



2014

# How Higher Education Institutions Utilize Social Media

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## Recommended Citation

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# **How Higher Education Institutions Utilize Social Media**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the

Communication Arts Department

By: Shauntel Hall

Under the mentorship of Dr. S. Camille Broadway

## **ABSTRACT**

*Social media is dramatically changing the way that people communicate and interact online. Several businesses have made it a priority to establish a presence on social media to connect with some of its biggest users: millennials. As social media has gained popularity, higher education institutions all around have begun to establish social media platforms in order to interact with current and prospective students and alumni. This study examined how higher education institutions in the University System of Georgia are utilizing social media and also compared use among the various types of institutions (research, comprehensive, state college and state university). Using long interviews and a content analysis, this study found that higher education institutions understand the importance of using social media however, many are not taking advantage of tools & strategies that can help them succeed.*

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November 2014

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## **Introduction**

Social media is having a dynamic impact on communication. According to a Pew Research Center study, 73 percent of U.S. individuals between the ages of 18-29 utilize social networking of some kind (Duggan & Smith, 2013). These individuals are identified as millennials (those born after 1980).

As social media has gained popularity, it has become an attractive environment for businesses. This is apparent through the introduction of a new term, social media marketing, in which 93 percent of marketers utilize social media for business (Cooper, 2013).

Social media is currently redefining the ways in which businesses and organizations are reaching their audiences and communicating with these individuals (Hendricks, 2014). In an age of smart phones and social media, colleges and universities are now tasked with the ability to be able to reach their audiences in this new online environment in contrast to traditional marketing tactics such as print and in person advertising. Applying the diffusion of innovation theory, this paper used content collected from qualitative interviews with social media managers at various types of higher education institutions along with results from a content analysis of primary social media platforms in order to discuss factors that influenced various higher education institutions within the University System of Georgia to adopt social media technology to communicate with their various audiences.

## **Literature Review**

The millennial generation is made up of individuals who are consistently plugged into technology. According to eMarketer (2013), millennials have the highest social networking penetration of any generation. Approximately 49 million millennials own smartphones (eMarketer, 2013), 75 percent of millennials have a social networking profile, and 83 percent of millennials have either placed their cell phone on or right next to their beds while sleeping (Keeter & Taylor, 2010).

“They [millennials] have taken the lead in seizing the new platforms of the digital era—the Internet, mobile technology, social media – to construct personalized networks of friends, colleagues and affinity groups” (Doherty, Krishnamurthy, Parker & Taylor, 2014). The presence and impact of this generation on social media is evident, as Doherty et al. (2014) found that 55 percent of this population posted a “selfie” (word of the year in 2013 by Oxford Dictionary) on a social media site.

### **Institutions using Social Media**

Higher education institutions are using social media to engage with an audience well versed in new media channels. Social media is seen as a viable tool for university communicators due to its low cost, immediacy, and use by a large number of students (Kelleher & Sweetser, 2012).

One of the main ways that colleges and universities are utilizing social media is for recruitment. Many of the potential students to these institutions are already avid users of the technology, forcing admissions offices to meet their audience online. Ninety-five percent of college admissions offices use at least one form of social media (Barnes & Lescault 2011). In a

2012 study of social media adoption by university communicators, Kelleher and Sweetser (2012) noted that admissions and recruiting departments rely greatly upon social media due based on their job to communicate with younger audiences.

Although social media differs greatly from previous marketing tools used by higher education institutions, it shows great potential to be one of the most effective tools to engage students, increase enrollment and retention, and establish a foundation for strong alumni relations (Wandel, 2008).

### **A Shift from Traditional**

Traditional marketing tactics have facilitated one way communication; however, social media provide organizations with the opportunity to engage in two-way communications with their audiences. In regards to communication, social media has the ability to “facilitate dialogue among groups that’s wouldn’t easily be in conversation with each other- current students, prospective students, alumnae, parents, and friends of the college” (Bednar, 2013, p. 23).

Prior to the introduction of social media, higher education institutions relied primarily on websites as a basic environment for engagement between institutions and their publics due to the interactive nature of the web (Kang & Norton, 2006).

Research that examines these university websites provides an understanding to the impact of the Internet as means of dialogue and communication between universities and their publics, due to website’s similar purpose to social media: to help users stay connected and receive information.

## **Dialogic Problems on the Web**

Out of all the communication channels available, the Internet is most ideal for dialogue that leads to relationship building because of its ability to incorporate text, sound, image and movement, allowing real-time interaction to occur (Kent & Taylor, 2002). However, research has shown that higher education institutions are performing poorly at utilizing the dialogic features of their websites (Gordon & Berhow, 2009).

Kent and Taylor (2002) crafted a framework for understanding how organizations can build and maintain relationships with publics on the web that is used frequently in the field of relational communication. This framework, the five principles of successfully integrating public relations dialogue onto the web, includes five features: mutuality (the recognition or organization-public relationships), propinquity (the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics), empathy (the supportiveness and confirmation of public goals and interests), risk (the willingness to interact with individuals and publics on their own terms), and commitment (the extent to which an organization gives itself over to dialogue, interpretation, and understanding in its interactions with publics).

Using Kent and Taylor (2002)'s five principles of successfully integrating public relations dialogue onto the web, Gordon and Berhow (2009) found that:

University websites scored higher on principles related to providing information (usefulness of information) or making sites easier to use (ease of interface). They did less well in areas that promote online interactions between prospective students and the institutions (dialogic loop) and in areas that inspire users to return for changing content (return visits).

This failure to properly utilize recruitment tools, such as the web, causes concern as researchers believe that “the competition for students is fierce and survival ultimately depends on engaging them through the use of social media and new communications tools” (Barnes & Lescault, 2011, p.1).

Based on recent research that clearly establishes the increased usage of technological tools such as social media by millennials, the inability of higher education institutions to successfully create dialogue on traditional Internet sites sparks inquiry into how well these institutions are able to utilize social media to interact with their current and future publics.

### **Differences among Institutions**

According to a study of the top 25 schools in social media, by Socialgility (2012), research universities have been shown to be leaders among others in their activity online. The list, which compared 50 leading U.K. and U.S. schools, was a part of a study which sought to compare social media performance of the 50 leading universities in both countries. Harvard headed the list, with the University of Pennsylvania and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) coming in second and third place respectively.

Institutions were ranked based on their PRINT index which is a single number that is calculated on a brand’s performance across multiple channels, including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and the web. For each channel, five attributes were analyzed: popularity, receptiveness, interaction, network reach, and trust (Socialgility, 2012, p.5).

The institutions that received the top 3 placement were all classified as extensive doctoral research universities, according to the Carnegie Foundation (2000). The Carnegie Foundation

(2000) notes that doctoral/research universities, both extensive and intensive, “offer a wide range of baccalaureate programs, and they are committed to graduate education through the doctorate.”

Research concerning social media use among higher education institutions does exist; however, there is a lack of research that compares adoption rates and institution types. Several types of educational intuitions exist within the higher education sector. This study examined the University System of Georgia. The USG system consists of research universities, comprehensive universities, state colleges and state universities. The USG defines these institutional groups bases on their characteristics and mission statements. Comprehensive institutions include undergraduate and graduate institutions and few, if any, Ph.D. programs (Olwell, 2011). The USG system notes that comprehensive institutions serve a diverse background and have a commitment to research in selected areas. State colleges seek to meet the academic needs of an area local to them and offer a limited number of baccalaureate programs to serve economic development in their region. State universities seek to meet the academic needs of the area of a state and also provide professional academic programming in additional various academic and specialist degrees.

The purpose of the study is to add to the understanding of how different institutions adopt and utilize social media in terms of the type of institution within the University System of Georgia (research universities, comprehensive universities, and state colleges). Furthermore, this study aims to identify any differences in the way that institutional departments use social media to communicate to various audiences (internal vs. external) by specifically surveying the use of social media by the admissions/recruitment offices and the student life/activity offices.



## **Diffusion of Innovations**

The diffusion of innovations theory was created by Everett Rogers in the 1960s. The basis of this theory is to examine the adoption and penetration of a technological innovation by a society. According to Rogers, diffusion is “the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels overtime among the members of a social system” (Rogers, 1995, p.5) In order to properly illustrate the diffusion process, the theory is broken down into four elements which include innovation, communication channel, time, and social system. The theory looks closely at how ideas or innovations are spread throughout a society or public over time. The process of the diffusion over time separates participants in various groups including innovators, early acceptors (adopters), early majority, late majority, and laggards. Rogers (1995) also defined the perceived attributes of innovations which include relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. Relative advantage is defined as “the degree to which an innovation is perceived as better than the idea it supersedes,” (Rogers, 2003, p. 15). Compatibility is defined as “the degree to which an innovation is perceived as being consistent with the existing values,” (Rogers, 2003, p. 15). Complexity is defined as “the degree to which an innovation is perceived as difficult to understand and use,” (Rogers, 2003, p. 16). Trialability is defined as “degree to which an innovation may be experimented with on a limited basis” (Rogers, 2003, p. 16). Finally, observability is defined as “is the degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to others” (Rogers, 2003, p. 16).

Kelleher and Sweetser (2012) examined how university communicators were drawn to adopt social media into their communication programs by conducting long interviews with university communicators and analyzing participant responses in reference to the attributes of the innovation as defined by the “diffusion of innovation” theory. “Diffusion theory helps frame

questions of adoption of social media by public relations people by underscoring the importance of attributes of the innovations, the communication channels involved in diffusion, the decision processes of adopters over time, and the social systems in which adopters live and work” (Kelleher & Sweetser, 2012, p. 109).

While analyzing the responses of several university communicators used in their study, Kelleher and Sweetser (2012) found that several factors including relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability emerged when discussing why communicators adopted social media. After discussing this, Kelleher and Sweetser were able to separate participants into two categories, believers and nonbelievers, based on their responses. Their results showed that those identified as non-believers (communicators in academic based departments) adopted social media but only in order to keep up with other institutions that already did and found the technology to be very overwhelming. In contrast, communicators from the admissions and recruiting departments were seen as believers of the technology. Kelleher and Sweetser (2012) suggested that this divide was due to the admissions/recruiting department’s duty to communicate with a larger audience ranging various generations which requires them in turn to be more likely to accept and utilize a wider variety of technology.

The work of Kelleher and Sweetser (2012) provides a solid framework around why communicators within universities adopt social media. Given their findings on how adoption and use varied based on different departments within higher education institutions, this study aims to uncover any similarities while comparing social media use between admissions/recruiting departments and student life/activity departments. In addition, Kelleher and Sweetser (2012)’s work did not offer insight into how social media use varies among different types of institutions. That is an additional aim of the research that will be carried out in this study.

### **Research Questions**

Based on prior research and the diffusion theory, this study will look at the following research questions:

1. How do higher education institutions utilize social media?
2. Does the type of university (research, comprehensive, state university, state college) affect their social media usage?
3. What factors affect the adoption/use of social media by higher education institutions?

### **Methodology**

In order to answer the research questions, a mixed method research procedure was used. In-depth interviews with social media managers at each of the different types of institutions within the University System of Georgia were completed to gain insight on how higher education institutions are using social media. Social media managers within each type of institution (research, comprehensive, state college, state university) in both the office of admissions and the office of student activities were interviewed due to their contrasting target audience (incoming parents and students and current students) in order to uncover differences regarding their use and adoption of social media. Following the in-depth interviews, a content analysis was conducted to further detect how institutions utilized social media platforms.

### **Sampling and Recruitment**

The researcher began the data collection process by assigning each institution within the group of institutions as defined by University System of Georgia (research, comprehensive, state college, state university) a number. Institutions within each group were then chosen as participants using a random number generator. Once institutions from each group were chosen,

the researcher composed a list of institutions to begin contacting for research participation. Only schools with social media accounts were able to be participants in the study.

Upon gathering a list of institutions, the researcher contacted each institution to identify the appropriate social media manager in each department to receive his or her contact information. The researcher then sent out 20 recruitment emails or telephone calls to the identified professionals. The emails sent to these professionals also included an informed consent document which outlined the details of the study and the possible risks of research participation. A copy of the recruitment email, recruitment telephone script, and informed consent document used can be found in Appendix A.

### **Data Collection Method**

The researcher used qualitative research methods in order to analyze how higher education institutions utilize social media. Qualitative interviews were seen as the best research method because of their similarity to a loose, interactive and open-ended conversation between friends, which was considered appropriate to gather detailed responses regarding factors that led participants to adopt and utilize social media at their institutions (Lindlof & Taylor, 1995). The data collection method chosen allowed social media managers to freely discuss the social media practices and tools employed by their offices.

The researcher conducted long interviews with participants using an Institutional Review Board approved question guide, which can be found in the Appendix B. The question guide included 41 open-ended questions with several sub-questions and prompts. During the interview, which ranged from 30 minutes to an hour, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions, which covered the time of adoption of social media at their institutions, reasoning for

adoption, common social media practices, social media management, social media platforms used, and the value found in utilizing social media. The interview questions helped to answer the three research questions: how do higher education institutions utilize social media, does the type of university (research, comprehensive, state university, state college) affect their social media usage, and what factors affect the adoption/use of social media by higher education institutions? Questions one through eight of the question guide address the basic demographics of the social media managers as well as their personal use and understanding of social media. For example, question one asks: Define social media in your own words. Then question three and four respectively ask: Which social media platforms do you use personally and what value do you see in each? The remainder of the questions answer the research questions of the study. For confidentiality reasons and to protect possible risks to participants, names and other identifying information in the transcript are replaced with generic descriptions such as Research Participant 1A. The generic description chosen begins by identifying the type of institution (research) followed by a letter which represents the office or department within the institution (A representing main account/office of admission and B representing the office of student activities/student life).

The second data collection method used was a content analysis. During the interviews, each participant was asked to identify what they considered their primary social media platform at their office. Using the information provided by participants, the researcher conducted a content analysis of the platform in order to further answer research question one: how do higher education institutions utilize social media and also research question two: does the type of institution (research, comprehensive, state university, state college) affect their social media

usage. Only social media content posted from August to November was included in the content analysis.

In order to begin the analysis the researcher assigned each day, Monday through Friday, between August and November a number ranging from one to 76. Weekends were not included in the numbering due to the fact that institutional departments do not primarily operate during the weekends. The researcher then used a random number generator to pick five numbers which corresponded to different dates that would be analyzed during the content analysis of the primary platform as identified by the participant. Throughout this second research method, the research analyzed the social media platforms with respect to the type of content posted, user engagement (measured by likes, comments, and followers), additional attachments provided (photo or video), the use of tools such as hashtags, and the number of posts sent out daily. All content analyzed was then compared back to the responses given from the participant regarding their use of the platform for further understanding.

### **Assumptions of the Method**

In order to gain more insight into how higher education institutions utilized social media, the researcher included participants from the office of admissions/recruitment and the office student life/activities to participate in the study. The researcher assumed that these participants would be able to explain social media use, techniques, and methods that would not only explain how higher education institutions utilize social media but also demonstrate how their management and use of the platforms provides understanding between external (Office of Admissions) and internal (Office of Student Activities) communication strategies. The researcher also assumed that by conducting a mixed qualitative research method composed of in-depth interviews and content analysis, would also be sufficient to answer the questions.

### **Data Analysis Method**

Once the interviews were complete, the researcher then transcribed each interview. Once transcribed, the researcher read through each transcript and noted any repeating themes, practices, strategies or reasoning as noted by participants. The transcript data was synthesized as a whole to understand how institutions used social media (research question one) and what factors affected the adoption/use of social media by higher education institutions (research question three). After all transcripts were analyzed as a whole, the research then analyzed them according to the type of institution in order to understand if the type of institution (research, comprehensive, state university, state college) affected their social media use (research question two). These results were then analyzed according to the elements of diffusion of innovation theory, which helped explain their adoption of the social media technology.

### **Results**

In an effort to understand how higher education institutions utilize social media, the researcher recruited 13 participants from institutions within the University System of Georgia to participate in the study which included interviews and a content analysis. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 55 years old. There were 10 females and three males interviewed. All participants managed social media accounts for either the office of admissions/recruitment or the office of student life/activities. Upon completion of the interviews, a content analysis was conducted of the participant's primary platform (primarily Facebook) which showed that institutions primarily used social media in order to communicate with their audiences regarding events/programs, share positive content regarding their institution, and also participate in popular online trends. The random dates that were included in the content analysis were: August 25, September 18, October 1, November 4, and November 13.

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question asks: how do higher education institutions utilize social media? Both the interviews and the content analysis showed that higher education institutions utilized social media in order to disseminate messages to their audience, which may include the students, parents, alumni or the community depending on the department and the institutions. The interview results showed that many of the institutions included in this study utilize social media as an additional form of communication in their various departmental offices.

Despite communicating with students, higher education institutions are using social media as a way to project their brand online, which is something traditional websites have done in the past. At some point during the interviews, all participants mentioned carefully choosing and posting content as it relates to the mission and goals of the institution. Social media managers are very knowledgeable of the risk that social media holds in relation to the reputation of their institutional brand.

Higher education institutions are using social media very purposefully. Comprehensive Participant 1A noted that their goals on social media mimic their university goals which are to increase enrollment: “Our primary focus at the university is recruitment so that’s always going to be our number one goal: to try to reach students to keep our enrollment numbers up.” Throughout the study, this is a goal that was seen throughout the admissions and main institutional accounts.

The content analysis showed that many institutions utilized social media in the same ways. For instance, the majority of posts by the various institutions included content about events that they themselves or other departments were hosting, links to articles in the press that



represented their institutions favorably, several posts about upcoming athletic games or competitions, and other various important reminders (registration deadlines, event reminders, etc.)

The main difference between how the offices used social media is that admissions offices implemented more strategies and campaigns, whereas student life/activity offices tend to use more videos and graphics on social media.

## **Research Question 2**

The second research question asks: does the type of institution (research, comprehensive, state college, state university) affect their social media usage? Throughout the data collection process, it was easy to see that higher ranked institutions, such as research institutions, are better at engaging with their audiences online. For example, Research Participant 4B employed a strategy, called a “selfie challenge” in which they gave two random followers \$25 gift cards for engaging with them online. This strategy resulted in more engagement on social media through an increased follower count, comments, likes, etc. “We added about 25 followers that day and ever since then people realize that we’re actually not kidding about giving out stuff, our numbers have increased exponentially,” Research Participant 4B said.

Comprehensive institutions in this study displayed great knowledge regarding engagement strategies and research on social media by their use of social media campaigns and their tendency to utilize current students in their social media strategies. For example, Comprehensive Participant 3A used a social media campaign in which students who received acceptance letters to the institution posted that photo on Facebook to share their acceptance with their followers online. The institution then shared these photos onto their own timeline where

they received a great amount of engagement from their followers in the form of likes, comments and shares.

Comprehensive institutions placed an emphasis on working with students in prominent positions on campus in order to attract potential students. An interview conducted with Comprehensive Participant 3A, showed that although students do not have the ability to physically post online, their opinions are valued and trusted by professionals in the admissions/recruitment offices. Comprehensive Participant 3A said that by displaying the achievements of students such as these, prospective students would see that and think “Cool, I would like to go to a university where I could do something like that.” Participants also noted in the interviews that these students included in brainstorming meetings or are used to help them to find content around the campus that prospective students would be interested in.

During the interviews, Research Participant 1B, State College Participant 3B and State University Participant 2B each noted that they currently only used one social media platform: Facebook. This information was interesting to note as all the other participants surveyed noted that their offices used multiple social media platforms. When asked about the future of social media in their offices in the interviews, social media managers from the state college and state university did not indicate any desires to add any additional social media platforms into their routine.

On the other hand, during the interview the Research Participant 1B noted a clear intent to branch out to additional platforms, only after they research was conducted to find out what they needed to fix on Facebook before they moved to other platforms. “When I came into this job six months ago, social media was sort of a mess so we took some time to do some analysis to find out what we needed to fix and we decided that was Facebook. We didn’t want to open up

any channels until Facebook was correct. Once we get everything figured out we'll branch out to Twitter and then eventually Instagram," Research Participant 1B said.

In reference to the responses collected from interviews with participants from state colleges and state universities, these participants noted that they did not place a large emphasis on engagement of their audience, research of other institution's use of social media, and an overall plan to improve their social media performance. Participants from these institutions consistently said they knew their social media use should improve, however they lacked the time and effort to commit to the efforts.

A difference to note in the use of social media by the various institutions is the use of social media campaigns. Several research and comprehensive institutions utilized campaigns on social media. For instance, the office of admissions page of a comprehensive institution included several photos posted by students of themselves with a banner that they received once admitted to the institution that were then shared on the feed of their primary platform. The posts received many "likes," comments and shares by page followers who expressed their excitement regarding the institution. On the other hand research institutions employed similar social media campaigns by employing campaigns in which students were photographed with posters in which they held posters that listed what they thought they be able to contribute to the world as a student of the institution. This behavior showed the same favorable reaction from the institution's followers.

The content analysis conducted showed that institutions that worked to distribute creative and compelling content such as videos and graphics and also engage their audience by Internet campaigns, saw more interaction from their audiences. On the other hand, institutions that did not regularly use images, videos, graphics or even hashtags saw fewer interactions with their

audiences. The institutions that saw the most interaction were research and comprehensive institutions, while state college and state university saw little interaction and engagement.

### **Research Question 3**

The third research question asks: What factors affect the adoption/use of social media by higher education institutions? The top factors that affect adoption and use are staff size and participant knowledge of social media. The data collected showed that institutions that used social media well are backed by participants who possessed a wealth of knowledge regarding social media. Participants who mentioned things such as attending conferences and consistently reviewing new research about social media in the interviews, proved to represent institutions who received more engagement and interaction from their audiences on social media than others who did not. Many of these successful managers indicated that they possessed social media skills prior to obtaining their current positions, which means that their knowledge base of social media is more diverse than managers who have not received that prior experience.

Throughout the interviews, almost all participants said they used social media as a way to reach students. Participants indicated that social media was desirable because that is where students already spent their time. Participants also indicated that the immediacy of social media was desirable in order to disseminate messages. State College Participant 2A said, "I can quickly post something 99 percent of the time." Participants also indicated the value the geographic reach that social media has compared to other communication tools. State College Participant 2A said, "I think we reach folks that might not otherwise have any connection to the college. We also reach them through different layers by a friend of a friend of a friend. So we're able to reach beyond our normal communication reach through it." Participants described social media as another avenue to increase their visibility on the Internet as well as allow them to monitor their

brand online. State College Participant 2A added, “I think it gives us tremendous visibility. It kind of allows us to keep our hands on the pulse of what’s happening so that we can be proactive in dealing with potentially escalating situations.”

To also understand the management and use of social media by each participant interviewed, the researcher began the interview by asking participants to define social media in his or her own words. The purpose of this was to find out what social media meant to them personally and also analyze how that compared to their social media management strategies and behavior later discussed in the interview.

Participants repeatedly defined social media in terms of being a way to facilitate instant communication with others near and far. Many participants also noted the ease of remaining connected with friends and family members as well as connecting with people that you may not know personally. Comprehensive Participant 3A noted referenced the visibility of social media by saying, “pretty much any and everything that is going on in my life is put on blast for anyone via social media.” Research Participant 1B said, “Social media is the most prevalent way that our society communicates these days. It’s really become the new forum for our society and our culture, especially here in the U.S.” Other participants also highlighted social media’s ability to display a combination of text, images and video. Participants also mentioned the ability to function both professionally and personally on social media.

A major factor that affects the use and adoption of social media by higher education is the fact that social media is primarily seen as a supplement to previous existing communication efforts in various departments. Most participants indicated in the interviews that social media was one of many things that they did, which included other traditional marketing forms, and they

understood the value of it but they did not see social media replacing most of the things that they did.

Specifically, many participants from admissions offices noted that enjoyed using social media because it allowed them to connect to their primary audience- high school students. However, participants indicated that the process of choosing a college is personal and social media cannot replace impact of personalized letters or meeting someone face to face.

On the other hand, student activity offices noted that social media is not a primary outlet due to online student activities systems, such as OrgSync, that they have adopted and they themselves and their students see them as useful.

A final factor that affects social media use by higher education institutions is their inexperience with social media. Many are just trying out the media because it is popular, however they have no idea how to use it strategically. Participants have indicated that there is no correct formula to social media use. Regardless of how many measures or articles or information some participants used, the note that success on social media cannot be attributed to a specific process. They indicated that what may work today, may not always be successful tomorrow.

Although participants were not asked specific questions during the interviews about the attributes of the innovation, their responses indicated that relative advantage and compatibility influenced their adoption or use of social media.

#### *Relative Advantage*

Throughout the interviews, almost all social media managers mentioned using social media as a way to reach students. Participants noted that social media was deemed as a desirable because that is where students already spend their time. Participants also indicated the

immediacy of social media in order to disseminate messages. State College Participant 5B said, “I can quickly post something 99 percent of the time.” Participants also said the value in the medium in regards to the geographic reach that social media has which extends beyond the reach of other communication tools. State College Participant 2A said, “I think we reach folks that might not otherwise have any connection to the college. We also reach them through different layers by a friend of a friend of a friend. So we’re able to reach beyond our normal communication reach through it.” Participants perceived social media as another avenue to increase their visibility on the internet as well as allow them to monitor their brand online. State College Participant 2A added, “I think it gives us tremendous visibility. It kind of allows us to keep our hands on the pulse of what’s happening so that we can be proactive in dealing with potentially escalating situations sometimes.”

### *Compatibility*

For many participants social media was seen overall as compatible simply because their target audiences are already active on the medium. Comprehensive Participant 2B indicated that the ability to use social media in this line of work [higher education] as priceless. Communicators in both departments (admissions/recruitment and student life/activities) defined social media as an additional way to connect with students. Participants on the student activity side, who stated that they are constantly promoting events for students to attend, talked about how social media worked for their goals because it allowed for more engagement and interaction compared to traditional advertising such as posters and emails. Participants from this sector consistently spoke about being able to add digital images to promote their events. Research Participant 1B said, “It’s a difference in putting a poster in the hallway.

That is disseminating information but it's not something that you can interact and engage in, but Facebook really is."

### **Other Findings**

Participants considered social media to be difficult to use due to the lack of staff and time that need to be devoted to the medium. Most participants noted that this lack of time is indicative of the success that they have received so far in social media. When answering questions regarding the amount of engagement they receive from their audience on social media, State College Participant 3B said, "We get a little bit but I think the [institution name] page probably gets more. They post a lot more often than we do because we just don't have time. Hopefully maybe we can once we get more workers." When asked about the future of social media in their offices, many participants indicated that they wished to improve their social media however that would be dependent on the addition of staff in the future.

Participants overwhelmingly identified changes with platforms, specifically Facebook, which make it difficult to operate. Numerous participants referenced a recent change to Facebook in which brand pages lose visibility to their audience. Participants noted that this change has caused them to have to venture out to different platforms in an effort to connect with their audience. Comprehensive Participant 1A said, "They changed their setup so now instead of 15 to 20 percent of your followers getting your posts on a regular basis, now it's only 2 to 3 percent."

During the interviews participants were asked questions regarding the processes that they had in place in their offices regarding implementing social media platforms and strategies. Many participants indicated that they didn't have process in place for doing these things, while a few participants followed procedures that their offices had in place. Those who didn't have a process



in place described a very informal process in which they would discuss their ideas among staff members or supervisors. Participants who followed a process, proved to successfully engage with their audience members online through using strategies such as social media campaigns. Comprehensive Participant 3A, who implemented a successful admission campaign on Facebook, indicated that their office adheres to the overall institution's guide for best practices on social media.

In regards to procedures, institutions were also asked if their offices had a social media policy. Some participants were unaware if their office or their institution actually had a policy. When asked if their office had a social media policy Comprehensive Participant 4B said, "Not that I know of. The underlying precedent behind our posts are would we want our parents or preside to see this post." Other participants described a social media policy as an important tool on social media. "Social media policies are very important especially when it comes to how you interact with your audience," Comprehensive Participant 1A said.

### **Content Analysis**

As noted in the participant interviews, Facebook is considered the primary platform for the majority of institutions surveyed. Many of the institutions who claimed Facebook as their primary platform also said that they use other platforms like Twitter and Instagram. While surveying the content, it was seen that many institutions who used Facebook shared posts from their other platforms or from other departments instead of crafting personalized messages to send to their audiences. In the interviews, some participants noted that this was done out of convenience to the individual who was posting the content so that they would not have to copy the same information onto multiple platforms.

Tone was also evaluated during the content analysis. In general, overall institutional accounts and admissions accounts used more of a professional tone in the content that was sent out on social media. In contrast, the office of student activities pages used a less formal tone in their messages. This less formal tone also carried over into the content that they student activity pages posted as well. For example, in a Facebook post regarding an upcoming event, Research Participant 1B posted, “Finals week is upon us! Don't forget to POP by our Popcorn Pop Up today in the Student Center Commons from 11am-1pm. There you'll find free popcorn and giveaways--just a little treat from the Student Center to help get you through the week!” On the other hand while posting about events State College Participant 2A posted, “Considering transferring? Attend the Transfer Fair today in the Gym from 10am-2pm and speak with college representatives from across the state!”

Other than just looking at the content that institutions made available to the immediate public, the researcher also surveyed a closed group on a comprehensive university campus that included the freshman class of a comprehensive institution. Within this group students (and some parents) posted questions, comments or concerns that they had regarding classes, services, events, and other aspects of the institution. While surveying this group, the researcher found that the group managers (several faculty members at the institution) consistently acted as resources to students by responding to the majority of posts that students made. During instances where students expressed anger or frustration regarding things such as reoccurring Internet problems, faculty members commented back providing updates or recommendations to students. Faculty members were not the only individuals to respond to inquiries or concerns. Other student members of the group provided assistance more often than faculty members. As stated in the

interviews, this represented the purpose of the group, which was to promote interaction between students and to build a community online for new and incoming students.

The content analysis also showed that institutions were also plugged into popular trends on social media such as the Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) ice bucket challenge, which involved individuals pouring a bucket of ice water onto themselves to bring awareness to the pain that individuals living with ALS encountered by receiving donations from challenge members. Various institutions posted YouTube videos onto their primary account pages in which the institutional president or various staff members participated in the challenge. Posts such as this were also very popular due to the amount of likes, comments, and shares they received by their followers.

### **Discussion/Conclusion**

By research design, all of the participants included in this study utilized some form of social media. Upon conducting interviews and a content analysis, several aspects of social media use by higher education institutions were discovered. Higher education institutions have a clear understanding that social media is an attractive tool based on the ability to reach students.

In regards to *research question 1* about how higher education institutions utilize social media, the data collected showed that the institutions selected utilized social media as an additional communication outlet in order to reach their target audiences and well as an additional tool to brand themselves online. Although many institutions use social media, it is not considered a primary strategy in regards to communication. Most institutions in this study still relied primarily on printed advertisements, posters, email and more in order to reach their audiences.

Within institutions, different departments use social media differently. Admissions and recruitment offices use social media in an effort to support public relations and marketing of the institution. The content posted by admissions offices was carefully chosen in order to attract prospective students as well as ensure that the institution was viewed favorably by the public. On the other hand, student activity offices used social media with an effort to communicate and engagement with current students. After reviewing the data, it is clear that student activity offices use social media as way to increase face to face interaction with students at events and other programs.

In looking at the results for *research question 2*, That data collected also showed that differences in social media use existed among the different types of institution included in this study. The type of institution has proven to be parallel to its success and knowledge of social media for research and comprehensive institutions within the USG. State colleges and state universities fall behind on social media due to their lack of knowledge and resources. The success of the research and comprehensive institutions on social media can be attributed to the motivation that they have to do well on the medium. The interviews conducted showed that participants who were in charge of the medium wanted their platforms to be the best that they could be. In order to accomplish this, these participants placed a strong emphasis on implementing strategies and as well as researching what the top higher education institutions in social media were doing in an effort to model their behavior.

Although research and comprehensive institutions used social media better than other types of institutions, there are some important differences to note. Comprehensive institutions used students more often in the social media process. Students were involved in the management

of social media platforms as well supplying content that would appeal to other students just like them. These institutions were also more prone to take risks such as implementing new platforms.

In examining research question 3 results, this study showed that the presence of students on social media and the ability to send out messages quickly with no cost made the adoption of social media favorable to the participants in this study. Other important factors that emerged from the data collected are staff size and manager knowledge of social media. Institutions that had social media managers with experience in using social media in different environments (past jobs) were more successful due to their familiarity with the technology and other marketing methods. Staff size also dictated how institutions used social media. In institutions where there were more professionals in the office, more attention was spent on social media. During interviews with participants at smaller schools, staff members indicated that they had too many things on their plate to dedicate the necessary attention to social media. These factors led to a disconnect between what participants wanted to do on social media versus what they were currently doing.

The information collected in this study supports other literature regarding the influx of higher education institutions on social media. The study showed that the attributes of social media can be beneficial to the marketing, communication, and engagement efforts of higher education institutions. However, the continued adoption of these institutions seems to be dependent on the success that they receive. After collecting information that showed that many institutions are in need of more resources that teach them how to effectively manage and utilize social media to receive favorable results, the researcher offers five tips for higher education institutions using social media.

- The first tip is to dedicate additional resources to social media.

During the interviews, multiple institutions noted that they believed that there is more that they can accomplish on social media if they had additional staff members to manage the medium. By not only adding more staff, but also by adding individuals who possess a background in marketing or working with social media platforms, higher education institutions should be able to reach their potential online.

- The second tip is to place a stronger emphasis on conducting research.

Consistently throughout the interviews, participants noted that they had not conducted research into the social media habits or their audience or even other institutions. By spending more time conducting research on these topics, institutions can improve their social media practices and in turn become more successful in engaging with their audiences.

- The third tip is to implement more creative strategies online.

As the content analysis showed, implementing creative strategies online, such as social media campaigns, leads to increased levels of engagement with audience members. The institutions surveyed indicated that they had not yet developed enough interactions with the audiences that they wish for. Therefore by making an effort to include these strategies they can meet these goals.

- The fourth tip is to develop processes for social media.

During the interviews participants were asked if they had current processes in place for implementing social media strategies and platforms. A majority of the institutions indicated they did not have a solid strategy for completing these tasks; instead they just talked about them informally and implemented them in the way that they pleased. Creating a process for social media strategies would benefit social media managers by providing them with a more organized

way to conduct strategies on media as well as make it easier to track what does and does not work in order to improve the strategies for future use. Also, by employing a process, there will be more thought and research devoted to implementing ideas so that they are not conducted until they are concrete and have the potential to be successful.

- The final tip is to not be afraid to take risks.

Judging by the responses collected through the interviews, various participants noted they lacked engagement from their audience however they lacked any specific plans on how to combat that. By beginning to take risks with things that have already shown to be successful, such as social media campaigns, institutions can improve their use of social media and in turn lead to more knowledge and better practices that can be implemented into their routines.

In conclusion, social media managers at higher education institutions recognize that adopting and utilizing social media is critical; however they are still learning how to use it effectively in order to effectively reach their audiences online.

### **Limitations**

Similar to previous studies, research procedures limit the findings of this study. The main research limitation was the small number of participants. Not all participants who were initially contacted agreed to participate in the study. Some social media managers did consent to participate but failed to respond to various calls and emails when the time of the interviews approached. The number of participants available can be considered a restriction on the amount of data collected to answer the research questions noted in the study.

While conducting interviews with participants, it was found that many of the current social media managers could not provide information regarding when their office began to use

social media as well as why they chose to use the platforms that they currently had. The participants that were unable to provide answers to these questions attributed their lack of knowledge to the fact that they were new to the position or were recently assigned the task (social media manager). The lack of this information affected the researcher's ability to place the various participants on an adoption curve as noted in the diffusion of innovation theory, which would have better illustrated how the different groups of institutions adopted social media and also place them into the five adopter categories as defined by Rogers (1983): innovators, early adopters (or acceptors), early majority, late majority and laggards.

A final limitation to the research was the research design. Specifically, this limitation is in regards to the content analysis. The analysis of social media content only covered five random days of social media content. The content analysis proved to be a strong indicator of how these institutions used social media. However, surveying a wider range of content over a longer period of time would have possibly elicited additional results in this study.

### **Future Research**

The study conducted covers the basis of how higher education institutions are using social media. However, future research on this topic could provide a more in-depth and broader perspective. For example, a suggestion for future research would be to compare institutions from other states, including private institutions, in order to identify any differences in their social media use. Future research could also include, if possible, institutions that have not yet adopted social media in an effort to get a wider understanding of how the adoption process works in higher education. A final suggestion for future research is to survey how students feel about higher education institutions communicating with them via social media. By focusing on research from the prospective of students, researchers will be able to understand firsthand



student's (the target of these messages) expectations and habits regarding interacting with higher education institutions online. This topic would be vital to investigate further as some participants in this study noted how students felt uncomfortable regarding interacting with them in the social media environment.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Recruitment Materials**

#### **Recruitment Email**

Hello (participant's name),

My name is Shauntel Hall, and I am a senior journalism student at Georgia Southern University. I am conducting research as a part of my thesis project with the University Honors Program under the mentorship of Dr. Camille Broadway, an associate professor in the Department of Communication Arts.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how higher education institutions are utilizing social media and if this use differs between organizations within the University System of Georgia.

I am contacting you based on your expertise in this area. If you choose to participate, I will be asking you questions related to social media use in your office. Participation in this research is voluntary and will include a phone interview that will be audio recorded. The interviews will last approximately 30 minutes to an hour and will be scheduled between September and October. Please see the informed consent document attached to this email for more details. Participants will verbally consent to participating in the study at the beginning of the recorded interview.

If you are interested in participating, please let me know at your earliest convenience to arrange an interview time. I will be following up via telephone to gauge your interest in participating.

Thank you in advance for your time,

Shauntel Hall

#### **Recruitment Telephone Script**

Hello (participant's name),

My name is Shauntel Hall, and I am calling to follow-up to an email I sent you. I am a senior journalism student at Georgia Southern University and I am conducting research as a part of my thesis project with the University Honors Program under the mentorship of Dr. Camille Broadway, an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Arts.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how higher education institutions are utilizing social media and if this use differs between organizations within the University System of Georgia.

I am contacting you based on your expertise in this area and to gauge your interest in participating.

Are you available for a phone interview? When would be a good time for you?

Thank you so much for your time.

## **Informed Consent Document**

Hi (participant's name),

My name is Shauntel Hall and I am a senior journalism student at Georgia Southern University. I am doing research as part of my capstone project with the University Honors Program, under the direction of Dr. Camille Broadway, an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Arts.

The research that I will be conducting is regarding how higher education institutions utilize social media. The purpose of this study is provide an understanding regarding how higher education institutions are targeting their audiences using social media and also identify if the adoption of social media as an innovation varies among types of institutions within the University System of Georgia.

The extent of your participation will be answering my interview questions, which will take place during a phone interview that will be audio recorded. If you wish to participate, at the beginning of the interview, you will be asked if you have read and acknowledge this consent form and will at that time verbally consent to participating in this study.

I will ask you a serious of questions related to social media use at your institution. Interviews will include a series of open-ended questions from a prepared questionnaire. Questions will be constructed to cover the time of adoption of social media at your institutions, reasoning for adoption, common social media practices, social media management, social media platforms used, and value found in utilizing social media. There are no right or wrong answers, and names and identifying information will be removed. During the interview, please do not provide your name or identifying information.

The potential risk may be to the career of the participant if confidentiality is compromised. You will be asked to evaluate how well your organization uses social media, but confidentiality measures should prevent you from being identified and should limit any risk to you for participating. A benefit to you as a participant includes contributing general knowledge about social media use in higher education and helping other researchers and institutions understand how social media is used in the higher education sector. Once my project is completed, I can provide you with a copy of the final thesis if you are interested in my findings.

The interviews will last approximately 30 minutes to an hour. You have the right to ask me any questions throughout the interview and you have the right to stop the interview at any time. You can also decline to answer any questions that you feel necessary. There is no penalty for not completing the interview or withdrawing early.

The information gathered in interviews will be kept as confidential as possible. The researcher named above and the researcher's faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent, will have access to the information. The names of the participants and other identifying details will be eliminated and replaced with generic terms such as Respondent A and Institution A. It will be maintained in a locked filing cabinet of the faculty advisor's office for 3 years following completion of the study before being discarded per the Board of Regents retention policy.

Deidentified or coded data from this study may be placed in a publically available repository for study validation and further research. You will not be identified by name in the data set or any reports using information obtained from this study, and your confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.

The honors program and I would like to thank you for your participation. The information will benefit the academic and professional community and allow people to further understand how higher education institutions use social media. You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to this interview.

Thank you,

Shauntel Hall

## Appendix B

### Question Guide

1. Define social media in your own words.
2. When did you begin using social media personally?
3. Which social media platforms do you utilize personally?
4. What value do you see in each?
5. How often do you personally post to social media? (Prompt: several times a day, once a day, once a week)
6. How easy was it to establish the platforms you have now? (Prompt: one platform harder than others, one platform was most simple)
7. Do you perceive social media to be difficult to use?
  - a. If so, could you describe some of these difficulties?
8. What is your age?
9. What is your job title at your office?
10. What duties does your job include?
11. Are you the only person who manages social media in your office?
12. Is there a team that manages social media in your office?
13. What are the ages of the team members?
14. Are there any students on the management team?
15. When did your office begin to use social media?
16. What influenced this decision?
17. Which social media platforms does your office use?
18. Which platform do you consider to be the primary platform?
  - a. Why is it considered the primary platform?
  - b. How does your behavior on this platform differ from the others?
19. Why did your office choose to use these platforms?
20. Is the same content sent out on all platforms?
  - a. If not, describe the process in which you decide the appropriate platform for the content.
21. Have you started using a new platform within the last two years?
  - a. If so, what was it?
  - b. Describe the process that led you to implement this new platform into your social media routine.
22. How often does your organization post on social media?
  - a. Is this the same for all your social media platforms?
  - b. If not, how does it differ?
23. Is there an approval process for social media content?
  - a. If so, what is that process?
24. What is your office's process for implementing new social media platforms and tactics?
  - a. What office members (positions) are involved in this process?
25. Describe your primary audience on social media.
26. How do you define your social media audience?

27. Does your audience differ across your various social media platforms?
  - a. If so, how is it different?
28. Does your office keep track of changes in your audience's social media use?
  - a. Why or why not?
  - b. If so, how does that information influence your social media routine?
29. Have there been any changes within the ways your office uses any of your social media platforms?
  - a. What factors influenced this change in behavior?
30. Have you researched how other universities use social media?
  - a. How, if at all, did you utilize that information?
  - b. What kinds of universities did you look at? Why?
31. Who is the target audience of your organization?
32. What other forms of communication does your organization use to reach this audience?
  - a. How does social media differ from these other communication channels?
33. What feedback, if any, have you received from your audience about which channel they prefer for messages that you deliver?
34. To what extent, if any, do you define social media being a part of your overall communication plan to your office?
  - a. What changes do you predict will occur in the future regarding this?
35. How much engagement does your office receive from your audience on social media?
  - a. How do you define and measure that engagement?
36. Does your office utilize social media analytics?
  - a. How, if at all, do these results affect your social media routine?
  - b. If so, can you describe a change made based on analytic data?
37. Does your office have a social media policy?
  - a. What was the process for developing this policy?
38. Do you perceive social media to be difficult to use?
  - a. If so, could you define some of these difficulties?
39. What value, if at all, do you see in using social media?
40. Describe any barriers to social media use.
  - a. Are they organizational barriers?
  - b. If so, describe these in detail.
41. How do you see the university's use of social media changing over the next five years?
  - a. How do you see this change reflecting the use of social media in your office?



## Appendix C

### Sample Interview Transcript

#### Participant 1A

**R:** Define social media in your own words.

**P:** I view social media as a way to link you me to my family and friends. Primarily at this point in my life I'm really using it to keep up with other people's kids and families and to see what my friends are doing. But also I'll use it for business purposes as far as looking at sales or ads or things like that. Also, I'll use it to find ways to keep me sort of positive throughout the day. i look for positive reminders or scripture or just things that are uplifting to counteract all the negative things that you see people post sometimes. So really I just see social media as a way to keep me plugged into those around me.

**R:** When did you begin using social media personally?

**P:** I started using it in late 2007

**R:** Which social media platforms do you utilize personally?

**P:** Facebook, Instagram, a little Twitter, and LinkedIn

**R:** What value do you see in each?

**P:** With Facebook it's really just that more people are there. There are a lot more people that I am connected to there. Twitter I use more for news and also for bands and concerts. I know some people on Twitter but I am not nearly as connected on Twitter as I am on Facebook. Instagram of course is really just for friends. I really don't pay attention to businesses on Instagram because I think their pictures are just boring. LinkedIn is more of a professional network so with that I am just looking more to connect with colleagues who are in the same profession that I'm in and get connected through that medium.

**R:** How often do you personally post to social media? (Prompt: several times a day, once a day, once a week)

**P:** On Facebook I would say maybe once a day. Maybe twice. I would say Twitter maybe once a month or so. I really don't have a lot to say on Twitter. On Instagram, probably three or four times a week I would say. It just really depends upon what I'm doing and if I feel like i should sort of document it. LinkedIn is something where I really don't post all that often. It's more of just again staying connected to certain people in my profession.

**R:** How easy was it to establish the platforms you have now? (Prompt: one platform harder than others, one platform was most simple)

**P:** Not really, it's been so long since I've set all of them up. But there really wasn't anything complex about any of them. One that was definitely the most time consuming was LinkedIn because I went through a lot of detail on my job description and responsibilities and things like that. So that was really the most time consuming to actually set up. Otherwise, I would say all of them are pretty easy.

**R:** Do you perceive social media to be difficult to use?

**P:** No, not at all

**R:** What is your age?

**P:** 34

**R:** What is your job title at your office?

**P:** Communications Officer for Enrollment Services

**R:** What duties does your job include?

**P:** I do a lot of writing and a lot of marketing. I serve as a liaison between the admissions office and also our communications and marketing department. I am in charge of our marketing materials, our promotion materials, our website, web development, outgoing email campaigns, marketing campaigns and things like that. And also social media.

**R:** Are you the only person who manages social media in your office?

**P:** Sort of it's really a team effort. So basically how we have it set up our twitter feeds our Facebook and then we also have Instagram which I think Instagram may also be linked to those two but it also might stand alone right now. So essentially, we have one counselor who posts to Instagram, she is responsible for Instagram. So she takes care of posts because she has a lot of interaction with our tour guides and student ambassadors. We have someone else in our office who will typically post to twitter. He just has a very good what we would call 'twitter brain' as far as he can give distinct, catchy statements quickly and people seem to respond well to what he has to say. So those actually feed directly into our Facebook stream so it kind of feeds Facebook a lot and twitter is being fed, but while he's responsible more for posting links, comments or articles or things that he thinks are relevant. I am actually responsible for responding to people may questions. A lot of the time we may have students who come to our Facebook page with questions about admissions or getting into the institution and then I always respond to those. Same thing with twitter, for example this year we had students who tweeted directly to us to find

out how many applications we had received, if we would be releasing decisions early, and so I respond to those. I also respond to people who may be used one of our hashtags. So for example, we promote a certain hashtag for our visitors. So if we see a student or parent who has visited and has posted that hashtag then I always make sure to send them a quick thank you or thanks for visiting glad to see you or something like to acknowledge it.

**R:** Is there a team that manages social media in your office? What are the ages of the team members?

**P:** Let's see one, her birthday is actually tomorrow so I'm actually not sure of her exact age. I think she's 26. I want to say she is mid-twenties. The other person who posts on Facebook, he is 40.

**R:** Are there any students on the management team?

**P:** No, they are all staff.

**R:** When did your office begin to use social media? What influenced this decision?

**P:** They have been using it before I got here. I started here in April 2012. We already had Facebook and twitter handles already set up at that time so I'm not sure when. Instagram we actually established in the past year.

**R:** Which social media platforms does your office use?

**P:** Facebook, Instagram and Twitter

**R:** Which platform do you consider to be the primary platform? Why is it considered the primary platform?

**P:** As far as reach, I always sort of fall to Facebook because I feel like a lot of people are on Facebook and that also includes not only prospective students but also parents and alumni. But really I would say that Twitter is probably our many platform because we sent most of our messages out on Twitter and then again its fed out to Facebook and try to force equal part participation going onto Twitter because we feel that more students on Twitter than Facebook. We do every year on Facebook, once we've met our first round, we do create a class of page sort of like a class of 2019 page, for students to go online and like that page or join that page and start messaging to students via that page. So that's one way that we do use Facebook but I would say our probably driver on social media at this time is Twitter.

**R:** How does your behavior on this platform differ from the others?

**P:** On Twitter we typically try to a little more engaging as far as succinct statements but also something that will just catch your eye. The person that we have in charge of Twitter is very witty. He can get something down to 140 characters and make it catchy and something that you're going to want to click on. That's pretty fun. He is also post pictures and something that is quirky and fun. We just always get a really good response rate from that. It's also interesting to see something that's successful on Twitter and we also find that to be pretty successful on Facebook as well. But again it's fed from Twitter so that sort of makes sense.

**R:** Why did your office choose to use these platforms? Is the same content sent out on all platforms? If not, describe the process in which you decide the appropriate platform for the content.

**P:** We actually use Instagram for a different purpose. With Instagram what we're trying do is create a sense of face and place so by that just really giving an image of staff members and our counselors. For instance, if our counselors are travelling and maybe they post a picture of a college fair or something like that. We want students to sort of get an idea of who we are and not be afraid of us essentially. We find that students tend to be intimidated sometimes by admissions officers and we want to remind them that we are regular people too. We are not 100 years old or really stringent or angry or like old man Muppets that you see or anything like that we're just regular people and a lot of them are younger people as well. So hopefully try to ease some of that stress. I know what we also try to do with Instagram is post pictures of tour guides, of our student ambassadors and things like the campus to help students recognize what Georgia Tech is and what it's like, what the campus is like day in and day out, what the people are like and things like that. So Instagram is more of a kind of fun in a way. For example, this past week was our homecoming and leading up to that our office did sort of a through the homecoming week did different things each day of the week so one day we had twin day so different counselors dressed up together the same and we posted that on Instagram. Just little things like to help students know exactly who we are, who is reading their application and that sort of thing.

**R:** Have you started using a new platform within the last two years? If so, what was it?

**P:** Yes, Instagram

**R:** Describe the process that led you to implement this new platform into your social media routine.

**P:** We really just tried Instagram as shot in the dark. It was something that we weren't using and we felt that is was where most students are. And that's just given to us from our current student ambassadors when we had those conversations with them about what platforms are you using and many of them said they were on Instagram. There really wasn't a strategy behind it. We just started doing some random posts and getting some things out there to sort of gauge what would happen. Over the course of the past summer we tried to nail down a specific plan on what we trying to do through social media which is just active engagement of students and the families of prospective people who were involved or want to be involved with the institute. But really when

we started out Instagram it was to, I think what we were trying to push at that time was [Institution specific hashtag] which was hashtag that we were using, we just wanted students who were committing to [Institution] or the incoming class to post pictures and things like that. So it was really just something that we started from the ground level. I wanted it to be sort of an organic effort not something that was necessarily an official feeling paid, just something that felt a little more granular or organic.

**R:** How often does your organization post on social media? Is this the same for all your social media platforms? If not, how does it differ?

**P:** I'd say probably daily honestly. If not, every couple of days. Facebook we don't post all that often just because it being fed by Twitter so we don't really have to manage it as much. Twitter we do post around once a day or once every couple of days. Same with Instagram.

**R:** Is there an approval process for social media content?

**P:** There is not

**R:** What is your office's process for implementing new social media platforms and tactics? What office members (positions) are involved in this process?

**P:** We have a retreat each year, our leadership does, and essentially along with the communications folks and we sort of look at the year ahead, and find out what our goals are. So this year it was more of looking at social media and making more of a goal of being actively engaged and figuring out what are we trying to do with this and what are we trying to accomplish with this platform which is really how we came to where are now. It really most sense for someone who has a lot of interaction with our ambassador to be the one that was managing Instagram because she could easily have students send her pictures and take pictures in the lobby. She was interacting with a lot of people and still does so she's a great resource for that. Our staff member who posts to Twitter just has a knack for Twitter. We considered resolving all that over to me for posting on Twitter but we knew that there was just too much value in his style. People are really responsive to it and it's not something that you can really duplicate so luckily he was still able to post with the agreement that I would respond. And that's worked out really well for us. Because again it's something where that he can just use from his mobile device and then it's posted, it's updated, it's fresh and then we're done. What we do like to do moving forward is to draw in students more for yield and once they've been accepted to [institution] get them to turn the corner and deposit to come to the institute. So helping them connect with each other, which is really good about the class of 2019 page for example once we create that. Let me backtrack, so the class of 2018 page that we created last year, what I really saw in that is that a lot of students were connecting with each other. For example, one of the students posted 'hey, I'm a biomedical engineer from Florida' and other people would post 'I'm from Florida' or 'I'm biomedical engineering' or something like that. Or someone would say 'hey, I'm looking for a roommate. I'm interested in living on west campus. Message me if you're interested with a whole profile of themselves. So a lot of students were using it to connect with

each other to find roommates which I thought was really interesting. But that's also just a good platform for students who are considering [institution] to get an idea of who was coming here and if it's something that they want to do and if people like them would be here. So that's what we try to use it for especially going into the spring of the year to use it as a tool to help students understand what our campus culture is like and to also help them understand and get to know each other better so that they can make those connections before they get to orientation and things like that.

**R:** Describe your primary audience on social media.

**P:** Our primary audience are high school students.

**R:** How do you define your social media audience?

**P:** I see our primary audience as being students who are 16-17 years old who are on social media. I would say that a large party that we have involved are parents on Facebook especially but also on Twitter. We have a lot of parents that I know follow us that will ask questions and do things like that. So really we're targeting prospective students and their families.

**R:** Does your audience differ across your various social media platforms? If so, how is it different?

**P:** I haven't really seen many parents who are on Instagram, that's primarily student driven I find. Twitter is also very student heavy. Facebook is very parent heavy.

**R:** Does your office keep track of changes in your audience's social media use? Why or why not? If so, how does that information influence your social media routine?

**P:** Not at this time. This is a work in progress for us. So we really haven't been able to dive into those specifics just because of the capacity of our staff to do the amount of things that we're doing already. So social media is one of a lot of things that we're doing. So we're not able to delve that far down into the data just yet.

**R:** Have there been any changes within the ways your office uses any of your social media platforms? What factors influenced this change in behavior?

**P:** Not really at this time. We've sort of been on the same track of using it for those prospective students and also admitted students and helping them to connect with each other. Again, the biggest change has been trying to give that sense of face and place on Instagram. And that's the newest edition since I've been here. So again that's more just focused on what is this place like? People drive by us all the time on the interstate but that doesn't mean that you've actually been

here. What is it actually like here? What is it actually like to be a student here? I think Instagram is a great way to frame that conversation sometimes.

**R:** Have you researched how other universities use social media? How, if at all, did you utilize that information? What kinds of universities did you look at? Why?

**P:** We haven't really done any formal research. Now that's not saying that perhaps the institute has not. We do have a staff members who do social media for the entire university. So I'm sure that they've done a lot more formal research. For our department, we haven't done any formal research. I follow other schools to see what they're posting and to see what they're doing. A lot of our staff members do that. We'll follow other schools or like other pages just to see what kind of things they've posted but it isn't something where we do any formal research. We typically look at our peers. Typically mid to large size universities and colleges from all around.

**R:** Who is the target audience of your organization?

**P:** It is our same target audience on social media

**R:** What other forms of communication does your organization use to reach this audience?

**P:** Really email and print. Email campaigns are something that we use very heavily. Along with print campaigns, we do search pieces, summer mailers, things like that. We also use web chats, online webinars, online chat nights and things like that to help the students connect with us as well. Of course we also have our visit days and open houses where our counselors travel a lot to different high schools and things like that. But really as far as our primary communication efforts, it is very email driven at this time.

**R:** How does social media differ from these other communication channels?

**P:** Social media has to be more immediate. You can't be posting yesterday's news. Yesterday's news has to come out today. Also, social media I think can be a little more fun and a little more informal. This week we posted something on Twitter about congratulations because one of our tour guides was named Miss [Institution Name]. That's not something that you're going to want to send out in an email to 6,000 prospective students. But it's something that you can easily post on social media and get some retweets, or some likes or congratulations or something like that. It's just a different way to interact with our audience.

**R:** What feedback, if any, have you received from your audience about which channel they prefer for messages that you deliver?

**P:** We haven't received a lot of feedback from our audience at this time. We are currently doing some focus groups, going into our new design pieces and things like that but we really haven't surveyed our current students about our social media efforts at this time.

**R:** To what extent, if any, do you define social media being a part of your overall communication plan to your office?

**P:** It's certainly in the forefront of our minds, it's something that we do keep in our conversations constantly. I really can't give you a percentage of how much I say that we really utilize it above anything else. I would say that we more utilize it along everything else. For example, if we had an email push for applications and our early action deadline. We are going to send that out through email and social media. It's not only going to go through social media. I would say that it supplements at this time our primary efforts. Our primary efforts are always going to come through email or a student portal. Once they apply, every student has a portal they can access so primary communication comes through those channels but social media is something that we use to supplement to let know if we need to post something in five different places to be sure that they hopefully get it in one of those places.

**R:** What changes do you predict will occur in the future regarding this?

**P:** I'm really not sure at this time. It's something that we do want to continue to grow as we move forward but it's not something that's going to become the #1 way that we communicate with our students or applicants. We're always going to use more personalized ways to do that whether it via email, mail, or through letters. Whatever the case may be.

**R:** How much engagement does your office receive from your audience on social media? How do you define and measure that engagement?

**P:** Really the engagement that we see are the pop ups from Facebook that say this percentage of people have seen your post, this percentage of people have viewed it, or whatever the case may be so whenever we post something we do look to that. Same with Twitter. I actually utilize Hootsuite to manage the different hashtags that we have going to sort of gauge that involvement and that interaction. Our visit hashtag is one that i monitor daily, and multiple times a day and of course it's always used traditionally during more heavily visited times of the year. For example, if we have an open house day, an admitted student day or during spring break when we have a flood of high school students visiting - that's when we're going to see that traffic a lot more heavily. Same thing after acceptances are released. We can always gauge a lot more involvement because students are excited about getting accepted. Their parents are excited. But we don't really have any hard numbers or firm measures that we use to gauge that. It's more of just an organic, watching it daily, and just sort of being involved in monitoring it.

**R:** Does your office utilize social media analytics? How, if at all, do these results affect your social media routine? If so, can you describe a change made based on analytic data?



**P:** We use google analytics for our website but we don't use any for our social media outside of Hootsuite and outside of what Facebook provides so that you can dig into data which we do try to do. So no we don't really use any analytics outside of that.

**R:** Does your office have a social media policy? What was the process for developing this policy?

**P:** There is a social media policy for the institute. We do not have a specific social media policy written up for enrollment services.

**R:** Do you perceive social media to be difficult to use?

**P:** No

**R:** What value, if at all, do you see in using social media?

**P:** I think it's really great for student engagement. It's a great way to reach students where they are. Each day they receive emails from so many people. Not only people but colleges, companies, friends, and everything else to the point where email is becoming irrelevant to some students because they get flooded with so many all the time. So to be able to engage with them on social media and to show sort of the lighthearted side of who we are, our campus, our student body, and things that happen in our office, I think there's a lot of value in that because people can see sort of the fun side at the same time. And again there are the people who will log onto Twitter and log onto Facebook and send a question that they just don't want to bother to send via email but they'll send online through social media. You know what ever work for them. Whenever we can meet students where they are I think it's an advantage to be able to do that.

**R:** Describe any barriers to social media use.

**P:** From the audience perspective, I would say maybe the access to technology you know access to smartphones or things like that. I think that is a primary driver of social media. Professionally, there really aren't any barriers which itself is a little bit of a barrier itself. It's so wide open and you have to be careful how you use it because it's really easy to fire off a statement or say something real quickly and you could get into trouble. So that's why with our office we only have a very small amount of people who are involved with it that are managing it. So even if we have other people who may want to contribute, they come through one of the three of us and it funnels out that way. That's the way that we ensure that everything is appropriate, on par, and on message. But I really don't see a lot of barriers in using social media at this time.

**R:** Are they organizational barriers?

**P:** Not at this time for our division.

**R:** How do you see the university's use of social media changing over the next five years? How do you see this change reflecting the use of social media in your office?

**P:** We have a social media manager who is over social media for the entire campus. Which is a huge undertaking so a lot of times people they go out and have meetings with other people on campus and take pictures of random things on campus. It's been a great resource for us because we can meet with them and get ideas on what we can be doing and what we should be doing. We're a large enough place so that every division, every school, or every college has their own Facebook page so it's a lot of content out there. It can be a little bit overwhelming for people when they look for one school but probably find 15 or 20 different pages associated with the school all of which have a different sort of view regarding what they are trying to get out there. I think for us it's something where as time goes by in the next five years we'll be more and more strategic with it as we continue to get more applications and seek out those students and so on. I think that it's something that will become more a strategic priority but right now it's something we're still trying to get a handle on. We sort of have a mantra of we'll try something new and if it doesn't work, it doesn't work. We're not afraid of that because the only way to find something that works is to give it a shot and try and if you don't try you never know. So we're always open to suggestions from within our staff. We have a really open and really great team oriented staff. We have counselors that send us pictures to post online or send us stories that they find. So it's something that I think within the next five years we'll continue to push more buy-in from our own staff who can get that buy-in from students they know can get involved and give us ideas. We rely a lot on those who have their feet on the ground that can give us sort of the lay of the land and project that to our audience.