How did it influence your college choice?
 - **Probing question-**Do you trust what peers share more than parents or counselors? Why?
 - **Probing question-**What social media sites did your peers use the most? Why?
- ❖ **Question 7-** How did enrollment counselors use social media to influence your college selection process?
- **Probing question-** What type of content was shared between you and your counselor? i.e. YouTube videos, blogs, etc
 - **Probing question** How did the content influence your college choice?
 - **Probing question-** Do you feel like the information shared was authentic?

- **Closing remarks-** This concludes the interview portion of this research. A synthesized analysis of the final themes will be provided to you for review at the conclusion of this study. If you have any additional questions please contact Allison Mason. Thank you for your participation.

Appendix G.

Focus Group Questions

1. From your experience, how do prospective students use social media?
 - a. What social media platforms do they use most frequently?
 - b. In what ways do you think social media influences college selection?
2. What types of social media strategies do you employ to attract students?
 - a. Tell me about a strategy that you believe has been successful or unsuccessful in attracting students.
3. What types of interaction do you have with the parents of prospective students on social media?
 - a. In what ways do you feel like parents use social media to influence college choice?
4. What types of interaction do you have with high school counselors on social media?

Appendix H.

Focus Group Protocol

Step 1	Contact participants to schedule focus group
Step 2	Re-introduce researcher to participant and verify the participant is still willing to participate
Step 3	Inform participants that the interview will be recorded and remain confidential
Step 4	Begin interview

Interview Script- Thank you for volunteering to participate in a brief focus group discussing your perspective of how social media is used to influence college choice. This focus group is designed to examine how first-year college students and university-employed marketing staff describe the influence of social media on students' decision to attend a four-year private college in the southwestern United States.

- ❖ **Question 1-** From your experience, how do prospective students use social media?
 - **Probing question-** What social media platforms do they use most frequently?
 - **Probing question-** In what ways do you think social media has an influence on college selection?
- ❖ **Question 2-** What types of social media strategies do you employ to attract students?
 - **Probing question-** Tell me about a strategy that you believe has been successful in attracting students.
- ❖ **Question 3-** What types of interaction do you have with the parents of prospective students on social media?
 - **Probing question-** In what ways do you feel like parents use social media to influence college choice?
- ❖ **Question 4-** What types of interaction do you have with high school counselors on social media?

Closing remarks- This concludes the interview portion of this research. A synthesized analysis of the final themes will be provided to you for review at the conclusion of this study. If you have any additional questions please contact amason06@gmail.com. Thank you for your participation

Appendix I.

Alignment Table

Research Question #	Questionnaire #	Interview Question #	Focus Group Question #
RQ 1 How do college students perceive the role of social media in supporting their college application and admission procedures?	5, 6, 7, 8, 9	1, 1a, 1b, 1c, 2, 2a, 2b, 3, 4	
RQ 2 How do college students perceive the role of social media in supporting their communications with their parents, peers, and university-employed enrollment staff regarding college application and admission procedures?	10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17	5, 5a, 5b, 5c, 6, 6a, 6b, 6c, 7, 7a, 7b, 7c	
RQ 3 How do university-employed marketing staff use social media as an information sharing and interactive tool to influence college choice decisions?			1, 1a, 1b, 2, 2a, 3, 3a, 4, 4a

Appendix J.

Initial Codes

Table J1.

Initial Codes

Initial Codes	# of Questionnaire Occurrences	# of Interview Occurrences	# of Focus Group Occurrences
1. Academic		15	3
2. Athletics	7	15	1
3. Authentic		14	
4. Campus	18	32	8
5. Clubs	1	10	
6. Comment/share		7	8
7. Enrollment counselor interaction	4	27	3
8. Facebook	1	10	3
9. hashtag	1	9	9
10. GENUINE CONTENT		1	
11. Helpful info		24	3
12. Instagram	14	19	
13. Interactive on SM	3		5
14. Marketing recommendation		19	
15. Non SM resource		17	1
16. Observe social media	5	3	7
17. Other school SM		16	
18. Out of state		9	
19. Parent influence	16	7	
20. Parents social media		44	10
21. Peer interaction	24	44	
22. Peers shared about schools	24	16	
23. Perspective student interaction	1	29	
24. Reason for selecting university		16	
25. Seek info on SM		40	
26. Snapchat	7	8	4
27. Social media influenced choice		18	
28. Social media site interaction	19	28	6
29. Social media strategy		6	
30. Spiritual life		6	1
31. Student life	4	9	
32. Testimonial or review	2	6	5

33. Time to select university		13	
34. Trust parent		9	
35. Trust peers		11	
36. Twitter	3	4	2
37. Types of content	14	44	8
38. Academic		15	3

Table J7.

Categories and Associated Initial Codes

Categories and Associated Codes	# of Occurrences in Student Questionnaire	# of Occurrences in Student Interviews	# of Occurrences in University-employed marketing staff Focus Group
Category: Campus life			
<i>Initial Codes:</i>			
Academic		15	3
Athletics	7	15	1
Authentic		14	
Campus	18	32	8
Clubs	1	10	
Genuine content			1
Spiritual life		6	1
Student life	2	6	5
Category: College search			
<i>Initial Codes:</i>			
Enrollment counselor interaction	4	27	3
Hashtag	1	9	9
Interaction on social media	3		5
Observe social media	5	3	7
Parent influence	16	7	
Parents social media		44	10
Peer interaction	24	44	
Peers shared about schools	24	16	
Perspective student interaction	1	29	
Seek info on SM		40	
Social media site interaction	19	28	6
Testimonial or review	2	6	5
Trust parent		9	
Trust peers		11	

Categories and Associated Codes	# of Occurrences in Student Questionnaire	# of Occurrences in Student Interviews	# of Occurrences in University-employed marketing staff Focus Group
Category: Social media influence			
<i>Initial Codes:</i>			
Facebook	1	10	3
Instagram	14	19	3
Snapchat	7	8	4
Social media influence choice		18	
Twitter	3	4	2
Types of content	14	44	8
Category: Information for universities			
<i>Initial codes:</i>			
Helpful info		24	
Marketing recommendation		19	
Other school social media		16	
Reason for selecting university		16	
Social media strategy		6	
Time to select university		13	
Category: Other factors			
<i>Initial Codes:</i>			
Non-social media resource		17	1
Out of state			9