New Media Communication and Recruitment for Postsecondary Institutions

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Master of Arts in Media and Communication Degree
with a Specialization in Strategic Communication

Project Approval Form

Candidate Jessica Gast has completed all the necessary master project requirements of the School of Media & Communication’s Master of Arts program.

APPROVED:

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Claudia Y. Owens

Date

June 20, 2017
New Media Communication and Recruitment for Postsecondary Institutions

Jessica Gast

A Master’s project submitted to the faculty of
Bowling Green State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Media and Communication
with a Specialization in Strategic Communication

Dr. Claudia Y. Owens, D.M.

Approved 6/26/2017
Executive Summary

Postsecondary institutions are in constant competition to recruit and attain high school seniors to attend their institution. Communication and recruitment strategies are critical, and as technology changes, the methods utilized to communicate and engage with prospective students should be altered. Postsecondary institutions need to research what new media practices are being used by high school seniors during their college decision-making process to determine successful and innovative communication and recruitment strategies to attract students and increase enrollment. Institutions need to understand how and why a prospective student decides which college to attend and which new media outlets are influential during their college selection process.

The purpose of this final Master’s project is to analyze the literature to recommend the best communication and recruitment strategies in which postsecondary institutions should invest. The evidence-based research was utilized to examine how and why high school seniors learn about and engage with institutions, as well as the motivations and influential factors involved during the college selection process. This project will contribute to the higher education marketing and recruitment literature and provide postsecondary institutions with the best strategies and practices for successfully communicating with and recruiting high school seniors.
DEDICATION

This Master’s project is dedicated to my loving daughter, Aubrey. This always has been and always will be for you. You gave me all the inspiration I needed. I love you.
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Introduction

The field of higher education has become extremely competitive, and institutions are actively competing for high school seniors to select and attend their college. Sandlin and Peña (2014) explain that technology has fundamentally changed the ways postsecondary institutions interact and communicate with prospective students (p. 333). With institutions facing increasing competition and the most technologically-advanced generation of college students, a “clearer understanding of why and how students choose universities will help universities to develop successful and sophisticated recruitment strategies” (Munisamy, Jaafar & Nagaraj, 2014). The high school senior’s college choice process is important, yet comprehensive, as it involves a variety of factors and media practices that may influence why or how a student determines which institution to attend. Institutional branding and marketing efforts are increasing. Finding new methods to differentiate from other competing institutions and innovative approaches that will attract high school seniors during their postsecondary decision-making process is critical.

Hanover Research (2015) explains that “In today’s technology-centric world, student enrollment strategies must incorporate the latest trends in technology” (p. 3). Postsecondary institutions need to research what new media communication practices are currently being used by high school seniors to learn about college choices, and to implement successful and innovative communication and recruitment strategies. This project is important as it will use evidence-based literature to suggest best new media communication practices for postsecondary institutions to communicate with and recruit high school seniors.

Han explains that “Hossler and Gallagher (1987) proposed a three –stage behavioral model to describe the stages that students pass through to make the college selection”
The process involves three stages, which include predisposition, search, and choice. Han (2014) states that the first stage involves the student’s development and aspiration to attend college, the second stage involves students gathering information, entrance examinations, and selecting one or more colleges, and the last stage is when the students decide which institution to attend and finish the enrollment process (p. 121). “Hossler’s and Gallagher’s model provides a conceptual framework for many studies of college choice and understanding the college choice process has implications for higher education recruiting practice” (Han, 2014, p. 127). This project will focus specifically on the second and third stages of Hossler and Gallagher’s model, which is the search and choice stage. Munisamy et al., (2014) explains that “most universities recognize that they need to market themselves to drive enrollment and build image” (p. 1). However, an institution must first understand how high school seniors are searching or learning about postsecondary institutions to develop successful and innovative communication and recruitment strategies to recruit and attain students.

The development and recruitment of high school seniors is an increasingly important initiative for institutions of higher education to implement. Han (2014) explains that the “most common marketing activities that were engaged in by institutions were strategic planning, advertising, marketing planning, and target marketing” and “the common communication practices used to reach the targeted students include print publications, advertising publications, network marketing, direct mail, electronic mail, telemarketing, marketing in the field, and campus visits (p. 124). With the millennial (born 1977 to 1995) and Gen Z (born 1996 and later) generations constituting the current target audience, they rely heavily on web use for information search. “Institutions are increasingly taking advantage of social media mobile marketing, and
other digital strategies not only to recruit students, but also to research prospective students” (Hanover Research, 2015, p. 4). As a result, “Colleges and universities have adapted their recruiting strategies to meet the demand of college-bound students, taking advantage of the Web-based technology, engaging in e-recruiting tactics like E-mail communications, recruiting pages on Web sites, online net price calculators, campaign videos, and social networking” (Han, 2014, p. 126). Survey data indicate that “most college admission offices consider social media outlets (i.e. blogging, podcasting, social networking, message boards, etc.) to be important tools for student recruitment, and consequently adopting these tools” (NACAC, 2009, p.1). Numerous aspects are associated with shaping the student’s college decision, with a mix of both traditional and new media practices being informational and influential factors.

**Description of the Problem**

Technological innovations have a substantial impact on the trends and developments in marketing and recruitment strategies for postsecondary education and “have radically altered the college search process and how students interact with campuses” (E-Expectations Report, 2015, p. 1). Due to the popularity of new and digital media, “marketers have been forced to reevaluate their media strategies and reconsider the process by consumers who make decisions and the media that influence these decisions in order to more effectively communicate with consumers” (Belch & Belch, 2014, p. 130). The problem is that with rapid growth and interest in the Internet and social media, postsecondary institutions face difficulty identifying the best new media communication practices high school seniors use to learn about and engage with an institution during their college search process. It is not as simple as institutions disseminating information across multiple media channels to recruit students.
Munisamy et al., (2014) explain that “with increasing competition in the higher education environment, a clearer understanding of why and how students choose universities is more important than ever to help universities develop marketing strategies” (p. 1).

**Significance of the Problem**

A major issue in student recruitment is understanding how students make decisions during their college search process and the factors that influence those decisions (Washburn & Petroshius, 2004, p. 35). With the variety of postsecondary institutions available, the industry is becoming more and more competitive, and institutions are aggressively searching for new and enticing methods to compete and stand out from others. “The extent to which institutions successfully market to and recruit prospective students has major implications for college enrollments, budgets, and institution livelihood” (Sandlin & Pena, 2014, p. 1).

Postsecondary institutions need to understand that communication and recruitment strategies play a key role in how high school seniors learn about and engage with an institution. With the popularity and increased usage of new media communication practices, it is critical that an institution identifies the media consumption habits of high school seniors and the ways in which they learn about and engage with institutions during their college search process. Belch and Belch (2014) explain that “the consumer decision process is becoming an increasingly digital experience” (p. 131), and understanding the best new media communication and recruitment practices to develop can be extremely useful information for institutions to utilize in future enrollment marketing, recruitment initiatives and strategy planning.

**Theoretical Background**
Technology has fundamentally changed the way we interact and communicate, altering the college search process for high school seniors. As a result, postsecondary institutions face the problem of determining the best new media communication and recruitment strategies for high school seniors. To analyze this problem, communication media and the social influence process during the college search and choice stages are examined through the social identity theory and media richness theory.

The social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) can be utilized to understand how and why high school seniors use specific media communication practices to obtain information and learn about the college experience. The theory may also contribute to better understanding the social influence process during a prospective student’s college decision-making process, as the social identity theory is defined as “an individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (Hogg, 2016, p. 6). The theory explains how “social groups, whether large demographic categories or small task-oriented teams, provide their members with a shared identity that prescribes and evaluates who they are, what they should believe and how they should behave” (Hogg, 2016, p. 6).

The media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) will be used to evaluate the communication medium’s ability or effectiveness to communicate and engage with high school seniors. The theory provides an explanation of how information is processed, explaining that “information richness is defined as the ability of information to change understanding within a time interval” (Daft & Lengel, p. 560). The media richness theory is based on the degree of
richness that a media possesses, resulting in the selection of specific media to deliver communication effectively.

**Research Question**

RQ1: What does the literature on higher education suggest are best new media communication practices for postsecondary institutions to communicate with and recruit high school seniors?

**Purpose**

The purpose of this Master project is to analyze evidence-based literature to recommend the best communication and recruitment strategies in which postsecondary institutions should invest. This project will make use of reports such as the 2015 Pew Research Center Report Overview on Teens, Social Media & Technology, the 2016 Trends in Higher Education Marketing, Enrollment, and Technology Report, and the 2015 Noel Levitz and E-Expectations Report.

**Definitions of Key Terms**

- **Attain**- To reach a goal of having a prospective student enroll and commit to an institution
- **College and University**-Higher Education institution or educational institution
- **Digital Media/New Media**-Content, audio, video and images that are viewed through digital technology, such as the Internet, on a computer or electronic device
- **Enrollment**-The number of students enrolled at a college or university
- **Higher Education**-Education received at a college, university or institution beyond high school
- **High school seniors**- Students in their final year or twelfth grade of high school
- **Innovative**-New, creative, different or advanced method of thinking or designing
• **Media**-The medium or outlet type used to communicate information or a message

• **Prospective Student**- A student who is actively searching or considering attending a college or university, but has not committed or enrolled in any specific institution

• **Postsecondary Institutions**-Education at a college, university or institution that follows graduation from a high school senior. Consists of non-profit and for-profit, as well as two and four-year institutions.

• **Recruitment**- The action of attracting prospective students to attend and enroll at a college or university.

• **Social Media**-Internet-based applications to create and share information through online communities. Examples: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat

• **Strategies**-An action plan or direction aimed at achieving an objective or goal for a specific audience

• **Traditional Media**- Advertising through newspapers, magazines, radio and television

**Summary**

This project provides a systematic literature review that will advise postsecondary institutions as to which new media communication and recruitment practices are critical to investing in to communicate with and recruit high school seniors. This project will examine literature on higher education marketing and enrollment management, as well as the social identity theory and media richness theory. The literature and theories will be used as a theoretical framework, examining communication media and the social influence processes during the second and third stage of Hossler’s and Gallagher’s three–stage behavioral model, which are the search and choice stages for college selection. This project will also offer a proposal for higher
education practitioners and admissions representatives for implementing a successful and innovative marketing and recruitment strategy to attract high school seniors and to increase enrollment and brand awareness. Lastly, practical implications and recommendations for future research will be discussed.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

This systematic literature review is designed to provide recommendations for successful and innovative marketing and recruiting strategies that postsecondary institutions can implement to obtain high school seniors and to increase enrollment. This review will consist of existing evidence-based literature on higher education marketing and recruitment that examine the problem of determining the best new media communication practices high school seniors use to learn about and engage with a college during their college search process. Database searches were conducted using key words associated with higher education, branding, marketing and recruitment, and the college decision-making process. Articles were exclusive to scholarly and peer-reviewed. Grey literature was also utilized in this Master’s project, and consisted of articles written by marketing professionals and higher education professionals.

To identify new media communication practices that high school seniors use, as well as their media consumption habits and influences that contribute to their college selection process, specific reports were utilized. The 2015 Pew Research Center Report Overview on Teens, Social Media & Technology used a sample of over 1,060 teens ages 13-17 to acquire a better understanding of social media and technology usage. The 2016 Trends in Higher Education Marketing, Enrollment, and Technology Report includes an examination of recent higher education trends and developments related to marketing, branding, technology and the student life cycle. The 2015 Noel Levitz and E-Expectations Report includes preferences and expectations of high school juniors and seniors related to the college search process and how students interact with campuses. The social identity and media richness theories will also be used
as a theoretical framework, examining communication media and the social influence processes during the search and choice stages of the college selection and decision-making process.

**Background**

The field of higher education has become extremely competitive, and institutions are actively competing for high school seniors to select and attend their college. The students process of determining which college to attend is important, yet difficult, with nearly 6800 institutions of higher education (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 2011) in the USA alone. Prospective students in America have a wide range of options to choose from for postsecondary education: public or private four-year institutions, two-year institutions, for-profit institutions, community, technical and vocational schools, or virtual universities offering online courses (Han, 2014, p. 120). According to the NCES (2011), seven million students were expected to attend two-year institutions, and 13.2 million were expected to attend four-year institutions.

Given the large interest of high school seniors wanting to pursue a postsecondary education, the college selection and decision-making process has become an area that institutions are trying to better understand. In the past, the methods prospective students used to learn about a college, as well as the strategies institutions utilized to market and recruit students, were very different than those methods used today. In this digital world, technology has fundamentally changed the ways postsecondary institutions communicate and engage with prospective students (Sandlin & Pena, 2014, p. 333). High school seniors are the most technologically-advanced generation of college-bound students, as they grew up with Internet technology, radically altering the way they obtain information and interact with campuses. “Students are now constantly
connected to the Internet, and many of them are browsing via mobile devices. Social media has further changed the entire concept of communication in addition to giving campuses more communication channels to manage” (E-Expectations Report, 2015, p. 1). Galan, Lawley, & Clements (2015) explain that, “As modern society becomes more and more communicative and engaged in content sharing, universities need to adapt to the latest changes in order to differentiate themselves and to make their message memorable” (p. 287).

**Problem**

As a result of the rapid growth and interest in the Internet and social media, marketing and recruiting strategies will need to reflect current trends. The problem is that postsecondary institutions face the challenge of knowing the best new media communication practices high school seniors use to learn about and engage with an institution during their college search process. Anctil (2008) discusses the challenges with higher education marketing and states that “the most problematic set of consumers for the responsive marketer is the traditional prospective student---the high school senior” (p. 92). The field of higher education is further discussed and Anctil notes Jugenheimer (1995) as stating “Colleges and universities generally do a poor job of advertising and marketing, with inadequate planning, a resistance to advertising, and a lack of a comprehensive marketing plan being contributors” (2008, p. 90). Marketers should focus strategically on the product and the market, and the methods high school seniors use to communicate and interact with an institution. Marketing higher education is about understanding the “product” to define the message and create memorable images or experiences with which the prospective student can associate a college or university (Anctil, 2008b, p. 90). Han (2014) also discusses the difficulty facing higher education and states the problem lies in the intangible
nature of education. It is not the typical product consumer’s see, touch, and use and the benefits are not immediately available after purchase (p. 124). “Successful marketing for higher education requires identifying tangible characteristics of an institution and distinguishing them from the tangible characteristics of competitors” (Han, 2014, p. 124). Establishing a strategic marketing plan is suggested, and two overarching concerns should include the position in the competitive marketplace and how you implement and support the overall strategy on a daily basis (Anctil, 2008b, p. 94). The importance of the product, market and competition is essential. Han (2014) explains that “a positive image of a college or university is a valuable intangible asset making the institution stand out,” and “image helps institutions of higher education create a positive view that can attract prospective students to enroll” (pp. 124-125).

**College Choice**

The literature on college choice seeks to measure the influences and motivations that contribute to the thoughts about college search, attendance and enrollment (Anctil, 2008a, p. 10). Anctil discusses higher education and the college choice as a developmental process and emerges with “two themes that illuminate the choice process and how colleges and universities market and advertise themselves: (1) college choice is a long, developmental process with a variety of informational inputs that shape college and university choice sets, perceptions about particular institutions, and prospective student actions; and (2) research indicates how many constraining variables exist for many prospective applicants and how their decisions are largely shaped by forces that extend beyond interest or motivation” (2008a, p. 10). Understanding the developmental process of college choice is beneficial, as it assists in explaining influences and
motivations of a prospective student and how they seek out information regarding a particular institution.

Anctil also discusses the higher education literature on the behavioral model of college choice for high school seniors as a three-step process, and “In undergoing each phase of the college-choice process, high school students develop predispositions to attend college, search for general information about college, and make choices leading them to enroll at a given institution of higher education” (2008a, p. 11; Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000, p. 5). Anctil (2008a, p. 11) and Han (2014, p. 121) explain the conceptual model as three-phases of college choice: (1) The Predisposition Stage, occurring in grades seven to nine where students decide whether they would like to continue their education beyond high school and includes parental encouragement and involvement, parental collegiate experience, and socioeconomic status; (2) The Search Stage, occurring in grades ten to twelve, which is a period students gather information about postsecondary institutions and attribute values, and (3) The Choice Stage, occurring in grades eleven and twelve, when prospective students generate and narrow the choice set and make the final decision on which institution to apply to and actually attend.

In the predisposition phase, the development of educational aspirations occurs, with background characteristics having a significant role, as well as the attitudes of parents and peers in the influence on the enrollment decision. There is a positive relationship between the amount of parental involvement and encouragement and students’ postsecondary education plans. Han (2014) provides data on parental involvement in the predisposition phase and explains that “Several studies revealed that parents’ expectations, experience of financing their own college study, involvement in information search, knowledge and understanding of college cost and aid, and willingness and ability to provide financial support to colleges, had a strong effect on
students’ college decisions” (p. 122). Parents play an important role in shaping attitudes and decisions toward higher education and college choice. College attributes and institutional characteristics also affect the decision-making process, as prospective students consider cost, financial aid, campus location, amenities and reputation as important attributes.

In the search stage, high school seniors and college prospectives start to research information about postsecondary institutions, and more interaction occurs between the student and the institution. Students are searching websites, social media platforms and online communities to learn about institutions during their college search phase. Galan et al., (2015) explains that “Social media has become a key part of human interaction and communication, having a big influence on people’s behavior and decision-making” (p. 291). As Hossler and Gallagher (1987) indicated in the search stage, high-ability students performed more sophisticated searches, while minority students, students from low-income families, and students with parents of low education conducted longer searches and were less efficient (p. 214). Research explains that due to these findings, recruitment activities should be different for each segment.

In the choice stage, the student’s choice is evaluated and narrowed to a specific institution to apply and enroll. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) explained that “as the student selects an institution to attend, the preferences of the applicant, the attributes of the college or university, and the courtship procedures that appear determine the outcome” (p. 216). Many factors play contributing roles to a student’s final choice of a college or university. During the college planning, parental encouragement and involvement were found to be critical factors. In addition to parental involvement, other factors play a role in the choice process. “College size, location, academic offerings, reputation, prestige, selectivity, and significant alumni” are all
variables that measure and evaluate the choice process, as well as “a student’s peers, friends, and high school personnel---specifically the school counselor---influence the selection process, with financial considerations often guiding the final choice” (Anctil, 2008a, p. 12).

The Elaboration Likelihood Model is used to explain the behavior regarding the marketing and advertising efforts for institutions, as it involves two processes as to how communication influences attitude: a central and peripheral route. The central route is “a clear, direct and uncluttered message and focuses on the central features of the message, issue, or idea” and the peripheral route, which is the “dominant route for persuasion and involves a quick examination of the product and a focus on simple cues about whether or not to cognitively elaborate on the message and accept or reject” (Anctil, 2008a, p. 14). Motivation and ability is discussed and is characterized by either a low or high involvement level. Low involvement has little relation or interest to the product, and high involvement includes a high degree of interest with the message or product. Anctil explains that “When applied to higher education, this peripheral route messaging helps explain why colleges and universities often advertise and highlight elements of the college experience that have little to do with the process of learning itself” (p. 15). Higher education appeal is peripheral and not central, leading institutions to search for ways to stand out or apart from other competitors to achieve awareness and arouse interest and action. College choice is a high involvement activity that relies on images or impressions of an institution, and can be used “in an attempt to build positive mental images of an institution and to reinforce these images through personal contact or other tangible evidence” (Anctil, p. 17). “Achieving market differentiation becomes the most challenging aspect of marketing and advertising higher education” (Anctil, p. 18).

Decision-Making Process
Anctil (2008b) explains that “Higher education is an intangible product working for market differentiation in a crowded field” (p. 89). “Many prospective students, especially the high school senior, knows only vaguely what educational benefits he or she wants and the complexity of the choices, and their uncertainty about what they need leads to great parental involvement for many prospective students” (Anctil, p. 92). The college decision-making process is complicated, involving a variety of factors from opinions of peers and parents to information on institutions, to constraining factors such as cost and location (Anctil, p. 9).

It is suggested that marketing efforts be directed to parents, as well as students during their decision-making process. Anctil (2008b) explains that “Students make a college choice based on the advice of family and school personnel, their perceptions of key anticipated social experiences, and what they perceive as the ability to convert their college degree into a job or advanced education” (p. 93). Rogers (2015) provides statistical data from the Social Admissions Report and explains that “56 percent of students applied to at least one college or university because someone else wanted them to, with the key influencer being family, with nearly 60 percent of students indicating their parents influenced their decision” (p. 43). Rogers also found that “Only one third of students indicated a college rep visiting their school as being influential, as well as three out of four students stating college fairs were not influential” (2015, p. 43).

Above the influence of a parent, the campus visit is what influenced a high school senior’s decision about where to apply. Rogers (2015) stated that “75 percent of students indicate the campus visit being influential,” (p. 43). For many, the search for the right institution comes down to the campus visit. Anctil (2008b) explains that “It is the campus visit where the student experiences what has largely been an abstraction and allows them to test the assumptions they have carried based on their other information channels (print materials, online information, and
others’ perceptions)” (pp. 93-94). According to the E-Expectations Report (2015), “Half of all high school seniors expressed an interest in virtual tours through webcasts” (p. 19). Campus visits are considered a vital recruiting tool in the prospective student’s selection process, as they are utilized to communicate information and to showcase the benefits of the university, especially when “conducted by selected college students who embody the characteristics a campus hopes to promote” (Anctil, p. 94). “These visits, and the perceptions that the students and their parents take away from them, are often critical to students who have not already decided which institution to attend” (Wasburn et al., 2004, p. 36).

Marketing efforts should be developed with these influential considerations in mind, as they affect the college decision-making process. Rogers (2015) even suggests that “Leadership should focus on a strong parent engagement strategy, as well as aim to make campus visits more frequent, accessible, and authentic” (p. 43).

Innovativeness also has a significant impact on the market orientation of higher education. Prospective students are engaging with current students on social media platforms to learn about their college experiences, becoming another influential factor in their decision on where to enroll. Rogers (2015) stresses the importance of balance, as “online tools influence students most greatly, but offline resources play a part as well” (p. 43).

**Higher Education Branding**

Higher education institutions are dedicating far more attention and effort to branding and marketing than they did in previous years (Hanover Research, 2015, p. 4). Branding is used as an attempt for an organization to tell their own story and to meet consumer expectations. “Within the university setting, “a brand is a name, an image, a compelling description of an organization that captures the essence of the value that your college provides”
To attract prospective students, branding is an increasingly-used mechanism to provide differentiation between competitors. Stephenson, Heckert, & Yerger (2016) explain that the “branding process itself reflects the accumulation of experiences with the specific product or service, both directly relating to its use, and through the influence of advertising, design, and media commentary” (p. 490). Judson et al., (2008) explain that “the usefulness of this brand is that it allows individuals to make a decision on a limited amount of information, and selecting a university to attend is certainly a complex consumer decision, and looking to the brand simplifies the selection process for many” (p. 57). Institutions recognize the importance of building brand identity. Branding is used not only to differentiate one institution from another, but to define a message or image that an audience can associate with. “Prospective students compare university brands and features and assign levels of importance,” further explaining that “institutions with well-known brands will have a better chance of recruiting students” (Stephenson et al., 2016, p. 490).

In a study on institutional image, it was found that it is the most influential antecedent for students’ perceived value, satisfaction, and loyalty” (Stephenson et al., 2016, p. 493). They discuss results of another study that showed “Students tend to decide between approximately three colleges or universities, and commonly, friends and relatives acted as decision mediators in the college selection process” (2016, p. 501). Stephenson et al., (2016) as well as Judson et al., (2008) noted “four influential factors in college selection, which included (a) image/reputation; (b) location; (c) cost; (d) and availability of major with image being most important, as well as the significance of the campus visit as participants claimed it was the factor that swayed their final decision” (p. 501).
Hanover Research (2015) explains that “Effective strategic planning and brand management require more than traditional advertising, marketing or identity development, and institutions that craft, present and manage a unified brand message, experience, and environment achieve a competitive advantage in recruiting, retaining, and building loyalty amongst their students, parents, faculty, alumnae and donors” (p. 6). To help with these efforts, “The majority of institutions hire external marketing professionals or companies and invest significant time and money in creating strong institutional brands” (Hanover Research, p. 7). However, communicating a brand successfully can be accomplished without hiring professionals if institutions are utilizing the right marketing tools, approaches, and planning effectively.

**Higher Education Marketing and Recruitment**

Postsecondary institutions are focusing more on branding and marketing with an ever-increasing and diverse student base, going to great lengths to stand out and differentiate themselves from other competing institutions. In recent years, Branding, marketing, and recruitment in higher education have shifted toward online and digital strategies, and institutions are increasingly taking advantage of social media, mobile marketing, and other digital strategies not only to recruit students, but also to research prospective students” (Hanover Research, 2015, p. 4). “Marketing and advertising by colleges and universities should be targeted to both engage prospective students while they are in the process of choosing a college and create opportunities for prospective students to elaborate on the institutional message offered” (Anctil, 2008a, p. 9). Communicating a brand successfully to high school seniors requires strategic planning and effective tools to attract students and how they go about making their college decision-making. Rogers (2015) explains that “When building an enrollment
recruitment plan, it’s critical to segment where and how students find, request information from, and evaluate schools using specific tools” (p. 42). According to a report from The Digital Search for Education, “Student survey data reinforces that higher education institutions must place greater emphasis on their digital presence, engaging students with digital communications that are most in line with their preferences in order to boost enrollment” (Bethke, 2016). Prospective students are reviewing websites to learn about the campus experience and to gain information on things like cost and application requirements. Rogers (2015) included information from a recent Social Admissions Report and cited that “90 percent of students are performing college research and when students are in the discovery phase they gravitate to online tools that help them shop, compare, and evaluate schools side-by-side” (p. 43).

Postsecondary institutions have several marketing techniques to select from to communicate and recruit prospective students, which include “advertising (TV, radio, outdoor, print); relational marketing such as open houses, information sessions, interaction with alumni, or visits to high schools; internet marketing through websites, blogs, or social media platforms; public relations, or other initiatives designed to have a marketing impact” (Angulo-Ruiz, Pergelova, & Cheben, 2016, p. 19). Angulo-Ruiz et al., breaks down marketing efforts into three areas, which include traditional advertising (builds brand awareness and association); relational marketing (builds closer ties and creates emotional attachment); and internet marketing (creates positive impact with target audience)” (2016, p. 20). Traditional advertising is utilized to increase awareness and image of an institution, as well as to influence student choice in the postsecondary search process. Relational marketing is used as an opportunity for prospective students to experience the college experience first-hand, before they
visit an institution. Lastly, internet marketing is becoming an important and standard practice for prospective students to communicate and learn more about institutions. According to Hanover Research (2014) the largest area of innovation and growth in higher education marketing and branding, as well as in recruitment, is in the online and digital space” (p. 3). The results of this study provide evidence that online and digital space are the best new media communication practices for postsecondary institutions to communicate with and recruit high school seniors. “It is inevitable that new marketing tools will continue to be developed and become options to the marketer who will have to better understand new methods of communication” (Fong, 2013, p. 97).

Higher Education Media Strategies

Recruiting for higher education has included traditional marketing, relational marketing and internet (new and digital) marketing media practices to attract and attain high school seniors. Han (2014) discusses the use of media in college recruitment and explains that “The common communication practices used to reach the targeted students include print publications, advertising publications, network marketing, direct mail, electronic mail, telemarketing, marketing in the field, and campus visits (p. 124). Institutions also rely heavily on digital and social media and “Colleges and universities have adapted their recruiting strategies to meet the demand of college-bound students, taking advantage of the Web-based technology, engaging in e-recruiting tactics like E-mail communications, recruiting pages on Web sites, online net price calculators, campaign videos, and social networking” (Han, p. 126). Hanover Research (2015) found that “60 % of seniors stated that they are more likely to consider institutions that use digital strategies—such as email, text, and social media—to communicate” (p. 3). The E-
Expectations Report (2015) found similar results, stating that “Students tend to prefer electronic communications from campuses rather than printed pieces or phone calls” (p. 3). However, it is important to note that “40% of high school seniors are still likely to consider institutions that use brochures and phone calls to communicate” (p. 4). This split notates that these channels are still important methods in college communication and that a multichannel marketing and communications strategy be implemented.

Belch and Belch (2014) explain there is a decline in traditional media use with the growth of the Internet, social media and mobile media, and “Marketers have been forced to reevaluate their media strategies and reconsider the process by which consumers make decisions and the media that influence these decisions in order to more effectively communicate with consumers in the new digital age” (p. 130). A survey report of 1,520 adults enrolled in classes reinforces that “Higher education institutions must place greater emphasis on their digital presence, engaging students with digital communications that are most in line with their preferences in order to boost enrollment” (Bethke, 2016, p. 1). The impact of digital and social media alters the way marketers communicate with an audience. “As the growth in social and digital media continues, marketers have begun to shift more of their marketing communication budgets to these media at the expense of traditional media” (Belch & Belch, p. 130). They further explain that “With the advent of social networking tools and the availability of digital devices, such as smartphones and tablets, consumers are more empowered than ever before as they can access and review information, connect with one another to share it, discuss products/services and brands, and interact with marketers more quickly and easily” (p. 131). Digital media is changing the way information is acquired and the way people interact and engage with others. Belch and Belch
(2014) found that social media is a unique component of the consumer decision, as “It is the only form of marketing that can touch consumers at each and every stage, from when they’re pondering brands and products right through the period after a purchase, as their experience influences the brands they prefer and their potential advocacy influences others” (p. 132). There are various digital and social media tools that influence a consumer’s decision. Belch and Belch discuss a study that found consumers to be more influenced during the evaluate stage, and that “For many consumers the most important incentive to buy may be another person’s advocacy or recommendation” (p. 133).

According to Hanover Research (2014), the “Marketing and branding trends have shown a progressive reliance on more creative outreach efforts, as well as design and advertising campaigns” (p. 6). Postsecondary institutions need to be innovative in their communication and recruitment strategies, utilizing new media practices that high school seniors are consuming, to best reach and engage this audience. Successful marketing and recruiting activities are increasingly important for institutions and Rogers (2015) explains that “When building an enrollment recruitment plan, it’s critical to segment where and how students find, request information from, and evaluate schools using specific tools” (p. 42). “Universities must now go to greater lengths to differentiate themselves from competitor institutions and find the need to appeal to an ever-increasing and diverse student base” (Hanover Research, 2014, p. 5). Hanover Research (2015) provides data that suggest recruitment strategies should incorporate a mix of channels to engage with students, such as institutional websites, mobile marketing, and social media (p. 35). Higher education institutions can start with direct mail and then maintain or
follow up with engagement online, or institutions can use a variety of media approaches simultaneously, to recruit high school seniors.

**Traditional Marketing**

Traditional marketing media use has been a common practice for institutions to utilize in recruiting prospective high school seniors. Traditional media consists of television, radio, newspapers, magazines or other print related publications. Posters, brochures, and view books are often examples of what postsecondary institutions send to high school seniors or prospective students to increase awareness and provide information regarding the institution.

Although traditional media is now on the decline, television still holds value and popularity among marketers and media buyers, compared to magazines, newspapers and radio. “Studies have shown that traditional media are often more effective in achieving upper funnel objectives such as awareness and interest, as well as in driving search” (Belch & Belch, 2014, p. 133). Belch and Belch explain that “The wide reach available through traditional media impacts top of the funnel stages such as exposure, awareness and interest that might be much more difficult to achieve through non-traditional media” (pp. 133-134). Belch and Belch further explain that “As much as 67% of online search is driven by offline (traditional) media, with 47.2% magazine ads, 42.3% newspapers and 42.8% television ads still effective in leading the consumer’s first exposure to products and/or brands, initiating the consumer decision process” (2014, p. 134). Belch and Belch also discuss the Harris Interactive Study, noting that TV ads were the most common reason why a search for a product was initiated, with both television and the Internet combined even more effective (2014, p. 134). The media environment
is continuing to change and grow; however, marketers need to consider embracing marketing communications that involve both digital and traditional media practices.

**Relational Marketing**

Relationship marketing is an approach that institutions are utilizing to communicate, build relationships and recruit prospective students. “The primary goal of relationship marketing is to develop a base of customers that have formed strong relationships with the firm’s brand and are therefore deeply committed to that brand” (Bowden, 2011, p. 211). Clark, Scheuer, & Fine (2016) state that “Relationship marketing is critical to create and maintain a relationship between institutions and students” (p. 2). Bowden (2011) explains that “the student-university relationship has the potential to lead to the development of a positive reputation in the educational marketplace” (p. 212).

Relational marketing is aimed at building trust and long-term relations with institutions and prospective students, which start from the time they begin searching for colleges or universities until they make a final decision. Common relational marketing approaches for recruiting higher education prospects could consist of campus visits, open houses, information sessions and visits to high schools, as well as blogs and narrative storytelling. These approaches allow prospective students or high school seniors the opportunity to relate to a college campus, college experience or even a current student, helping form the connection or identity that allows the prospective student to see him/herself at a specific institution. Relational marketing provides the authenticity that many prospective students want to hear or experience.

**Blogs**
A blog is similar to an online journal, as it is a website that allows a writer to write about experiences and opinions. A blog can be an effective tool for postsecondary institutions and admissions offices, as it provides the opportunity to offer current student testimonials and acts as a form of relationship marketing. Sandlin and Pena discuss a blog-related study provided by the Center for Marketing Research at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth and reported that “85% of institutions with recruitment-related blogs considered their blogs successful as a recruitment strategy; 48% of institutions without blogs planned to add them” (2014, p. 335). Blogs are utilized and considered successful when compared to other marketing tactics as they provide prospective students an authentic perception from a current student who is going through a college experience. Sandlin and Pena (2014) explain that in the focus group study of college-bound high school juniors, it was important that participants learned the thoughts and opinions of current college students, and that if current student bloggers “did not disclose personal experiences, opinions, or stories, participants did not connect with the blogger or the institution while reading that blog” (p. 339). The study demonstrated that building authenticity in social medial tools, specifically blogs, can “help lay the foundation for improved recruitment and retention by helping prospective students form realistic expectations and connect to their soon-to-be peers” (Sandlin & Pena, p. 346). The personal experiences included in the blog allow prospective students to form connections with the institution and make them more likely to want to learn more about the institution.

**Narrative Storytelling**

Narrative storytelling is another method used as a persuasive recruitment tool for institutions. “Storytelling is a natural communication process that has been proven persuasive
and provides an understandable channel for complex messages because stories provide evidence and context” (Burns, 2015, p. 100). Burns explains that “Stories that represented both the academic and social sides of college helped students visualize themselves at the university and made the idea of higher education more tangible” (p. 99). High school students are unfamiliar with institutions and what to expect. Institutions are providing or selling a social experience, utilizing “current students and their stories to help prospective students visualize themselves fitting in at the campus, maintain their feeling of rightness, and help the idea of college become more tangible” (Burns, p. 100). It is suggested that these stories be authentic, and created directly by current students to display their own ideas and experiences. Burns (2015) explains that “Using stories that have high levels of narrative fidelity and probability may help prospective students to better visualize themselves at a particular institution, which may then influence their decision to attend that university” (p. 100). Burns concludes his research study with results indicating that “Most participants explained that hearing stories was not or would not be their primary reason for choosing a university but would provide the “final push” or “tipping point” when they had narrowed down their choices to two or three schools” (p. 106). Participants in each focus group stated that narrative stories were helpful in making their final decisions about college due to their authenticity and enjoyable experiences at that particular school. Stories that were normal or described everyday life activities at college were liked most. In the narrative storytelling blogs and videos, “participants explained that seeing what life would be like once they arrived at that college was an important aspect” (Burns, p. 108). Technology should be used as much as possible through blogs and videos to communicate the stories of current students. The more visual the message the better, as Burns (2015) explains that “Meeting millennials online and sharing stories through blogs and videos will help maintain that relationship with the
students and build their identification with the university” (p. 113). Daily experiences, student stories, academic stories, and entertaining and unique stories were all mentioned as valuable insight or the types of stories that prospective students would like to see and learn more about. “Using stories in recruitment makes the abstract more concrete, which prepares students for the transition into college life and reduces some of the anxiety related to going to college” (Burns, p. 115).

**Internet Marketing**

“The technological revolution occurring since the early 2000s has drastically revolutionized traditional marketing approaches and brought marketers to a new era” (Galan et al., 2015; Altaf, 2014). Hanover Research (2015) explains that “branding and marketing in higher education have significantly changed in the online space, with an increased focus on new platforms for external engagement and communication” (p. 12). Much has changed when it comes to high school seniors and their use of technology. The Pew Research Center (2015) reported that “87% of American teens ages 13-17 have or have access to a desktop or laptop computer, and 58% of teens have or have access to a tablet computer” (p. 10). Institutions continue to take advantage of new media (digital and social media) to market their programs and present themselves to prospective students. Rogers (2015) explains that “When students are in discovery mode they gravitate to online tools that help them shop, compare, and evaluate schools side-by-side” (p. 2). The Pew Research Center (2015) reported that 80% of all teens use at least one social media platform, with 71% reporting using two or more platforms (p. 25).

**Websites**
A postsecondary institutions website is the main source for prospective students to get to know schools and decide where to apply (Han, 2014, p. 126). According to Hanover Research (2015), an “effective and intuitive website, which is often the “ultimate brand statement” for an institution, is among the most important marketing tools in higher education” (p. 4). The E-Expectations Report (2015) found that “58% of prospective high school seniors rely heavily on college websites as their main source for information on an institution, and college websites are by far the most influential resource for students when they are researching colleges” (p. 2). The report also found that “Eight out of 10 high school seniors said that a college website affects how they perceive an institution” (p. 3). Hanover Research (2014) explains that “among the most important tools for social and online marketing is an effective and intuitive website, which should be considered the “ultimate brand statement” for an institution” (p. 3). An institution’s website features content, highlights important deadlines, includes engaging visuals such as images and video and is used to encourage students to apply or learn more about the institution. Han (2014) discusses a survey performed of 2,000 junior and senior high school students and 52% of the students thought campus Web sites played a significant role in assessing schools. On the website, ease of browsing and value of content were rated as most important elements of the website (p. 126). The survey also indicated that a well-organized website with easy access to application information, graphics and text increased the likelihood of application (Han, 2014, p. 126).

The E-Expectations Report (2015) found that “the integration of search into web experience has had a profound impact on e-recruitment and that 86% of high school seniors use search engines to find college websites rather than entering the URL’s directly” (p. 6). In using
the search engine, the report found that 90% of high school seniors use the college name for their search parameter, while other search parameters consisted of college and program name, program name and location. The E-Expectations Report (2015) explained that “The reliance on search and the searches for programs and locations show that campuses need to be ready for prospective students to arrive on a variety of web pages instead of landing on the homepage first” (p. 7).

When high school seniors land on a college website, it is important for an institution to know the content students want, how they navigate and what grabs their attention. The E-Expectations Report (2015) found that “high school seniors are “drawn to information about academics, followed by pages on cost/financial aid, and then enrollment-related content” (p. 8). The report also included that high school seniors look for websites that “demonstrate the value of an education from an institution, with job placement stats, testimonial quotes, grad school placement, program rankings, program videos, accreditation details and faculty profiles” being listed as valuable (p. 9). Further, web personalization and optimization are essential for higher education institutions to focus on, as these provide a personalized web experience tailored to a prospective student’s needs.

Paid interactive marketing ads are also presenting institutions with new opportunities to attract and engage high school seniors and target audiences. The E-Expectations Report (2015) found that “34% of high school seniors have clicked on an ad, and most students have clicked on these ads from Google search results” (p. 16). The report also found that over 40% of seniors have clicked on a paid interactive advertisement on Facebook, leading students to look at information on college websites, watch videos and fill out forms. This suggests that “There are
enough students clicking on paid interactive ads on Google and Facebook that campuses should use these cost-effective advertising methods” (p. 22).

Prospective students also crave more visuals, interaction and engagement. The E-Expectations Report (2015) found that “Photography is a key element of any campus website, as images draw the eye of students and can lead them toward important content and support the message of the page” (p. 11). The report also found that high school seniors reported that “Conversations with students, alumni, faculty, and counselors all have a strong influence on student behavior and the enrollment decision” (p. 18). Han (2014) explains that there is “desire for collaboration and connecting with others as two distinct characteristics of the millennial generation, and applying social media in recruiting by admission offices to communicate and connect with college-bound students” (p. 126). Webcasts were mentioned as a missed opportunity for engagement and facilitating conversations, as the E-Expectations Report (2015) found that most prospective students have not attended a webcast, however, half of all seniors said they would” (p. 18). The report found that topics of webcast interest would include financial aid and scholarship information, program details, virtual tours and student and campus life. Han (2014) discusses Barnes’ (2009) eight best practices for optimizing web and social media efforts, which include: (1) taking advantage of video to attract attention; (2) designing social networking sites to be consistent with their home page; (3) linking social media sites together; (4) mixing views from students, faculty, and staff; (5) publicizing achievements accomplished by faculty and students; (6) getting visitors involved and interacting with the page; (7) tracking visitors; and (8) updating frequently (p. 126). The E-Expectations Report (2015) stresses the importance of a quality website, as the website has an increasing influence on a students’ opinion of an
institution, and when a quality web experience is provided, it conveys the quality of the institution (p. 22).

**Email**

Email is still commonly used to interact and communicate with higher education institutions. In the E-Expectations Report (2015), the report found that high school seniors “use email frequently when researching colleges and are extremely receptive to opening emails from campus, even those they do not know” (p. 20). The report stated that 97% of seniors uses email at least once a week, and that many hold on to emails with more than half of seniors saving college emails in their inbox. The E-Expectations Report (2015) also found that “More and more high school seniors are reading emails and submitting forms on mobile devices, with 40% of seniors checking their email on a mobile device at least once a day” (p. 5). This data reinforces the importance of mobile devices and ensuring that digital content is optimized appropriately.

**Mobile**

The E-Expectations Report (2015) notes that “web-enabled mobile devices are arguably the most significant change in e-recruitment in the last 10 years” (p. 5). Today’s college-bound students are accustomed to having information instantly and constantly at their fingertips, on their mobile devices. The Pew Research Center (2015) reported that three-quarters of teens have or have access to a smartphone and 92% of teens go online daily through their mobile device (p.2). The E-Expectations Report (2015) found that “69% of high school seniors have viewed a college website on a mobile device” (p. 5). Rogers (2015) explains that “If your general institution website is not mobile friendly and responsive in design, you will not get high enough
on a student’s list for it to matter” (p. 43). Information is expected to be delivered quickly and personalized. Rogers (2015) provided survey data from the Social Admissions Report and explained that “60 percent of students indicate a desire to receive a response from admissions within 24 hours when requesting information and more than 90 percent of those students prefer that the information be tailored specifically to them” (p. 43). Rogers further explains that “Three-out-of-five students access college sites on a mobile device at least weekly,” and that “two-in-five students would download an app to communicate with college representatives” (p. 43).

Texting has also become a popular means of communication for teens, with The Pew Research Center (2015) reporting that “91% of teen cell owners use text messaging--either directly through their mobile phones or through an app or a website” (p. 17) and “A typical teen sends and receives 30 texts a day” (p. 4). The E-Expectations Report (2015) found that “Students are much more receptive to receiving text messages from campuses, and that 71% of high school seniors would allow text from campus” (p. 15). However, the report stated that few institutions are taking advantage of sending text messages.

Video call and chat is another technology that teens are using to stay connected, with The Pew Research Center (2015) reporting that “47% of teens talk with others over video connections such as Skype, Oovoo, Facetime and Omegle” (p. 25).

The E-Expectations Report (2015) makes it clear that “All college e-communications need to be optimized for mobile. Whether students visit a web page, read an email, fill out a form, or view a video, that experience needs to read and function well on a smartphone” (p. 22). Hanover Research (2015) explains that “Mobile marketing strategies must ensure that information is quickly accessible, rewarding, and easy-to-navigate” (p. 14).
Social Media

Social media plays an important role in the communication and recruitment strategies for many higher education institutions. Kimmons, Veletsianos, & Woodward (2016) define the term social media “as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (p. 98). Social media is becoming a new medium and standard practice to strengthen communication and institutional marketing and recruitment of prospective higher education students. “Social media has become the younger generations’ primary means of interacting with the world, actively applying their love for social to their post-secondary lives--using it to inform everything from their school selection to course choices” (Russel, 2015). Social media usage has increased drastically, with over 90% of college students using social media in 2015 and 74% of college students using Facebook specifically (Clark et al., 2016, p. 2). Sandlin and Peña explain that “One of the first ways in which prospective college students interact with postsecondary institutions is through social media” (2014, p. 333).

The Pew Research Center (2015) reported that “Facebook is the most popular and frequently used social media platform among teens; half of teens use Instagram, and nearly as many use Snapchat” (p. 2). The E-Expectations Report (2015) found that “YouTube and Facebook continue to lead the way as social media channels used by high school seniors, with Snapchat in third and Instagram right behind” (p. 12). The report found that high school seniors reported Facebook, YouTube and Twitter as the top three sites for researching colleges. The E-Expectations Report (2015) found that “actions seniors have taken after looking at an institution’s Facebook page, with 65% of clicking like, 44% joining a group and 23% adding a
comment” (p. 13). YouTube is also a very popular social media site, with the E-Expectations Report (2015) finding that “Nearly 75 percent of seniors and juniors saying they use YouTube at least once per week, and 41% of seniors viewing videos linked from college sites” (p. 14).

Institutions, specifically admissions representatives, are utilizing social media platforms for student engagement purposes, as well as to market and recruit college students. The Pew Research Center (2015) reported that “teens are diversifying their social network site use, with 71% of teens use more than one social network site” (p. 3). The way social media platforms are designed and the information disseminated through these outlets is important, as it provides an experience and impression of how college prospectives understand higher education online. “Social media was mostly used by students in the information search stage as it allowed them to follow what the university offers (facilities), information about student life (events, pictures), and experiences of former students (testimonials)” (Galan et al., 2015, p. 303). Sandlin and Peña (2014) explain that in a recent survey of college-bound high school students, 44% reported using social networking sites to gather impressions and information about colleges” (p. 334). The innovativeness of social media provides a more dynamic and authentic depiction of campus life and the student experience than compared to other traditional recruitment practices, such as a brochure or pamphlet. Sandlin and Peña discuss the research on the use of social media as a marketing tool and explains that “Consumers who gather information from blogs and other social media tools deepens connections, build affinity, and develop brand loyalty” (p. 334). Social media platforms not only accurately portray the college experience, they help to shape academic and social college expectations.
Clark et al., (2016) discuss the importance of student engagement and relationship marketing through college social media websites. Their study found that “Following a university on a social media platform does, on average, enhance students’ perceived relationship quality and that social media has the potential of positively impacting university-student relationship quality” (p. 10). Sandlin and Peña explain that the way social media platforms and activities are designed and implemented can make a difference or impression on how students experience institutions of higher education (p. 334). Involving student participation through blogging and social media is also recommended, as this practice offers an authentic college perspective that high school seniors and college prospects can use to gain insight into campus life and the college experience. “What is perceived to be authentic in marketing materials by students in the college search process is critical because the material presented in social media outlets can shape student expectations about institutional practices, campus life, and culture” (Sandlin & Peña, p. 334). When college expectations are created, they are used toward social integration and impact the student’s decision-making process. “The authenticity of social media materials used for prospective students is very important for postsecondary institutions and their admissions offices, and perceived authenticity led the college-bound students to form a connection with the institution, making them more likely to want to explore the institution further” (Sandlin & Peña, p. 342). Developing college student peer connections through social media is noted as a powerful tool that impacts prospective student recruitment, as it forms realistic expectations and connects students with their eventual institution and peers.

Social media has also been utilized in efforts to stay connected with prospective students. Birkner (2015) discusses college recruiters utilizing a university’s Twitter and Instagram account
at “college fairs and high school visits with postcards that include their social media profiles and hashtag” (p. 2) as a means for prospective students to easily learn more about an institution. Birkner also mentions Twitter and Instagram hashtags as an easy way to follow-up with prospective student’s post-visit, or even during a visit (2015, p. 2).

**Facebook**

The Pew Research Center (2015) reported that “Facebook remains the most--used social media site among American teens ages 13-17, with 71% of all teens using the site” (p. 2). Facebook continues to be one of the biggest sites for higher education to utilize. Rogers (2015) explains that while data shows a 21 percent decline in Facebook usage by college-bound students, use of the platform for college research, particularly at the decision phase, continues to increase” (p. 43). Hoover (2015) states that “Two-thirds of teenagers consider Facebook the most valuable form of social media they used when researching colleges (p. 1).

**Twitter**

The Pew Research Center (2015) reported that 33% of all teens use Twitter, specifically older teens (p. 32). The E-Expectations Report (2015) found that “45% of high school seniors say they use Twitter at least once a week and 30% of seniors said they followed feeds from campuses” (p. 14). Twitter is an online social media platform to share news and interact with others through Tweets. Twitter is used by higher education institutions to reach and interact with prospective students, as well as current students, alumni and the community. Specific uses based on the literature of social media in education over the last decade explain that institutions specifically use Twitter as “a news platform, recruitment tool, and public relations device, with
the majority of institutional university communications on Twitter is currently taking the form of one-way messages aimed to disseminate information from the institution” (Kimmons et al., 2017, p. 99). Further research has shown that Twitter is used as a tool to recruit and research prospective students. Research found that “71% of the institutions sampled believed that Twitter was an effective tool in recruiting prospective students, while 13% reported actively researching prospective students via social media as part of their admissions process” (Kimmons et al., p. 99). Kimmons et al., reported that Twitter is an ideal tool for colleges and universities to engage in their communities, providing a positive image in the social and economic environment” (p. 99). “Over 84% of institutions in higher education have at least one Twitter account, making the platform one of the most popular social media tools used by institutions” (Kimmons et al., p. 99). However, there is plenty of future potential with Twitter use, as research concludes that “Institutional uses of Twitter are not living up to their potential as an educational or communication medium and it is suggested that institutions should reconsider how they are using Twitter and explore ways that the medium can be more used more meaningfully” (Kimmons et al., p. 109).

**Other Platforms**

Instagram and Snapchat are other platforms worth mentioning, as their use is quite popular with high school seniors. Instagram has become a common choice for social media users to share photos and videos. The Pew Research Center (2015) reported that “More than 52% of all teens report using Instagram” (p. 28). Snapchat is another relatively--new and quite popular social media platform being utilized to “send snaps” of photos and videos to others. The Pew Research Center (2015) reported that “two-in-five American teens or 41% use Snapchat” (p. 30).
Theoretical Framework

Media richness theory and social identity theory are the theoretical frameworks for this Master’s project, as they assist in analyzing communication media and the social influence process during the second and third stages of Litten’s (1982) three-phase model of college choice, which are the search and choice stage for high school seniors. Applying these theories will contribute to the selection of new media communication practices to invest in, as well as to identify the social influences and impacts that occur during the college decision-making process for high school seniors.

Media Richness Theory

The media richness theory by Daft and Lengel (1986) provides an explanation of how information is processed, explaining that “Information richness is defined as the ability of information to change understanding within a time interval” (p. 560). The theory is used to evaluate and rank communication media richness based on a low—to—high degree of richness that a media possesses, resulting in the selection of specific media to deliver communication effectively. Daft and Lengel provide the media classifications “in order of decreasing richness, which include (1) face-to-face, (2) telephone, (3) personal documents such as letters or memos, (4) impersonal written documents, and (5) numeric documents” (p. 560). Face-to-face is considered the richest medium as it provides immediate feedback and multiple cues, body language, and tone. “Communication media vary in the capacity to process rich information, and the reason for richness differences include the medium’s capacity for immediate feedback, the number of cues and channels utilized, personalization, and language variety” (Daft & Lengel, p. 560).
The theory is used to assist in communication challenges of media use, rather than media choice. The theory argues that media performance improves by using a richer media, and that “Certain media are better able to transmit information depending upon whether the information is used in situations of uncertainty or equivocality” (Dennis & Valacich, 1999, p. 1). With the media richness theory, communication media or channels can be selected by institutions based on how effective or communicative they are for high school seniors. Media richness will vary in the capacity to process information based on media type selected for high school seniors.

**Social Identity Theory**

Social identity theory was originally developed by Henri Tajfel in the 1970’s and involves the role of self and identity in groups through categorization, self enhancement and social perception. The theory defines social identity as “an individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (Hogg, 2016, p. 6). The theory explains how “social groups, whether large demographic categories or small task-oriented teams, provide their members with a shared identity that prescribes and evaluates who they are, what they should believe and how they should behave” (Hogg, p. 6). Hogg, Terry, and White (1995) further discuss the social identity theory and explain that the “basic idea is that a social category into which one falls, and to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category--a self-definition that is a part of the self-concept” (p. 259). “Each of these memberships is represented in the individual member’s mind as a social identity that both describes and prescribes one’s attributes as a member of that group--that is, what one should think and feel, and how one should behave” (Hogg et al, pp. 259-260).
The social identity theory involves two underlying processes, which include categorization and self enhancement. “Categorization sharpens intergroup boundaries by producing group-distinctive stereotypical and normative perceptions and actions, and assigns people, including self, to the contextually relevant category” (Hogg et al, 1995, p. 260). Self-categorization emphasizes similarities and differences of people, including self, belonging to the same or different categories. “Self enhancement guides the social categorization process such that in-group norms and stereotypes largely favor the in-group” (Hogg et al, p. 260). Hogg (2016) explains that “Social identity defines and evaluates one’s self-concept and how one will be treated and thought of by others” (p. 7). Social identity highlights how the in-group and out-group are distinct from one another in a social context, but that their own group is differentiated and more favorable than compared to other groups. Hogg et al., states that management of identity depends on subjective belief structures, and that “subjective belief structures influence the specific behaviors that group members adopt in the pursuit of self-enhancement through evaluative positive social identity” (p. 260).

The social identity theory is a “conceptual framework that explicates group processes and intergroup relations in terms of the interaction of social cognitive, social interactive, and societal processes, and places self-conception at the core of the dynamic” (Hogg, 2016, p. 14). The theory provides an understanding behind the categorizations and social influence process that occur during a high school seniors’ search and choice stages of the college choice process. Hogg (2016) explains that “Human groups are categories that people mentally represent as prototypes-fuzzy sets of interrelated attributes (attitudes, behaviors, customs, dress, and so forth) that capture overall similarities within groups and overall differences between groups” (p. 8).
Summary

The evidence-based literature reviewed in this chapter identified successful and innovative marketing and recruiting strategies that postsecondary institutions should invest in to recruit high school seniors and increase enrollment. The media communication practices that high school seniors utilize most to learn about and engage with a college, as well as the media consumption habits and common influences that play a contributing factor in the college selection process were also identified. This systematic literature review is important, as it provided evidence that answered what the literature on higher education suggest are best new media communication practices for postsecondary institutions to communicate with and recruit high school seniors. “In today’s technology-centric world, student enrollment strategies must also incorporate the latest trends in technology” (E-Expectations Report, 2015, p. 3) to be successful. The Hanover Research study further explained that “Recruitment strategies should incorporate a mix of channels in order to spark engagement with students” and that “It is not sufficient to use direct mail, email, website, mobile, and other strategies “if they do not work in harmony to attract and convert new students” (2015, p. 4).

The next chapter will offer a discussion on this Master’s project’s conceptual model. The conceptual model will utilize the evidence-based literature on higher education marketing and recruitment reviewed in this chapter. It also utilizes the reports, findings and theoretical framework that addressed the research question of this study, which is what does the literature on higher education suggest are best new media communication practices for postsecondary institutions to communicate with and recruit high school seniors.
Chapter Three: Conceptual Model

The purpose of this conceptual model is to use the literature and reports presented in the literature review to create a systematic analysis of the perspectives, findings and frameworks that address what the literature on higher education suggest are best new media communication practices for postsecondary institutions to communicate with and recruit high school seniors in this Master’s project. Each element of the conceptual model is described in the sections below. Figure 3.1 illustrates the need to understand why and how a student determines which institution to attend during the college decision-making process. Figure 3.2 depicts the conceptual model for this final project, which is developed from evidence-based literature on higher education that represents the best new media communication practices for postsecondary institutions to communicate with and recruit high school seniors.

Assumptions

Technological innovations have a substantial impact on the trends and developments for marketing and recruitment strategies for postsecondary education, radically changing the college search process for high school seniors. Thus, a major issue in student recruitment is understanding how and why students make decisions during their search process and the factors that influence those decisions. Therefore, for this Master’s project, the following assumptions are valid based on the evidence-based literature.

1. Munisamy, Jaafar, & Nagaraj (2014) explain that “With increasing competition in the higher education environment, a clearer understanding of why and how students choose universities is more important than ever to help universities develop their marketing strategies” (p. 1).
2. “Marketers have been forced to reevaluate their media strategies and reconsider the process by which consumers make decisions and the media that influence these decisions in order to more effectively communicate with consumers in the new digital age” (Belch & Belch, 2014, p. 130).

3. Hanover Research (2015) explains that “In today’s technology-centric world, student enrollment strategies must incorporate the latest trends in technology” (p. 3).

Components of Conceptual Model (Figure 3.1)

Figure 3.1 illustrates the college choice process, which is a three-step behavioral process for high school seniors that begins as early as the seventh grade (Anctil, 2008a, p. 11). The three stages of the college selection process include the predisposition stage, search stage, and the choice stage. Each stage of the college choice and decision-making process involves motivational and influential factors that ultimately contribute to college selection. This Master’s project focuses specifically on the search and choice stages because the emphasis of this project is to understand how and why high school seniors learn about and engage with institutions, as well as the motivations or influential factors involved during the selection process. The motivational and influential factors identified in each stage assist in the selection and use of new media communication practices for successful and innovative communication and recruitment strategies to recruit and attain students.

Figure 3.1 College Choice Process
During the predisposition stage of the college choice process, high school seniors develop aspirations to attend college that align with student characteristics, institutional attributes and motivational and influential factors. This stage of the choice process involves the exploration of attending college, based on student characteristics, as well as the background characteristics and influential factors received from parents and peers. Han (2014) provides data on parental involvement in the predisposition phase and explains that “Several studies revealed that parents’ expectations, experience of financing their own college study, involvement in information search, knowledge and understanding of college cost and aid, and willingness and ability to provide financial support to colleges, had a strong effect on students’ college decisions” (p. 122). Student characteristics, institutional characteristics, and parental, peer and high school personnel all assist in shaping the college choice process for high school seniors.
Anctil (2008b) explains that “Institutions can target desirable students who possess characteristics that are similar to the students who are most likely to enroll in their institutions by understanding the effect of students’ attributes on their decision process” (p. 121). Anctil discusses the importance of understanding what prospective students expect from prospective institutions, as “cost (including tuition, room, and board), financial aid, the distance from home, and reputation were consistently identified as important institutional attributes” (p. 122). Majors or programs offered were also important elements relevant to college selection. Influences through parents, peers, friends, counselors and teachers and college personnel are considered important and influential factors through the choice process for high school seniors. Parents are considered important in every step of the choice process, as they help fund the education and shape the choices to be made, and serve as encouragement throughout the process (Anctil, pp. 11-12).

**Search Stage**

During the search stage of the college choice process, high school seniors gather and search information about colleges and universities through a variety of strategies and media outlets to obtain information to assist in college decision-making. Anctil (2008a) explains that this stage involves “accumulating and assessing the attributes of various institutions, including considerations for socioeconomic status, occupational aspirations and educational aspirations” (p. 11). Input from parents, peers, friends, counselors and teachers and college personnel are still considered influential in this stage, as students are asking for opinions from parents and friends, and meeting with counselor’s teachers and college personnel to review a variety of options. Media influences and recruitment through traditional, relational and digital marketing practices are utilized in the search stage of the college choice process. Han (2008) discusses the common
communication practices used to reach high schools seniors, which include “print publications, advertising publications, network marketing, direct mail, electronic mail, telemarketing, marketing in the field, and campus visits” (p. 124). Each of these marketing efforts is considered an influential factor in the decision-making process as each approach is utilized to provide information to a prospective student about a specific institution. Social media and digital marketing is also used as a strategy to recruit and communicate with high school seniors. Since they are technology-centric, institutions are taking advantage of web-based technology, “engaging in e-recruiting tactics like E-mail communications, recruiting pages on Web sites, online net price calculators, campaign videos, and social networking” (Han, 2014, p 126). Anctil (2008a) explains that “identification of colleges and universities that can stand apart from others in this stage is critical” (p. 11).

Choice Stage

During the choice stage of the college selection process, high school seniors evaluate their options, decide which institution to attend, and begin the enrollment process. As an institution is being determined, influences are considered, information from media and marketing sources are utilized, and attributes of a college or university are reviewed. Many factors play contributing roles in a student’s final choice of a college or university, making the process complicated, as it involves a variety of factors from opinions of peers and parents to information on institutions, to constraining factors such as cost and location (Anctil, 2008a, p. 9).

Components of Conceptual Model (Figure 3.2)

Figure 3.2 depicts the best new media communication strategies and practices for postsecondary institutions to communicate with and recruit high school seniors. According to Hanover Research (2014) the largest area of innovation and growth in higher education
marketing and branding, as well as in recruitment, is in the online and digital space” (p. 3). The results of this study provide evidence through higher education literature and reports that online and digital space are the best media communication practices. These media communication strategies and practices, as well as the social identity theory and media richness theory, help to demonstrate a theoretical framework for successful and innovative marketing and recruitment strategies to attract high school seniors and to increase enrollment.

**Figure 3.2 Conceptual Model**

**Effective New Media Communication and Recruitment Strategies**

**Media Richness Theory**
- Medium Type
- Uncertainty and Equivocality level
- Media Richness

**Institutional Websites**
- Images
- Narrative Storytelling
- Blogs

**Effective Recruitment Strategies-Postsecondary Institutions**

**Social Identity Theory**
- Social-Identity
- Social Categorization

**Mobile Media**
- Mobile
- Email
- Text Messaging

**New Media Elements for Success**

**Social Media**
- Facebook
- Twitter
- YouTube
- Snapchat

**Media Richness Theory Component**
The media richness theory component is utilized to evaluate and rank how information is processed through a low-to-high degree of richness in a given media. This theory aids in the media selection type used to deliver communication effectively, as well as the effects of the media utilized. Media dependency is an important variable in understanding when and why media messages affect an audience. Daft and Lengel (1986) explain that “Communication media vary in the capacity to process rich information, and the reason for richness differences include the medium’s capacity for immediate feedback, the number of cues and channels utilized, personalization, and language variety” (p. 560). The media richness theory is used to assist in understanding communication challenges of media used, arguing that media performance will improve based on using a richer media. Dennis and Valacich (1999) explain that “Certain media are better able to transmit information depending upon whether the information is used in situations of uncertainty or equivocality” (p. 1). The medium type, uncertainty and equivocality levels, and media richness degree are factors involved in the media selection that institutions can utilize to communicate with and recruit high school seniors.

**Medium Type**

The medium type is the media or channel utilized to transmit a message from a sender to a receiver. A medium type is selected based on how communicative or rich the medium is to deliver the message and by the message level of uncertainty and equivocality. Daft and Lengel (1986) provide the following media classifications “in order of decreasing richness, which include (1) face-to-face, (2) telephone, (3) personal documents such as letters or memos, (4) impersonal written documents, and (5) numeric documents” (p. 560). Face-to-face is considered
the richest medium as it provides immediate feedback and multiple cues, body language and tone. Written communication was determined to have a low-channel media richness.

**Figure 3.3 Effectiveness of Communication**

![Communication Effectiveness Diagram](image)

**Uncertainty and Equivocality Levels**

The uncertainty level is the degree of absence of information. Daft and Lengel (1986) discuss uncertainty levels as “the difference between the amount of information required to perform the task and the amount of information already possessed” (p. 556). As the information increases, the uncertainty decreases or high uncertainty requires more information than low uncertainty. Equivocality describes the level of confusion and lack of understanding, and the communication media aligns the equivocality of the message with the richness of the medium type. Both uncertainty and equivocality influence the information processed.
Media Richness

Dennis and Valacich (1999) explain “Media richness theory proposes that task performance will be improved when task needs are matched to a medium’s ability to convey information” (p. 1). Dennis and Valacich (1999) stated that Daft and Lengel (1986) “argued that media varied in their ability to enable users to communicate and change understanding—their richness” and rich media had a greater language variety, cues, personalization, and more rapid feedback (p. 1). Media richness describes the carrying capacity of data or information through a medium type or communication channel. Daft and Lengel (1986) defines information richness “as the ability of information to change understanding within a time interval” (p. 560). “Communication transactions that can overcome different frames of reference or clarify ambiguous issues to change understanding in a timely manner are considered rich” (Daft & Lengel, p. 560). Medium types and channels are evaluated by their low-to-high richness levels and their ability to deliver a message. Media richness levels differ by “the medium’s capacity for immediate feedback, the number of cues and channels utilized, personalization, and language variety” (Daft & Lengel, p. 560). Daft and Lengel explain that “rich media provides the capacity to process complex messages and media of low richness process-fewer cues and restrict feedback” (p. 560). Rich media is described as face-to-face contact, while media with low richness is impersonal. Dennis and Valacich explain that “Media richness theory was developed to not theorize how managers choose media, but to theorize which media should prove most effective in what situations” (p. 2). Performance will improve when media are matched to the task equivocality and uncertainty.

Social Identity Theory Component
The social identity theory provides an understanding framing the formation of social identities, and the categorization and identification for high school seniors during their college decision-making process. This component involves the formation of one’s own identity, the categorization of high school seniors as a group, social influences and relationships students will develop or identify with an institution.

**Social Identity**

The social identity theory involves the role of self and identity in groups, and is defined as “an individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (Hogg, 2016, p. 6). Social identity is the perception of self and the social groups that one may belong to, helping to construct one’s own identity. One’s own social identity is created through social categorizations and social groups. Having a social identity allows one to relate with a specific group, and to be like those in the group and to share their perspectives.

**Self-Categorization**

The process of self-categorization is used to form one’s identity and “A social identity is a person’s knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group” (Hogg and Abrams, 1988; p. 225). High school seniors involved in the college decision-making process are categorized into a social group, as “social groups, whether large demographic categories or small task-oriented teams, provide their members with a shared identity that prescribes and evaluates who they are, what they should believe and how they should behave” (Hogg, 2016, p. 6).
As a group, many high school seniors are going through the same college decision-making process, trying to determine whether to attend college, whether they plan to attend, which institution they relate to, and which would be the best fit for them. Social influences contribute to this process, as the development of educational aspirations occur through background characteristics and the attitudes of parents and peers. These influences and characteristics play a role in a high school senior deciding whether to attend college, as well as searching for institutions to attend. Han (2014) provides data on parental involvement in the predisposition phase of the college choice process and explains that “Several studies revealed that parents’ expectations, experience of financing their own college study, involvement in information search, knowledge and understanding of college cost and aid, and willingness and ability to provide financial support to colleges, had a strong effect on student’s college decisions” (p. 122). During college planning, parental encouragement and involvement were found to be critical factors. Anctil (2008a) explains that “A student’s peers, friends, and high school personnel—specifically the school counselor—influence the selection process, with financial considerations often guiding the final choice” (p. 12).

Once the selection of a college is made, the student will experience a new social identity, reflecting how the student identifies with the institution and as an undergraduate student enrolled at a college. A new group for the student will occur, and Hogg, Terry and White (1995) explain that the “basic idea is that a social category into which one falls, and to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category—a self-definition that is a part of the self-concept” (p. 259).

New Media Elements for Success
Student recruitment and enrollment strategies must incorporate the latest technological trends for today’s college-bound students, as they are the most technologically advanced generation, altering the way they obtain information and interact with campuses. Hanover Research (2015) found that “60 percent of seniors are more likely to consider institutions that use digital strategies—such as email, text, and social media—to communicate” (p. 3). “Successful branding and marketing initiatives have become increasingly important for institutions to appeal to a growing and diverse student base and to differentiate from competitor institutions” (Hanover Research, p. 6). New media elements critical for effective recruitment strategies for postsecondary institutions to invest in are broken down by institutional website, social media and mobile media strategies. These strategies will provide successful and innovative concepts as “branding and marketing in higher education have significantly changed in the online space, with an increased focused on new platforms for external engagement and communication” (Hanover Research, p. 12).

**Institutional Websites**

An institutional website is a critical component for a college or university, as the website design and functionality is used to present the institution to prospective students. There is an increasing prominence of college websites during a high school senior’s college search process. The E-Expectations Report (2015) found that “Nearly 80 percent of seniors say that a campus website affects their perception of an institution” (p. 1) and that “58 percent of seniors use college websites to find answers to questions when they are researching colleges” (p. 2). Hanover Research (2015) found that an “effective and intuitive website, which is often the ultimate brand statement for an institution, is among the most important marketing tools in
higher education” (p. 4). The content that high school seniors utilize the most from an institutional website include academics, cost/scholarships, enrollment process, campus events, student life, placement statistics and student testimonials and quotes. The institution’s website should be content-rich, intuitive, engaging and uncluttered to provide a quality experience and perception of an institution.

**Images**

Web page photography and images are considered key elements of any institutional website. The E-Expectations Report (2015) found that “Images draw the eyes of students and can lead them toward important content and support the message of the page” (p. 11). The report also found that 67 percent of high school seniors found aerial types of photos on a campus most appealing (p. 11). Using real and engaging photos is recommended as appealing when compared to stock photos because “Offering a blend of images that allow students to see how they might fit in with the current student body should be the goal, as well as providing a clear sense of your campus layout and setting” (p. 22).

**Narrative Storytelling**

Many high school seniors are unfamiliar with institutions and what to expect as new college students. Narrative storytelling can be used as a persuasive recruitment method to offer current students the opportunity to authentically discuss their college selection process and experience with prospective students. Institutions are providing or selling a social experience, in hopes that the stories of current students will help prospective students “visualize themselves fitting in at the campus, maintain their feeling of rightness, and help the idea of college become
more tangible” (Burns, 2015, p. 100). Burns explains that “Stories that represented both the academic and social sides of college helped students visualize themselves at the university and made the idea of higher education more tangible” (p. 99). Participants in all six focus groups of the Burns study concluded that “The stories they heard would help them make their final decisions about college because they heard unscripted students describing their stories’ ‘happy endings’ at that particular school” (p. 107). It is suggested that these stories be authentic and created directly by current students to display their own ideas and experiences so that prospective students can better visualize themselves at a specific institution. Burns explains that “meeting millennials online and sharing stories through blogs and videos will help maintain that relationship with the students and build their identification with the university” (p. 113). Daily experiences, student stories, academic stories, and entertaining and unique stories were all mentioned as valuable insight and the types of stories prospective students would like to learn about. Narrative stories were found to be extremely helpful in the final decision-making. “Using stories in recruitment makes the abstract more concrete, which prepares students for the transition into college life and reduces some of the anxiety related to going to college” (Burns, p. 115).

Blogs

A blog can be used in the field of higher education as a way for current students to write about their own experiences and opinions of their campus life. A blog can be an effective tool for postsecondary institutions, as it provides the opportunity for prospective students to hear testimonials from current students. Blogs are considered successful marketing tactics as they provide prospective students an authentic perception of a current student who is immersed in the
college experience. Sandlin and Peña (2014) explain that blogs can “help lay the foundation for improved recruitment and retention by helping prospective students form realistic expectations and connect to their soon-to-be peers” (p. 346).

**Social Media**

Russel (2015) explains that “Social media has become the younger generations’ primary means of interacting with the world, actively applying their love for social to their post-secondary lives—using it to inform everything from their school selection to course choices” Sandlin and Peña (2014) explain that “Technology has changed the ways postsecondary institutions interact and communicate with students, and one of the first ways in which prospective college students interact with postsecondary institutions is through social media” (p. 333). Social media usage has increased drastically, with over 90% of college students using social media in 2015 (Clark et al., 2016, p. 2). The Pew Research Center (2015) reported that “teens are diversifying their social network site use, with 71% of teens using more than one social network site” (p. 3). Social media platforms can be utilized not only to market the institution, but to engage and recruit prospective students as well. “How social media platforms and activities are designed and implemented can make a difference in how college-bound students experience institutions of higher education online” (Sandlin & Peña, p. 334).

**Facebook**

The Pew Research Center (2015) reported that “Facebook remains the most-used social media site among American teens ages 13-17, with 71% of all teens using the site” (p. 2). The E-Expectations Report (2015) found that 54 percent of high school seniors utilize Facebook as the
best means for researching colleges (p. 13). Once those seniors visited the institutional Facebook page, 65% clicked “like,” and 44% joined a group and 23% added a comment (p. 13). Facebook continues to be one of the prime sites for higher education to utilize for communication and recruitment purposes. Hoover (2015) states that “Two-thirds of teenagers consider Facebook the most valuable form of social media they used when researching colleges (p. 1).

YouTube

YouTube is a very popular social media site, with the E-Expectations Report (2015) finding “Nearly 75 percent of seniors and juniors saying they use YouTube at least once per week, and 41% of seniors viewing videos linked from college sites” (p. 14). The report (2015) found that high school seniors utilize YouTube as the second best means for researching colleges (p. 13).

Twitter

“Over 84% of institutions in higher education have at least one Twitter account, making the platform one of the most popular social media tools used by institutions” (Kimmons et al., 2017, p. 99). The E-Expectations Report (2015) found that “45% of high school seniors say they use Twitter at least once a week, and 30% of seniors said they followed feeds from campuses” (p. 14). The Pew Research Center (2015) reported that 33% of all teens use Twitter, specifically older teens (p. 32). The E-Expectations Report found that high school seniors utilize Twitter as the third best means for researching colleges (p. 13). Research found that “71% of the institutions sampled believed that Twitter was an effective tool in recruiting
prospective students, while 13% reported actively researching prospective students via social media as part of their admissions process” (Kimmons et al., p. 99).

Other Platforms

Instagram and Snapchat are other platforms worth mentioning, as their use is quite popular with high school seniors. Instagram has become a common choice for social media users to share photos and videos. The Pew Research Center (2015) reported that “More than 52% of all teens report using Instagram” (p. 28). Snapchat is another more relatively new and quite popular social media platform being utilized to “send snaps” of photos and videos to others. Sharing snaps could be used during a prospective students’ college visit, highlighting memories of an institution with friends and family. The Pew Research Center (2015) reported that “Two-in-five American teens or 41% use Snapchat” (p. 30).

Mobile Media

The E-Expectations Report (2015) notes that mobile web devices are the most significant change in higher education recruitment in the last 10 years (p. 5). The Pew Research Center (2015) reported that three-quarters of teens have or have access to a smartphone, and 92% of teens go online daily through their mobile device (p.2). The E-Expectations Report found that “69% of high school seniors have viewed a college website on a mobile device” (p. 5). Today’s college-bound students have information instantly and constantly at their fingertips, through their mobile devices. With the advances of technology, digital communication requires optimized or mobile versions of websites and content to ensure mobile friendliness. The E-Expectations Report makes it clear that “All college e-communications need to be optimized for mobile,
whether students visit a web page, read an email, fill out a form, or view a video, that experience needs to read and function well on a smartphone” (p. 22). Mobile media should be quickly accessible and easy to navigate. Rogers (2015) further explains that “Three-out-of-five students access college sites on a mobile device at least weekly,” and that “Two-in-five students would download an app to communicate with college representatives” (p. 43).

Email

With the high use of mobile web devices, email is commonly used to interact and communicate with higher education institutions. In the E-Expectations Report (2015), the report found that high school seniors “use email frequently when researching colleges and are extremely receptive to opening emails from campus, even those they do not know” (p. 20). The report stated that 97% of seniors uses email at least once a week, and that many hold on to emails with more than half of seniors saving college emails in their inboxes. The E-Expectations Report also found that “More and more high school seniors are reading emails and submitting forms on mobile devices, with 40% of seniors checking their email on a mobile device at least once a day” (p. 5). This data reinforces the importance of mobile devices and ensuring that digital content is optimized appropriately.

Text Messaging

Texting has become a popular means of communication for teens, with The Pew Research Center (2015) reporting that “91% of teen cell owners use text messaging—either directly through their mobile phones or through an app or a website” (p. 17), and “A typical teen sends and receives 30 texts a day” (p. 4). The E-Expectations Report (2015) found that “Students
are much more receptive to receiving text messages from campuses, and that 71% of high school seniors would allow text from campus” (p. 15). However, the report stated that few institutions are taking advantage of sending text messages.

**Summary**

This chapter has applied evidence-based literature to the three-stage college choice process, as well as the development of successful and innovative communication and recruitment strategies that can be utilized to attract and attain high school seniors. The conceptual model demonstrated the best new media communication strategies for postsecondary institutions to communicate with and recruit high school seniors. Applying this model not only assists in attracting high school seniors, it also aims to increase enrollment and brand awareness for postsecondary institutions.

The next chapter will offer recommendations and strategies for higher education practitioners, suggestions for admissions and enrollment to implement for successful and innovative marketing and recruitment strategies to attract high school seniors and increase enrollment and brand awareness. Practical implications and recommendations for future research will also be discussed.
Chapter Four: Recommendations and Implications for Practitioners

Introduction

The evidence-based literature reviewed for this Master’s project addressed the problem of postsecondary institutions identifying the best new media communication practices high school seniors use to learn about and engage with an institution during their college search process. This project also examined the college decision-making process for high school seniors and the factors that influence their final selection. Specifically, this project identifies the best new media communication practices for postsecondary institutions to invest in for marketing and recruitment strategies to attract high school seniors and increase enrollment.

The systematic literature review for this project included existing evidence-based literature on higher education marketing and recruitment and the college decision-making process (Anctil, 2008a; Anctil, 2008b; Angulo-Ruiz, Pergelova, & Cheben, 2016; Belch & Belch, 2014; Bowden, 2011; Burns, 2015; Clark, Scheuer, & Fine, 2016; Fong, 2013; Galan, Lawley, & Clement, 2015; Han, 2014; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Judson, Aurand, Gorchels, & Gordon, 2008; Munisamy, Jaafar, & Nagaraj, 2014; Kimmons, Veletsianos, & Woodward, 2016; Sandlin & Peña, 2014; Stephenson, Heckert, & Yerger, 2016; Washburn & Petroshius, 2004). Grey literature was utilized and consisted of articles written by marketing professionals and higher education professionals (Bethke, 2016; Birkner, 2015; Hoover, 2015; Rogers, 2015; Russel, 2015). The media richness theory (Ball-Rokeach, 1985; Daft & Lengel, 1986; Dennis & Valacich, 1999) and social identity theory (Hogg, 2016; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995) were theoretical frameworks used for this Master’s project. Lastly, the 2015 Pew Research Center Report Overview on Teens, Social Media & Technology (Lenhart, 2015), the 2016 Trends in Higher Education Marketing, Enrollment, and Technology Report (Hanover
Research 2014; 2015), and the 2015 Noel Levitz and E-Expectations Report (Ruffalo Noel-Levitz, 2015) were reports utilized to identify new media communication practices that high school seniors use, as well as their media consumption habits and influences that contribute to their college selection process. The research question asking what the literature on higher education suggest are best new media communication practices for postsecondary institutions to communicate with and recruit high school seniors, along with the literature and reports for this Master’s project helped to identify that online and digital space are the best new media communication practices for postsecondary institutions to communicate with and recruit high school seniors.

In this chapter key recommendations and implications for practitioners, resulting from a systematic analysis of the perspectives, as well as findings and frameworks from the literature review, are discussed and represented in a practitioner’s model illustrated in Figure 4.1. The challenges associated with higher education marketing and recruitment, literature gaps, and suggestions for future research will also be included. This chapter will conclude by summarizing the importance of this Master’s project to scholarship and practice, as well as its contribution to the field of higher education marketing and recruiting.

Key Recommendations

Literature and database searches were conducted using key words associated with higher education, branding, marketing and recruitment and the college decision-making process to examine the problem of determining the best new media communication practices high school seniors use to learn about and engage with a college during their college search process.
The findings indicated that to provide successful and innovative communication and recruitment strategies for high school seniors, postsecondary institutions need to incorporate online and digital space into their marketing efforts.

**Figure 4.1 Practitioner’s Model**

**How to Determine Effective Recruitment Strategies for Postsecondary Institutions**

- **Theoretical Frameworks**
  - Media Richness Theory
  - Social Identity Theory

- **How to Determine Effective Recruitment Strategies for Postsecondary Institutions**

- **Factors to Examine**
  - Decision-Making Process
  - Motivations and Influences
  - Types of Communication Practices
  - Media Consumption Habits

- **New Media Elements Identified as Best Communication Practices**

- **Digital Presence**

- **Institutional Websites**
  - Images/Photos
  - Blogs
  - Narrative Storytelling

- **Mobile Media**
  - Mobile Web
  - Email
  - Text Messaging

- **Social Media Platforms**
  - Facebook
  - YouTube
  - Twitter
  - Snapchat
Recommendation One - Digital Presence

The research that supported the findings for this recommendation (Anctil, 2008a; Anctil, 2008b; Belch & Belch, 2014; Bethke, 2016; Clark, Scheuer, & Fine, 2016; E-Expectations Report, 2015; Fong, 2013; Galan, Lawley, & Clement, 2015; Han, 2014; Hanover Research, 2015; Kimmons, Veletsianos, & Woodward, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2015; Rogers, 2015; Sandlin & Peña, 2014) assert that institutions must emphasize a digital presence to engage and communicate with prospective students and to increase enrollment. Sandlin and Peña (2014) explains that due to technological innovations, the ways postsecondary institutions communicate and engage with prospective students must change (p. 333). Since high school seniors have grown up with Internet and technology, they are the most technologically-advanced generation of college-bound students, altering the way they gather and interact with institutions. The E-Expectations Report (2015) stated that high school seniors are constantly connected to the Internet, their mobile devices and social media (p.1). Galan et al., (2015) stated that “Universities need to adapt to the latest changes to differentiate themselves and to make their message memorable” (p. 287) and that “Social media has become a key part of human interaction and communication, having a big influence on people’s behavior and decision-making” (p. 291). As the growth in digital and social media continues, Belch and Belch (2014) explains there is a decline in traditional media and “Marketers have been forced to reevaluate their media strategies in order to more effectively communicate with consumers in the new digital age” (p. 130). Institutions that utilize an online digital presence will provide successful and innovative communication and recruitment strategies to high school seniors.

Recommendation Two - Institutional Websites
The research that supported the findings for this recommendation (Burns, 2015; E-Expectations Report, 2015; Han, 2014; Hanover Research, 2015; Sandlin & Peña, 2015) assert that an institutional website is a critical component for disseminating communication and engaging with high school seniors during the college search process. A campus website also provides a perception of the institution, and the opportunity for prospective students to build an authentic relationship through images, blogs and narrative storytelling. An “effective and intuitive website, which is often the ultimate brand statement for an institution, is among the most important marketing tools in higher education” (Hanover Research, p. 4). The use of images offers a visually appealing experience, allowing prospective students the opportunity to see how they can relate to and fit in at a campus institution. The use of blogs is considered a successful strategy by helping current students to form realistic expectations from current students and their experiences (Sandlin & Peña, p. 346). Narrative storytelling is a persuasive recruitment method to allow prospective students to learn about a current student’s unscripted college experience (academic and social) and an opportunity to “visualize themselves fitting in at the campus, maintain their feeling of rightness, and help the idea of college become more tangible” (Burns, p. 100). A content-rich, engaging and visually appealing website will provide the information prospective students need to learn about and engage with an institution.

**Recommendation Three-Social Media Platforms**

The research that supported the findings for this recommendation (Birkner, 2015; Burns, 2015; Clark, Scheuer, & Fine, 2016; E-Expectations Report, 2015; Galan, Lawley, & Clement, 2015; Han, 2014; Hanover Research, 2015; Hoover, 2015; Kimmons, Veletsianos, & Woodward, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2015; Rogers, 2015; Russel, 2015; Sandlin & Peña, 2015) assert that social media plays an important role in communicating with and recruiting high school
seniors. The Pew Research Center (2015) reported “Facebook is the most popular and frequently used social media platform among teens; half of teens use Instagram, and nearly as many use Snapchat” (p. 2). Not only are teens active on social media platforms, the Pew Research Center reported that “71% of teens use more than one social network site” (p. 3). Sandlin and Peña, (2014) stated that “One of the first ways in which prospective college students interact with postsecondary institutions is through social media” (p. 333). Social media is also used as a tool for high school seniors to research colleges, with the E-Expectations Report (2015) naming Facebook, YouTube and Twitter as the top three sites utilized for researching colleges. Social media usage has increased drastically, and Clark et al., (2016) found that over 90% of college students used social media in 2015 (p. 2). Social media is becoming a critical piece throughout the college choice process, as it allows high school seniors to follow and learn about institutions, academics and programs, student and campus life and authentic testimonials and experiences from current students. Sandlin and Peña explain that utilizing social media portrays the college experience and shapes expectations as it “deepens connections, builds affinity, and develops brand loyalty” (p. 334). Utilizing social media platforms is the best way to provide an information hub and two-way communication with which an institution and prospective students may both engage.

Recommendation Four-Mobile Media

The research that supported the findings for this recommendation (E-Expectations Report, 2015; Han, 2014; Hanover Research, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015; Rogers, 2015; Sandlin & Peña, 2015) assert that mobile media should be utilized for communication and recruitment, as high school seniors are accustomed to having information and communication capabilities instantly, through their mobile devices. The E-Expectations Report found that “web-
enabled mobile devices are arguably the most significant change in e-recruitment in the last 10 years” (p. 5). With the rise of mobile media, The Pew Research Center found “Three-quarters of teens having access to a smartphone and 92% going online daily through their mobile device” (p.2). It was also found through the E-Expectations Report (2015) that “69% of high school seniors have viewed a college website on a mobile device” (p. 5). The importance of mobile friendliness was also recommended, as websites need to be optimized for mobile use so that information and emails display and disseminate communication efficiently. Text messaging capabilities were also discussed, with the E-Expectations Report finding that “Students are much more receptive to receiving text messages from campuses, and that 71% of high school seniors would allow text from campus” (p. 15). Institutions must stay current with technology trends, and the E-Expectations Report makes it clear that all college communication should be optimized for mobile, since when “Students visit a web page, read an email, fill out a form, or view a video, that experience needs to read and function well on a smartphone” (p. 22).

Prospective students want and expect to quickly access and easily navigate information from their mobile devices.

**Challenges**

**College Choice Motivations and Influences**

The motivations and influences during the college decision-making process play a critical role in shaping a high school senior’s decision to attend college, guide the search process, and facilitate the selection of which institution to attend. Anctil (2008a) explains that the “College decision-making process is complicated, involves a variety of factors from opinions of peers and parents to information on institutions, to constraining factors such as cost and location (p. 9). Understanding the college choice process can be a challenge, as it requires knowing how
prospective students seek out information about institutions. While institutions determine which
new media communication practices to use in communicating with and recruiting prospective
students, institutions must consider motivational and influential factors that contribute to the
college selection process. Even if an institution is utilizing the best new media approach to
recruit students, parental influence, as well as peers, friends, and high school personnel influence
the selection process as well (Anctil, 2008a, p. 12). Rogers (2015), in Data from the Social
Admission Report, explained that 56 percent of students apply to at least one college due to
someone else encouraging them to do so, and it was found that 60 percent of students indicated
parents as influential in their decision” (p. 43). It is suggested that marketing efforts be
developed with these influential considerations in mind, targeting both parents and students
during their decision-making process.

Technological Advances

As Belch and Belch (2014) explain, there is a decline in traditional media use with the
growth of the Internet, social media and mobile media, leaving marketers to “reevaluate their
media strategies and reconsider the process by which consumers make decisions and the media
that influence these decisions to more effectively communicate with consumers in the new
digital age” (p. 130). It is critical that as technology advances, postsecondary institutions stay
current in technological uses and adapt their communication and recruitment strategies to the
latest trends. This may be a challenge as institutions will need to continuously determine the
most successful and innovative communication and recruitment strategies year after year, to stay
engaged and competitive with other institutions.
An analytical survey questionnaire given to incoming freshman may be of use to resolve this challenge. A survey questionnaire will allow institutions to better understand how the college selection was determined for incoming freshman students while they were high school seniors, and which media, mediums and influences were persuasive during this process. Digital communications should align with what high school seniors are utilizing to communicate and engage with institutions, and as their preferences change, so should the marketing efforts for institutions. To ensure that the most effective communication and recruitment strategies are being utilized, Rogers (2015) explains that “It is critical to segment where and how students find, request information from, and evaluate schools using specific tools” (p. 42). “It is inevitable that new marketing tools will continue to be developed and become options to the marketer who will have to better understand new methods of communication” (Fong, 2013, p. 97). However, Anctil (2008a) explains that it is essential that “Marketing and advertising by colleges and universities should be targeted to engage prospective students while they are in the process of choosing a college” (p. 9). It is critical that institutions stay up-to-date on the latest communication and engagement opportunities to ensure they can effectively reach prospective students.

Summary

The findings derived from the evidence-based literature review for this Master’s project indicated that online and digital space are the best new media communication practices for postsecondary institutions to communicate with and recruit high school seniors. The findings for this project identified the most effective communication and recruitment strategies for postsecondary institutions to invest in to attain high school seniors and to increase enrollment. The systematic review also analyzed the media consumption habits of high school seniors, and
the motivations and influences that contribute to each stage of the college selection process, which aids in the selection and use of new media communication practices. The findings and recommendations for this project were significant and contribute to the field of higher education marketing and recruiting. Chapter five will conclude this project with a discussion on gaps in literature, unanticipated findings, limitations, and significance to scholarship and practice.
Chapter Five: Findings and Analysis

Introduction

This Master’s project examined the evidence-based literature relating to the best new media communication practices for postsecondary institutions to communicate with and recruit high school seniors. The literature provided insight as to how and why high school seniors learn about and engage with institutions, as well as the motivations or influential factors involved during the college selection process. The literature also provided media consumption habits of high school seniors, and the communication effectiveness of several mediums. The results of this study provide evidence that online and digital space are the best new media communication practices for successful and innovative marketing and recruitment strategies in which postsecondary institutions can invest.

This chapter will provide a discussion of any gaps found in the literature, suggested additional research, unanticipated findings in the research, and any limitations to consider. A conclusion to this Master’s project will also be included, as well as the significance to scholarship and practice.

Gaps in Literature

While conducting the systematic literature review for this Master’s project, more research is needed on how specifically each medium affects high school seniors during their college search process. This project found media consumption habits and the types of Internet, social media and mobile media practices utilized; however, specific effectiveness of each type of medium would be beneficial. Implementation of an analytical survey questionnaire to incoming freshman at post-secondary institutions could assist this issue, as results from the survey would allow further understanding of what recruitment media and mediums affected the college choice
selection of incoming freshman when they were high school seniors. Providing the survey
annually to incoming freshman will assist in analyzing the institutions current communication
and marketing efforts, comparing the effectiveness and quality of the new media communication
practices being utilized. This survey could also be utilized to ensure the institution is staying
current with the latest technology trends and usages for high school seniors.

Another area of research that should be further examined is the use of measuring tools
and tactics for digital and social media efforts through web analytics. With the ability to measure
digital media efforts, institutions can determine the impact of efforts to identify what is working,
and what needs to change to be more effective. Measuring tools can also assist in monitoring
recruitment goals for each digital or social media platform, helping to identify which mediums
are best in communicating and recruiting prospective student’s.

Suggested Additional Research

With digital media communication practices being identified as best strategies for postsecondary
institutions to communicate with and recruit high school seniors, institutions should consider a
better understanding of the persuasiveness of each new digital media or social media platform.
Questions that can be utilized or considered for future studies include the following:

- What types of recruitment media influence a prospective student’s decision to attend
  a specific college or university?
- How does a prospective student’s perception of a college or university differ based on
  the new digital media used?
- What social media platform works best to influence a prospective student’s college
  choice?
Unanticipated Findings

Although the evidence-based research for this master project identified digital and online media efforts as the best practices to utilize, Hanover Research (2015) did find that “40 percent of seniors noted that they were more likely to consider institutions that use print and phone communications” (p. 3). This finding indicates that some traditional marketing efforts may still be beneficial and that a multichannel marketing and communications strategy may be an effective strategy to implement. Belch and Belch (2014) explain that traditional media is often used to drive search to online platforms (p. 133).

Another unanticipated finding was the heavy involvement, motivation and influence parents exert on high school seniors and their college decision-making process. This is a significant finding, as it stresses the importance of marketing to both the high school senior and the parents of the prospective student, as parents help in shaping their decisions. Han (2014) provides data on several studies that revealed that parents’ expectations, their knowledge and understanding of college, financial support and opinions all had a strong effect on student’s college decisions (p. 122).

Limitations

The Pew Research Center Report Overview on Teens, Social Media & Technology, the 2016 Trends in Higher Education Marketing, Enrollment, and Technology Report and the 2015 Noel Levitz and E-Expectations Report were utilized to identify new media communication practices that high school seniors use, as well as the media consumption habits and influences that contribute to their college selection process. The three reports were extremely beneficial in this project; however, the reports did have some limitations. The Pew Research Center Report Overview on Teens, Social Media & Technology surveyed in this report included teens ages 13-
17. This age span should be considered as a limitation, as the target audience for this project is geared toward high school seniors specifically, which is typically teens ages 17-18. *The 2015 Noel Levitz and E-Expectations Report* also had limitations, as the report included a survey of 3,000 high school juniors and seniors, with the senior data only being used in this project. Given that juniors are starting their college search process, this data may also need to be considered.

**Conclusion**

**Significance to Scholarship and Practice**

The field of higher education will continue to remain competitive, as institutions will need to compete for high school seniors to select and attend their institution. Technological innovations have a substantial impact on the trends and developments for marketing and recruitment strategies for postsecondary education, radically changing the college search process for high school seniors. As technology continues to change year after year, it is critical that postsecondary institutions understand why and how high school seniors learn about and search for colleges and universities. Identifying the best new media communication practices is essential in implementing successful and innovative communication and recruitment strategies in which postsecondary institutions should invest.

This Master’s project is significant as it contributes to the higher education marketing and recruitment literature and provides evidence-based research that online and digital space are the best new media communication practices for postsecondary institutions to communicate with and recruit high school seniors. The results of this Master’s project also provide recommendations for successful and innovative communication and recruitment strategies in which postsecondary institutions should invest. Marketing and communication tools will continue to be developed,
and it is the responsibility of the institution to ensure it is utilizing the best media communication methods to reach and attract high school seniors.
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