

Recruiting the New Generation: The Use of Social Media Platforms for College Advertising

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COME 468

Abstract

The following research proposal looks at a specific context of colleges and universities using social media to advertise to prospective students. A variety of platforms are split into categories of visual, video, and text-based platforms in which around 200 highschool juniors and seniors will rate the ads they see on excitement, interest, and visual appeal. The ads will be from different colleges to test how engaged traditional prospective students will be on these different types of platforms. The results will inform colleges on how to best reach out and recruit students in this new age of social media based news and ads and how to best utilize this technology.

The idea of college social media sites and interactive pages affecting students' college decisions is an important phenomena to delve into further and understand as college's become more and more student-centric. The student experience of looking at traditional four year colleges has changed as technology upgrades and college becomes more and more accessible or considered a "norm" in society. Now, as colleges adapt to this new more involved student, they must look at their social media methods in order to reach prospective students at their own technological level. Through this research, colleges will be able to rework their social media with the information gathered as to how prospective students perceive advertising by colleges on various platforms. This will also help the mass communication community understand in general how to reach the new age of prospective college students as well as the impact social media may have on them.

Therefore, a broad question to ask is how social media impacts students' decision of which colleges to look at and apply to. Therefore, this research will look at how different styles of social media platforms (text, visual, and video) affect traditional prospective college students, people in their mid-late teens and twenties. This will be measured through the interactions on each type of platform based on excitement, interest, and visual appeal.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

This research was informed by various sources, their measures and finds, as well as mass communication theory. Specifically the Elaboration Likelihood Model will be discussed as it can predict the type of behavior results in people after being exposed to media or advertising. This will inform the research and hypotheses. Also, previous sources on college media use and other

experiments done involving multiple platforms will inform the experiment and hypotheses. It is important to understand the context of social media use in colleges and how that has changed as well as understanding the large amount of media platforms out there to use.

Elaboration Likelihood Model

This unique context, studying college relationships with social media and the effects on prospective students, will be looked at using persuasive theory, more specifically the Elaboration Likelihood Model. A broader understanding of this cognition process can be found in the *Applied Mass Communication Theory* textbook, which goes through the persuasive theory and underlying processes (Rosenberry, J. & Vicker, L., 2017, ps. 76-81). The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), proposed by Petty and Cacioppo, builds off the original persuasive message steps proposed by psychologist William McGuire. This model informs researchers on the processes consumers may go through as they receive a persuasive message. As any college advertisement will attempt to be persuasive or at least appealing in some way, this broad overview of the model will assist in understanding how to set up the experiment and account for the process taking place as the prospective student looks through different advertisements.

Types of Media Platforms

Social media is being used more and more commonly by colleges to reach the next generation of students. Research done by Dr. Nora Barnes and Ava Lescault (2013) looked at how social media is used by colleges and universities to recruit students. It was found that there has been a significant increase in school officials using social media to promote their universities that seems to directly attribute to an increase in enrollment. This research into that increase and

the multiple formats in use on college campuses not only explains how social media has become more and more of a normal tool of advertisement and communication but also how colleges have adopted social media within their processes. With this in mind, research regarding colleges use of social media to draw prospective students and keep them engaged throughout the enrollment process is necessary to understanding which medium colleges should be using. Knowing from the research that a large amount of colleges already utilize social media for some aspect of student interaction, it will be interesting to keep building on this knowledge.

Platforms used in this experiment will have three different types of advertisements: visual, video, and text. A study by Voorveld, van Noort, Muntinga and Bronner (2017) informed the experiment of such platforms that have already been studied in media and how they could be examined in the college media context. This study also explained that there is limited data and research available concerning advertising engagement on social media as many platforms are relatively new, as are advertisement plans involving media. It was seen that how consumers' engaged with social media platforms drove engagement with the advertising that has been embedded within these platforms, as well as how influential this advertising is. It maps social media users' engagement experiences with Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter, Google+, Instagram, Pinterest, and Snapchat and people's experiences and evaluations of the advertising on each. It was shown that engagement is very context specific, as in each media platform allows for various experiences to happen uniquely, which in turn pulls people to enjoying and engaging in certain media platforms. This, combined with Barnes' research, provided this experiment with its variable platforms of study and understanding in how these platforms' advertisements may differ for students' interest levels and appeal. Likewise, Smallwood's study (2018) processes

social media cross-platforms to show the use and effective-ness of advertising across many platforms, as most colleges do. This study helps inform the experiment taking place, as most colleges will have multiple avenues of advertising and may show up many times on different platforms.

Social Media Use and Limits

Platforms are important, but so is understanding how people will receive and evaluate the advertisements embedded in each medium. A study done by Haugtvedt, Petty, and Cacioppo (1992) analyzes the necessity for cognition when viewing an advertisement. Basically, three experiments were done to understand the role of cognition in advertising, how much cognition plays a part in actual persuasion, and how personality variables play roles in interest and cognition in advertising. If someone is less inclined to think deeply about advertisements they will rely on peripheral cues surrounding the advertisement when responding to it (Haugtvedt, Petty, & Cacioppo, 1992, p 239). On the other hand, it was shown by Haugtvedt, Petty, & Cacioppo (1992) that those with a need to think about advertisements (have high cognition) were more likely to think deeply about the advertisement and actual product attributes instead of just going with what the peripheral cues said. This is vital to understanding the attitudes teenagers and prospective college students might have and their ability to be influenced by advertisements as well as the peripheral cues associated with them.

A study conducted by Diehl, Weeks, & Gil (2015) explored the interactions and news-seeking behaviors on social media and how these interactions lead to different networks, opinion exposure, and changing political viewpoints. It is a nationally representative survey that dissects how people use social media and hypothesized that no matter which way it is used,

media will still contribute to democratic processes and opinion making. Thus, this explored the wide variety in which media is used, which is important for college media outlets to understand as they post and create content for their prospective audiences.

Another study that looked at social media fatigue and how it affects people and their behavior, is necessary in understanding the many variables of media platforms and advertisements (Lee, Son, & Kim, 2015, p. 51). There tend to be unexpected side effects of overuse. Though these information and communication technologies (ICT) are great for innovative ways of reaching businesses, people, and specific audiences like students, too much use of ICTs can lead to stress and fatigue. More studies were done by Park (2019) delving into news overloading and how it affects people especially using different social and messaging systems. Though it is based in South Korea, the concept of news overloading could be applied to U.S. college students and understanding the extent of their media interaction. This study is critical to comprehending the limit of college advertising. If colleges are advertising too much to prospective students, overloading them with information, opportunities, and deadlines, on college media consumption and provide an idea to the limit that prospective students may have when consuming college media.

Hypotheses

Previous experiments have focused on studying people's use of different platforms, their engagement in media, and at what point they begin to avoid or be over stimulated by media. This is all informative to the creation of the experiment as the participants will be able to answer questions about fatigue, favorite platform, etc. and will show how persuasive the advertisements

are on each platform. The following hypotheses will build upon the Elaboration Likelihood Model within the context of prospective students and college advertising.

H1: The participants will be more excited to look at colleges with visual social media rather than text or video social media.

H2: The participants will be more interested in colleges with visual social media rather than text or video social media..

H3: The participants will find college advertisements more appealing with visual social media rather than text or video social media..

H4: College's visual social media will cause more interaction from prospective students with colleges than text or video social media.

These proposals will be tested using the background knowledge of ELM, overstimulation, understanding of cognition vs. peripheral cues, and the different social media types (text, video, visual) currently used by colleges. Thus the ELM model will be built upon in this context of college recruiting, an increasingly competitive aspect campuses are dealing with and responding to across the country.

Method

To test the hypotheses described above, this proposed experiment will examine colleges' video, visual, and text use of social media and how they correlate with the recruitment of prospective students. The experimental design will be 1x3, testing the response of participants'

excitement, interest, and appeal to each type of social media. The participants will see all three types of social media and scale their reactions accordingly.

Sample

The proposed experiment will take place in three different highschools and recruit roughly 200 students in total to participate. They will receive extra in their College Prep classes if they participate. The students will be in their third and/or fourth year of high school as this is the traditional age of prospective college students.

Procedure

Participants will fill out an informed consent form, which will then be collected from each individual and recorded so that they may receive their incentive. Participants will be randomly assigned to view advertisements of either visual social media, text social media, or video based social media. Each group will be asked to interact with their advertisements and record their excitement, interest, and appeal to the social media advertisements. After viewing the materials, participants will be asked to answer questions about their typical media usage (visual, text, and video), time spent on social media and exposure to advertisements. The anticipated completion time for these tasks is forty minutes to fit in a high school class period.

Measures

Measures for this experiment will be taken for demographic information as well as the categories discussed below. Participants will have to answer questions on gender, age, ethnicity, and information about family history regarding college education. They will also be asked if they are interested in colleges, if they have seen college ads, and if they have started to look at any

schools prior to this experiment. The participants will then be shown (on a tablet) a multitude of college advertisements carefully chosen that are video, visual or text-based platforms depending on the group they were randomly assigned to. Links will be available in some forms of media, but will be deactivated on the ads during the experiment. Questions will be asked based on what type of platform they are seeing the ad on, not the school itself.

Excitement and Interest

The variables measured in this study are excitement, interest, and visual appeal to provide an overall average for each platform category. Excitement will be assessed using a scale from a study by Voorveld, van Noort, Muntinga, & Bronner (2018). The scale originally measured entertainment, but was restructured to measure excitement the social media advertisements through dichotomy, where participants would check the boxes that applied to them after each ad. This was done instead of a likert scale because too many different platforms and media were involved and created a heavy burden on respondents. Therefore, the participants will just check whether they experienced the excitement prompts after each ad and then the amount of experiences they checked will be calculated into an average number for excitement. The prompts for excitement are as follows: *Gave me enjoyment, Made me cheerful, Gave me a pleasant feeling, Gave me a satisfied feeling, Made me feel invested, Was relaxing, Annoyed me, Was rather unclear, Made me nervous, and I felt involved in it.*

Interest will be assessed using a scale originally measuring stimulation from the study by Voorveld, van Noort, Muntinga, & Bronner (2018). The questions were restructured to measure the interest developed by student participants in relation to the social media advertisement, also done in a dichotomic style, the same as excitement. The interest prompts will also be taken and

averaged out to get a score for interest for each type of advertisement. The interest prompts are as follows: *Made me enthusiastic, Fascinated me, Was original and unique, Kept me informed of college information, Clicked link to see more, and Offered me something new.*

Visual Appeal and Interaction

Visual Appeal will be assessed using the Perceived Social Affordances of Communication Channels Scale because it can help identify the specific affordances, or aspects of the social media platforms that students enjoy or like (Graham & Mazer, 2020). This scale is also easily replicable when thinking ahead to future experiments and can show across platforms what is preferred by viewers and users.

The totals for each categorical group (visual, video, and text-based advertisements) will be averaged at the end to test H4. Thus the excitement, interest, and visual appeal scores will be used to determine what participants experienced in each advertisement platform category.

Results

I plan to analyze the experimental responses of each advertisement category group to see which advertisement type is best received by college students. The data will be gone through so that any participants who did not fully complete their questions will not be part of the data. Data points will be averaged for each independent variable category to compare to each other. I will also explain the data more by describing the frequency of responses to each question, percentage of male and female participants, and the range of answers to experiment questions.

Hypothesis 1 (H1) will be tested using a one-way independent ANOVA or the Krunkel-Wallis test to denote the excitement based on the different social media advertisement

categories. I predict that the participants will be more excited about the visual media advertisement than either video or text media.

Hypothesis 2 (H2) will be tested using a one-way independent ANOVA or the Krunkel-Wallis test to measure the interest of participants based on the different social media advertisement categories. I predict that the participants will be more interested in advertisements using visual media platforms than either video or text media.

Hypothesis 3 (H3) will be tested using a one-way independent ANOVA or the Krunkel-Wallis test to measure the appeal of participants based on the different social media advertisement categories. I predict that the advertisements using visual media platforms will be more appealing to participants than either video or text media.

Hypothesis 4 (H4) will be tested using a one-way independent ANOVA or the Krunkel-Wallis test to measure participants favoring visual media over video or text based on social media advertisement categories. I predict that the participants will be more interested in advertisements using visual media platforms than either video or text media as it provides more engagement socially and typically provides information quicker.

Discussion

Limitations

The first overall limitation is that because it is an experiment, participants are not seeing advertisements in realistic scenarios. Also, many participants may not answer every question and the missing data will be weeded through and those participants scores will be taken out as the entire process will inform the data. Another limitation is that many aspects contribute to interest in colleges and ads can only explain so much about said colleges. This can be accounted for with

the different measures of excitement, interest, and visual appeal, letting the researchers know which ads participants were affected by most in the initial preview or look at a college, keeping it strictly about the advertisements colleges use and not the specified aspects of a college.

Implications and Conclusion

The above limitations are small hindrances in comparison to what can be learned. As there is a lack of research in identifying the different types of social media platforms that can be used best to advertise, there are many more opportunities to test such information. This is especially true as new generations are given more social media technology options and advanced platforms to stay informed and receive information. This information will help colleges to advertise their schools and programs, meeting the prospective students where they are at in terms of technology use and the information they can find on social media. It could be informative to learn what is necessary to have on college advertisements and social media platforms to catch students' attention as well as which types of platforms peak interest and excitement about college. Therefore the research conducted in the future may have to be targeted specifically at certain age groups to narrow down who is more stimulated by what types of platform advertisements and how those ads are imbedded in the platform. The results of this study will spark more understanding of how to reach students in the digital age of social media.

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